
NOVEL
05
Lout of Count's Family
BY Yu Ryeo-Han

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Lout of Count's Family

NOVEL

5

WRITTEN BY

Yu Ryeo-Han

Seven Seas Entertainment

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Chapter 36:
Somehow Once Again

CALE HEARD a distant cacophony of raised voices, screams, and shouts mixing together until he couldn't tell one from the other. Eyes locked on the cat peering up at him, he spoke to the man at his side. "Hilsmann."

The cat flinched.

"Yes, sir!"

Vice-Captain Hilsmann swooped in with outstretched hands. The cat whirled and tried to flee, but the wound along his flank made his forepaws buckle. Hilsmann didn't miss his chance. The vice-captain gently seized the animal, careful not to put pressure on his injuries, and returned to Cale.

"I caught him!"

The cat snarled, baring his fangs and flashing his claws as if ready to slice through Hilsmann's leather armor at any moment. "Grrrrr!"

A sigh came from above him. "Goodness." Cold liquid splashed over the cat. It was a potion, applied by Cale as a temporary remedy. "After seeing the knight who served as my escort with an injury like this, I can't turn a blind eye."

The cat and Vice-Captain Hilsmann jumped in tandem. Cale held back another sigh at Hilsmann's befuddlement; it seemed the vice-captain hadn't connected the cat to his human identity.

This knight—a shapeshifting member of the Cat Tribe—was supposedly from the slums. Each nation's royalty selected knights from the common citizenry according to a strict ratio, so the average person already had a slim chance of being selected. Someone from the slums would need significant talent and luck to make the cut.

Cale recalled what Hilsmann had said about the knight: *"Apparently, some of his siblings went to the Alchemy Tower fifteen years ago. His parents definitely seem to be human."*

Had the knight's siblings truly gone to the Alchemist's Bell Tower fifteen years ago? If so, the knight's attempt to kill the vice-master would make sense.

Cale and the cat continued their staredown, feeling each other out. Finally, the cat glanced between the empty potion bottle and his healing injuries and asked, "What do you plan to do with me?"

"You ask that *after* letting us catch you?"

At Cale's response, the cat knight's mouth snapped shut.

"Are you trying to eradicate alchemy too?" When Cale asked him that, the cat knight had flinched, and agony shot through his body. Then the pain disappeared as the potion did its work.

He'd grown up in the slums and developed sharp instincts while living on the edge inside the palace, hiding his true identity. Those same instincts told him he should go with this Rowoon nobleman, Cale Henituse.

"We came from Rowoon to investigate the wrongdoings of the Alchemist's Bell Tower and the Empire that occurred fifteen years ago," Cale explained.

Fifteen years ago. Emotion flashed across the cat knight's face, while Cale maintained his composure.

"We wish to reveal their heinous crimes to the world—to expose what the Empire and the Bell Tower did to the people of the slums back then."

"But I heard you came here to investigate the bombing."

"If that were the only reason, why would I bother healing you or trying to save you?"

The cat winced. "*Save* me?"

"That's right."

Cale padded from the dark corner of the garden to the brightly lit area, issuing an order to the vice-captain. "I'll take care of the rest. You head back to the palace. Be careful."

"Yes, sir. Understood!" Hilsmann replied, reliable as ever. As a top-tier swordsman, he could best just about anyone if it came to blows.

Cale turned away, eyes trained on the throng of people still spilling from the Sun Palace entrance. Before he could take a single step toward them, however, he heard the cat knight's faint voice.

"I don't deserve to live."

What?

When Cale made to look over his shoulder, he spotted a woman dressed in an imperial maid's uniform laughing maniacally as a pair of knights dragged her out through the palace doors. "Ha ha ha ha!"

One of the knights escorting her rushed toward Prince Adin, a grave expression on his face. Just as Cale was wondering why an imperial maid was here, a male servant was hauled out after her.

While regular servants handled tasks out in the open, like attending to nobles and royalty, these servants oversaw a number of behind-the-scenes palace duties. They flitted from place to place, but they didn't have the standing to join a banquet hall overflowing with nobles.

What are they doing here? Cale shifted his gaze back to the cat, feeling uneasy. They weren't out of the woods yet.

"Lord Cale?" Hilsmann called out in confusion as Cale zipped right back to him.

Without answering, Cale lifted the lowered chin of the cat in Hilsmann's arms. "What are you trying to do?"

Avoiding Cale's gaze, the cat said, "I didn't know that was why Rowoon's delegates came here."

"Explain," Cale demanded. At his icy tone, the cat finally made eye contact.

"Ha ha ha ha!"

Upon hearing his cohort's laughter in the distance, the cat knew it was too late. "I'm a member of the Cat Tribe," he began, "but I was abandoned at a young age. My human parents took me in, and I grew up as the youngest of five siblings. Then, fifteen years ago, three of us were chosen by the Alchemist's Bell Tower."

He still remembered his mother's words: *"If you go there, you'll be able to lead a successful life and eat lots of delicious food. Just make sure you never show them your cat form. Lean on your big sister and brother if things get hard."*

Of the three siblings heading to the Alchemist's Bell Tower, the cat was the youngest. When the incident happened, he managed to escape because he was a cat—no, a mere kitten, tiny enough to flee through a filthy sewer. He never forgot what his siblings, only one and two years his senior, said as they helped him.

"Hurry, turn into a cat and escape!"

"Our sister's right! Listen to her so at least one of us can make it out. You have to live!"

He returned to his parents, who hid him in a crypt for the next two years. Once he turned seven, he began living as his parents' new *sixth* child, as opposed to the youngest of five, pretending he was only five years old. With a bit of luck, and because administration in the slums was poor, this deception succeeded.

"I—no, *we* haven't forgotten about our siblings and friends."

Although the Bell Tower had showcased a few youths publicly to maintain the facade that the children of the slums were thriving, those whose siblings and friends had gone to the tower always had their doubts. The cat knight had told them the truth and brought them together.

He briskly described everything that had happened since.

"Five years ago, I left the Empire's dirtiest place behind to get my revenge. We established a group, then split off into cities across the Empire to buy bombs from real and fake alchemists in the underworld."

Cale remembered what he'd said to the alchemist Rei Stecker: *"An alcoholic and a fake alchemist. You make poison and small bombs for crime syndicates in the underworld to use against each other."*

Now he knew where some of Rei Stecker's bombs had ended up. *And they did this all over the Empire. This is nuts.*

The pieces of the puzzle were clicking into place. As the toughest and the leader of the group, the cat had taken on the role of assassin, but it would have been difficult for him to target the tower's vice-master all by himself.

"I became a knight three years ago," the cat continued. "I had the talent and the strength for it. The others were brought in as imperial servants."

That was the highest position someone from the slums could achieve. The cat knight thought about the difficult lives his companions had led for the past few years.

"Poverty won't stop us from getting our revenge. Today, we finally made our move."

Cale released the cat's chin and turned back around. "I'm guessing the bombs you picked up around the Empire are gathered here today. And I'm sure there are other members of your group who haven't been caught."

The captives laughing so loudly were probably acting as distractions, making it easier for the others to move.

"Small-scale bombs made with alchemy aren't enough to destroy the Sun Palace."

Compared to bombs made from mana, alchemical bombs weren't very strong; they merely *imitated* mana, and the natural power they harnessed was less effective. Only a timed magic bomb with a mana orb, like the one Cale had discovered, was guaranteed to succeed.

The cat knight wasn't sure what to tell the Rowoon nobleman. He knew the bombs couldn't demolish the Sun Palace entirely, but they could destroy *part* of it. And they had to do it today.

This celebration—a ball to commemorate the end of war with the Kingdom of the Whipper—had likely garnered most imperial citizens' attention. The cat knight wanted as many people as possible to witness the truth he was about to reveal to the world; that was the best way for him to settle his grudge.

"I'm sorry. We collected these bombs over the past five years. We've spent the past month slowly placing them around a single column."

They intend to destroy one column. Cale understood his meaning: The cat and his companions believed their five years of effort were sufficient to take down just one column.

"My apologies to Rowoon, but the bombs will go off soon. It'll be difficult to stop them."

The cat knight had injured the vice-master, but he'd failed to kill her. That being the case, his group *at least* needed to take revenge against the corrupt Empire. He had pitied Rowoon's delegates from the beginning, but now he felt even worse.

Cale slowly faced him again, and an eerie feeling racked the cat from tip to tail. "You crazy bastard. What did Rowoon ever do to you?"

"It's for the greater good…"

"Bullshit."

The cat knight hung his head at the sight of Cale's disbelieving smirk. "That's why I won't ask for my life to be spared."

"Ridiculous."

The cat knight cowered before him.

Out of all the delegates, Cale Henituse had been the center of palace gossip due to his reputation as a just and respectful noble. Hearing such coarse language come out of his mouth surprised the knight, but Cale wasn't looking at him. Wind swirled around Cale's feet.

"Hilsmann."

"Yes, sir?"

"Hold on to him so he doesn't kill himself."

"Got it!"

As Cale stepped forward, the cat knight muttered behind him, "It's too late. The bombs should already be set."

‹We'll save them, human!› Raon declared.

Cale moved quickly. He still needed to ask the cat knight how they'd planted so many bombs around the wing without alerting the guards, not to mention what they planned to do afterward—but there was something he had to take care of first. He hurried toward the entrance of the Sun Palace.

"Lord Cale!" Daltaro, the diplomat in charge of the delegation, called out in surprise, joyfully waving Cale over. Cale noticed Crown Prince Albert standing beside him.

When Albert saw Cale speeding toward them, he couldn't contain his shock. "You—!"

"Damn it!"

Cale's sudden curse made Albert's mouth snap shut. Then the lout burst into motion again, leaving Albert to follow his path with widening eyes.

The palace entrance swarmed with chaos. Foreign dignitaries clogged the area in droves, either chatting with low-level imperial administrators or having their identities verified as they exited. The Empire's higher-level administrators had already escaped.

One of the palace's columns caught Albert's attention. "What the…?!"

A lone servant stood next to it, separated from the others. In an instant, a cloak of flame swallowed his body. *Whoosh!*

"Aiiieee!"

"What *is* that?!"

Screams and gasps echoed through the palace grounds. The flaming imperial servant—or rather, the man who'd stolen an imperial servant's uniform—clung to the column, a small bomb plummeting from his hand.

The cat's warning played back in Cale's mind. *"It's too late. The bombs should already be set."*

The cat was right about one thing: The falling bomb was already lit.

‹Human, it's not too late.›

Raon was right too. Cale reached out, shooting wind from his hand like an arrow. Raon infused Cale's wind arrow with his own magic—this was the only way to prevent the Empire's swordmaster and the vice-master of the tower from noticing his presence.

The burning servant groaned as Cale's wind shoved him away from the column.

Boom!

A blast rattled Cale's ears, and the earth trembled underfoot. The ground beneath one of the massive columns supporting the Sun Palace's infrastructure was vibrating. The chain explosion had already begun.

‹Should I use my own magic, human? If I do, that swordmaster will sense my great and mighty power! He'll know you're not alone!›

Cale saw Imperial Prince Adin with the Huiten, the swordmaster. Behind them, Albert and Daltaro were making a beeline for Cale.

As Cale's eyes darted between Albert, Daltaro, and the other foreign dignitaries, an otherworldly voice reverberated in his mind. **"Are you trying to sacrifice yourself?"**

Sacrifice myself? How absurd.

Boom! Booooom!

Dozens of bombs went off at once, rocking the palace wing's foundation. Panic-stricken crowds struggled to flee through the Sun Palace doors. It was a scene ripped straight from hell.

Cale opened his mouth. "Help me." He stretched out his hands, tremors rippling through his body. The shield surrounding his heart shuddered awake for the first time in a long while.

Crack! The middle of the shaking column had snapped, and the wing it supported slanted downward.

"We'll hold it up," Cale said.

‹All right.›

At that moment, Albert stopped striding through the night, the redhead's name slipping from his lips. "Cale Henituse…"

A silver halo expanded in the darkness, emanating from Cale. The people surging through the palace entryway froze to gawk at the spectacle, only to scramble onward when those behind them resorted to shoving. Their gazes never left the shimmering interloper as they stumbled outside.

One of Rowoon's delegates stared raptly at Cale, his eyes following the strand of silver light beaming from Cale's hands. His

heart beat faster. He had seen that light before, during the Plaza Terror Incident.

"Lord Cale…" he murmured.

The delegate remembered it clearly. Though he was a lower-class noble, he'd been present during that incident as a member of the palace staff. He recalled the silver shield and broad wings that had protected Rowoon's people.

His gaze shifted up to the sky. "Ah…"

A silver sheen arced overhead, the tips of giant wings stretching all the way to where he stood. That one winged shield supported a massive palace column, wide as a cluster of fully grown men, but that wasn't the only thing it held up. It also braced the ceiling above the column, protecting the crowd clustered below.

I'm getting out of this alive, the delegate thought.

Then someone else spoke.

"I can't…hold this much longer."

At the sound of Cale's voice, Albert snapped to his senses. His eyes flicked from the large shield preventing the column's collapse to the gawking crowd beneath it. Focused as they were on the bright shield, they'd forgotten that this was all being done by a single person.

Albert faced Imperial Prince Adin, who was staring intently at Cale. Adin's expression changed the instant the two made eye contact, but Albert caught the look in his eyes. Adin was *amused*.

A wing of the Sun Palace was falling apart, threatening the lives of imperial nobles and foreign dignitaries alike. And yet, contrary to the grimace Adin wore, amusement danced in his eyes. His somber expression might've fooled anyone else, but Albert saw it clearly.

Albert's gaze darkened as the princes regarded each other, but he maintained his air of urgency as he spoke. "We don't have much time!"

"I understand," Adin said. "Duke Huiten!"

"Yes, sir!"

As Duke Huiten raced to the palace entrance, Adin told his knights, "Order the mages and alchemists to get here as quickly as possible! Now!"

"Yes, Your Imperial Highness!" the knights replied, springing into action.

Albert also dished out orders to the people around him. "Help the remaining dignitaries escape right away. And see to it that the other nobles—no, actually, the Empire's citizens—make it out safely!" There were more servants, musicians, and cooks still inside the palace than nobles. Recalling the look in Adin's eyes, Albert focused on the common citizens instead of the nobility. He singled out a few knights and added, "You there! Guard Lord Cale!"

"Of course, sire!"

On command, the knights ran over to Cale. Albert then quietly addressed the two dark elves, Ben and Kora, who were still in disguise. "Ben, keep track of the servant who ran toward the pillar, and watch the imperial prince."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Unable to shake the image of Prince Adin's enchanted look from his mind, Albert said, "Kora, go to Lord Cale's chambers and let his people know what happened."

Albert didn't see Cale's knightly guard, Hilsmann, with him. That probably meant Cale had given his subordinates other jobs to do—and that included the swordmaster, Choi Han.

"Should I bring Choi Han here?" Kora asked him.

"No. Just tell him what happened."

"Will do, sire."

The two elves sped away.

Upon seeing Albert walk toward Cale, Daltaro cautiously spoke up. "Your Highness, you must evacu—"

"It's fine."

"All right."

Daltaro gave an order to his subordinates before standing behind the crown prince, who was fixated on Cale. The redhead's face was extremely pale.

Stupid idiot.

"Hold on a little longer," Albert told this sly yet stupid man. "The Empire's mages will be here soon. People are escaping quickly."

Cale heaved a deep sigh, startling Rowoon's knights. The tips of his fingers were turning white, and the expression on his pale face was darkening more every minute.

One of the knights clenched his sword tightly, recalling what had happened during the Plaza Terror Incident. *He coughed up blood, and then he collapsed.* Indeed, Cale had staggered before falling down and hacking up blood, requiring a lengthy recovery period afterward. Remembering this, the people around Cale stiffened in worried silence.

By contrast, Cale's mind was full of noise.

‹Are you okay, human? Does it hurt? You're not coughing up blood this time,› Raon observed. *‹My heart is pounding, human! We're saving people again! Even though you're weak, you're still very great!›*

Raon was thrilled that Cale was saving people again, but Cale scowled at his ramblings. *So loud.*

‹Human, stop using your power if it's too tiring! Don't overdo it! I can handle this myself!›

What would the others say if you did? If the tower stayed up even without the shield and its wings, the swordmaster and the

imperial prince would question the situation. *The swordmaster probably already thinks this Ancient Power is quite strong.*

Raon's formless mana and Cale's Ancient Powers differed from conventional magic. Since both drew from nature, Duke Huiten would have a hard time figuring it out.

If he starts to suspect there's even more to it than this, I'm in trouble.

Worried that Duke Huiten would overestimate his Ancient Power, Cale used the Unbreakable Shield at its maximum level, making its silver light shine brighter and clearer than ever before—but this made it difficult for him to maintain it.

Thus, for the first time, he was truly exerting himself. It was different than when he'd deployed the shield for a short duration to defend against the magic bombs in the plaza.

"Oh, Lord Cale…" Daltaro said, seeing the sweat on Cale's forehead. He could feel the toll these few minutes were taking on the young noble's endurance.

A commotion picked up, and Daltaro sussed out the cause right away. "Th-the mages and alchemists are here!"

Albert whirled toward the entrance just in time to see Duke Huiten and one of the dignitaries' knights sending out signals. Half the palace mages focused their magic on the ground near the column.

Thrummm.

The alchemists threw an unidentifiable liquid on the ground. The twenty or so remaining mages took to the sky, casting a second shield on top of Cale's.

Ka-chak!

At the same time, a pillar of earth lurched from the ground beside the tower, created by the alchemists and mages working in tandem. The pillar shot higher into the air to a rhythm of *thuds* until it stratified under Cale's shield.

The alchemists' leader shouted, "Start the additional support process!"

With that, the alchemists placed odd-looking black ropes around the pillar. The more ropes they surrounded it with, the sturdier the fragile-looking pillar became.

As Cale watched, he heard a mage call out, "Commence support!"

"Lord Cale, you can stop now!" Duke Huiten roared, loud enough that everybody heard the noble's name. All eyes were on Cale.

Psshhh.

The silver light that outshone the Sun Palace winked out.

Boom!

With a deafening blast, the column and ceiling crashed down on the shields and earthen pillar beneath them. All of the mages who had cast the shield grunted at the weight, though the skilled mages muffled their groans. Upon hearing their strain, everyone recalled how firmly Cale had been standing; he hadn't let out a single grumble. They couldn't help but face him anew.

Cale covered his mouth with both hands, coughing so hard that his entire body slumped forward.

"Lord Cale!" Daltaro cried out, shocked.

Blood seeped between Cale's fingers. His body didn't hit the ground, however; Albert supported his weight, steadying him. "Cale, are you all right?" His eyes swept over the redhead, who stared blankly down at the ground.

With his head bowed, Cale thought to himself, *This is so refreshing.*

His palms tingled more than last time due to the longer duration and greater degree of power he'd exerted, but his body felt better after a single cough.

The Energy of the Heart rocks.

As Cale reflected that the Energy of the Heart was the best Ancient Power he'd obtained, he heard a voice in his head.

"Why did you not sacrifice yourself?"

The voice of the stone guardian—former owner of the Scary Stone—made Cale shudder, but what he heard next gave him pause.

‹I…want to destroy the Empire,› said Raon. *‹But since you seem to be doing better than when you used the fiery thunderbolt, I'll hold myself back.›*

Why Raon reacted so intensely every time Cale got injured was beyond him. Raon should've known by now that Cale would be fine even if he coughed up a little blood.

Does he react this way just because he sees blood? I need to convince him I'm fine as soon as I get back to my room.

While Cale struggled to fathom what was going through the five-year-old dragon's mind, he heard Albert ask, "Hey, are you feeling okay?"

Cale's shaking shoulders unnerved Albert; the sight of the fearless Cale Henituse trembling was difficult to accept. Of course, Cale had only flinched after hearing the stone guardian's and Raon's comments, but everyone else believed he was suffering the recoil from using his power.

Seeing this punk who always had a sarcastic response being so quiet, Albert frowned. Then he heard Cale's weak voice.

"The dignitaries—*ahem!*" The loud cough he'd just let out had left Cale's voice sounding raw, but he soon managed to speak normally. "Are the dignitaries all safe?"

Aside from feeling suddenly peckish, Cale was otherwise in good shape. He raised his head, only to stiffen when he saw the crown prince's pinched expression.

"Did they get hurt?"

"You craz—" Albert began, then cut himself off with a sigh.

What?

Cale felt certain the crown prince would've called him a *crazy bastard* if not for the crowd's attention. Instead, Albert helped Cale sit on the ground, passing him a handkerchief. "Wipe the blood off your mouth first."

"Oh." Cale scrubbed at the blood. Since he wasn't in pain, he'd forgotten all about it.

"Some sustained minor injuries, but everyone is fine overall," Albert told him.

"That's a relief."

Albert massaged his temples with one hand, his frown deepening as he watched Cale wipe away the blood. Paying him no mind, Cale scanned his surroundings to find only Albert's personal knights and Daltaro nearby.

"Your Highness," he murmured, "why don't you check on the lower-ranking nobles?"

If the crown prince took care of the middling and lower-ranking nobles from his brothers' factions now, he would get into their good graces. There was a solid chance they would consider Albert capable of greater protection than the other princes.

Cale's comment rendered Albert momentarily speechless.

"Worry about your own condition before talking politics, you foo—" he blurted out, only to transition into another long exhale.

It sounded like he was about to call me foolish this time. Cale peered up at Albert from the dirt, still dabbing away blood. Daltaro chose that moment to interject, his tone utterly solemn.

"Your Highness, Lord Cale is correct. You must console the others. Please leave Lord Cale to us. I'll do my best to send him safely back to his room."

Something about Daltaro's comment felt off to Cale, but when Albert nodded and sighed for the umpteenth time, he opted to keep it to himself.

"Yes. I'll do that," Albert agreed. Cale expected him to move in the direction of Rowoon's delegates, but he didn't. Instead, he offered Cale his hand. "Can you stand?"

In lieu of an answer, Cale climbed to his feet unassisted. The knights gripped their swords in awe at his steadfastness. Only after standing did Cale take Albert's hand, leaning in as Albert embraced him naturally.

The knights and Daltaro took a collective step back, suppressing their emotions as they remembered the pair's embrace after Rowoon's Plaza Terror Incident. The gesture was moving, conveying the pair's relief at safely escaping with their lives—something none of them had expected to experience in a foreign empire.

Cale spoke softly so that only Albert could hear. "Your Highness, you *will* be asking the Empire for compensation, right? Let's milk them for all they're worth. Oh, and I'm glad you're unharmed."

The crown prince huffed a laugh. *"I'm glad you're unharmed," he says.* Cale truly meant it, so Albert had no choice but to trust him. *He hasn't changed a bit.*

In hushed tones, Albert responded, "No need to ask me something so obvious."

Cale chuckled under his breath. Albert's tone carried both relief that the delegates and dignitaries were safe and anger that they'd been forced to endure this disaster. Hearing this blend of emotions from the prince, Cale knew Albert was going to bleed every concession he could from the Empire. This was a perfect example of why Cale was pushing for Albert to become Rowoon's next king.

The sight of Rowoon's crown prince and the son of a count laughing in relief as they embraced touched many people's hearts.

The pair's gazes sharpened, however, as Adin approached. Cale prepared to act the part of a heroic injured noble once again.

"Lord Cale, are you all right?" Adin asked, and Cale met his eyes.

"I am, Your Imperial Highness."

Cale stood tall, so he didn't look hurt at first glance, but anyone could see the bloodied handkerchief clutched in his quivering hands and the wan smile on his face. He seemed far from all right.

"Is everyone else okay?" he asked.

An imperial administrator accompanying the prince hummed in admiration.

Adin took a brief moment to study Cale, his clinical gaze devoid of any care or warmth. After a few seconds, his expression transformed into the very image of gratitude and concern as he met Cale's eyes again. "Yes, everyone is fine thanks to you. There are some with slight injuries, but you needn't worry."

Cale's brow creased at the mention of injuries, but he said, "I see."

He looked past the imperial prince at the mages and alchemists fixing the broken column. *This tower should be fine, right?*

Showing his concern until the end, Cale posed another question. "Is it safe now?"

Adin firmly responded, "That it is."

At that, Cale dipped his head in a respectful bow, pushing back his mussed hair with trembling fingers as he straightened back up.

While the imperial prince examined Cale's hands, Albert inserted himself into their conversation. "Your hands are shaking so badly. It's worse than last time."

Cale shook his head, smiling at Albert. "No, Your Highness. I'm fine."

"Fine?!" Albert scowled. "The last time you did this, you had to rest for months! You coughed up blood because your body's breaking down inside!"

Breaking down inside? Isn't that a bit too much?

Cale was debating whether to address Albert's choice of words when Daltaro suddenly grabbed him. The diplomat spoke quietly in front of the imperial prince, but he was still loud enough for others to hear.

"You don't need to force yourself to stand. It's okay to rest now, Lord Cale."

Although the way Daltaro's eyes shone with pride and worry made Cale feel strangely uncomfortable, he decided to play along for now.

"But I…"

As Cale trailed off, Adin ceased his silent assessment and spoke with an air of command. "It will be fine, I assure you. We'll take care of everything from here, so you can go get some rest."

This incident had happened in the Empire, and within the Sun Palace at that. In assuaging Cale's worries, Adin was effectively telling him to drop it.

Cale opened and closed his mouth a few times but said nothing.

"I'm included in that 'we' you speak of, right?" Albert said, reminding Adin that Rowoon's delegates were also involved.

The imperial prince eyed Albert for a moment before pasting on his trademark warm smile. "Absolutely."

Albert scoffed in the privacy of his mind. Adin treated Cale and Albert with consideration, but he hadn't apologized once for putting them in danger.

He'll only say something like "It's a pity that this happened" in the official follow-up announcement as well.

The imperial prince didn't deign to lower his head before Rowoon's delegates. That was how Mogor, the Western Continent's only empire, treated an apparently powerless nation like Rowoon.

Accepting this attitude for the time being, Albert reached out and patted today's hero on the shoulder. "Go. I'll call my personal physician to check on you."

"Thank you very much."

After thanking Albert for taking steps to prevent an imperial doctor from latching on to him, Cale accepted support from one of Albert's knights and walked away from the Sun Palace. Many people watched him depart before quickly returning to their tasks.

It was one chaotic night.

***

Cale's night went no differently. The moment the dark elf serving as the crown prince's personal physician left the room, a cluster of people surrounded him.

The gold dragon, Erhaven, watched Cale with a peculiar expression. He thoroughly inspected Cale's body, then clicked his tongue.

"What?" Cale asked him, but the dragon only tut-tutted.

"What an unlucky human."

Lost for words, Cale shifted away from him, only to lock eyes with Raon. Now that the outsiders were gone, Raon sat on the bed openly. The black dragon's gaze made Cale uncomfortable, so he turned his head once again, this time spotting Choi Han.

What's with this guy?

Choi Han was touching the hilt of his sword, seemingly deep in thought as he slid the blade in and out of the scabbard repeatedly.

Clank. Clank.

Feeling a chill run down his spine, Cale spoke up. “Where are they?” he asked, referring to Hilsmann and the cat knight.

Choi Han walked over to the en suite bathroom and opened the door with a *creak*. Hilsmann emerged from within. The vice-captain was covered in leaves and dirt, with a cat and two empty potion bottles cradled in his arms.

“What the hell did you do on your way back?” Cale frowned at Hilsmann, then crooked his finger. “Bring him here.”

Hilsmann approached with the cat, who fixed Cale with a piercing gaze.

“Sir Rex,” Cale began, startling the cat.

The vice-captain placed the cat—Rex—on the bedside chair, leaving him no choice but to sit and listen.

“The Sun Palace didn’t fall.” Rex flashed his fangs at that. “Your friend lit himself on fire, but he survived. And then he was caught.”

Rex’s expression crumpled. Unbothered, Cale lounged back against the headboard and went on with his speech. After all, they didn’t have much time.

“Do you know the alcoholic alchemist?”

The cat recoiled. Of course he knew that alchemist; Rei Stecker was known to be a decent sort, and Rex had purchased some bombs from him. Did the alchemist work for this noble?

Cale met Rex’s questioning eyes and said, “Sir Rex, that alchemist feeds the children of your neighborhood in the slums. Choi Han will take you to him. Your family and the rest of your group are already in hiding, right?” Cale was certain that they must’ve hidden before this incident started. “However, at your level of doing things, the imperial prince will find them within a day. Find everyone sanctuary with Choi Han’s help.”

Rex hesitated, unable to respond right away.

"What's stopping you?" Cale pressed. "Are you thinking you can't escape alone when your friends might be tortured and killed?"

"I—"

"You can do better."

Rex shut his mouth, cowed by the formidable aura emanating from Cale.

"I'm going to destroy the Alchemist's Bell Tower," Cale announced, eyes never leaving the cat's. "And I won't let Adin wear Mogor's crown."

The saintess's story had planted the seeds of a plot in Cale's mind, and those seeds had blossomed into the storybook tale of a revolutionary hero, featuring Rex as one of the key players. Rei Stecker would act as the new leader of the alchemists, while Rex would take center stage among the citizens.

Rex slowly shook his head. "That's impossible."

With a chuckle, Cale said, "Can't you see the dragon over here?"

Rex's denials died on his tongue. Until that moment, he hadn't noticed the black dragon at all.

"Choi Han will guide you to the slums. He's a swordmaster."

Rex peeked at Choi Han, who subtly increased his aura.

"Furthermore, the Empire's newest hero will lend you a hand."

"Hero? What hero?"

Cale pointed to himself. "Me."

Erhaven shot Cale a questioning glance, and Raon nodded vigorously in agreement. Rex searched their faces, perplexed.

Ultimately, Cale was right. The Empire had to divert the public's attention from the attempt on Metelona's life, but they couldn't sweep the collapse of an entire palace column under the rug; too many people had witnessed it. Everyone who'd been there

knew Cale had held up the ceiling, and he had no intention of hiding his involvement this time. He was more than happy to serve as part of the Empire's smokescreen.

"By tomorrow morning, I'll probably be a household name," Cale said. "Why, they'll be singing my praises across the Empire."

Rex's head snapped back in Cale's direction.

"I saved everyone, Sir Rex. Nobody died."

The cat knight gasped, his expression twisting—whether with relief or disappointment, Cale couldn't tell. Cale signaled with his eyes to Choi Han, who nodded and picked up the cat. Rex's wounds had yet to fully recover.

"We don't have much time," Cale went on as Rex regarded him silently. "You should seize the opportunities that fall into your hands."

The word "opportunities" had Rex opening his mouth to reply, but Cale's next command stifled him.

"And don't breathe a word about what happened today."

Cale imposed his Dominating Aura upon Rex as he spoke. Seeing that Rex had quieted once more, Cale handed a memo to Choi Han.

"For Bilose."

Choi Han pocketed the memo with another nod. "I'll be back soon."

"Good. Be back before dawn."

After that, Choi Han slipped soundlessly through the window and disappeared into the distance. A black forepaw then patted Cale's arm. *Tap. Tap.* Not thinking much of it, Cale glanced at Raon.

"Lie down," the black dragon said.

Cale obeyed without argument. Raon pulled the blanket up to Cale's chin, ensuring he was snugly tucked in. Erhaven sighed, exasperated with the two of them.

"Gragon Gramps will nurse you. I'll follow Choi Han." Raon puffed out his chest, looking dependable. "It'll go better if I'm with him."

"Just stay by my side," Cale said. He had a bad feeling that Raon's help would only complicate things. Bilose was always discreet, so he and Choi Han would be enough.

The dragon's brow furrowed, then his eyes opened wide. "You want me to stay close to you?"

"Yes," Cale said curtly, too lazy to offer more than that.

Raon's lips twitched. He curled up in a ball next to Cale, who drifted off to sleep. There was a great commotion outside the bedroom, but it was none of Cale's business.

***

When Cale awoke the next morning, he was startled out of his wits. Erhaven, Hilsmann, and Choi Han loomed in front of him, looking tidier than they had last night. Raon was nowhere to be seen.

"Why does our precious Lord Cale look so shocked?" came a voice from Cale's bedside. It was Albert, sitting in the chair.

"Your Highness, you are indeed the star of Rowoon, even when you're the first thing I wake up t—"

"Enough."

Cale sat up without another word.

"It seems you'll be getting a medal," Albert continued, and Cale winced. Knowing Cale had refused any medals or titles after Rowoon's Plaza Terror Incident, the prince hastened to add, "You'll receive additional compensation, of course. The Empire needs to shift focus away from last night's incident…" Albert trailed off, scrutinizing Cale's face. "You look happy."

Indeed, Cale had welcomed the morning with a beatific smile. "Say, why don't we hold an official ceremony to bestow my medal?"

"What?"

"Think about it," Cale replied, then began counting off on his fingers. "A noble who's honorable, self-sacrificing, frail in body but firm in conviction…who wishes to protect the weak…who cares not for status or nationality and possesses a strong, beautiful Ancient Power…"

An invigorated gleam shimmered in Cale's eyes.

"You see, Your Highness," Cale said, slow and deliberate, "I want to become the hero of the Mogor Empire."

"Why's that?" Albert asked, forehead creased in confusion.

He nearly scoffed when Cale beckoned him closer to the bed, but he played along out of consideration for the lout's poor condition. Cale bent down to whisper in the crown prince's ear.

"Sir Rex has decided to join us."

Sir Rex? At first, Albert couldn't put a face to the name—but the sight of Cale's red hair dredged up a mental image of the knight. "You crazy bastard," he spat, unable to stop himself.

Beside him, the dark elf Kora stiffened in surprise. He smoothed out his expression shortly after, conscious of Cale's guards in the room.

"Why?" Albert pressed.

"Well, I'm sure details of his past have *at least* reached the nobles in the capital by now."

Albert nodded. Despite being an outsider, even he had received intel about a knight named Rex who came from the slums. As he pieced it together, realization dawned on him. "You mean…?"

"He escaped from the Alchemist's Bell Tower and knows the truth."

"Then we need to save him."

"I already have."

Cale watched as the prince lapsed into thought. While Albert wasn't aware of the divine items, he knew of the saint and the saintess living in exile, as well as the alternative alchemist who wasn't affiliated with the Bell Tower. This gave him a solid idea of Cale's goal regarding the Bell Tower and the Empire as a whole. Rex's value immediately made sense.

"What does he have to do with you stepping forward as a hero, though? Don't you hate being in the spotlight?"

The Cale he knew disliked being the center of attention. People in the public eye lived under many restrictions, and they had to act carefully around others. Even if Cale didn't care what others thought of him, his best chance at the quiet slacker life he dreamed of was in staying out of the spotlight. This was an exception, however.

"I definitely hate it," Cale admitted, meeting Albert's gaze, "but it's fine. Once the people meet the heroes I'll put forth in the future, my name will forever vanish from their minds."

Albert sighed, swiping a hand down his face. "I suppose you plan to make Sir Rex a hero as well."

Cale grinned. "We'll make the public lose faith in the crown and the nobility. Shouldn't someone be primed to take their place?"

The prince had no rebuttal; in fact, he agreed. "And who better than a knight from the slums, who dared to attack the vice-master of the tower in his quest to reveal the truth hidden within the darkness?" Albert nodded, matching Cale's expression. "Good. Very good."

He was satisfied with the current situation. They stood to profit a great deal as long as Rex remained free, so he knew Cale must've been perfectly thorough in choosing Rex's hiding place. *I'm sure this punk wouldn't leave Rex somewhere he's bound to get caught.*

"You taking that medal and becoming popular with the citizens can only benefit me."

Following last night's incident, the Empire's treatment of Rowoon's delegation had already improved. The imperial officials had focused on protecting their high-ranking nobles, neglecting the lower classes—including the lower-ranking delegates. Between this and the attempt on the vice-master's life, the reputations of the Empire's leadership were at risk. Thus, they'd opted to allow news of Cale's involvement to spread. Since the public would know the truth anyway, the officials had deemed it preferable to permit the least damaging gossip.

Thanks to that, praise for Cale had spread like wildfire. Although he was a foreign noble, he was the one who'd prevented Rowoon's Plaza Terror Incident. Furthermore, his heroics in the Sun Palace had been the first piece of good news in the Empire since the war with the Kingdom of the Whipper ended. All in all, it made for a great story.

Albert rose from the chair; he had plenty of work to do. "Get some rest."

Cale nodded, lying back down right away. "Yes, Your Highness."

Though Albert clicked his tongue at Cale's impertinence, his expression betrayed hints of remorse and concern as he exited the bedroom.

"How fares Lord Cale?" Daltaro asked.

Glancing at the imperial administrator standing at Daltaro's side, Albert shook his head—yet he followed up with, "He's fine."

The disconnect between Albert's answer and his actions pained Daltaro. As he contemplated going inside to ask after Cale himself, Albert said something else that dissuaded him.

"He used his power too much yesterday. We should let him get his rest."

"Understood, Your Highness."

"Plus, we still have much to take care of."

"Indeed we do," Daltaro replied solemnly.

Albert had stopped to see Cale on his way to meet the imperial prince, who was managing the incident's aftermath. Daltaro, being the leader of the delegation, had accompanied him.

"Let's go."

At Albert's command, Daltaro and the others walked away from Cale's bedroom.

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That same moment, Cale lounged in bed eating cookies Raon had brought him. Choi Han, who'd had a long night, came to whisper in his ear, "Bilose asked to see you."

"Bring him over."

Choi Han departed promptly.

A few hours later, Bilose of Flynn Merchant Fleets entered Cale's bedroom under the pretext of delivering a special blend of tea to soothe Cale's tension. He plopped onto the bedside chair, mopping sweat from his wide forehead despite the winter chill.

"Thank you."

"Lord Cale!" Bilose burst out, unable to stop himself.

"Hm?"

Cale's nonchalant reaction left Bilose speechless. The merchant had let Rex stay—or rather, he'd locked Rex up—inside his own safe house. Thinking about last night's chaos, Bilose turned to Choi Han. The young man offered him a gentle smile when their eyes met, but the words Choi Han said after they'd completed their stealthy evacuation of Rex's loved ones and secured the cat knight in the safe house lingered in Bilose's mind.

Rex had initially wanted to be with his family and the other members of his group, but Bilose had ruled it out. Rex's cohorts would be safe within the secret passages and forgotten hovels of the

slums because the Empire didn't know their identities. Someone like Rex, however, who'd exposed himself publicly, needed to hide someplace where magic couldn't reach him.

Bilose's safe house was equipped with a barrier against all magic. His uncle Odeus, the kingpin of Rowoon's northwestern underworld, had built the place for any crises that might arise in the Empire.

The young merchant recalled what Choi Han had told Rex as he left him inside: *"You're a dangerous bomb. If you go off, you'll kill not only yourself but everybody else involved with this incident. You might not mind hurting other people for the 'greater good,' but I finally have a family after all this time. Their safety comes first. So you'd better stay here and keep quiet as the dead."*

Bilose had always thought of Choi Han as a purehearted man of few words; he'd never imagined something like *that* would come out of the young man's mouth. Nor had he imagined Choi Han even had such thoughts. To Bilose's knowledge, Choi Han didn't have any family—or rather, he had no blood relatives.

Choi Han's family must be…

Bilose's gaze slid from Choi Han to Cale.

"The hell are you looking at?" Cale demanded.

"…No, nothing." Bilose pushed the thought aside and took out a magic bag, holding it up. "Here are the items you requested." Cale gestured to the bedside table, and Bilose placed the bag atop it.

"How much do you know about the Kingdom of Karo?" Cale asked out of the blue.

"Pardon?"

Bilose had expected to discuss other matters with Cale today; he was a merchant, after all. He had a fair understanding of Cale's actions up to this point, as well as the reason for last night's escapades, and he wanted to report on his own participation.

Why is he suddenly bringing that up?

"Forgive me, Lord Cale, but I think I should fill you in about last night first."

"No need."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm sure you took care of it."

Bilose pursed his lips. On his way to the Sun Palace earlier, Bilose had reviewed the information he'd gleaned from Choi Han—along with every scrap of intel he'd scrounged up in the capital—to confirm a few things. Although he'd never seen the Sun Palace in person, he'd heard that it was a palace boasting a luxurious grand hall and that one of its columns had almost collapsed. The redhead in front of Bilose had single-handedly prevented its fall, then coughed up blood and required support in returning to his bedroom.

Reflecting on this, Bilose thought Cale looked paler than usual today.

"Why do you think I left you with that task, Bilose?"

The answer to this placid question was obvious: "I suppose you consider me trustworthy."

"Of course."

Bilose held back a sigh. He was no longer sweating like a hog; in fact, he felt relieved. "Lord Cale," he said, quickly catching on to Cale's intentions, "is this regarding the auction house in the Kingdom of Karo?"

Cale nodded. He'd already discussed this with the crown prince as well. Of all the treasures they'd discovered in the Vatican's secret chamber, two would be difficult for Rowoon to handle publicly. These two items needed to be dealt with.

"I want to participate in their secret VIP auction."

"The next one is the New Year's celebration auction in February. Is that the one you mean?"

"Yes."

The Kingdom of Karo was more famous for its auction house than the desert that hid the dark elves. As part of Karo's description in *Birth of a Hero*, the peculiar VIP auction was said to be the most secretive—yet the most well-known—auction in the kingdom.

"Is it possible, Bilose?"

Neither Cale nor the crown prince could participate in the VIP auction under their real names. The two items Cale had found in the cavern beneath the secret table had originally belonged to someone, and as far as anyone knew, they should've still been in that person's possession. Even Cale couldn't fathom how they had ended up in the pope's coffin.

"Yes, my lord. It's possible. Are you trying to sell something?"

"No."

Bilose frowned. Why did Cale want to go if he wasn't planning to auction anything off?

Rather than explaining, Cale asked, "Can you send out two invitations?"

"Invitations to what?"

"To participate in February's auction."

"Very well… Shall I be discreet?"

"Yes. Make sure they can't tell who we are."

"Understood."

Cale had one more tidbit to share with Bilose. "I'll see to it that you pocket the transaction fees for the deal."

A pause. "Sounds like a large transaction."

"It is."

With a nod, Bilose rose to his feet. "Then I'll see you next year. I suppose I should head to Henituse territory in February?"

"No," Cale said, having a different destination in mind. "Guiller territory."

It was unexpected, but Bilose was unruffled. “As you wish. Will you be there from the start of the New Year?”

“I can’t be certain. I’ll probably travel in from the north.”

“The north?”

“That’s right.”

Their business done, Bilose didn’t pry further. He figured Cale would spend some time in one of Rowoon’s northern regions before heading to the Guillers’ lands in February.

In truth, the “north” Cale referred to was somewhere else entirely.

While Vice-Captain Hilsmann escorted Bilose out, Choi Han asked Cale, “Are we waiting to deal with Lord Antonio’s situation until February?”

“We have to. I’ve ended up staying in the Empire longer than I expected.”

The unforeseen extension of Cale’s time in the Empire had disrupted his plans. He needed to push back his scheme to use Antonio Guiller’s weakness to another time.

Choi Han seemed concerned about the change in their schedule, but Cale shrugged at his fretting. “We don’t have a choice. It’s almost the new year. Shouldn’t we celebrate at home with our family?”

“Oh.”

Patting Raon’s round head, which had suddenly appeared, Cale continued, “I promised I’d be home for the New Year, so I have to go. Don’t you agree?”

He’d told Deruth, Ohn, and Hong that he’d spend the New Year at home. He had to keep his promise.

Choi Han bobbed his head, an innocent smile lighting up his face. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right, sir!”

Cale watched Choi Han for a moment before telling the two dragons and his human companion their upcoming plans. "We'll welcome the New Year in Henituse territory, then head up north."

"Are we going to see the whales, human?"

"That we are."

Witira had been nagging Cale nonstop about the sea route contract, so he intended to prepare a home for the Tiger Tribe before going north to meet with the Whale Tribe.

But that's not all.

He picked up the magic bag Bilose had brought and handed it to Erhaven and Raon. The gold dragon had been eyeing Cale with suspicion for some time now, but he accepted it. "Are these alchemy ingredients?"

"Yes, sir."

Raon's jaw dropped. "We can make the pillar of fire now!"

Indeed, the bag was full of the materials used to create the Empire's pillar of fire.

"Of course." Erhaven smirked. "This great dragon can make anything as long as he has the ingredients, youngster."

Though he said as much, the ancient dragon seemed a bit fatigued. Cale took note, mentally adding another task to his agenda in the north.

"When do we get to use this?" Raon asked, eyes sparkling as he peered at Erhaven.

The gold dragon flinched. He couldn't answer that question easily; although they did need to conduct some tests in the process of improving on the version that the Empire had created, they couldn't use the pillar of fire however they pleased.

They exchanged glances, neither speaking—until someone answered their question for them.

"Probably early next year?" Cale said offhandedly.

"Huh?"

"Hmm?"

The two dragons turned toward Cale, who added, "If we're somewhere cold, starting a fire will warm us up."

Erhaven cocked a brow. *Warm, he says? I'm sure he knows "warm" would be an understatement…*

Then Raon blurted out, "Let's show it to the whales too!"

"Sure."

Ignoring Erhaven's umpteenth sigh, Cale reclined on the bed once again. It was nice to be warm during winter, and nothing beat the cozy comfort found beneath a blanket.

***

A mere few days later, Cale was forced to abandon his toasty covers and brave the bitter winds atop a platform. The voice of an event coordinator echoed through the area with the help of a magical amplification device.

"We will now present a medal to the valiant Lord Cale Henituse, who showed our Empire his sense of sacrifice!"

Nice narration, Cale thought as he faced forward. The emperor welcomed him with a kindly smile. Behind him, a massive crowd watched from the plaza outside the imperial palace.

Cale didn't mind the stares boring into his back.

‹Human!›

He *did* mind Raon's commentary, however.

‹I'm proud of you. This feels amazing. We did it!›

Trying his best to ignore the emotional dragon, Cale tilted his face toward the emperor, who stood one level above him. The emperor only made public appearances during situations like this, but Cale felt apathetic about his presence here.

I think they said he's sick.

Rumor had it that the emperor had grown so weak, it was almost a miracle that he was still alive. The same thing had happened to the former emperor as well. *No wonder they treasure Prince Adin.*

A line in *Birth of a Hero* said of the prince: *The emperor projected his greed onto Adin, who used this to his advantage.*

Adin had been born with a healthy body and a knack for swordplay. He used these qualities to make the emperor rely on him, as both were traits that the emperor wished he had. Furthermore, Adin absorbed the houses of knightly heritage that had been diminished by two generations of weak emperors.

"Cale Henituse."

The one and only emperor in the Western Continent called out Cale's name, his voice carried by the magic amplification device. As Cale formally paid his respects, the emperor continued his speech.

"Your actions during the Sun Palace Bombing Incident were courageous and beautiful. Despite being a guest from abroad, you did something that would have been difficult even for one of our own. Thanks to your heroic deeds, the Sun Palace did not fall, and many lives were saved."

Cale studied the emperor's face as the man praised his actions. The emperor *did* seem frail. *Other than that, they're two birds of a feather.* Although their physical conditions were worlds apart, the emperor and his son shared the same mindset. He swiftly suppressed his thoughts, playing the part of a respectful young noble in front of the nation's ruler.

The emperor raised his voice. "I am here to present this courageous young man with the third-tier Mogor Medal of Honor, as well as a few of our treasures!"

He pinned a silver medal to Cale's shirt.

Cheers exploded in the plaza, and the emperor patted Cale on the shoulder. "Good work."

The emperor's sincerity shone through. The Empire had given Cale a third-tier medal, after all. Of the many medals available, the third-tier Mogor Medal of Honor was a grand award indeed. The first-tier medal was awarded to officials who had exhibited outstanding service, the second went to war heroes, and the third was for individuals who'd performed exemplary deeds for the nation. The third-tier medal was the highest honor available to foreigners, and Cale was the first person to receive it in quite some time.

Probably because no one in the Empire has done anything praiseworthy lately.

In the eyes of the other kingdoms, the Mogor Empire seemed to be stumbling from failure to failure. They lost Myple Castle, one of their palace columns was all but destroyed, and the vice-master of the Alchemist's Bell Tower was almost assassinated in the Sun Palace. Then, in their darkest hour, a shining beacon named Cale Henituse appeared before them.

‹I'm super proud of you, human! You may be weak, but your heart is pure!›

As usual, Cale ignored Raon's praise.

"Why don't you briefly share your sentiments?" the emperor suggested, pointing to the plaza behind Cale. This was part of the agenda, before the treasure presentation.

After bowing to the emperor, Cale pivoted to face the plaza. A sea of people stretched out before him.

‹Human! Bilose is at your three o'clock, by the fountain!›

Cale's eyes drifted toward it; he'd instructed Bilose to choose that very spot. There stood Bilose, Rei Stecker, and even Choi Han—who had the cat knight in his arms. Although Cale couldn't make out their faces from this distance, he recognized their silhouettes. *They're all here.*

He swept his gaze across the rest of the plaza, watching people cheer in anticipation of his remarks. Then he announced, "I'm so happy."

His happiness really did appear genuine. The crowd applauded this young noble, who openly expressed his joy at receiving their Empire's medal. They were pleased to find that he appreciated the honor.

News of the terrorist attack at the Sun Palace had shocked the nation, but the Empire's people also heard what this nobleman on the platform had achieved: No one had been hurt, and the Sun Palace remained standing. That being the case, these events had little effect on the average citizen. The people Cale saved had primarily been nobles; the masses in the plaza would voice their support, but nothing more. Naturally, Cale understood this.

"I'm happy that I was able to save others and fulfill my responsibilities," he went on.

The audience's expressions changed. It wasn't receiving the medal that made him happy?

Yet that was the end of it, as Cale didn't elaborate further. A wave of disappointment at the short speech coursed through the plaza as Cale returned his attention to the emperor.

"I suppose it is now time for the treasure," the emperor said. He motioned to someone, who approached with a long box wrapped in velvet.

As Cale looked at the box, the emperor observed him in kind, feeling something was off about the young nobleman. Cale had just finished saying how happy he was, but his expression was stiff and his attitude hesitant. The emperor also caught Cale sneaking glances at him.

The emperor had seen these signs before. Like many cautious young nobles before him, Cale wanted to say something, but he was faltering in the emperor's presence. Suppressing a cough caused by

the frigid wind, the emperor asked, "Is there something you wish to say?"

"…It's nothing, Your Imperial Majesty."

"I shall ask you a second time. Speak freely."

At that, Cale Henituse's face hardened. His mind apparently made up, he said, "I'm afraid I don't know what the treasure is."

"That's true."

The courage in Cale's expression reminded the emperor of other young nobles he encountered from time to time. He had a decent grasp of what was happening.

"May I exchange this treasure for something else?"

"Hrm…" The emperor glanced at Adin, who stood right below the platform.

"He's considered an honorable young noble, Father."

"Is he now?"

"Most people would think so."

The emperor knew how potent the combination of youth and a sense of justice could be. His tone gentle, he asked, "What do you wish to exchange it for?"

Cale's face lit up in a dazzling smile.

‹Human, that smile of yours looks so shady!›

Again, Cale let Raon's comments go in one ear and out the other. "My friend told me something."

A friend, he says?

Their conversation was amplified for the entire plaza to hear, and the unexpected turn confused the audience and emperor alike.

"He said light illuminates the darkness."

Recognition dawned on the crowd's faces. For most of them, a particular phrase came to mind: *"The Sun chases the darkness and*

shines its light upon it."

This saying was widely known as the foundational principle of the Church of the God of Sun. While Cale's words didn't match exactly, they echoed the original sentiment. Unbeknownst to the audience, Cale's "friend" was the one and only Saint Jack.

"My friend also said light does not diminish, even if you share it."

The sun was vast enough to shine its light upon all living things. Odd as it was, considering the differences between Cale's speech and their doctrine, the God of Sun's followers couldn't help recalling fundamental truths taught by their church.

While the church's leadership had committed terrible atrocities, those misdeeds contradicted the tenets of their faith. There were still many devotees in the Empire, and now, someone unrelated to the church was reminding them of their beliefs.

Cale's jubilant voice rang through the plaza. "That's why I want to share—even if I do, the light will never dwindle."

The Church of the God of Sun's faithful interpreted Cale's words differently: *The sun shines on forevermore, unchanging.* No matter the sins of the past, their faith was righteous, everlasting.

"It's been a while," one citizen mumbled to himself as he gazed up at the platform. It had been too long since he'd felt the teachings in his heart rather than his mind.

Some *were* strictly pragmatic about the message, the emperor among them. His gaze sharpened for an instant before returning to normal. *He doesn't seem to have done that on purpose, but that's irrelevant.* He didn't suspect Cale of referencing the church's fundamental truths intentionally. After all, this daring young man now awaiting his response was far from the first noble naive enough to believe he could build a beautiful world.

The emperor didn't miss the chance to solidify his own position. "You wish to share this treasure with others rather than use

it for yourself?”

“If that’s possible, Your Imperial Majesty, then yes.”

Laughing, the emperor declared in a booming voice, “I will grant Cale Henituse’s request! We will open the granaries and share food exceeding the value of this treasure with citizens in need!”

Everyone’s faces lit up. Before they started cheering, the emperor continued, “In addition, I will present the magnanimous Cale Henituse with this treasure as originally planned!”

The emperor played the part of a benevolent ruler, matching Cale’s show of generosity. His subjects ate it up, roaring their approval even more passionately than before. This plaza, a desolate place since the church’s fall and the Empire’s defeat by the Kingdom of the Whipper, erupted with vibrant energy as the people vigorously applauded the emperor and the young foreign noble. A chorus of voices rose up to sing Cale’s praises.

Clapping away, one man said, “It’d be great if that noble were one of us, wouldn’t it?”

“No kidding!” said another. “But hey, our emperor’s quite generous too!”

“True enough. Anyway, that noble’s an upstanding guy!”

“What was his name again?”

“Cale Henituse.”

“Oho, I see. Is he a member of the Church of the God of Sun, then?”

“I don’t know about that…but he seems like a good person. And he’s brave. You don’t see aristocrats like him too often.”

“Right?”

Rei Stecker surveyed the rowdy plaza, then fixed Cale with a look of confusion. Before all this, he’d learned that Cale was the white-haired priest who visited him, and he’d also heard what Cale

had done for Rex. The cat knight himself wore a complicated expression as he eyed the platform where Cale stood.

Bilose addressed both of them. "Lord Cale did the same thing in Rowoon. He hasn't changed a bit."

"In Rowoon?" Rei asked.

With a nod, Bilose deliberately raised his voice. "He also single-handedly prevented Rowoon's Plaza Terror Incident, but he refused any honor beyond the joy of saving others. He was only worried about those who might still be suffering."

His reveal shocked the imperial citizens who heard it, and their impressions of Cale changed. At the same time, Bilose's subordinates—who were scattered throughout the plaza per the merchant's instructions—shared stories of Cale's deeds.

Cale Henituse was the noble who put his body on the line during the Rowoon's Plaza Terror Incident, then came to help investigate the terrorist attack at the Vatican. Tales of Cale's valor spread through the plaza like wildfire.

"…What an amazing person," Rei said once Bilose was finished.

Choi Han, who'd been standing by in stoic silence, finally spoke up. "Mr. Cale has always been like that," he said proudly.

Sensing the man's deep trust in his charge, Rei and Rex gaped at Cale anew.

As the emperor started a short speech, Cale descended from the platform. He spotted Adin at the foot of the steps. Though Adin forced himself to keep smiling, he didn't look very happy; Cale's little stunt had soured his mood. He moved toward Cale, presumably to discuss what just happened but stopped short—Albert had reached Cale first.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to do that?"

Cale responded to Albert's reprimand by bowing to both princes. "My apologies, Your Highness. The idea popped into my head out of the blue."

Adin patted Cale on the shoulder, smile still in place. "No need to apologize. You have my gratitude for thinking of our citizens."

"Thank you for your understanding."

As Adin took note of Cale's relief, Albert spoke again. "You always put others first. It was the same during the terror incident too."

Upon hearing that Cale had pulled something similar before, Adin's taut expression softened a bit.

Cale smiled at Albert before quietly returning to his spot. While Cale hadn't informed the emperor and the imperial prince of his plans, he actually *had* warned Albert in advance. When he rejoined the rest of the delegation, Daltaro gave his shoulder a good-natured pat.

"Good job. You were inspiring!" Daltaro said, regarding Cale with pride and affection. "Get plenty of rest before we leave tomorrow."

As Daltaro said, the delegation would depart the next day. Because unforeseen events had kept them in the Mogor Empire longer than they'd intended, they would pass through Guiller territory briefly to use the magic teleportation circle.

Cale offered Daltaro a smile in reply. As his fingers ran over the treasure box in his arms, Raon's voice echoed in his mind. *‹I feel an evil aura coming from that box! Let's ask Gragon Gramps—no, let's ask Mary!›*

"Are you planning to sacrifice yourself?" the stone guardian chimed in.

I knew it. Though the emperor had handed him the treasure, it was obvious that Adin—who'd arranged the event—had selected it. Thus, it couldn't be anything good.

Cale peeked into the box, only to see a lightweight sword suitable for self-defense. The weapon had a jewel embedded in its

pommel. After seeing that the so-called "treasure" Adin gave him was useless, Cale made up his mind.

Yeah, no. I don't like this.

***

Later that night, Cale gathered his retinue at Bilose's secret residence to share his plans. "I'll destroy the Alchemist's Bell Tower for sure."

Bilose flinched. "You're going to *destroy* it?"

"Yes. If we destroy the tower, and you source the materials to build a new one, won't you make a killing?"

Without missing a beat, Bilose said, "You have my full support."

Any reservations Bilose might've had were gone the moment there was money to be made. By contrast, Rei and Rex were visibly anxious. Even Choi Han, who stood at Cale's side, peered at him with hesitance.

"My lord," Rei began, "I didn't know you were a noble."

"Is that a problem?"

Rei answered Cale's question with a brisk shake of his head. It simply amazed him that someone like Cale, who could have ignored all this and returned to his peaceful life, would willingly oppose the powerful forces of alchemy and the Empire to share the truth with the Empire's citizens.

"I'm leaving tomorrow. I came here to tell you a couple of things before I go."

Cale's statement recaptured Rei's attention. Rex, still in his cat form, continued to observe Cale in silence. The Empire's frantic search for Rex and his companions made it difficult to move them, and Rei needed time to gather other alchemists who were unaffiliated with the Bell Tower. They needed to lie in wait for now.

To that end, Cale would keep dead quiet until the northern alliance attacked. Wouldn't that be the optimal time to hit the Empire where it hurt, when their guard was already down? But for his plans to succeed, he needed something for his players to rally behind.

Cale promptly got to the point. "The saint and saintess are still alive."

Rei gasped. *They survived!* Not only that, but Cale's reveal was twofold. *He knows where they are.*

Choi Han had already told Rei and Rex why the Church of the God of Sun had been bombed: It had tried to expose the secrets of the Alchemist's Bell Tower. He'd also explained that the Empire had framed the saint and saintess for the incident and attempted to kill them.

Conscious of everyone's eyes on him, Cale continued, "I'll be back within a year. Stay strong until then." He followed this order by promising a reward for their success. "If you can hang tough, I'll bring you everything you want."

Everything you want. Rei and Rex reeled at that. This man was promising to bring the two of them—an alcoholic alchemist from the slums and a cat knight wanted for attempted murder—all the coveted things they struggled to obtain.

Rei answered easily; their only other options were death or life in seclusion, anyway. "I'll endure until then."

Cale smiled at him. "You don't reek of alcohol anymore. That's great."

Rei grinned. Now that he'd shaved his beard, combed his hair, and dressed himself in proper (albeit shabby) clothes, he looked more like a scientist than an alcoholic.

"I'll hang in there too," Rex said after a brief pause. If all he had left was a choice between dying or running forever, he'd rather hold out for one last chance to achieve his goals.

Rex stiffened when Cale stood and approached him, but he quickly calmed himself—until Cale's quiet voice made his anxiety spike all over again.

"Sir Rex."

Cale produced several items from his magic bag and piled them up in front of Rex.

Whump. Whump. Whump.

A stack of heavy objects grew before Rex's widening eyes. They were books.

"Read all of them."

There was a veritable mountain of tomes in front of him. Rex scanned the titles on their thick spines. *Leadership? Politics? Military science?*

"Why do I need to read these?" he asked, puzzled.

"Just read what I tell you to read," Cale said instead. "Even better—study them thoroughly."

Seeing the look in Cale's eyes, Rex slowly bobbed his head. Only then did Cale beam in satisfaction.

When the imperial prince was deposed, someone had to take his place. But who? Cale kept his ideas to himself for the time being, his expression smug as he stroked the cat's red fur. Rex cringed but held himself still.

‹Human, why're you smiling like that again?› Raon asked. *‹Isn't everything over?›*

Over? This is just the starting line.

The day Cale returned with the saint, saintess, and the divine item—that was the day it would all begin.

***

"Human, I'm six years old now! I've grown bigger too!"

"Yes, yes."

Raon pointed at Cale with his stubby forepaw. "And you're twenty years old, human!"

"Uh-huh." Cale nodded lazily and addressed the driver. "Choi Han, are we almost there?"

"Yes, sir. We'll reach Harris shortly."

The New Year had arrived. After spending the days following his return from the Mogor Empire slacking off in the Henituse estate, Cale had emerged for the first time since he got home.

It was going to be quite a lengthy trip north through the town of tigers, the home of the whales, and the Kingdom of Faern.

Chapter 37:
Perhaps

C*LICK.*

When Cale opened the carriage door, the rush of frigid air wasn't his greatest shock.

"L-Lord Cale!"

Someone barreled toward him with arms wide open, ecstatic to see him: the dwarf-rat half-blood, Müller. The architect's coat flapped askew as he made a mad dash for Cale, looking as if he was on the verge of tears.

"What's wrong with him?" Cale asked Choi Han, who shrugged.

Müller skidded to a halt in front of Cale, panting heavily. "M-my lord!"

"What?"

Normally, Müller would've shrunk back in Cale's presence; this difference in his behavior was baffling. He snagged the side of Cale's trousers. "Please take me too!"

What's going on? The desperation on Müller's face mystified Cale. *Something's not right here.*

Thanks to Müller's work designing the walls and the golden turtle ship, his reputation was soaring. He should've been strutting about with his nose in the air, so why did he seem terrified instead?

"I'd rather follow you around! Th-this is just…!"

Cale wasted no time in dislodging his grip. Gesturing for Choi Han to pacify Müller for the moment, Cale entered Harris.

No soldiers or knights guarded the town. Those previously stationed here had all returned to the Henituses' castle for training

under the knight captain. This was partly to keep the Tiger Tribe's move to Harris under wraps, but more importantly, the tigers hardly needed soldiers to protect them.

Cale inspected a wooden fence that looked like Müller's handiwork before venturing farther into the snow-covered town. He made a face when he saw young tigers and wolves rolling around with two familiar cats in the snow.

‹Looks fun!›

"Mm."

‹I'm going to play too!›

"Do whatever you want."

Raon appeared in the air and zipped toward the children.

"Eek!"

A yelp rose up behind them—Müller again. The half-dwarf ran over and latched on to Cale's trousers once more, perhaps shocked by Raon's abrupt entrance.

Cale didn't push him away this time. Instead, he turned to the cherubic thirty-year-old and spoke with sympathy. "Ah, yes. Tigers and cats are both felines."

Had Müller nodded any harder, he'd probably have broken his neck. Now that Cale understood the half-rat's conundrum, he let Müller cower behind him as the cats and tigers bounded toward them. Ohn and Hong reached Cale first.

"Wow! It's been so long!"

"You're finally here!"

Choi Han let out a chuckle. From his vantage point at Cale's side, he'd seen the corners of Cale's lips twitch.

"We missed you!" said the red cat, Hong, who was all bundled up. He rubbed his head on Cale's leg, prompting Müller to take cover behind Choi Han instead.

The silver cat, Ohn, circled Cale. “We heard you got hurt,” she said, sounding concerned. She’d grown a bit since turning twelve, but a twelve-year-old was still a child.

“Yes, I coughed up some blood.”

Ohn, Hong, and the other young beastfolk frowned. So did Raon. Cale paid them no mind, focused on someone walking his way. It was Gashan, the tiger shaman, accompanied by tiger warriors.

“Welcome, Lord Cale.”

“Hello there. It’s been a while.”

While Cale had on snug layers to keep warm, Gashan wore thin garments despite the chill. Smiling with his eyes closed, he said, “That butler, Hans, told us what you did in the Empire.”

“Did he?”

Cale’s deeds in the Empire had prompted a flood of correspondence from all over Rowoon. The northeastern nobles, among others, had invited him to various balls. Only Eric Whilsman proved to be an exception; he’d sent a fretful letter inquiring about Cale’s condition.

As Cale had exhausted this topic, he casually changed the subject. “Has nature told you anything else?”

Gashan loosed a loud, breathy hum. Startled, Cale regretted asking in the first place.

The shaman clenched his staff for a moment, then tilted his head. “Nature said…warm air will fill the north this winter.”

Wow. Cale was amazed, though he remained outwardly stoic.

“Isn’t the northern alliance our enemy?” Gashan mused aloud. “I fear this may be a good omen for them.”

“No need to concern yourself,” Cale declared. When the tiger warriors turned toward him, he offered them a gentle smile. “So long as we do what we must, things will go our way.”

Gashan nodded. “I see. There’s no need to worry about events so far in the future.”

Meanwhile, Cale thought to himself, *Nature really is psychic.*

Tap. Tap.

Cale turned to see a surprised black dragon prodding his shoulder. The six-year-old stared at Gashan in wonder.

‹That’s amazing, human! There’s no way that tiger shaman knows about the Dragon’s Rage!› That was the name of the pillar of fire created by Erhaven.

In lieu of a response, Cale’s smile only grew.

‹Not that smile again!›

Raon shook his head and flew to Ohn and Hong. As the children now averaging nine years old whispered among themselves, Cale walked off.

“Let’s go home.”

“Got it, Mr. Cale.”

Home.

Choi Han and Gashan followed him. Keeping as far away from Gashan as possible, Müller maintained his grip on Cale’s trousers as he went along with them.

***

When Cale said “home,” he meant the stone guardian’s villa. Several people gathered at the entrance to greet him. As soon as he saw them, his lips quirked up.

“So devious!”

“He’s plotting something again!”

“You’re right! It’s that smile!”

Cale ignored the rapid-fire comments from Hong, Ohn, and Raon, taking in everyone standing at the cave opening. He’d

expected to see Lark, Hans, and Rosalyn as per usual, but the ones waiting for him instead were completely unexpected.

"You're here?"

The one who'd spoken was Hana, the swordmaster, who leaned against the cave wall with her arms crossed. Cale scarcely registered her curt greeting, instead focusing on the two people who'd probably dragged her here.

Kage, the crazy priestess, gnawed on her fingernails while one of her legs shook fiercely. She was so deeply entrenched in her own thoughts that she hadn't even noticed Cale's arrival. "You crazy god… Why do you keep showing up in my dreams and bawling?! 'Grab onto Lord Cale's coattails'? What the hell does that mean?!"

She hadn't had a good night's sleep for the past few weeks. Every night, her dreams were filled with the God of Death sniffling and crying out over and over. How could a god act like that? And he always muttered the same thing:

"At last, at last! That human Cale really was the genuine article! Now I can share a beautiful death with the world!"

That wasn't the strangest part. It was what the god said next that Kage couldn't believe.

"Would you like to try being a saintess?"

Every time, Kage woke at that moment and shouted back, "Screw that! Do you think I'm nuts?!"

When she'd responded that way this morning, however, the God of Death's voice had reached her—accompanied by a severe headache. *"Do as you like. That is the path you should take."*

The god telling her to do whatever she pleased made her feel even more suspicious.

Just then, Jack's shaky voice reached her ears. "Um, priestess?"

Kage's eyes snapped over to Jack when he called her. The saint had been complaining of insomnia, headaches, and palpitations over the last few days. He didn't hear the voice of his god; he simply felt strange.

Tremors seized Kage's entire body as an ominous feeling overwhelmed her. "Shit!" she blurted out, whipping her head toward the source of her unease. She had experienced this chilling sensation before, when she and her fellow priest and priestess candidates took their vows before the God of Death. Since none of the others had shared her sense of foreboding, she'd kept it to herself.

No… This is different.

It was deeper and darker than before.

"Cursing at the sight of me? How friendly."

Kage's gaze landed on Cale, and she sucked in a breath. She'd heard about Cale's heroic exploits in the Mogor Empire. Though she debated breaking the ice by bringing that up, even she was surprised by what she said next.

"What the hell did you bring with you?" Kage asked, her mind clearing instantly. "What horrible thing did you get your hands on?"

This dread I'm feeling is…

Although the Church of the God of Death presented death as something beautiful, Kage knew the truth. There was no crueler mistress. Death was fair in that it came knocking for everyone—the rich and the poor, the weak and the powerful—without discrimination. Death was also terribly unfair. It would snatch away a sweet child too soon and let an evil scoundrel live to a ripe old age. Whatever Cale had brought, Kage knew in her bones that it had something to do with death.

Jack, on the other hand, patted his chest with visible bewilderment. "Huh? What's happening?"

At Jack's reaction, Cale's grin only widened. *I knew it,* he thought. The crazy priestess was just as incredible as he'd expected —more authentic than even Saint Jack.

Cale hadn't been stopped by any priests from the Church of the God of Sun nor from the Temple of the God of Death on his long return journey from the Empire. Yet now Saint Jack hesitated to approach him, wearing a strange expression, while Kage strode over.

"Lord Cale, why's there such a dangerous aura clinging to you? It's not good for your health!"

As Kage voiced her concerns, Cale studied her face. "Miss Kage. Saint Jack." Unruffled, he pointed to the cave. "Let's head inside before we chat."

He took the lead, ushering them into the underground villa.

***

Cale reclined on the couch in his fifth-floor chambers for the first time in ages. A teacup materialized in front of him, courtesy of Hans, who also set out some snacks before quietly exiting the room.

"Go on, have some tea," Cale told his guests, sounding unhurried. "We're all freezing."

Kage and Jack gaped at him, then picked up their teacups and took a few slow sips. The calming beverage soothed Kage's nerves.

Cale chose that moment to place two items on the table. One was an old compact mirror, and the other—

"Pffft!" Kage spat out her tea.

It was a white book. The author's name was A Heartfelt Death. Tea dribbled from her chin to the floor, but neither she nor Cale spared a glance at the mess.

Tamping down his anxiety, Cale asked, "What do you think?" He didn't know much about divine artifacts, so her input was vital.

Kage wordlessly reached for the book, hesitating midway.

"No, please, take a look."

At his urging, she picked it up. With a loud hiss, an eerie black glow enveloped the white book.

Bang!

At the sound of someone rapping at the fifth-floor window, Cale whirled to see Raon's face flattened like a pancake against the glass. He must've flown over from his playtime with Ohn and Hong. "Human! What are you doing?! I sense a super scary aura!"

While Cale marveled at his speed, he heard Kage's voice. "This…"

Cale shifted back toward her, his heart hammering in his chest. How amazing would this divine item be?

Kage gulped. "Th-this is a single-use item."

What? Cale stared at Kage in shock. Had he heard wrong? "Excuse me? What did you just say, Miss Kage?"

While Cale waited on tenterhooks for her explanation, Kage recalled what the God of Death had wailed about in her dreams. "I'm not so sure myself."

"Really?"

It was true; Kage knew nothing more. Instead, she told Cale what she saw. "This book only has one sentence."

When she said as much, Cale thought back to what he'd read in that very book:

All the world's beings are beautiful once they're dead.

Do you wish to die? I'll teach you about the easiest way!

He remembered it clearly—yet Kage only saw one sentence? Cale donned a complicated expression.

Peering back up at him, Kage recalled something the God of Death had told her last night after weeks of endless sobbing: *"Heroes are beings even gods cannot predict. The time has come for the birth of a hero."*

The birth of a hero.

Abandoning that thought, Kage read the sentence aloud. "'Do you want to know how to kill death?'"

Every single one of the book's several hundred pages were filled with that single sentence.

So vicious, Cale thought.

The crazy priestess flipped rapidly through the pages, perusing their contents. "Every page says the same thing. All of them."

"It looked like an ordinary essay collection to us."

Nothing about the original contents was "ordinary," of course, but the book hadn't given off such an eerie aura before.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Raon kept pounding on the window, interrupting Cale's musings. Heaving a sigh, Cale opened it for him.

"I've got a bad feeling about this!" Raon proclaimed upon entry. He plopped down right beside Cale, staring at the book in Kage's hand.

The priestess watched Raon in a daze before Cale's gaze prompted her to speak. "To be honest, I can't actually *read* what's written here. When I look at these unfamiliar letters, that statement appears in my mind."

She lapsed into silence, so Cale ventured, "What does it mean, 'to kill death'?"

Kage shook her head. "I'm not sure. What a complicated book… The author's name is total bullshit, though. 'A Heartfelt Death'? Heartfelt, my ass."

The more she spoke, the rougher her language became. She bit off a curse, then cleared her throat to continue. “The Temple of the God of Death has a book containing the God of Death’s words. They have deciphered the book’s contents and consider them to be the god’s fundamental truths.”

She recalled the verses she was forced to memorize as a child before bed each night. The senior priests wouldn’t allow her to sleep until she could recite every word.

“Is there a similar phrase in that book?”

Kage smiled at Cale; he always understood what she meant to say. “No, there isn’t. But supposedly, the God of Death did say this: ‘Death is not the end.’”

Such was the God of Death’s message about life.

“After death, we are all given a choice between two roads: the straight and narrow or the twisted path.”

Another hiss, and a black glow enveloped the book again. Both Cale and Kage flinched, but the priestess kept her cool.

“The moment you step onto the twisted path, you’re destined to receive yet another choice when you reach the end.”

Out of nowhere, the book’s pages began flipping all by themselves, then stopped at a particular spot. Cale opened his mouth to ask Kage what she read there, but the crazy priestess’s sharp reaction cut him off.

“You crazy god!”

Cale cringed.

“It’s asking the same question: ‘Do you want to know how to kill death?’” Kage informed him. “Well, do you?”

“Not at all.”

He wasn’t even remotely curious. Here he thought he’d uncovered a valuable treasure, but this book had turned out to be something terrible.

"Good, human. You don't need to keep such a nasty thing!" Raon said with a grin, patting Cale's arm with a stubby forepaw to congratulate him on a job well done. Cale held in a sigh at the black dragon's behavior.

On the way back from the Empire, Cale had asked Erhaven about divine artifacts.

"There's no translating the language of the gods," Erhaven had replied at the time, shaking his head. *"Only those qualified can make heads or tails of it."*

"Do *you* want to know, Miss Kage?" Cale asked.

"I'm not the slightest bit interested either."

As I thought. Grateful that they were on the same page, Cale pointed at the book. "Can you hold on to it for me?"

"Sure. I'll keep it safe and hand it over to you when you need it." Kage smacked the book as if she considered it more of a nuisance than a priceless treasure. "I heard most of the God of Death's divine artifacts were gone. This one's got such an ominous aura, I figure it'd give any regular person nightmares or sleep paralysis."

"That must be why I had a nightmare!" Raon exclaimed, glowering at the book again.

Cale tilted his head. *Nightmare? Sleep paralysis? That's strange.* He hadn't had any issues sleeping; in fact, he'd never slept better.

As Cale considered how strange this was, a clattering sound caught his attention. "Saint Jack…?"

Jack didn't answer Cale's call; he just continued shaking, looking like he might drop the teacup in his hand any moment. The cup clinked against its saucer almost hard enough to spill the tea inside.

What's his problem? Cale's brow furrowed; he had no clue what was going on.

"It s-suddenly got cold, so I w-wanted to drink some tea," Jack squeezed out. "Th-that's all I was trying to do."

He's cold?

While Cale puzzled over Jack's response, Kage snatched the teacup out of Jack's hand and all but slammed it on the table. *Clack!*

"It's a god," she told Jack sternly.

This only confused Cale further. *A god?*

"Saint Jack, that's a god's aura," Kage said.

The crazy priestess had figured out what Jack was feeling—a chilly, terrifying sensation beyond what hot tea could remedy.

He can't hear his god speak, but…I guess he can still feel it.

Kage thought Jack truly was fated to became a saint. He might not hear anything his god said to him, but he could at least feel the deity's gaze. "The aura of a god is eerie, disturbing, and cold," she explained.

Though she griped about the God of Death's whining and frequently swore about it, she hadn't abandoned her identity. Excommunication didn't stop her from living according to her own principles. Likewise, as a priestess, she couldn't avoid her god.

"Miss Kage, I…" Jack clasped his shaking hands together, eyes locked on Kage. The touch of a priestess of the God of Death had calmed him a bit.

"What do you want to do, Jack?" she asked.

Jack reached out a hand, apparently seeking the compact mirror. The mirror soon settled into his palm—placed there by Cale.

"Do whatever you like with it."

At Cale's prompting, Jack opened the compact with utmost care. *Click.* There was an old, cracked mirror inside.

"Oh!" Jack looked up at Cale, wide-eyed. "Th-there's a word written on the mirror!"

More hidden words? Cale thought, then softened his tone a little. "What does it say?"

Jack's gaze slid back to the mirror while his body continued to quake. "'Condemnation.' It says 'condemnation.'"

He felt as if the word was being etched into his mind, proving beyond doubt that this compact mirror was the Condemnation of the Sun.

The God of Sun was a righteous god, his actions guided by rational judgment. Yet that very rationality made him benevolent. Never swayed by power, affection, or compassion, he treated all equally.

Relief washed over Jack at the word on the mirror; the God of Sun's "condemnation" wasn't directed at him. Still, his fear had yet to abate. The anger he felt emanating from the divine item overwhelmed him.

"Lord Cale, I'm not confident that I can safeguard this item."

"I'll keep it, then."

Cale took the mirror back. He didn't see anything written on the reflective glass, nor did he sense an intimidating aura from it. Though the saint had relaxed, what Cale said next wiped the smile from his face.

"But you'll need to take it with you when we go to the Empire."

After that, Cale told the pair about the alchemist and the cat knight. He described the demolished Vatican in detail, then relayed the conversations among the citizens.

Once Cale was finished, Jack stared blankly at him.

"We have to save them," Cale declared.

Those words brought Jack back to the present, and he nodded. "Yes… They need our help." The crazy priestess patted his shoulder, and Jack smiled at her in return. "Say, Lord Cale?"

"Yes?"

"I respect you."

When Cale remained silent, Jack continued, "I want to protect others like you do. I want to be like you."

Pressured by Jack's pure, earnest gaze, Cale could do little but nod. He couldn't possibly encourage this holy and pure saint to follow his example. "Well then, I think we're finished here."

Cale drained the rest of his tea and stood. He bid them farewell and opened the door—only to gasp in shock. A pair of pure-white eyes hovered mere inches from his face.

It was Gashan. "My lord."

"Y-yes?" Cale stammered, unsettled.

Gashan looked deadly serious. "Are you all right? Nature told me that a mighty power descended. Did something happen?"

Wow. Nature really is *psychic.*

Cale nodded to reassure him. "It's fine. You don't need to wor__"

"Worry? About what?"

Again, Cale nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Gragon Gramps!" Raon barked, rounding on the gold dragon who'd appeared out of nowhere. "Can't you see my human is startled? He's so weak, you might kill him if you pop up like that!"

Would that really kill me? Cale stopped Raon from saying anything scarier and offered Erhaven an awkward smile. The gold dragon had been holed up in his lair since they'd returned from the Empire; he must've just teleported here.

"My goodness. I cannot believe this youngster is a dragon," Erhaven said with a shake of his head, regarding Raon with incredulity before returning his attention to Cale. "Here you go."

He placed a bottle of purple liquid in Cale's hands. Raon's eyes sparkled as he examined it. "Is this the Dragon's Rage?"

Gashan flinched at the moniker, but Cale ignored him. “No, this is the one from the Mogor Empire. Dragon’s Rage is different.”

They had stolen this purple liquid from Myple Castle.

“Why do you need it?” Raon asked.

Tucking the bottle away in his magic bag, Cale replied, “To trigger conflict between the Empire and the northern alliance.”

His blithe answer made Gashan shudder; they were discussing such a large-scale scheme like it was nothing. Then he heard Raon’s sunny voice:

“Ooh, I see!”

Did I submit myself to a dangerously powerful man? Gashan felt uneasy, but it was too late for misgivings now.

“Are tigers good at climbing cliffs?” Cale asked him.

“Pardon? Cliffs?”

“Yes. Dangerous ones too.”

Confused though Gashan was, he answered honestly. “Well, the warriors are certainly capable.”

“Are they now?” Cale murmured, donning a devious grin.

Gashan found himself practically throttling his staff, waiting for a warning from nature. When none came, he focused on Cale’s instructions.

“When the weather warms up, let’s head to Death Canyon.”

“As you wi—wait, what? Did you say Death Canyon?”

Death Canyon was another of the Five Wonders. It was a gorge known for its abysmal terrain, so horrendous that even plants struggled to thrive there. Its terrible weather, a result of its high elevation, made it an unwelcoming environment for humans, animals, and monsters alike.

When Cale mentioned going there, Gashan gulped.

"The Dragon's Rage will rain down on the canyon," Cale added with total nonchalance.

Erhaven scoffed. "That's a gutsy move for the unlucky punk." Seeming oddly proud, he added, "Good. The unluckier you are, the bolder you need to be."

"Thank you kindly."

Cale accepted the compliment with grace, though not without some bashfulness. Gashan watched the exchange in silence until Cale addressed him.

"Gashan, may I go now? I have something to discuss with Lord Erhaven."

The tiger shaman nodded absentmindedly. "Ah, of course."

With that, Cale and Erhaven walked off toward Rosalyn's laboratory. At that moment, Raon approached him. Gashan found it odd; the black dragon had never spoken to him first before.

"Cheer up!" Raon said.

"Excuse me?" Gashan replied, but Raon hurried after Cale, his now chubbier cheeks adorned with a smile. Gashan watched the departing trio for a few moments, then left Cale's room with Jack and Kage.

***

"You want me to climb on your back?"

"Yes. We'll guide you to the village."

It was late at night on the Uvar coast. Cale stood beneath a small light source while a massive humpback whale with an X-shaped scar offered her back to him.

When Cale hesitated, Witira added, "Lord Cale, you and your followers have earned the right to ride on my back. Lord Raon as well."

"She's right!" said the half-blood whale, Faseton, agreeing with his sister. He likewise displayed his back to Cale. "I can give you a ride too!"

"Mm…" Cale dithered a moment longer, then said, "Sorry."

"Excuse me?" Faseton blurted out, baffled.

Cale tightened the scarf around his neck. "The winter winds are downright freezing at sea."

It was the middle of January; Cale thought he'd be too cold on a whale's back. Faseton hummed in understanding. Cale had braved the frigid weather to meet the whale siblings in secret on one of the islands within Henituse territory. Now it was time to head for the sea route via the Whale Village.

Catching Witira's eye, Cale pointed to Rosalyn and Raon nearby. "Tell me the teleportation coordinates, please. They'll send me over."

Witira's expression faltered. "Oh. Um, Lord Cale…"

Her attitude worried Cale a bit. "What?"

"It's an iceberg."

Hmm?

"Our village is on top of a giant iceberg," Witira explained with an awkward smile, "and that iceberg is constantly moving. It would be difficult to give you accurate coordinates."

Ah. In that case… Cale mulled it over. "Flying there by magic would be cold too, right, Raon?"

"It'd be super cold! You'd get sick, human!"

"…Thermal magic, please."

The whales had mentioned that the northern alliance was keeping an eye on them, leading Cale to believe their village was part of the continent. He never would've expected to find the Whale Village on top of a moving iceberg.

As Cale watched, Choi Han wordlessly tethered a small ship to the two whales. Rosalyn enchanted the ship with magic, Ohn and Hong cradled in her arms. Figuring he'd rather take refuge in the ship than ride a whale, Cale boarded the vessel with a look of dejection.

"Human, I'm gonna ride on the little whale's back! It feels refreshing!"

Cale listened disinterestedly to Raon's voice, already wrapping himself up in a blanket.

***

A few days later…

"Wow," Cale breathed in amazement as he stepped off the ship, carrying Raon. The black dragon was completely swaddled up in a blanket.

"Achoo!"

When Raon followed up his sneeze with a few sniffles, Cale was awed all over again. "Wow. Even a dragon can catch a cold."

"You can be mighty and still get sick."

Glancing down at the grumbly Raon, Cale struggled to disembark with his scaly companion. Atop the iceberg, houses made of ice glittered in the sunlight as though composed of countless diamonds.

"Welcome to our village," Witira said, excitement plain in her voice.

"It's beautiful." Cale took a moment to admire the village, but his peace was short-lived.

Boom!

With a deafening blast, one of the ice houses shattered. Right after that, someone was forcefully expelled from the building.

Reeling, Cale heard Raon speak up from his chest. “Huh? It’s a human!”

Another whale, I assume? Cale mused, turning to Witira.

“Business as usual for them. Looks like they’ll need to build a new house.”

At her placid tone, Cale thought, *I’ve found myself somewhere strange yet again.* A house had exploded and someone had gone flying, but everything else remained peaceful. There was obviously something off about this place.

“Ngh…”

More importantly, this guy’s pretty heavy.

Cale locked eyes with Raon, who looked away. The black dragon had been about 150 centimeters tall last year. He’d grown five centimeters since—and gotten heftier to boot.

“Achoo!” Raon tried not to smirk as he sneezed, deliberately avoiding Cale’s gaze. Cale had the urge to shake his head, but the sight of a distant mountain—no, a residence—distracted him.

“The one who just went flying is a blue whale.”

“Oh!” Cale said, impressed. Aside from monsters and dragons, blue whales were the largest creatures in this world.

Smiling tenderly at Cale’s reaction, Witira went on, “They’re the biggest members of our tribe. And the strongest.”

He followed her line of sight to the spot where the blue whale had crash-landed. The fallen whale climbed to his feet, coughing. As he stood up, brushing shards of ice from his clothes, he didn’t appear to be injured at all.

“That whale is laughing!” Raon said.

Cale grimaced. *Right…* He turned away from the cackling blue whale, meeting Witira’s eyes instead.

She grinned. “He’s a bit special.”

"I see." Shrugging it off, Cale changed the subject. "It's quiet here."

The Whale Village was quite tranquil. Though the ice houses sparkled brilliantly in the sun, the structures themselves were of average size, with simple architecture.

"It is," Witira replied in a tone as serene as their surroundings. "We're at sea, after all."

Is that why? Cale looked around. This giant iceberg floated on the vast ocean, a colossal block of ice topped with houses. In the distance, Cale spied other whales and also penguins.

"Witira, is there a Penguin Tribe too?" Cale asked, curiosity piqued.

"How did you know? They're financially savvy, and they make the best butlers. They waddle around wearing black outfits. I can introduce you, if you'd like?"

"I'm interested in the penguins!"

"Me too!"

"I wanna be friends!"

Raon, Ohn, and Hong all voiced their interest, but Cale was unmoved. He didn't want to get involved with any more animals. "No. I don't want to meet them."

With this stern refusal, Cale returned his attention to the ocean. He could barely make out the Kingdom of Faern in the distance. Faern was at the northern tip of the Western Continent; these large icebergs comprising the Whale Tribe's territory were even farther north.

"I don't see any wyverns."

He'd heard that Faern's wyvern tamers had been dropping by once or twice a week since October. Hence, Witira had kept the Whale Tribe's movements under wraps during the conflict with Arm's

First Battle Brigade in November. The Whale Tribe didn't mind the wyvern tamers' surveillance—they deliberately allowed it, in fact.

Witira beamed. "They won't be back for a few days." She seemed certain of it.

"Really?"

"Yup. I saw a wyvern tamer before I headed to Uvar territory. I had a feeling we'd made eye contact, so…"

"Yes?"

"I destroyed one of the small icebergs next to me," Witira said happily. "Then I watched him turn tail and flee. I think I scared him enough that he won't be back for a few days."

Cale had no words. *She destroyed an* iceberg*?* It was definitely possible for a humpback whale's tail whip to shatter an ice floe…but Cale had no idea what Witira's definition of a "small iceberg" entailed. He tightened his arms around Raon.

"If you hadn't told us to go easy on them, Commander Archie or I would've probably paid Faern a visit already."

Witira's careless declaration made Cale hug Raon even tighter. *These vicious whales…*

Whales commanded authority. Humpback whales had earned their reputation for benevolence, but only because they were the ocean's most powerful force. To these giants, the puny humans using wyverns and ships to spy on them were an amusement at best and an annoyance at worst.

The northern alliance hadn't had a reason to spy on the Whale Tribe until last year, when Arm tried to cross over from the Eastern Continent. Centuries ago, the northern kingdoms kept a vigilant watch on the whales, but their caution had ebbed away with time.

They forgot the Whale Tribe's strength.

It had been ages since the Whale Tribe revealed their prowess to humans on the continent. Though this was partly due to their

battle with the mermaids, the affairs of the continent simply didn't interest them. The humans couldn't have known that, however; they felt no need to guard against a group they'd never seen—or at least one they deemed a relic of the past—no matter how supposedly powerful.

As if to highlight this fact, Witira said, "I think we've been *too* quiet."

"Aren't you lying low on purpose?" Cale joked.

The Whale Tribe had learned that Arm was collaborating with the Empire and the northern alliance. The whales had reason to suppress the alliance, and they wanted to destroy Arm. They permitted Faern to spy on them, pretending nothing was amiss—or so they let Faern believe. In reality, they were busier than ever before.

***

"Long time no see."

"I'm honored to meet with you again, Your Majesty."

Cale shook hands with Seakeller, the Whale King. Though it had been a while since they last saw each other, there was little awkwardness between them.

"I have those documents you asked for."

At a gesture from Seakeller, a penguin waddled over and handed Cale a stack of papers. Cale passed them to Rosalyn—remembering to thank the king, of course. "You have my gratitude, Your Majesty."

"For what? This is nothing, my boy." Though Seakeller downplayed his actions, Cale saw him smiling.

The documents contained intel on the ships that the northern alliance had built along the coast. While the alliance guarded against spies from other kingdoms, they never suspected they were being watched from the sea.

Seakeller's royal residence was plain compared to most. The Whale King reclined on the couch in front of his guests, speaking in a leisurely manner. "It's been some years since I've fought a battle like this."

"And what sort of battle is that?" Cale asked, sniffing his seaweed-scented tea.

Seakeller looked over at him. "A complete cock-up."

Cale's lips curved in a smile as he set down his teacup. Seakeller didn't hide his enthusiasm either; though the chain of events that brought them here had occurred after they suppressed those annoying mermaids, he found this quite entertaining.

"We whales—no, I speak only for myself. *I* prefer a straight fight without strategy. I can't stand all that scheming hogwash."

"Ahem!" Archie loudly cleared his throat a few times at the king's less-than-regal word choice. "Your Majesty…"

Seakeller ignored him. A thoughtless comment or two wouldn't diminish his majestic aura. "Even so, playing the trickster myself for once is actually quite fun."

"It's their fault for trying to do the same to you, isn't it, Your Majesty?" Cale quipped.

"Ha ha! You're right. I cannot forgive those who used the mermaids to toy with us."

That explained why Seakeller had been so jovial as of late.

"Never in their wildest dreams would the northern alliance expect us to ally with the other kingdoms. Most importantly, neither Arm nor the alliance realize we're aware of their existence and what they're up to."

"That's why you said it'll be a 'cock-up' for them," Cale surmised.

Seakeller nodded. "I daresay it will be *most* amusing."

Cale made no effort to calm Seakeller or his kin. When the strong were raring to join the vanguard, the weak had a better chance of survival. Cale also stood to gain a great deal from the eager whales.

"What do we need to do for the sea route?" Cale asked. After all, that was why he'd come.

"Everything's in place on our end. I've appointed a squad to escort your group to the Eastern Continent under Faseton's command." Faseton, who'd been quietly standing off to the side, gave a little wave. "That said, you must ready the ships."

With a nod, Cale passed the Whale King a document. "We prepared this contract on behalf of our territory."

Cale was present as a territory administrator. As this exchange needed to remain secret, and he had a good rapport with the whales, he was the most fitting representative. The sea route would start in Uvar territory, following the Whale Tribe's escort through the north to the Eastern Continent.

Seakeller perused the contents before signing at the bottom, then hashed out the details with Cale. When they were finished, Seakeller asked him, "What's your next destination?"

There was a reason the Whale King had gotten right down to business the day Cale arrived: The young nobleman had requested it. Cale's packed schedule left him no choice. After hearing of Cale's goal in the north, the Whale King had agreed.

"I'll be heading to the Lake of Despair," Cale replied. He would set off early tomorrow morning.

"Pardon?" Seakeller goggled at Cale's answer, as did the penguin secretary beside him.

The Lake of Despair was blanketed by a snowstorm and avoided by the people of Faern. Not only was the snowstorm severe, but it was also toxic.

"You intend to set the lake ablaze?!" Seakeller heard himself ask.

"Wait, Lord Cale!" Witira cried out. "Don't you know the World Tree is there?"

Faseton chimed in, "You want to set the World Tree on fire? Isn't that a huge problem? That would be a disaster, even for someone as bold as you!"

What are they talking about? Cale stared blankly at the whale siblings before saying, "No. I'm going to set fire to the lake in Faern's capital."

Flabbergasted, Seakeller sprang to his feet. "What?!"

Although it was called a "lake," the basin in Faern's capital didn't hold a single drop of water. According to legend, the lake had been formed by a god's tears. Once those tears ran dry, the god left Faern behind. The people of Faern were waiting for the god to return and fill the lake with tears once again.

As the humpback whale family stared aghast at him, Cale explained, "They'll be surprised if we show them a god's rage instead of tears, don't you think?"

"You're right, human!" Raon agreed with a sniffle. "They'll be shocked!"

"Then why go to the Lake of Despair?" Seakeller asked in a daze.

"I'm running an errand for someone." He was headed to see the World Tree and the elementals nearby, as well as the elf village.

"For whom?" Seakeller asked, wondering who dared to use Cale as an errand boy.

Casual as always, Cale answered, "For Lord Erhaven, a gold dragon."

With a sidelong glance at Raon, Seakeller sat back down and mulled it over for a bit. "Oho… Well, all right." He sighed, accepting

the idea. “I suppose if anyone can set the capital’s lake aflame, it’s you.”

“What are the elves at the Lake of Despair like?” Cale asked, wiping snot from Raon’s nose with his handkerchief.

“They’re arrogant and rude,” the Whale King said without a second’s thought.

“Great,” Cale replied just as quickly.

Hmm? “Great,” he says? Seakeller and the penguin stared at Cale, befuddled. Cale’s group, on the other hand, seemed unaffected—as did Archie and the whale siblings.

Cale stroked Raon’s round head as he drifted into thought. *Who cares when I have two dragons behind me?*

It made no difference to him whether the elves were arrogant or not.

***

Thus, when they snuck into Faern via the kingdom’s northern shoreline a few days later, Cale was as carefree as ever. They arrived at Faern’s northernmost point to find it devoid of life thanks to the snowstorm whirling nearby.

Archie pointed to the blizzard. “It’s over there.” Seakeller had sent the killer whale along with Faseton because it would be “entertaining.”

Cale had no issues with Archie coming along; he agreed with the king’s logic. *A rude guy like Archie is best suited to handle those snooty elf bastards.* That hadn’t stopped Archie from sulking throughout the entire journey, however.

“Let’s go.” With that, Cale strode toward the largest lake in the north, which was frozen all year round.

Meeeeeow.

“Awesome! I’m getting stronger!”

Ohn and Hong wriggled excitedly in Cale's arms—especially Hong, whose tail lashed back and forth at the thought of the white poison falling like snowflakes.

Ohn's eyes sparkled as she took in the snowstorm. "It'd be cool if I could make my mist look like that!"

A toxic snowstorm, eh? Cale looked just as thrilled as the red kitten, who specialized in poison.

***

"No way!"

Cale was visiting the one small inn in the village closest to the Lake of Despair. When Rosalyn asked about visiting the lake, the owner's grandson emphatically shook his head.

"It might make sense in another season," the young man continued, handing Cale a large glass of wine, "but going there in January is a death sentence."

"Really? So people go during the other seasons?"

Cale lifted the glass to his lips but stopped after a single sip. The warm drink was fairly strong. *I asked for something weak.* This was the weakest beverage available, but Cale already felt his neck and stomach burning.

‹Human, why do you keep drinking even though you're frowning? Is alcohol tasty?›

Cale's gaze slid to the apparently empty chair where Raon sat, invisible. After a swift scan of his surroundings, he firmly whispered, "No."

A six-year-old drinking alcohol? Even if Raon was a dragon, Cale could never allow it. What if he got drunk and blew up a mountain, or worse? It would be a catastrophe.

‹…Fine.›

Ignoring Raon's disappointed voice, Cale focused instead on Rosalyn's conversation with the young man serving them. His group had all dyed their hair a common shade of brown, courtesy of magic. Faseton and Archie also wore robes to subdue their stunning good looks.

"Hmm. Some people *try* to go during the spring or summer." The owner's grandson shivered at the thought. The Lake of Despair was one of the Five Wonders, so adventurous folk often set out for it, but it never ended well. He snuck a peek at his grandmother, who was sitting by the fireplace, then went on, "The people who fled at first sight of the snowstorm survived, but only half the people who went into the storm ever made it out."

"So they came out okay, then," Choi Han piped up.

The man shook his head. "The ones who returned were severely poisoned. They went blind soon after."

Cale had heard that people affected by the snowstorm's poison grew weak, losing their sight and their sense of direction. His knowledge now confirmed, Cale reflected, *This is quite a cruel world if you think about it.*

Death Desert spewed dead mana, while a toxic snowstorm surrounded the Lake of Despair. Plus, there was plenty to fear from the living beyond human power struggles: Numerous strong and vicious beings inhabited this world, like beastfolk and races with the darkness affinity.

But that's what keeps the monsters in line.

All of these factors confined monsters to very small habitats, preventing them from running wild. It also mattered little to Cale; his plans didn't include any monster encounters.

"Anyhow, please think carefully about whether you really want to go," the owner's grandson cautioned. "It's a terrifying place." He was worried about them, perhaps because Cale and company were the inn's first guests in some time.

"Sully."

His grandmother had remained silent up to this point, but when she called his name, Sully closed his mouth.

The elderly proprietress gazed into the crackling fire. "As I've watched people set out for the Lake of Despair, there's something I've noticed."

Her shadow seemed to swallow the walls, which looked as worn and aged as she was. She'd lived in this village since her youth; she and her husband, an adventurer himself, had built this inn together. They had one daughter, who married and gave birth to Sully.

The proprietress turned her head, meeting Cale's eyes. "None of them listen." None of the people heading to the lake heeded their warnings. "My daughter and son-in-law were the same way."

Prior to his death a few years ago, her husband had told her he was off to reunite with their daughter and son-in-law, who had departed before him. He asked his wife not to follow right away, urging her to stay until Sully grew up and got married. The old woman had promised that she would.

Searching Cale's face, the woman tilted her head. "Looks like you're listening, but you plan to go anyway."

"I'll come back alive and drink all the alcohol you have," Cale said, holding her gaze.

The old woman stretched her hand toward the fire's warmth. "Sully."

"Yes, Grandmother?"

"Their drinks are on the house."

Cale raised his glass in a toast toward Sully, earning an awkward smile from the young man, before downing the remaining wine in one giant gulp.

‹Human, let's destroy that snowstorm!›

Once again, Cale ignored Raon. Ohn and Hong meowed and batted the tabletop, but he disregarded them as well, thinking back to what Erhaven had told him. The gold dragon rarely warned Cale about anything, but this time, he'd had much to say.

"The World Tree controls the snowstorm. To get rid of the storm, you'd need to destroy the World Tree. But if you use a token of mine, it will open up a path for you. When you first lay eyes on the snowstorm, you might think the World Tree is cruel—but that tree has lived, died, and been reborn for over ten thousand years. Life and death are natural processes, and the World Tree is closer to nature than anything else. Remember this."

The World Tree had created the snowstorm to protect itself. Though the storm had claimed many lives, it kept the World Tree safe from the greed of other living things.

Cale set down his glass and stood to head to his room, Ohn and Hong trailing behind him.

When Choi Han got up to follow, Cale murmured to him, "If any of the deceased left their belongings near the lake, make sure you pick them up. Tell the others to do the same."

Choi Han stopped short, then nodded. While Cale climbed the stairs to his room, Choi Han smiled and rejoined the rest of their party at the table.

As soon as Cale flopped onto his bed, he had to field a question from Hong. "If I eat that poison, do you think I'll be able to blind people?"

"Probably?"

"Ooh!"

Excited, Hong scampered off to his sister so they could get ready for bed. He drifted off to sleep thinking about how much of the snowstorm he could possibly eat.

***

The next morning, Hong was nestled in Cale's arms at the edge of the raging storm. With an "aah," Hong opened his mouth wide. Snowflakes fluttered into his gaping maw; the tingling sensation differed from poisons he'd consumed before.

"More, more!"

At Hong's eager request, Cale hefted the red kitten closer to the blizzard while Archie looked on in horror. Brusque as the killer whale was, he still had a moral compass. *He's pushing a child into the snowstorm!*

Dumbstruck, Archie opened and closed his mouth multiple times before grabbing Faseton's shoulder. "H-hey—"

He was about to say *"Shouldn't we stop him?!"* when he heard Hong's voice. "Delicious!"

"If you eat too much, you'll get a stomachache," Cale said.

"Snow's so tiny that you'll never get full," Ohn retorted from beside him.

Cale shook his head. "He can get sick if he stuffs himself with cold things."

Ohn nodded with a hum of understanding. She turned to the black dragon sniffling at her side, who was bundled up in a fur coat and using thermal magic on himself.

"He's right!" Raon declared. "You need to be wary of catching a cold. Even great and mighty beings can get stuffy noses."

Ohn accepted Raon's statement with another nod. She then set to work creating mist. Hearing a small *swoosh* by his leg, Cale glanced down to see Ohn spinning her mist below. "What're you doing?" he asked, and she peered up at him.

"I want to make mist like this snowstorm."

He shared his honest opinion: "Splendid."

With a contented smile, Ohn continued swirling her mist. Raon offered advice to help her strengthen the mini-twister.

Watching all of this with a befuddled expression, Archie could only stammer, "Wh-what the hell?!"

Faseton pretended not to notice Archie's fumbling, his gaze fixed ahead. The half-blood whale couldn't make out the icy lake beyond the frosted trees in front of them, but based on the size of the snowstorm, he assumed the Lake of Despair had to be much broader than the black swamp back in the Dark Forest. That said, it was merely his assumption.

He took a quick look around. Thanks to the black dragon's assurance that there were no other creatures in the vicinity, everyone was relaxed—but that was impressive in and of itself. *They have no problem being out in these winds,* Faseton noted.

The blizzard produced gusts powerful enough to blast people backward. Every speck of snow pricked at the skin, threatening lethal toxicity if one trudged deeper into the storm. The frozen trees, grass, and even the very earth only made the area more intimidating. It was easy to understand why many intrepid souls turned away when confronted with this maelstrom.

And yet, the people around Faseton were as calm as ever. Archie, Choi Han, Rosalyn, Raon, Ohn, and Hong were behaving like usual. Even Cale was unaffected.

Lord Cale must possess an invisible strength, Faseton thought as he watched Cale stand tall against the gale. Cale's oppressive aura frequently astonished him.

What Faseton didn't know was that Cale was using the Sound of the Wind to repel the storm's gusts, while the Energy of the Heart canceled out the touch of every noxious snowflake. Cale still had to suffer the prickling pain of each impact, though, so he was impatient to forge a path through the snowstorm and escape his discomfort.

Setting Hong down on the ground, he said, "It's time."

Rosalyn approached, scooping up the red kitten. After confirming that there were no witnesses, they'd magically reverted

to their natural hair colors. Hong, Rosalyn, and Cale were like three splashes of red against the white snow.

"Are you going to use Lord Erhaven's token right away?" Rosalyn asked Cale.

"That's the plan."

Curiosity shimmered in Rosalyn's eyes. As a mage, it was no wonder she took a keen interest in an ancient dragon's token.

During Cale's entire time in the Empire, Rosalyn had been holed up in her laboratory. Erhaven had assessed her achievements with a single sentence: *"Ask me if you have any questions."*

Rosalyn had picked up quite a bit from watching Erhaven teach Raon. Although Erhaven usually pretended not to notice, this was the first time he had offered to answer any questions she might have. The gesture proved that she'd grown.

"Lord Erhaven will tell you about the token later if you ask him," Cale pointed out.

"You're right. I'll definitely ask him when we get back."

Rosalyn's energetic nod reminded Cale how excited she'd been when Erhaven tacitly allowed her to listen in on his lessons with Raon. Her determination was incredible.

As she studied the shining blue token in Cale's hand, he called her name. "Miss Rosalyn."

"Yes?"

"How would you feel about establishing a Magic Tower?"

"…Excuse me?"

Unperturbed, Cale pressed on. "Don't you think you're more than qualified?"

"I'm qualified indeed," Rosalyn acknowledged, matching his composure. Her expression spoke to her ever-confident rationality. She was self-aware, as certain of her status and abilities as she was about her dreams and aspirations. And Cale knew it.

"Let me know if you need money or magic stones."

"Thank you very much."

Rosalyn didn't reject his offer. Cale smiled at her before striding into the snowstorm, token in hand.

This is a bit rough.

The blizzard was so intense that he still felt its pressure, even after diverting the gales with the Sound of the Wind. As he walked out of the forest and toward the lake, he remembered something else Erhaven had said.

"The Lake of Despair has been a wonder since ancient times. The snow moves according to the World Tree's will; it doesn't admit just anyone. As for those who make it through the maelstrom, the World Tree rewards them with paradise."

Cale stopped in his tracks. *Paradise, he said.* He was right in front of the storm-covered lake, one step from the frozen water's edge. As he stepped forward, he fumbled with the token in his right hand.

The token produced a nigh inaudible *click*, and light poured out of it. Cale's foot landed on the ice—and that was when it happened.

Crackle, crackle.

Cale went still. "Hm?" He looked down at his free hand to see red currents zipping around his palm. It was the Fire of Destruction.

More of Erhaven's remarks passed through his mind.

"Well, there was a time the World Tree went wild and the snowstorm covered the entire north, freezing everything. It was before my time, so even I've only heard stories, but it sounded quite terrifying. Ah! And the legend said there was a human hero who got rid of all of that ice."

Suddenly, Cale thought of the elf chief he'd met in the Ten Finger Mountains. When Chief Canaria handed him the book about the Scary Stone, she'd said, *"It's a funny legend. There was*

supposedly a hero with strong destructive powers who was quite money-hungry. Once he died, this legend's hero is said to have found and safeguarded his friend's wealth. But would a hero be greedy for money? Especially one who supposedly kept the world from freezing and didn't seek power, influence, or fame? How could someone like that be avaricious? Isn't it far-fetched?"

That brought Cale back to Erhaven's comments about the legend.

"The legend has some nonsense about the hero trying to incinerate the World Tree as well. How could that be true? When I asked about it in the past, the World Tree didn't respond. Doesn't that mean it's all made-up?"

Wait, it can't be… Cale's head snapped up as firebolts danced in his hand.

Just then, the blizzard parted. *Swoosh!* A clear tunnel stretched through the storm, following the trajectory of the blue light.

"Did you use the token, Lord Cale?"

"Human! Why are you summoning your fiery thunderbolt?"

As Rosalyn's question and Raon's urgent voice reached his ears, Cale heard another voice at the same time.

"Are you planning to destroy it?" the Scary Stone's owner asked, its query different than usual.

Well, this is new. Cale clenched his fists, electricity still crackling between his fingers.

"Why're you using the firebolt, human?!" Raon demanded, pressing close to Cale. "I'll destroy whatever it is for you! Just tell me!"

"I'm not using it." Cale gently pushed the dragon away and resumed walking. As he moved forward, his shoes slipping a bit on the ice, a warm breeze brushed his cheek in the wake of the token's blue glow.

"Did something happen?" asked Choi Han, who'd rushed to Cale's side.

Cale waved a dismissive hand. "Not really."

"Oh, good." Choi Han then followed Cale into the tunnel.

"Do we have to walk far?" Faseton asked, wary.

"I heard we'll need to walk a little ways," Cale said offhandedly. Erhaven had told him that the entrance was a bit of a distance from the lake.

Rosalyn examined her surroundings, eyes bright with interest. She could see the snowstorm raging on beyond the tunnel's clear walls. Hong, of course, was drooling at the blizzard around them.

"It's fascinating that this safe path appeared the instant you used the token, Lord Cale. I guess the World Tree felt the signal right away."

In her excitement, Rosalyn didn't see the odd expression on Cale's face. He played along. "I'm not sure, but it does seem that way."

Cale's reaction made Choi Han flinch, but Cale ignored him, busy thinking about what Erhaven had said.

"This token will let the World Tree know that I sent you, so a half-decent pathway will appear to protect you from the poison."

Erhaven had promised a "half-decent" pathway, but this passage went well beyond that definition.

I have a bad feeling about this.

Despite his misgivings, Cale wasn't afraid. The Scary Stone's owner hadn't made its spiel about sacrificing himself, as it usually did when danger approached. In fact, it had asked if he planned to destroy something instead. It had even sounded deeply concerned.

Cale looked down at the Fire of Destruction crackling in his hand, but he didn't retract it. *Did he really try to incinerate the World Tree?*

As Cale recalled, the owner of this Ancient Power had been money-hungry. And seeing as the World Tree had so generously created a safe passage for Cale and his companions…

He smirked. *I think I get it now.*

Archie, who'd been sneaking peeks at him, spoke up. "Lord Cale, have you ever met elves before?"

"I have."

Archie's expression turned grave. "Then you must know what they're like."

"What do you mean?"

"This lake's elves are worse than any you've encountered."

They're worse? Seakeller had also called the elves here "arrogant and rude."

Once he'd caught Cale's attention, Archie continued, "We've dealt with them a few times because they're the closest elven village to our tribe, and we each have things the other side needs."

"And?"

Archie heaved a sigh. "They think they're the *chosen* elves."

A thought flashed through Cale's mind. "Do they believe they were selected by the World Tree?"

"Something like that." Archie snorted. "They're the only elves who get to see the World Tree on a regular basis, not to mention a *dragon*. They're extremely full of themselves."

"Mm-hmm. They certainly have a habit of looking down on other races and ignoring them," Faseton said. "It's probably worse here than in any other elven village. We may be visiting them on a dragon's orders, but, well…" He trailed off.

"Well what?"

At Cale's urging, Archie cut in, "They think whales are all brawn and no brains. They'll likely dismiss *you* because you're

human." If Seakeller hadn't told him to let it go out of respect for the World Tree, he would've tail-whipped those elves into oblivion.

In contrast to the seething killer whale, Faseton merely looked solemn. *Commander Archie is pretty bad too.* He had seen Archie repay rudeness with even greater rudeness in the past.

Cale then asked the two whales, "Don't you know how elves feel about dragons?"

"We do," Archie said. "The elves respect them, apparently."

"You've never seen them interact with a dragon, then?"

"Not personally." Side-eyeing Raon, Archie cautiously went on, "I suppose they may relax those stiff necks of theirs a fraction since Lord Raon is with us this time."

Cale's face hardened, much to the whales' surprise. "Is that what you think?"

"Pardon?"

Even if Raon was only six years old, he was still a dragon. Plus, they'd be delivering a message from an ancient dragon. Would the elves truly be disrespectful? The whales couldn't help thinking those haughty pricks would do just that.

Deadpan, Cale declared, "They'll burst into tears."

Archie couldn't make sense of it. "Huh? Who will?"

"The elves," Cale said, just as matter-of-factly as before.

"Sorry?"

"I suspect they'll get emotional and cry when they see Raon."

They think elves "respect" dragons? Cale wished elves merely *respected* dragons, but alas.

Archie and Faseton looked at Raon, who confidently puffed out his chest and stretched his wings wide. "I *am* pretty great and popular!"

In his white fur coat, Raon hardly seemed majestic. Yet Cale's group had a self-assured swagger, so the two whales decided not to argue. Cale turned away from the bewildered pair and continued following the blue light.

Before they left for the north, Erhaven had pulled Cale aside to speak privately. *"We must strengthen the defensive magic around the World Tree, Cale Henituse. The youngster and Rosalyn should be able to handle it. As for you, deliver this message to the World Tree…and don't tell the kid."*

His message was as follows:

"I have less than two years to live. World Tree, I hope you can give your fruit to the dragon I send in my stead. I've taught that youngling everything I know."

Once he'd told Cale as much, the ancient dragon had chuckled and added, *"Do keep this to yourself, Cale Henituse."*

"Yes, sir," Cale had replied, unfazed. *"I won't tell anyone else."*

"Of course. I knew you'd say that."

After seeing the satisfied expression on Erhaven's face, Cale had racked his brain once more for a way to extend the dragon's life. It wasn't that Erhaven was sick; he was simply facing a natural death due to old age.

"But, sir…"

"What is it?"

"Do you welcome your death?"

"Is there anyone in the world who would welcome death? Nobody wants to be sick, and nobody wants to die. I think that's true of both dragons and humans."

Erhaven's reply had been nonchalant, but Cale felt his desire to live. Observing the dragon, he'd thought, *There has to be a way.*

While the laws of nature made true immortality impossible, Cale figured there must be an Ancient Power that slowed the aging

process. Even now, as he walked through the snowstorm, the Ancient Powers he'd read about filled his mind until his steps came to a halt.

"We're here!"

At Raon's excited shout, Cale looked down.

Swoosh.

There was a gaping hole at the center of the storm.

"Hey, human! Gragon Gramps said the World Tree would be down below!"

"Right. Go invisible for now, Raon."

"Me? All right!"

Once Cale felt the invisible dragon clinging to his back, he gave instructions to his other companions. "Archie, you've met these elves before, so you go first. Choi Han, you bring up the rear."

"Yes, sir!" Choi Han replied immediately.

Archie grimaced at the opening. When Cale patted his back, he sighed heavily before leaping into the seemingly endless chasm.

"Looks fun!"

"I wanna jump in now!"

Cale was nervous, but Ohn and Hong were so giddy that he heaved a sigh of his own and jumped in with them. It reminded him of when he visited the dark elves' underground city. Still, the steeper slide here made for a more dynamic experience than last time.

‹Wow! Human, this is fun!›

Raon, still riding on Cale's back, was having a blast. Cale ignored him and let gravity do its work. Soon enough, he could see light at the bottom. His body plunged into the brightness and—

Splat!

Cale grunted upon landing, brow furrowed. He didn't like the squelching sound he'd made one bit. This wasn't at all like the fluff

they'd landed on in the dark elves' city. He quickly discovered he was resting on soggy straw, his fur coat sopping wet. Another sigh slipped past his lips.

"Ahem! Hrm!"

Scowl firmly in place, Cale rose to his feet. Gorgeous elves stood before him, fixing him with dubious stares. He counted two guards, plus three other elves who'd come to greet him. The middle-aged elf in front had been responsible for those fake coughs.

Cale gave this elf a once-over before looking up.

‹This is so cool!›

It was just as Raon had said: The vast lake filled Cale's vision, with the World Tree and the elven village beneath it. A transparent barrier prevented the water from spilling down into the elf village below. He also spotted additional tree branches.

"Ahem!"

Cale ignored the elf's continuous stream of throat-clearing and looked behind him.

"Wow, that was fun!"

After checking in on Ohn and Hong, as well as the rest of the group, he finally approached the middle-aged elf.

Seeing the looks on the elves' faces, Archie thought to himself, *They haven't changed.* The middle-aged elf appeared uncertain as to how to treat Cale. The elves normally dealt with humans a certain way, but Cale was also the ancient dragon's messenger. Perhaps thinking the same, Faseton watched Cale with concern.

With one last cough, the middle-aged elf spoke up. He seemed to hold a fairly high position in the village. "Well…"

Cale understood the true reason for the elf's reaction, just as he knew why the elves behind him were so stiff. Because of Cale's lofty status, the venerable elf was suppressing his excitement to

maintain his composure. The other elves followed his example and did their best to calm themselves.

"Are you the one who has come to deliver the great Lord Erhaven's message? D-did the esteemed dragon come as well?"

Huh? Archie was taken aback by the elf's deferential attitude. On closer inspection, the elf's shoulders were trembling. This persistently rude bastard, with whom Archie had traded countless barbs in the past, was behaving strangely. *What's gotten into him?*

Cale responded with a single word: "Raon."

On cue, the black dragon materialized out of thin air. "Ta-da! I have arrived!"

"Ohhh!"

Archie's head whipped toward the elves. The leader of the bunch was clutching his chest in amazement. The elves behind him were equally awed.

"What the…?"

Why are the elves acting like this?!

Having never seen elves encounter a dragon before, the whales became flustered. Cale's group, on the other hand, remained steadfast; thanks to Healer Pendrick, they'd grown accustomed to this reaction.

"I am the great and mighty Raon Mir!"

The elves bobbed their heads, murmuring Raon's name in chorus as if memorizing it to be quizzed upon later. Cale caught one elf on the verge of kneeling and helped him straighten up.

"Thank you very much." When the elf beamed at Cale, his smile overflowing with kindness and gratitude, Archie's jaw dropped.

For his part, Cale was merely annoyed—he'd expected nothing less. "Where do I need to go?"

"Oh! Right, sir." Mopping sweat from his brow, the middle-aged elf said, "You must meet with the priestess who tends to the World

Tree. She was hoping to come and greet you herself, but the World Tree suddenly summoned her beforehand."

"Is that so? Then let's go see this priestess right away." Cale wanted to wrap things up as soon as possible and lie down in front of a fireplace.

"Of course. We will take you there immediately!" The middle-aged elf turned toward the village, then stopped and gasped in surprise. Cale was perplexed by the interruption.

A little girl was running toward them, a couple other elves trailing after her.

"Priestess?"

Priestess? The middle-aged elf's comment prompted Cale to look at the girl again. The two of them made eye contact. *Hmm? Is she looking at me?* A chill ran down Cale's spine. The petite elf rushing over to him had the air of a troublemaker.

She looks desperate.

The young priestess was frantic, charging at Cale like she was on a critical mission. When she drew close, the middle-aged elf hurried to meet her. "Priestess, what's going on?"

The priestess bypassed him completely, pointing at Cale. "Red hair!"

Cale flinched. The girl strode in front of him, urgency painted on her freckled face. Cale took a slow step backward; something was off about this priestess. At that moment, an intriguing *clink-clink* caught his attention. It was the sound of coins.

He stared at the young priestess as she raised her head and thrust out the bag in her hand. Coins jingled inside it. "It's just old human money, but please accept it!" she blurted out. "It seems they're silver coins!"

What?

"Here, here! Take it!" The priestess shoved the bag at Cale until he accepted. Then she rummaged through her wide sleeves and produced a flat, rectangular item. "Here's some gold as well! We didn't have any gold coins!" The young elf was beside herself.

"What the hell?"

Cale's surprise drew an unwitting curse from his mouth, but the priestess didn't seem to notice. In her ten years of service, this was the first time she'd seen the World Tree so frightened.

Pushing the bar of gold at Cale, she went on, "The World Tree told me to give money to the red-haired person! It said to give you coins!"

Coins? There seemed to be a reason she kept using that word. Cale opened his left hand. The Fire of Destruction was still there, crackling away.

When he looked back up at her, the young priestess burst into frenzied speech. "Please take it! If you don't, the World Tree said everything will burn! There'll be a sea of flame!"

The wheels in Cale's head started turning. *Just what did the owner of the Fire of Destruction do?* Cale had assumed he was a normal hero obsessed with money.

"It said you really like coins, and you'll go crazy for them!" the elf priestess cried out, desperate now.

Flustered, Cale took the bar as well. Once he had both the gold and the coins in his arms, she sighed in relief—then went stock-still. She'd finally spotted the black dragon sitting next to him.

They all heard her gasp.

‹She seems like a nice elf,› Raon told Cale, sharing his first impression of this priestess. He kept peeking at the large bag of coins cradled in Cale's arms.

The young priestess bowed to Raon. "It is an honor to meet you, Lord Dragon! My name is Adite. I serve the World Tree in this village."

Cale let out a murmur of admiration. He'd never seen an elf behave so calmly around a dragon before.

"If the other elves don't understand, speak to the one in charge of the World Tree. Then everything will be fine."

When Erhaven had told him the elves might not understand, he'd meant it in a literal sense; they'd be too busy revering the dragon to process anything else.

"Nice to meet you, little elf!"

Raon's bright greeting made the rest of the elves smile. They kept nodding their heads, gazes fixed on the black dragon. Occasionally, they spared glances at the human who'd come to deliver Erhaven's message. It wasn't that they were ignoring Cale on purpose; they simply couldn't tear their eyes away from Raon. They couldn't register anything Cale needed to say.

Unbeknownst to Cale, there was another reason the elves were bobbing their heads and peeking at him every so often: Beings he couldn't see were having their own conversation.

"The World Tree summoned the priestess to discuss this red-haired human! I think it's been over a century since the World Tree has talked about a human!"

"He has a strong aura of nature about him. He's probably the human with the most natural elements."

"No wonder he's with two great dragons—this human smells really good."

The elementals were chatting about Cale. Given what they had to say, the elves ventured curious glances his way.

Cale noticed that the elves were looking at him more and more. "Hm?" Most significantly, the young priestess scrunched her freckled nose as she stood there with clasped hands.

This is weird.

Sensing something was off, Cale winced. He felt a sensation like a breeze, but the air was still. *Swisssh.*

Cale was flabbergasted. "What's this…?"

One by one, translucent elementals of manifold colors appeared. That wasn't strange in itself; the same thing had happened at the elf village in the Ten Finger Mountains.

"Wow!" Hong exclaimed.

Ohn was awestruck too. "There're so many of them!"

The sheer quantity of elementals wasn't outside Cale's expectations either. The World Tree's domain was the elementals' motherland, after all. No, the real issue here lay elsewhere. Just where were these countless elementals conglomerating?

Each and every one of them hovered close to Cale, flying around him in a swarm. It sounded like they were speaking, but he didn't understand anything they said.

"I smell a strong aroma of wind! It's covert but noticeable!"

"This one is wood. Yes! It's faint compared to the earth, wind, and other elements, but it's firm. I can feel that firmness! How wonderful!"

"Mmm, I also smell the fragrance of very sweet water. Feels like it's luring me in."

As the young priestess listened intently to these comments, something the elementals said caught her attention.

"There is an aura of fire as well—an utterly natural one. Yes, fire is greedy, but that's what makes it pure and beautiful."

A sea of flame. The World Tree's warning echoed in the young priestess's mind. Clasped fingers tightening, she asked, "Are you the one who has come to deliver the great Lord Erhaven's message?"

Despite his growing irritation at the crowding elementals, Cale smiled and did his best to respond—but Raon was faster. "He is! My

human is a very good person! His name is kind of cool too. It's Cale Henituse!"

The elementals buzzed around Cale with even more energy. He smiled wider at Raon, who was glued to his side, then faced the elves gaping at him. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance. Cale Henituse, at your service."

His respectful demeanor exuded a poise unique to the nobility. The older elves were pleased by his politeness.

The middle-aged elf who had first come to greet him stepped forward. "My name is Dikell. I am the village chief."

"Nice to meet you."

Faseton watched in a daze as Cale and Dikell shared a respectful greeting, then heard a shaky voice at his side.

"What the…?"

It was Archie. After witnessing one of the constants in his life turn on its head, the killer whale was in a state of shock. He finally understood why Cale had said that the elves might cry at the sight of Raon, but he still couldn't believe the way they'd responded to the black dragon. Watching the elementals surround Cale astonished him even more.

Is he really human?

Archie knew the answer to that question, yet he couldn't help but wonder. Cale was one of a kind. Although humans controlled the Eastern Continent and the Western Continent through strength in numbers, there were various beastfolk and other beings who called these lands home. It was odd to see a human on good terms with so many different races.

It was then that Choi Han and Rosalyn's conversation reached Archie's ears.

"That's our Mr. Cale."

"Don't you think you sing his praises too often?"

"Am I wrong?"

"No, you're right. Lord Cale is special. Very special."

Choi Han and Rosalyn spoke casually, as if calling Cale special was nothing new for them. When Rosalyn caught Archie watching, her eyes widened; she realized what must've been going through the killer whale's mind.

"Isn't it amazing how Lord Cale gets along with everybody?" she said.

"Yes," Archie replied without missing a beat.

"But when you think about everything Lord Cale has done so far around the continent, isn't it obvious he'd be treated so well?"

Faseton, who'd been listening in, hummed in understanding as he reflected on Cale's various deeds.

Rosalyn went on, "Lord Cale has done so many things, but he's never asked for a title or any kind of influence. Though he has received some monetary rewards, those don't outvalue his life."

She knew that Cale was slyer than he was brilliant. Still, there was one reason she continued to believe that he was a good person: He wasn't avaricious. Sure, he liked money, but monetary greed was preferable to a lust for fame or power. Why else would merchants purchase titles for themselves once they were swimming in cash? And why did so many kings start useless wars despite their lofty positions and ample coffers?

People could be greedy for far worse things than money. But Cale showed no cravings for those; in fact, he tried to avoid them.

He also doesn't use his money for selfish reasons.

Cale had poured a lot of his own wealth into the upgrades to Henituse territory, as well as all of their other activities. He sometimes did spend his money for his own purposes, but only to feed himself or to secure food and lodging for his group.

That's the type of person who ought to be rich.

She believed that someone like Cale, who didn't hesitate to spend for the greater good but was satisfied with eating simple fruits to fill his belly, deserved to be wealthy. It would be all right for Cale to make more money—no, Cale *should* make more money.

A Magic Tower…

Rosalyn recalled Cale's earlier proposal. She hadn't declined Cale's offer to invest in the Magic Tower. Though she couldn't say she knew the ins and outs of others' minds, she felt like she understood Cale's reasoning in light of his actions.

We need a Magic Tower that helps make the world a better place.

It would have to be completely different from the tower that once stood in the Kingdom of the Whipper. Rosalyn made up her mind: She would create that ideal Magic Tower and become its master.

The moment she found her resolve, Cale turned around. Their eyes met. Only then did she realize the elves were looking in her direction as well.

Raon flew toward Rosalyn and the others, introducing each of them to the elves. "This is Rosalyn—she's super smart! And over here is the powerful Choi Han."

Every time Raon opened his mouth, the elves beamed brightly. Rosalyn shook hands with the elves who reached out to her. Choi Han and the whales followed suit.

"It's been a while since I've seen whales. You seem very reliable. How wonderful! Ha ha!"

Archie only smiled in response to Dikell's praise, shaking the middle-aged elf's hand. Even he was beginning to accept the situation now.

Once Cale confirmed that his group and the elves were getting along, he called out to Adite. "Priestess."

Then he startled—the young girl had tears in her eyes. Adite was staring at Cale as if he were a ticking time bomb. Her expression only stoked his curiosity.

"Are your people uninterested in material wealth?" Cale asked, gesturing to the coins and gold in his arms.

Adite answered gravely, "Long ago, the World Tree instructed us to gradually gather coins. It told us that while we shouldn't fixate on worldly possessions, these preparations would prove useful in the future." With a smile, the priestess went on to deliver a message from the World Tree. "The World Tree wishes to meet with you, Lord Cale."

In truth, the World Tree had directed her to grant Cale an audience only if he accepted the coins and the gold, but Adite didn't feel the need to share that technicality.

"That sounds great—I want to meet the World Tree too. Let's go right away."

"Follow me."

At Cale's acquiescence, the priestess led the way. Raon and Cale fell into step behind her as the elementals chattered on.

"He's imperfectly perfect and strong in his weakness. How intriguing!"

In general, elementals only concerned themselves with elementalists, but these elementals were taking an interest in a human.

Adite walked faster as they approached the World Tree, so Cale quickened his pace to keep up. At last they reached an old conifer tree, no different from the ones sprouting on any mountain.

Cale made a face. *It looks so…normal.*

The priestess pointed at the run-of-the-mill tree in front of him. "This is the World Tree."

He couldn't believe it. Though the World Tree was at least three times taller than he was, it resembled the trees in the Dark Forest. In fact, the white tree Cale had seen when he obtained the Unbreakable Shield seemed more magical than this one.

The trees surrounding it look more befitting of the name. They loomed around the World Tree like guardsmen, massive and verdant green.

"Does the World Tree's appearance surprise you?" the priestess asked, as if she'd anticipated Cale's reaction. Even the elves had been shocked when they first laid eyes on it.

Cale looked around for a moment before blurting out the first gibberish line that popped into his mind. "Just as we might overlook precious things in mundane places, an unremarkable appearance may hide a deeper truth."

"As I thought."

Having settled her nerves on the way to the World Tree, the priestess agreed with Cale's sentiments. Cale paid her no heed as he scanned the area again. Only he, Raon, the young priestess, and the World Tree were present.

Out of nowhere, the leaves on the trees started rustling despite there being no breeze. *Fssshhh.*

"Lord Cale!"

When Adite called his name, Cale saw a blue glow envelop her. It was the same shade as Erhaven's token. Adite met his gaze, unable to hide her shock.

"The World Tree…it wishes to speak with you."

"*Speak* with me?"

"Yes."

The priestess was astonished; before this moment, the World Tree had only ever spoken personally with Erhaven. She then glanced at Raon.

"The World Tree also wishes to speak with Lord Raon in the future, when the two of you can enjoy a leisurely conversation."

"All right, I got it! Nice to meet you, World Tree!"

The leaves shivered as if in response to Raon's greeting. *Fssshhh.*

Radiating happiness, Raon rolled around in the grass. "After our house, this is my new favorite place! It's so warm and refreshing."

With a smile at Raon's pronouncement, Cale asked the priestess, "How do I chat with the World Tree?"

Adite pointed to the World Tree's trunk. "Close your eyes and touch the tree."

Cale strode straight toward it, placing his palm against the bark as the priestess had instructed. The trees swayed. *Fssshhh.*

The priestess observed the World Tree with an uneasy heart. *The World Tree is usually calm. I can't believe a human made it so nervous.* Everything about the situation surprised her.

Wondering what Cale would discuss with the World Tree, she watched the red-haired man with a penetrating gaze. *Hm?* He'd abruptly flinched, his forehead wrinkling above his closed eyes.

At that moment, Cale was listening to the World Tree's voice.

‹I didn't expect another human to earn that lunatic arsonist's ability.›

An arsonist? It must be referring to the Fire of Destruction.

‹But you obtained the previous owner's full power and even fortified it. You are quite remarkable yourself, Cale.›

I fortified it?

Cale thought of the Energy of the Heart, but then the World Tree's manner made his skin crawl. The way it spoke openly with him, calling him by his name, was far too friendly—so much so that

it made him suspicious. The World Tree was acting downright chummy with him.

In a gentle voice, like a kindly grandparent, the tree continued, *‹I have encountered many foolhardy heroes in my lifetime, but I've never seen such a crazy arsonist—I mean, hero—who cared about nothing but wealth. A hero whose life goal was to be rich. I have died and been reincarnated many times, but because of that hero, I almost burned to death.›*

The World Tree experienced a cycle of death and rebirth in this place, withering and blooming anew with the growth of fresh leaves. It always maintained the same identity, never returning to the dust whence it came. As it reminisced about bygone days, the immortal World Tree sounded slightly relieved.

‹That is why I collected money. This was my way to ensure my own longevity. Anyway, I had no idea you had gained that power, Cale. I was so shocked. I sent Adite with money just in case the power of fire went wild.›

As he listened to the World Tree, Cale's suspicion grew. *Does it know me?* The tree spoke as if they'd met before. Cale opened his mouth to ask if the World Tree was familiar with him, but then—

‹Is Gashan well?›

Gashan? As in the Tiger Tribe's shaman?

Cale shuddered.

Is the "nature" that Gashan's always talking about actually the World Tree?

Gashan often recited the phrase "Nature has spoken."

‹Gashan is an interesting lad who can hear my voice,› the World Tree said.

Wow. Cale was dumbstruck. Did this mean that the World Tree had the power of foresight? All of a sudden, the tree's voice no longer sounded so kindly. Another series of chills ran down Cale's spine.

Then the World Tree asked, *‹Cale…who are you?›*

The leaves rustled again. *Fssshhh.*

Albert had questioned Cale’s identity in the past as well, but this was different.

‹I cannot see your future, Cale, nor your past beyond the last two years.›

Two years ago—that was when Kim Roksu had become Cale Henituse.

‹I may not be much to look at, but I have lived a long time. Dying and being reborn gave me some insight into the workings of the world.›

The World Tree could see a fraction of the flow of time. These days, the World Tree saw less and less, but there was a time when it couldn’t see even a sliver. The tree vividly remembered what had forced it to create the snowstorm and take over the north. That was the first time it had ever known fear.

‹A long, long time ago…there were others like you. I could not see their pasts nor their futures—only tiny glimpses of what was about to befall them.›

There were people like him in the past? That captured Cale’s attention. *Did they transmigrate here too?* If there were other transmigrators, he was curious about their fates.

The World Tree swiftly dispelled Cale’s thoughts, however, providing a completely different explanation. *‹The owners of the Ancient Powers were just like you: I could not trace them.›*

Oh, this has to do with the Ancient Powers?

‹I couldn’t see through the arsonist or that boulder-brained fool.›

I feel like I know who “that boulder-brained fool” is.

Cale’s mind drifted from the Scary Stone’s owner to the many people who’d possessed Ancient Powers in ages past. It was said

that during that period, darkness fell upon the world. Then that darkness disappeared, and peace was restored. There was no explanation as to precisely where the darkness had come from.

"What is the 'darkness'?"

Raon and the priestess tilted their heads in confusion at Cale's question, but the World Tree understood.

‹I can only tell what the world allows me to say.›

In other words, it couldn't give Cale the answer he sought.

‹I also cannot speak of things I cannot see. I could not predict the true form of the darkness. The version of myself that lived during that time did witness it, but unfortunately, that is something I cannot discuss.›

Cale frowned at the winding nonanswer.

‹The name of the group targeting me—is it Arm?›

"Indeed."

‹I could not see Arm. The things I can see are few and far between these days.›

The World Tree didn't know Arm's true identity, then. *How disappointing.* The situation was already in disarray, but Cale had a bad feeling that the upcoming future held even greater catastrophes in store. *Looks like things will only get messier.*

‹Whenever the flow of time was obscured to me, danger came to call. I may yet become involved in these events as more than just a bystander.›

Having said its piece, the World Tree came to an abrupt conclusion.

‹But that is my problem. Let us return to you. Who are you?›

Cale calmly replied, "One average person among many."

"My human isn't average!" Raon piped up. "And he's weak!"

What is he talking about? Cale let Raon's nonsense go in one ear and out the other, but he couldn't ignore the World Tree's next statement.

‹I intend to throw away three or four branches today.›

Branches? Tree branches? This seemed ominous; Cale had thought the World Tree was protective of its body. Though it was unexpectedly small, it was still taller than Cale, and its branches looked sturdy and strong. *Why would it throw them away?*

Cale opened his mouth to speak, but the World Tree beat him to it.

‹One.›

The World Tree was about to speak of things it did not have permission to say. As long as it wasn't fully destroyed, it could live eternally; it could afford to sacrifice a few branches.

During the ancient era, when darkness blanketed the world, many races warred with one another. These Dark Ages were also known as the Warring Ages—a period when living things happily slaughtered one another for their own benefit. Peace was nowhere to be found.

The World Tree uttered its first taboo truth. *‹The person collecting Ancient Powers has gathered three.›*

Cale flinched. *If they have three of them, it's not me. There's someone else collecting Ancient Powers? Why?*

These days, people viewed Ancient Powers as mediocre abilities, barely worth holding in reserve. This was because Ancient Powers had limitations; a power that couldn't develop would never reach greater heights.

Cale spoke up in a rush. "Why is someone trying to—"

Boom!

A deafening noise cracked in his ears, and the ground trembled underfoot. Something had fallen.

Cale's lids fluttered.

‹Do not open your eyes,› the World Tree commanded.

"W-World Tree!" Adite shrieked. "My goodness!"

"What's going on?" Raon asked. "World Tree, one of your big branches rotted and fell to the ground! Are you hurt? You're not sick, are you?!"

"Great Lord Raon, you mustn't approach it!"

The young priestess prevented Raon from moving toward the World Tree. She stamped her feet, at a loss for what to do.

When Raon shot her a questioning glance, wanting to know why she'd held him back, she responded in a quavering voice, "The World Tree… The World Tree does not want you to approach."

"Really? All right, then." Raon retreated to his original spot without saying anything more. His eyes brimmed with concern as he stared at Cale, who was right next to the fallen branch.

Meanwhile, Cale's mind had grown even more muddled.

‹Second.› The World Tree spoke weakly but urgently. *‹Find the remaining traces of the black dragon's parentage.›*

Raon's family? Cale had planned to investigate that topic at some point in the future.

Boom! Another large branch fell down.

"What do I do, what do I do?!"

Though Cale could hear the frazzled elf's voice, his mind was already whirling at the World Tree's words. He tried to stay focused.

‹Finally…› One last statement remained. *‹The judge who fled to the Eastern Continent—find her.›*

Now what the heck is it talking about? Cale's brow furrowed like never before.

Something snapped above his head. *Crack!* An instant later, his body went flying.

"Ugh!"

What felt like a hard, round stone slammed him sideways, while a small, round paw supported his back.

Thud!

Cale opened his eyes to see a large branch, withered black and oozing red, in the spot where he'd just been standing.

"Are you okay, human?"

Raon stuck his head out from behind Cale. Looking at the black dragon who'd headbutted him out of the way and then caught him, Cale said calmly, "You could've moved me with magic."

Cale could have avoided the impact from Raon's rock-hard head that way.

Raon's eyes wavered. "But you dodged the branch!"

"Yes, yes," Cale said flatly before he approached the World Tree again.

Drip. Drip. The sounds that he had missed while focusing on the World Tree now reached his ears. Three large branches had broken off, red fluid flowing out of them like blood. He'd never seen a tree "bleed" like this.

I thought this tree was normal, but I was wrong.

Slowly, Cale placed his hand back against the World Tree's trunk, and it loosed a feeble sigh.

‹It seems I'll be able to give you the fruit only after summer passes. This is the limit of what I can tell you.› Lowering its voice, the World Tree added, *‹You have no plans to get stronger, do you?›*

That was correct; Cale had zero intention of improving in that regard. The World Tree had glimpsed enough of the flow of time to notice as much, as this was something they had in common. Like Cale, the World Tree didn't desire strength, nor did it care for power or fame. It only wished for a peaceful life. When it foresaw difficulty in achieving that wish, it took action.

The tree had blanketed the north with a snowstorm in the past, and now it had cast away three branches to provide this human—whose fate it couldn't read—with precious insights. This wasn't the first time it had protected such humans, and the tree believed it wouldn't be the last.

‹I must rest.›

When Cale could no longer hear the World Tree's voice, he took his hand off the trunk and looked at Adite. Through her tears, the priestess told him, "The World Tree said that it must sleep for a long time, and you should speak to the fruit later."

The fruit—that was the item Cale needed to get from the World Tree. He still didn't know what abilities the World Tree's fruit had, but he assumed that it was something useful; Erhaven wanted the World Tree to give it to Raon, after all.

Caressing the blackened branches, Adite continued sadly, "The tree also expressed its regret that it couldn't chat with the great Raon. It asked to delay that until next time as well."

"I'm disappointed too, but that's okay!" Raon approached the World Tree, concern etched on his scaly face. "Hey, World Tree, is there something I can help you with?"

The priestess shook her head. "The World Tree must recover alone. All we can do is wait."

Fssshhh.

Cale listened to the rustling leaves, contemplating the information he'd received from the tree.

Someone has collected three Ancient Powers and is trying to gather more. I've got to track down traces of Raon's parentage, then find the judge who fled to the Eastern Continent.

Cale dragged his hands down his face, feeling gloomy. When would *he* get to rest?

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Cale's spirits improved a few days later. He was lounging in the warm elven village beneath the frozen lake, popping fresh cherries into his mouth.

"Should I just live here?" he murmured in jest.

"No! Our house is the best!"

That's true. Cale agreed with Raon, yet he felt more relaxed than ever.

Faseton watched this exchange with fascination. He alone accompanied Raon and Cale in the shade of a cherry tree, surrounded by trays of fruits and drinks. The cushion Cale was sitting on seemed quite comfortable.

The elves' VIP treatment of Cale amazed Faseton. How was this possible? Before he could think further of it, Cale's command prompted him to stand up.

"Assemble everyone."

"Yes, sir."

Cale likewise rose to his feet, watching Faseton leave to round up the group. Rosalyn and Raon had finished reinforcing their defensive magic barrier and were testing it with Choi Han today. Meanwhile, Ohn and Hong were having fun rolling around in the snowstorm, accompanied by Archie.

"Are we leaving now, human?"

Cale petted Raon's head in lieu of an answer. After spending the past few days contemplating the puzzles that the World Tree had handed him, he'd now reached a conclusion.

In the distance, Cale saw Adite hurrying toward him. The young elf struggled with her loose priestess robes as she ran, then took a moment to catch her breath when she reached him.

Panting, she cried, "Lord Cale!"

"Yes?"

"Before the World Tree went back to sleep just now, it said one more thing!"

Hm?

Cale waited for the priestess to continue. She squeezed her eyes shut and shouted, "'Those punks with Ancient Powers were all lunatics! Do as you see fit!'"

Adite had never heard the World Tree speak so roughly before. As she stewed in her anxiety, she heard Cale's voice.

"How did it know?"

"What?"

Opening her eyes, the priestess came face-to-face with Cale's brilliant smile.

"Tell it not to worry. I already intended to do whatever I please."

Cale had never been one to blindly follow orders, after all.

Raon approached him then. "Human, is it time to go set things on fire?"

The priestess shrank back in shock. Faseton, Rosalyn, and Choi Han—who had just arrived on the scene—whirled toward Cale.

Yet Cale was thinking about something else entirely: God's Tears. It was a masterless, mysterious water said to have the power to heal any type of illness. A thing of legend, as no one knew whether it truly existed.

"Do you really believe in that legend, Cale?" Erhaven had asked him with a laugh, insisting it was nonsense.

"Why aren't you answering, human? Are we gonna do something else instead?"

"Yes. We're going to steal some things."

Cale's declaration of criminal intent flustered the elf priestess—and when Raon opened his mouth, it staggered her even more.

"Again?"

Paying no heed to Adite's reaction, Cale pointed to himself. When the black dragon tilted his head in confusion, Cale said, "That's right. There's a thief inside me, remember?"

Though everyone else was befuddled, Cale only chuckled. If the so-called God's Tears truly were the tears of a god, they would roll into his hands on their own.

Chapter 38:
Tricked?

WHEN CALE AND HIS GROUP returned to the small inn they'd stayed in before venturing to the Lake of Despair, he sank into a chair and slumped back, looking uncharacteristically drained.

The invisible Raon, on the other hand, buzzed with energy. *‹That was lots of fun, human! I really am great and mighty!›*

"Those vicious bastards," Archie muttered in disbelief.

By that, Archie was referring to the village elves. Cale stared at the ceiling, recalling the elves' tearful farewell.

"You're leaving after such a short stay? How sad."

"It was like seeing the beautiful sun beneath this frozen lake for the first time in ages. I will never forget our blessed and joyful time together for the rest of my life!"

Weeping, the elves said many such things to Raon.

"Don't worry! I'll be back with Gragon Gramps!"

His excited promise had made them all cheer. As for Dikell, he'd caressed Cale's hand and said, *"Don't be a stranger."*

Aren't I a stranger to these elves, though?

Though Cale had no idea how it had happened, he decided it wasn't a bad thing and brushed the thought aside. The effort of wading through the sea of elves and elementals to leave the Lake of Despair had left him exhausted.

A wine glass appeared in front of him. *Clink!*

"What's this for?" Cale directed his question at the proprietress of the inn.

She examined Cale's group, eyes twitching at the corners. "You made it back alive."

This elderly woman, who had lost her daughter and son-in-law to the Lake of Despair, vividly remembered what this young redhead had said to her: *"I'll come back alive and drink all the alcohol you have."*

"It's on the house, right?" Cale joked.

"You look plenty rich!" The old woman playfully clicked her tongue, then smirked. Glancing sidelong at Cale, she added, "I don't think you need much wine to warm you up. One glass should do it."

Warm? Both Cale and Raon flinched.

‹Hey! This human granny is weird!›

Before Cale could say anything, the old woman returned to her chair by the fireplace. Her grandson, Sully, walked up as Cale watched her go.

"My grandmother asked me to provide some snacks as well."

Sully hesitantly moved the dishes onto the table, his expression betraying his mixed emotions. The young man was curious as to what the Lake of Despair was like and how Cale's group had managed to escape with their lives, given that he'd lost his parents to the lake. He wondered who they were, yet he was relieved by their safe return. Above all else, something else had snagged his attention.

At last, Sully's curiosity got the better of him. "Excuse me…"

Unlike Cale, whose hair was dyed brown with magic, this naive-looking fellow had natural brown hair and freckles. He had never set foot outside the village near the Lake of Despair.

Rubbing his eyes, he spoke up again. "Pardon me, sir?"

For some reason, Cale began to feel uneasy. The boy wasn't looking at Cale but slightly off to the side, at the empty spot next to Cale's head—empty to Cale's eyes, at least.

"I'm sorry. I'm not sure if there is something wrong with my eyes, but… Augh, this is really weird." After mumbling for a bit, Sully pointed to the spot between Cale's and Choi Han's heads. "Is it just me, or is there a little red orb there, like a red ball of fur? A-am I hallucinating? What's wrong with me, darn it?!"

No matter how many times he scrubbed at his eyes, the red furball floating beside Cale didn't disappear.

Shit, Cale thought. *Is this boy an elementalist?* He couldn't believe it.

‹He must be able to see elementals!› Raon piped up.

The elemental had gone dormant to conserve its power in the cold air. Cale couldn't see the red ball of fluff hovering beside his head, nor could Raon and the others. They knew of the red furball's presence, however. Beneath the Lake of Despair, the elf priestess had presented it to them with an awkward smile.

"Excuse me, Lord Cale?" Adite had worn a pinched expression when she broached the subject, her fingers fidgeting. *"If it's okay with you, this… Well, this baby fire elemental, born less than a year ago, would like to escort you to the entrance of the village outside the lake. Would that be acceptable?"*

When the semi-transparent red furball had floated to Cale's side, Cale had looked at Adite as if to ask what kind of baggage she was saddling him with.

She'd quickly explained, *"Elementals change their shapes once they determine their own paths. This elemental hasn't chosen its shape just yet, but it will keep you warm if you allow it to accompany you."*

This red furball was a fire elemental that had yet to find its way. Seeing Cale's furrowed brow, Adite had prattled on in a rush, *"The elemental said it respects you. It really wants to escort you, to the point that it threw a tantru—I mean, asked quite sincerely."*

"It respects me?"

"Indeed," Adite had answered matter-of-factly. *"It said it has never seen such an unhinged, destructive flame before! Why, it's found a role model!"*

The instant he heard why this baby fire elemental admired him so much, Cale had replied without hesitation, *"We'll part ways cleanly once we reach the village. Got it?"*

"Yes, sir!"

At Adite's lively response, the red furball had floated beside Cale's head before turning transparent. It had remained in that state while following them to their lodgings.

Yet he can see *this transparent elemental?* Cale peered past Sully— who was still rubbing his eyes as if he'd seen a ghost—at the old woman. Her ambiguous remark now made total sense.

"Well, it's warm, and you don't need a drink to warm you up."

Cale paused, his thoughts preoccupied with the concept of elementalists. He then returned his attention to Sully.

Just then, Sully flung his arms out in front of his face in fear. "Eek!"

The tray in his grip clattered to the ground. *Clang!*

"Th-the furball is floating toward me!"

Sully gaped, dumbfounded, as the red furball whizzed around him. He had no idea what to do.

Cale snapped his gaze back to the old woman to find her wearing a bright, toothy grin. "When I told him I could see them, my husband said they're called elementals." Meeting Cale's eyes, she continued, "I worried that my daughter would be like me. When she couldn't see them, I was relieved."

She was definitely talking about elementals.

"They enticed me so much that I settled down in this Land of Despair so I could catch glimpses of them when they appeared. But that damn lake seduces even those who can't see the elementals."

Regret clouded the old woman's eyes before her gaze shifted toward her grandson. The decades since she'd last seen an elemental had been a reprieve. It hurt to see flashes of something so beautiful, only for that beauty to shy away from her. But now her grandson could see them—and for the first time, she'd watched one take the initiative to go near him.

"I guess they *do* approach people."

As the old woman looked back and forth between Sully, the elemental, and Cale—who'd brought the elemental here in the first place—her lips curled in a smirk.

"You showed my grandson something useless. I'll have to charge you for that drink after all."

Cale shook his head. "You said it was on the house, so I'll gratefully accept your generosity." That comment earned Cale pointed looks from Choi Han and Archie, but he ignored them, continuing to address the smiling old woman. "I will pay you well for the snacks, though."

"Ha ha, what a funny kid! You're obviously a noble."

The group jumped at the elderly proprietress's observation skills, but Cale paid her no mind, turning his attention back to Sully. *I never thought he'd be an elementalist.* Someone with an unexpected gift had crossed Cale's path.

‹Hey, human! Will he come with us too?›

No. Why would he? Cale didn't want to involve himself with others for no reason. There was no need for someone like him, who possessed Ancient Powers of all elemental types, to keep an elementalist by his side.

I don't really have all of the elements, though.

Cale touched the necklace containing the Fire-Suppressing Water, recalling an earlier conversation with Adite.

"Do you know who the judge is?"

"The judge?"

"Yes. The tree told me about a judge who went to the Eastern Continent."

He considered asking Gashan and Ron, who originally hailed from the Eastern Continent, about the judge as well. Still, he'd questioned Adite just in case.

Adite had stretched a hand from under her flapping sleeve to scratch her hair before shaking her head. *"No. Can't say I've heard of someone like that before."*

"Never?"

"Nope. I have *heard about the Water of Judgment, though."*

"What?" Cale hadn't expected much, so this came as a surprise.

"The Water of Judgment is an Ancient Power," Adite had told him, tone contemplative. Instead of explaining it herself, she'd brought over an old wooden tablet from the village library. *"I remember it because the information inscribed on this tablet was quite shocking."*

"May I borrow it?"

"The tablet?" Though initially incredulous, Adite had nodded. *"Of course. Do as you wish."*

The tablet bore three lines of text. Cale had read the first line:

Letter of Resignation.

Then the second:

World Tree, you moron! I'm out of here!

The intense words had given Cale a certain impression. Once he'd read the third and final line, that impression turned into conviction.

The Water of Judgment? Forget it! I'm a free spirit now!

Yep, the Water of Judgment's owner seems like another lunatic. After reading the statements on the tablet, Cale had understood why Adite found the contents so startling. *I might wind up taking on another strange thing,* he'd thought.

Taking a big gulp of wine to ease his frustration, he quietly observed the fuss kicked up by Sully and the invisible fire elemental.

Will I run into them again?

This baby fire elemental could very well grow in a slightly destructive direction. Then there was Sully, painfully naive almost to the point of stupidity, and his astute grandmother. Cale had no reason to believe he would encounter any of them in the future.

However, he wasn't privy to what the fire elemental perched on the bewildered Sully's shoulder was saying. "Fiery thunderbolt. Respect. Sea of flame. Powerful."

The elemental's shape slowly morphed according to each phrase of this mumbled mantra. Yet it remained a bundle of flame; no one could anticipate its future form. As Cale could neither see nor hear the elemental, he had no way of knowing it wouldn't budge from Sully's side.

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"We made it."

Dressed in the ivory vestments of a priest, Choi Han surveyed the cityscape from inside the gates. The white snow blanketing the

pointy rooftops made it look like a kingdom of eternal winter.

He faced the white-haired man beside him—Cale in a matching priestly disguise. With a gentle smile, Cale adjusted his own robes. "Our destination isn't far. Let's all go together."

Cale had entered Faern's capital, Bago, without any issues. Dressed in his vestments and armed with an identification card Prince Albert had created for him, he sauntered right in.

‹Is there a festival going on, human?›

White rooftops. White snow. The white castle in the distance, adorned with an array of ornaments.

Rosalyn joined Cale's side, glancing around. "Bago is full of decorations. Have we arrived amid an event of some kind?"

The capital's streets were packed despite the freezing weather. There seemed to be a lot of people going through the gates.

Having noticed the same thing, Choi Han likewise turned to Cale for answers.

Faseton piped up, "Did you all come here without knowing about it?"

"About what?" Rosalyn asked. Although she'd been raised as a crown princess, she'd never had to memorize the northernmost kingdom's festivals. Upon hearing her question, Faseton glanced over at Cale, who wore a rare look of complete tranquility.

"Faern has a unique festival in January," Cale told them.

"Meeow." The red kitten Hong patted Cale's arm and urged him to elaborate.

Stroking Hong's fur, Cale went on, "The people of Faern bring offerings to the lake, which is supposed to hold a god's tears. They pray for it to take away the next year's worth of sorrow. Celebrations are held throughout the city of Bago as well."

This gave Choi Han pause. It sounded like an important event, but they were planning to start a fire in that very lake. He had a

feeling their actions would overlap with this festival.

Feeling Choi Han's eyes on him, Cale responded in a whisper to prevent others from hearing. "We don't want to hurt anybody, so we won't do it on the day of the offering. Apparently, they all gather in the plaza to dance on the last night."

On the last night of the festival, people convened in the plaza for the finale, dancing and singing all night long. No one would be at the lake except for a few guards; it would be easy to move without causing any harm.

Beaming, Cale asked his companions, "Shouldn't a festival end with fireworks?"

Everyone went quiet. Archie and Faseton were lost for words, while Rosalyn and Choi Han appeared contemplative. Ohn avoided Cale's gaze, her expression suggesting she expected as much from him.

Cale didn't have attention to spare for their silence, however, as there was a loud voice reverberating in his mind. *‹That's my human! We can't let people get hurt during our fireworks show!›* Raon sounded thrilled.

How can a six-year-old be so vicious? Shaking his head, Cale looked at Choi Han and Rosalyn.

Catching his eye, Choi Han asked, "What do I need to do?" He'd heard Cale loud and clear when the redhead said he didn't want to hurt anyone. Cale always thought that way, even when he took on the role of the villain, so Choi Han was ready to be at his beck and call.

"We'll figure it out together."

Together. Choi Han smiled. After spending decades fighting for his survival in solitude, Choi Han appreciated hearing words like that.

Cale made eye contact with Rosalyn, who was also smiling.

"Sounds like a very effective plan. The timing is perfect."

"I knew you'd say that, Miss Rosalyn." The two whales seemed even more confused, but Cale swept that aside and told Faseton, "We'll find a place to stay first."

"Oh! Yes, sir!"

"Then we'll go sightseeing around the lake."

Mention of the lake made Faseton gulp, but he nevertheless guided Cale's group deeper into Faern's capital.

Curious bystanders couldn't tear their eyes away. Cale's entourage wore typical hooded travelers' robes, obscuring their faces. Though that wasn't terribly odd, the robed travelers encircled someone as if guarding him. It was this man—a white-haired priest—who piqued their interest. Feeling their gazes trailing after him, Cale smiled.

‹Why're you smiling like that again? You're not even talking to the crown prince right now!›

As for Raon's commentary, he simply ignored it as usual.

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Cale crunched through the snow with steady footsteps, scanning the area. He didn't see many people. The occasional passersby chatted with one another in hushed voices, but they seemed happy; the mood was quiet but not solemn. All the while, Cale ambled along as if taking a stroll through the park.

‹Not only are there guards at the entrance, but there're also a bunch of soldiers on patrol!›

Now that Raon was one year older, Cale found the black dragon's initiative quite gratifying. *I don't even need to tell him what to do these days.*

Choi Han stepped closer and whispered in his ear, "They said we can't go to the northern section of the lake because they're preparing for the offerings, but if we want, we should be able to sneak in anywhere."

These days, Choi Han was always prompt with his reports as well. His growth was just as satisfying as Raon's. Both the black dragon who used to leave wild boar carcasses for Cale and the young man who once followed him for food had come such a long way. Cale regarded the two of them, heart swelling with pride.

It was then that Hong tapped him on the arm. *Pat. Pat.* When he got Cale's attention, the aghast cat pointed forward with a paw. Unable to speak openly, Hong mewed and asked with his eyes, *Isn't this the place we're going to set on fire?*

Cale quickly understood. "Yes, this is the place."

Hong and Rosalyn stared at him, speechless. Rosalyn pivoted to check on the two whales; they'd been standing in stunned silence for a while. She had a solid guess as to what they were thinking.

It's massive.

The Lake of God's Tears stretched out before her. It was completely empty, its floor latticed with cracks.

After following the wide path from the plaza to the northern edge of Faern's capital, they had come upon the large, dried-up lake. The sheer size of it gave everyone pause the moment they laid eyes on it.

Rosalyn approached Cale with measured steps, asking cautiously, "Lord Cale, isn't this essentially a third of Bago?"

"So it seems. It's smaller than I expected."

Smaller? Really? His remark caught her off guard.

Cale put Ohn and Hong down and walked along the lake's edge, clearly in no rush. "Let's split up and enjoy the view before we reconvene," Cale said, venturing away from the others. Only the invisible Raon went with him.

He had done a great deal of research on the Lake of God's Tears. The lake's northern section, where a small temple and an altar were located, were closed off for the festival, but the rest was

open. He headed for a spot that wasn't too crowded and stopped in front of an information plaque.

The Lake of God's Tears

According to the legend of this lake's creation, a god took pity on the ever-frozen Kingdom of Faern and bestowed upon this land a lake that would never freeze. At first, the people celebrated these eternal waters. Yet they soon lusted for more, and after a time, they coveted something that was never theirs to hold. This prompted the god to drain the lake, shedding tears all the while.

Rooted to the spot, Cale read on.

When at last the people realized the extent of their avarice, they acted to protect this place. To this day, they pray for that god to bless this lake with water once again.

The plaque intrigued Cale. This was information he already knew, but each time he read it, he found himself wondering, *Who was it? Which god made the lake?*

One day, when water fills this lake anew, we will know that the god has returned from the south.

"The south…"

Pondering this, Cale looked away—and was taken aback by what he saw. A white-haired man was staring at the bottom of the dry lake.

‹Why do you look so surprised, human?›

Raon called out to Cale, concerned by his reaction, but Cale ripped his gaze away. *Why is that punk here?*

A line from *Birth of a Hero* popped into his mind:

Looking at the white hair characteristic of his family line, Clope solidified his resolve to turn the legend into reality.

Sneaking another peek at the man to confirm his suspicions, Cale remembered another tidbit from the series:

He would bring the story of the wyvern knight brigade to life. Clope, successor to the Guardian Knight household of Seca, had made up his mind.

It was Clope Seca, Faern's Guardian Knight, in the flesh. This man was the leader of the wyvern knight brigade—the focal point of the northern alliance.

Cale couldn't suppress his shock. "Wow…"

I never expected to see Clope here. It was a surprise, but not an unwelcome one.

‹Are you acting like this because of that human over there? Hmm, he is a bit strong.›

He is? Cale thought, stunned by Raon's evaluation.

Clope had appeared even less frequently in the first five volumes of *Birth of a Hero* than Prince Adin, so Cale didn't know much about him. He had one useful detail, but nothing more to go on.

‹He's as powerful as Mary.›

Mary? He's at the same level as that necromancer?

Since Mary sat between Choi Han and Rosalyn in strength, Guardian Knight Clope had to be quite powerful.

‹Choi Han is coming, human!›

As the dragon said, Choi Han was striding toward them with a stiff expression on his face. Though Choi Han didn't know Clope, he'd probably noticed the man's strength and was coming closer just in case.

At a wave of Cale's hand, Choi Han came to a stop. Signaling for him to stay put, Cale walked off—toward Clope, of course.

‹There're two or three other knights around that white-haired knight.›

As he listened to Raon—his reliable danger detector—Cale remembered more from *Birth of a Hero*.

Clope believed in the legend. He was the sort of man who put his faith in myths, fables, and superstitions.

Cale's lips twitched. Why had he come here in a priest's robes, with his hair dyed white? Why did he plan to create a pillar of fire in the Lake of God's Tears and call it a god's rage?

‹That smile makes you look too much like a good person, human! I mean, you are *a good person, but…!›*

Treating Raon's chaotic ramblings as mere background noise, Cale grinned at the lake basin below. A whispering breeze picked up, gentle yet frigid as it coursed through the area.

Sensing someone nearby, Clope Seca pushed back his windswept hair and turned toward the source of the gust. *Is he one of Faern's citizens?* Clope wondered. He assumed the man standing there must have come here for the festival.

Clope had been staying out of the public eye for some time. He'd only intended to reveal himself again when it was time for the wyvern knight brigade to make itself known. That was when Faern would set out for warmer ports and fertile lands untouched by ice.

And yet, because Clope hadn't concealed the white hair he was so proud of, people approached him every so often. That hair marked him as a descendant of the Seca bloodline of Guardian Knights—Faern's indomitable shield and spear.

According to the legend, as the god gathered the water from the lake, a single drop slipped free. That droplet landed on someone, turning their hair the color of freshly fallen snow. It was said that this individual went on to become a knight who protected the northern land from darkness, renowned from then on as inheritor of the god's will.

Clope believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was the descendant of the inheritor. Thus, when he got a better look at the stranger nearby, his eyes went wide.

A shock of white hair filled his vision, accompanied by a snow-white priest's robe. The vestments bore no insignia indicating which god the priest served, but he gave off an aura that set him apart.

Hwoosh.

The wind brushed past the white-haired priest. As if he hadn't noticed Clope's gaze, the priest muttered to himself, "Will we cross paths if I head south?"

Clope froze, that soft murmur sharp enough to pierce his heart. The writings at the temple and the words on the information plaque spun through his mind.

"One day, when water fills this lake anew, we will know that the god has returned from the south."

Is this priest referring to the god who went south?

Guardian Knight Clope would soon travel south himself to conquer lands, seas, and lakes free of frost on his quest to transform

the modern Faern into a kingdom of legend.

This man feels so formidable. Who is he?

Taking one deliberate step after another, Clope moved toward the white-haired priest.

A moment later, Cale heard a rustling sound, followed by someone's voice. "Indeed you will."

Got you. Erasing the smirk from his lips, Cale slowly turned his head.

A strange feeling washed over Clope at Cale's expression of utter nonchalance, even though he must have noticed the Guardian Knight's white hair and sword. Clope sensed that while Cale was by no means strong, an inexplicable air of dominance emanated from him.

"Human greed," Cale began, "prompted their esteemed god to take back that gift to humanity and leave this land behind. Rather than lashing out in anger, the god shed tears of sorrow. I wonder how it felt…" He fell silent for a spell, taking in the lake with melancholy. "How much sadness filled the god's heart in that moment? What emotions stirred within?"

"Are you a god's servant?" Clope asked.

His solemn gaze trained on Cale, Clope looked exactly as a knight from a fantasy novel should—complete with white hair, handsome features, and eyes swimming with a woeful backstory. Even so, that was none of Cale's business whatsoever.

Hwoosh.

The wind picked up again, creating a mysterious atmosphere between the two men. That wasn't the reason for Cale's silence, though; he was unnerved by the Sound of the Wind's erratic behavior.

Yikes. Why is it acting up in front of this bastard?

The Sound of the Wind—or rather, the thief who'd stolen a divine artifact—was running wild at the sight of the Guardian Knight.

Does this guy have the God's Tears? Perhaps it was stashed in Clope's house. Would Cale need to loot the place?

While Cale debated what to do, Clope spoke up again. "Can't you tell me whom you serve?"

As if the Sound of the Wind's flailing wasn't enough, the Scary Stone's owner disturbed Cale as well. **"Are you trying to sacrifice yourself?"**

Seeing the priest's face stiffen all of a sudden, Clope went stock-still. Then he got his answer:

"All will become clear in due time."

Cale's lips had produced the words automatically. Focused on calming the two-pronged chaos between his Ancient Powers, he'd blurted out whatever came to mind. The gusts grew strong enough to send the priest's sleeves flapping in the breeze. Clope watched the swaying trees, awestruck by the mounting tempest.

"I pray that the lake fills again soon."

Clope gazed into the priest's eyes. Although Cale had only promised his prayers, he seemed certain it would happen. Clope's heart thudded in his ears. *Boom! Boom!* The lake would fill again. That was a sign—a sign that the legend would begin anew.

Cale *was* planning to fill the lake, of course. Except it would be with a pillar of fire rather than water.

A burning question leapt from Clope's tongue. "Who are you?" He simply *had* to know this man's identity.

The priest motioned toward the dry lake. *Could it be?* Clope wondered as another uncanny sensation took hold of him. This priest's palpable charisma surpassed even the king's.

With a mysterious smile, the priest walked past Clope. "I'm merely a wanderer passing through."

Although he didn't fit that description in the slightest, Cale gave no further answer as he strode away. Clope vacantly watched him go.

‹He's staring at you, human.›

As Cale listened to Raon's report, he thought to himself, *I've set the bait.*

"Raon," he whispered, so that only the black dragon could hear, "tell the others not to come near me."

‹All right. But I'm sticking with you.›

"Also, ask Faseton where Duke Seca's residence is."

Raon's innocent voice rang in his mind. *‹Are we looting that place next, human?›*

He definitely catches on faster now.

Cale nodded in satisfaction. "We'll scope it out first."

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As Clope watched Cale depart, his knights emerged from hiding and approached him.

"Should we look into him, Captain?"

Clope didn't answer his trusted subordinate's question. Instead, he continued to observe the priest, who was moving toward an area with few people.

"Captain?"

This time, Clope nodded in the affirmative. "Just a basic investigation for now."

This response shocked the two knights flanking Clope's trusted subordinate. *Basic?!* Normally, Clope would have ordered them to thoroughly investigate such a suspicious and inscrutable individual; his instructions for a cursory check were highly unusual.

Only his most trusted subordinate bowed without hesitation. "As you command."

He understood Clope's meaning: By ordering a "basic" investigation, Clope was quite literally asking them to find out who the man was. A "thorough" investigation would have involved digging up everything there was to know about the target, including their weaknesses, traumas, and anything else that might be useful. Knowing this, the trusted subordinate made up his mind to determine the priest's identity and nothing more.

Clope, however, felt uneasy about the command he'd given. *I hope I'm not committing heresy…* He feared that looking into this mysterious person might be a mistake. Then again, without knowing anything about the man at all, Clope couldn't be sure one way or the other.

Addressing the other two knights, Clope ordered, "Follow him."

The knights sprang into action. They set off in swift pursuit of the white-haired priest, who had disappeared into the eastern forest.

A few minutes later, they returned to deliver him a strange report.

"He's not there, Captain."

"What?"

"His footprints turned lighter and lighter starting from the forest entrance, until they disappeared without a trace."

Clope made a face at that.

"Might he be a mage?" one of the knights suggested in earnest.

"Perhaps he was a mage disguised as a priest, and he used flight magic?"

Clope shook his head vigorously. "No, I didn't sense any mana. Regardless, he was weak—nowhere near adept enough to use flight magic."

Though the knights had no reason to doubt an aura-wielding swordmaster like Clope, they were still grappling with the oddity. Clope shared their uncertainty; the priest had an air about him unbefitting of his apparent weakness.

I didn't see anyone powerful around either.

At Clope's level, he could neither recognize the depths of Choi Han's strength nor perceive Raon's existence. Consequently, a different interpretation of the priest's identity flashed through his mind. *A divine emissary.* What if the priest had come to impart a god's message?

"What should we do, sir?"

Clope didn't share his thoughts with his subordinate. He kept his sincere belief in the legends hidden from others. In fact, people considered him an atheist—a man without faith in anything.

In a firm voice, Clope said, "We'll revisit this once we get the list of visitors to the lake."

His cold countenance clashed with the wild beating of his heart as he marched toward the temple. It was closed to the public to allow for the festival preparations, but he stepped inside nonetheless. Clope's eyes sought the stone monument at the temple's center.

The god was always nearby. Appearing in a form that reflected this northern landscape, our deity gifted us with warmth.

The north was always draped in snow. *A form reflecting this snow-white land…* Clope read the text on the monument over and over with someone's visage in mind.

His trusted subordinate approached. "Captain, a white-haired priest was seen visiting the lake today. There were some robed

individuals with him. Apparently, they've all vanished from their quarters at the inn, leaving only a note behind!"

"What did it say?"

The man handed over the piece of paper, and Clope's eyes widened as he read it.

To the one seeking to transform yesteryear's legend into today's reality:

The same story cannot be repeated.

Only the birth of a new legend will keep the glory alive.

Clope's heart hammered in his chest. The first line had to be referring to the Guardian Knight himself, as he alone knew his true goal. While the others thought they were going to war over greener pastures untouched by frost and snow, Clope wanted more than that. He wanted to continue the legend.

"A new legend," hm? The corners of his lips quirked upward.

Clope felt certain that the priest was special—the man wouldn't have written such a message otherwise. The priest had put these words to paper knowing that they would reach the Guardian Knight.

The main character of a new legend… That doesn't sound bad.

Deep down, Clope was thrilled. He had no doubt that he would be the one to play the leading role in this glorious tale.

***

Brushing the red hair back from her face, Rosalyn posed a question to Cale. "What did that message mean?"

Cale took his time chewing a piece of chicken, then swallowed and dabbed his mouth with a napkin. "It was nonsense."

"Nonsense, really?"

He reclined on the couch, having returned to his usual appearance. As Rosalyn regarded this man with hair even redder than her own, she found herself thinking that even his very hair seemed lazy somehow—if hair could express character traits.

"Yup. I wrote whatever sounded fancy."

With a sigh, Rosalyn took a look around. They were inside a secret villa behind Flynn Merchant Fleets' first and only storefront in Faern. It only made sense for Flynn Merchant Fleets, one of Rowoon's three largest merchant guilds, to have at least one foothold in this kingdom. To reach Faern, one had to set sail and traverse other northern kingdoms, but merchants would brave much worse for a profit.

Reflecting that this red-haired man matched those merchants in meticulousness, Rosalyn asked, "You had us book lodgings at the inn even though this place was available. Was that because you anticipated running into the Guardian Knight?"

"I didn't expect it at all. The lodgings just made it easier for us to vanish without a trace after causing a commotion."

Rosalyn shook her head at Cale's carefree response. In addition to the identification cards Prince Albert had given them—which were fakes, of course—Cale had casually handed her another card a moment ago that identified them as Flynn Merchant Fleets personnel.

He always acts like he does things on a whim, but he's actually quite thorough.

She gave up trying to parse Cale's thought process; it was better to focus on the tasks ahead of her than ponder the workings of such an audacious mind. "What's our next move?"

Raon answered in Cale's place, voice bubbling with excitement. "We're looting the duke's estate!"

Rosalyn winced, as did Faseton, who'd informed the group of the house's location. Only Choi Han responded calmly.

"I see. So that's where we're headed this time."

Cale nodded and stood. "Let's scope out the place to start."

As Choi Han and Raon joined him, Cale crooked his finger at the kittens rolling around in the corner. "Time to earn your keep."

"Meow."

"It's been a while!"

Ohn and Hong approached him with swaying tails. Their stealth skills were only barely inferior to Ron's by now; they would have no trouble escaping Clope's notice.

Now assembled, Cale and company set out for the Seca home near Faern Castle.

***

In a neighborhood inundated with noble estates, Cale sipped tea on the second floor of a local teahouse, eyes focused on a white house atop the hill: the Seca manor. The monstrous sculptures by its iron gate had captured Cale's attention.

"How gruesome."

‹What's gruesome, human? Those statues?›

Cale answered Raon with a nod. Those sculptures, depicting the terrifying likenesses of wyverns, were large enough to be clearly seen from the bottom of the hill.

Confused, Raon said, *‹They're cuter than the rabbit you gave me—the one that looks like the devil's guard dog.›*

That was undeniably true. Cale had forgotten about the rabbit sculpture, as well as the assassin who'd carved it. *I should commission Frizia for some sculptures to stick in front of the Henituse estate next time.* Wouldn't most people avoid them out of

fear, then? Had Deruth been privy to his son's thoughts, they would've appalled him.

"Shall we?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Cale."

Cale and Choi Han rose to their feet. The kittens were already flitting across rooftops on the way to the Seca manor, taking note of all of the side streets and alleyways in the area.

Swish.

Cale's hair, dyed brown with magic, fluttered in the ever-strengthening wind. *What a mess.* It wasn't the tousled state of his now shoulder-length hair that vexed Cale; it was the Sound of the Wind going berserk.

Stopping a ways away from the estate, Cale heard the invisible Raon's voice again. *‹There's a bunch of knights around here, but very few mages!›*

Not only was Faern a kingdom of knights, but this was the Guardian Knight's home—of course these people favored sword over sorcery.

Swish.

Cale opened his hand. The wind seemed ready to burst into the Seca estate at any moment.

"This is weird."

"What is, sir?"

Cale shook his head at Choi Han, his mind buzzing. *Does the Guardian Knight know there's a divine artifact in his house?*

It would be strange if he did. Why would someone set on sparking a legend to life leave a divine item to gather dust in his home?

And is it really the God's Tears?

Was that truly the item the thief inside Cale wanted to nab? Furthermore, why would it be here?

The entire situation was bizarre—but not as bizarre as Choi Han's response.

"Mr. Cale."

"What?"

"Is it okay if we get closer to the house?"

"I don't see why not."

As the two of them slinked toward the manor, Choi Han tilted his head. "Something feels familiar."

Familiar how? Cale wondered what Choi Han considered "familiar." *The scent of blood?*

That thought made him stumble. While Cale put an extra step of distance between them, Choi Han asked, "If it's all right with you, may I go in ahead of time tonight?"

"Why's that?"

"I *know* something in there. I'll be careful to avoid attracting attention."

This was the first time Choi Han had requested to act in advance.

"You don't need my permission for things like this," Cale answered without delay. "Just make sure you don't get hurt."

"Yes, sir."

‹Should I go too, human?›

Ignoring Raon, Cale left Ohn and Hong with Choi Han and headed back to their lodgings. He then savored some wine and feasted on steak before falling asleep on his comfortable bed. It was a relaxing night.

***

Bang, bang!

The window sounded on the verge of shattering.

"What the…?"

Cale opened his eyes—and found himself nose to nose with Choi Han. It was so startling that he gasped and shoved his hand into Choi Han's face.

"Mr. Cale!" Choi Han blurted out. When Cale grimaced, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Why would you break in through the window instead of just using the door?"

Raon patted Cale's shoulder with his stubby forepaw. "Were you scared, human?"

Cale disregarded the dragon who'd neglected to wake him up beforehand, looking instead at Choi Han, Ohn, and Hong. The kittens were bouncing up and down.

"We saw something amazing!"

"It was incredible!"

A chill raced down Cale's spine, and he rubbed the back of his neck. "What was it?" he asked, voice still a tad husky from sleep.

"It's Arm!" Choi Han cried, frantic.

Cale's response was immediate. "Those bastards are here?"

"They were giving someone in the duke's manor an item!" Hong chimed in. "It looked important!"

No way.

Cale faced Choi Han again. "That familiar feeling you mentioned—was it Arm? Did you sense them too?"

He shook his head. "That was, um… Let's just say it was the scent of blood."

I never thought he actually *meant that.* Although Cale was mystified by the bizarre things powerful people could feel and smell,

he focused on what Choi Han had to say.

"Anyway, that's why I went to check it out in advance. It'd be terrible if we got into a risky situation while we were looting the estate."

He was right about that.

"Then we happened to catch Arm secretly handing over a small box. There seemed to be a precious object inside—"

Cale burst out laughing, prompting Choi Han to stop short. The count's son looked as if he found this solemn account quite entertaining.

"Choi Han."

"Yes, Mr. Cale?"

"Did you know my original plan? I was going to make a mess by wearing a priest's outfit when I created the pillar of fire." What a fiendish image that would have made: a white-haired priest cackling before a column of flame. "But I can't do that anymore."

He'd closed off that avenue the moment he used his priestly identity to bait Clope.

As Cale's smile widened, a thought occurred to Choi Han, and he swallowed hard. *Could it be?*

Cale spread his arms wide. "I brought those fake Arm outfits with me," he said enthusiastically, referring to their shoddy replicas of Arm's uniforms. He opened one hand, splaying his fingers. "There are exactly five of them. Isn't this perfect?" Between himself, Choi Han, Rosalyn, and the two whales, they made a group of five.

While Choi Han struggled to reply, the children shouted their approval.

"That's a great idea, human!"

"Brilliant!"

"I wanna try one on too!"

Cale watched them with satisfaction written all over his face. "I'll treat you to some delicious food during the festival."

In the end, Choi Han never did find his voice. The night passed, and the first day of the festival arrived.

***

Cale clapped along apathetically as the people around him whooped and applauded, watching the bishop pour water on the altar.

"The moment the water seeps into the ground, let all of this year's sorrows be washed away!" the bishop shouted.

"The moment the water seeps into the ground, let all of this year's sorrows be washed away!" the people recited. Some even stomped their feet to cheer for the legendary Lake of God's Tears.

Cale had expected the offering ceremony to be a somber affair, but it was surprisingly vibrant. He used the noisy environment to ask the red kitten in his arms, "Are those bastards staying put?"

Hong meowed in response. He looked as much like a kitten as ever, probably because he was only eight in human years. With Hong's confirmation, Cale organized his thoughts.

The "bastards" in question, Arm, had remained at the duke's manor after handing over the item rather than moving on. *Will we cross paths with them inside?*

Cale padded away from the roaring crowd, pondering the possibility of encountering new members of Arm. Just in case, he'd left Rosalyn—who wasn't as strong as Clope—and the dazzlingly beautiful whales behind. It would spell trouble if any of them caught Clope's eye or if other people remembered seeing them. Thus, only Choi Han and the children accompanied Cale this time.

"Our hopeful dispositions will surely please our god!"

"Woo-hoo!"

Accepting a skewer of rice cakes from Choi Han, Cale observed the cheering populace. *How interesting.* It fascinated him to see the citizens of Faern, a kingdom of disparate faiths without a national religion, praising a single god together. Perhaps they weren't necessarily extolling the specific deity in the legend of God's Tears but simply enjoying the opportunity to relax and celebrate instead.

Well, that's none of my business.

Chewing a rice cake, Cale scanned the area above the altar. He'd expected to see Guardian Knight Clope Seca, but only the current family head—Clope's father, Duke Seca—was present.

People still think the duke holds the title of Guardian Knight.

Most of the kingdom's citizens were under that impression; only a select few knew Clope was the true Guardian Knight. Those select few fell into two categories: Clope's collaborators in declaring war against the southern kingdoms, and members of Cale's retinue.

Beginning to feel unreasonably irritated, Cale heaved a sigh. He then hefted Hong up with one hand as he finished the rice cakes.

At that moment, he heard a pitiful voice in his mind. *‹H-human… I have a piggy bank. I've got a lot of money… Please buy me a skewer too.›*

Cale glanced down to see that Hong was salivating as well. Ohn, cradled in Choi Han's arms, also had her eyes locked on Cale. The three children's gazes bored into him.

"I'll buy you some later," he said. "With *my* money."

The cats' ears twitched, and Raon's voice rang out in his mind again. *‹Our human really is a good person!›*

Of course, of course. Cale nodded at Raon's assessment. He would let them eat and play to their hearts' content for the next few days. They'd be working through the festival's final night without sleep, after all.

"How about we swing by a restaurant, Choi Han?"

"Don't you want to stay until the end, sir?" Choi Han pointed to the lake, which was bustling with noisy revelers, but Cale had no reason to linger.

"Nah, no need to watch. We should go before it gets busy so we can enjoy our meal in peace."

As the disinterested Cale waded toward the edge of the crowd, he heard the cries of the local priests.

"Though the lake is dry, we can see traces of our god!"

"Our Faern is the only place where a god personally created water for the people!"

"Glory will come to Faern when this lake is filled with water once again!"

For Choi Han's part, his face tightened the more he listened. He found himself curious about this god that they were worshipping so fervently. "Just what kind of god is it?"

"No idea." Cale had no way of knowing; none of *Birth of a Hero*'s first five volumes revealed this god's identity. "The people of this kingdom call it 'the god of Faern.'"

Faern's citizens venerated this being as their land's patron deity. Not deeming the topic worthy of any further attention, Cale dismissed it and promptly headed to the restaurant they'd spotted earlier. Choi Han took one more peek at the altar and the people around it before hurrying after him.

When Cale arrived in front of the restaurant, he gasped in admiration and brushed back his dyed brown hair. A delicious aroma tickled his nose.

‹Human! Human! Make sure you slip some food under the tablecloth! I'll totally eat it!› Raon begged. *‹You have to!›*

Ignoring the dragon, Cale entered the restaurant to find it only sparsely occupied. He'd made a point of choosing a venue with long tablecloths so Raon could eat from his hiding place underneath.

Cale was moving toward a table in the corner of the room when he noticed something odd. “What are you doing?”

Choi Han had stopped in his tracks; now he was staring pointedly at Cale. *Why is he acting like this?* When Hong urgently pawed at his arm, he glanced down at the red kitten. Hong looked like he had something important to say.

Maintaining a pretense of normalcy, Cale surveyed the dining area for a bit until a server approached him. “Welcome! Shall I take you to a table?”

“I’d like one in the corner.”

“No problem! Please, have a seat over here!”

The server guided them to their corner table and provided some menus, instructing Cale to call for her when they were ready to order. Once the server left, Hong stood up with his front paws braced on Cale’s shoulder. Cale lowered his head so the kitten could whisper in his ear.

“The people we saw last night are here.”

‹Human, there’re beings as strong as Rosalyn in here.›

What? Cale absorbed their reports with a blank expression on his face. Judging by what Hong had said, the members of Arm were in the restaurant.

The sharp *screech* of a chair grinding against the floor made Cale turn his head. Choi Han sat across from him and whispered, “At your nine o’clock.”

Cale casually swept a glance around the restaurant. In the direction Choi Han indicated, he picked out two blonds who looked to be related. Raon’s word choice stuck out to him then. *Beings.* Not humans.

Those two blonds reminded him of someone. Despite their above-average height and size, they still appeared agile—much like the Tiger Tribe, who would be playing around in the snow back home right about now.

Only then did Cale notice that their golden-blond hair frizzed out in all directions. *Could they be…?* He looked at Choi Han and tapped his pointer finger against the table. When Choi Han looked down, Cale moved his fingertip, tracing out letters on the tabletop: *L-i-o-n-s?*

Choi Han shook his head; he didn't know. Ohn and Hong were similarly clueless, answering him with little shrugs. Even beastfolk couldn't immediately identify one another, and the other party's superior strength made the task all the more challenging.

Then Raon piped up, *‹Oh! They're lions! No wonder. They seemed a lot like the wolves, but they smelled different!›*

This dragon really was all-knowing. Cale dragged both hands down his face with a weighty sigh.

Tiger, bear, whale, and lion—those were the four strongest beastfolk tribes, with the wolves falling just beneath them in power. Of those four, the Bear Tribe and the Lion Tribe were notorious for their impressive numbers.

I didn't expect the secret organization to have lions.

He had assumed the secret organization only included humans. Based on the way Arm had treated the whales, wolves, and tigers up to this point, he'd believed that they sought to make humans the world's strongest life-form. This changed things.

Cale discreetly observed the two lions. *They seem quite tough.*

The lions looked rather imposing, even while gracefully eating their meal. The air about them suggested that they commanded respect among the Lion Tribe. *I suppose they'd need to be pretty high up the ladder if they're staying at the duke's place.*

"All the other members had masks on," Hong murmured. "Only those two didn't cover their faces."

They definitely held some rank, then. No wonder they equaled Rosalyn in power.

Cale's mood soured in a flash. *I wanted to eat in peace…* But now he had to deal with these useless fools. Still, he calmed himself down and opened up the menu.

Choi Han watched as Cale intently perused the restaurant's fare. "It'll be fine, Mr. Cale. I'm here," he said quietly. "If you're worried, do you want me to follow them afterward?"

"Have you decided what you want?"

"Sorry?"

With a straight face, Cale replied, "Everything looks so tasty. I can't choose what to order."

He had cast aside all other concerns in favor of picking something to eat. Disregarding Choi Han's dumbfounded expression, he motioned with his eyes to the kittens. They pointed to the pictures of their desired dishes with clandestine claws.

‹Human, I want five! I'll pick five dishes! It's free, so I can eat it all!›

Dragons were great and mighty indeed. Impressed by Raon's pronouncement, Cale placed their orders. Choi Han ordered for himself as well.

Under his watchful eyes, Cale spoke in a leisurely tone. "If you know the enemy and know yourself…"

Choi Han suddenly recalled a famous quote from Earth: *If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.*

Is that what Mr. Cale is going to say?

Alas, Choi Han's guess was far from the mark.

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you can cook up an even bigger shit show." Gleefully, he added, "And you can steal their stuff without getting caught."

Plus, you can prepare for the future.

Cale kept that last part to himself. He paid no heed to Choi Han's reaction, instead keeping tabs on the lions as they finished and stood. Suddenly, the male lion locked eyes with Cale, startling him.

The lion scoffed at Cale as if to say, *Yeah, I understand why you'd want to gawk at a knockout like me.*

In truth, that was exactly what he was thinking. *I guess I turn heads wherever I go,* the lion mused. Chuckling at his spectators, the lion exited with his female companion.

What's up with that lunatic? Cale thought. The male lion was a different kind of crazy than what Cale had encountered before. In any case, Cale had gleaned quite a bit from the two lions' appearances.

As Raon mentioned, the lions had to be around Rosalyn's skill level, as they'd failed to register either Choi Han's or Raon's capabilities. They also seemed to take Ohn and Hong for regular kittens.

They're not overwhelmingly impressive.

As Cale scrutinized the lions' large bodies, his brain shifted into gear. *Lions live in prides.* Unlike the Tiger Tribe, lions lived in groups; they were stronger when they fought together. If a streak of tigers faced off against a pride of lions, chances were high that the lions would come out on top.

Before long, a different tribe occupied Cale's thoughts: the Blue Wolf Tribe. Wolves couldn't compare to lions in terms of brute strength, but they could be fearsome in their own right.

I need to raise Lark right.

Though Cale had helped Lark overcome a bit of his timidity, the day when the teen would become the Wolf King was still a long way off. Cale had seen Lark training with Choi Han according to human methods, but this encounter with the Lion Tribe had him itching to fast-track the young wolf's development.

And not just Lark.

His younger siblings needed to grow into respectable wolves as well.

If we add the tigers' guerrilla warfare tactics…

Nobody could match the tigers' combination of brains and brawn in a one-on-one battle. If the Wolf Tribe and the Tiger Tribe joined forces…

It's worth a shot.

The idea definitely had value. The Bear Tribe remained a concern, but Cale would cross that bridge when he came to it.

Once the two lions had left the restaurant, Cale said, "For now, let's eat."

"Meow!"

"Meeeow!"

‹Me next! Please put the salmon steak under the table first!›

Cale snuck the salmon steak under the tablecloth before digging into his own meal, enjoying his food while idly eyeing the people who came into the restaurant. He hadn't forgotten the way the lion had scoffed at him.

I'm about to be a real thorn in their side.

***

The early morning found Cale with a frown on his face. *Pat, pat, pat.* A total of six paws weighed him down.

These little punks.

Brow furrowed, Cale cracked his eyes open. The sky outside his window was painted in dark-blue hues. In the midst of winter, the sun wouldn't rise for a few more hours. Red fur consumed Cale's vision.

"Today's the day," Hong said, resolute.

"Yeah, it's happening tonight."

"Time for fireworks!"

At these words from Ohn and Raon, respectively calm and exuberant, Cale sat up in frustration. Right then, someone knocked on the door.

"Come in."

The door creaked open to reveal Choi Han and Archie. Whereas Choi Han was visibly energetic, the killer whale behind him wore a complicated expression.

"I take it your morning 'training session' went well?" Cale said.

"Sure did, Mr. Cale. I feel refreshed."

Remaining outside the room, Choi Han had a wholesome smile on his face as he brushed the dirt from his hands. Archie shook his head at the sight. In reality, Choi Han had just buried the liquid catalyst for the pillar of fire in the dry lake.

"Nothing beats a good workout." Cale's favorite exercise was breathing, but he played along with Choi Han, welcoming the new day.

The last day of the festival—the day they planned to set off the fireworks—would begin with a bright and sunny morning.

***

Cale's group split up at daybreak. They would reconvene in the plaza at sunset.

"I'll be at the library. I'm curious about northern magic."

"I'm going to go get a sword, Mr. Cale."

Rosalyn went to the library and Choi Han to a weapons shop. The two whales disappeared into the crowd to complete their own tasks, fulfilling Cale's orders along the way. In the end, Cale was left with the three children.

“Can I really eat more, human?” Raon asked, peering at Cale’s kindly smile.

“You certainly can,” Cale said gently. He placed a steak he’d ordered—a northern specialty—in front of Raon before wiping sauce from the dragon’s mouth. Raon’s eyes flashed with suspicion, but he opted to chow down for now.

They were in a VIP room on the fifth floor of a restaurant in the main plaza. Cale handed a piece of cake to Hong and a plate of rosé pasta to Ohn. While Hong wasted no time biting into his cake with gusto, Ohn tilted her head in confusion.

“This is weird. You’re pretending to be nice.”

Cale flinched at Ohn’s observation, then pasted on a bright smile. “Pretending? Not at all. You need to eat plenty to grow up strong.”

Ohn slurped down a pasta noodle, observing Cale all the while. Hong and Raon were too busy gorging themselves to notice anything. Ultimately, the children were elated. Here they were, eating their fill while watching the plaza without having to turn invisible or pretend they couldn’t talk.

“Human, this is great!” Raon gushed. “Let’s play all day, then set the fireworks off with a bang!”

Nodding, Cale replied nonchalantly, “Sure. Let’s throw in a fiery thunderbolt as a bonus.”

Raon’s round eyes blinked a few times. “Fiery thunderbolt?”

The fork in his front paw clattered to the floor. *Clang!* His lips curved down in a frown.

“You’re going to use the fiery thunderbolt, human?”

“I won’t faint.”

“But we can use magic!”

“No, we can’t.”

“Why not?!”

"They'll recognize magic."

The swordmaster Clope and the mages of Faern needed to believe the Empire was responsible for today's incident while also experiencing the power of nature.

Seeing that Cale had already made up his mind, Raon wrinkled his nose before pushing the plate of steak across the table. "You eat it, then!"

"I'm full."

"Why is your stomach so tiny? Is it because you're weak?"

You're the one who can put away ten steaks. Aren't you the anomaly here?

Cale had no idea what Raon considered a "tiny" stomach, but he didn't expend more brainpower on the matter. Instead, he proceeded with what he needed to say. "I'll only use a little one today. I won't pass out."

"Really?"

"Yes. I just need enough to make a flash."

Raon continued to pout, but Cale's confidence quelled his protests. The kittens resumed scarfing down their food, apparently also accepting Cale's assurances.

With a sigh, Cale stewed in self-pity for a moment. Why did he need permission from these kids—less than nine, on average—to use his own powers? He wouldn't have hesitated in front of the whales or the tigers. How had it come to this? He even found himself thinking that he might've had it easier when he was living as an utter lout.

Nevertheless, Cale periodically dabbed the sauce from Raon's mouth. The three children exchanged wary glances with one another.

The dragon's stern gaze all but said, *If he passes out, we'll obliterate everything!*

Hong nodded at Raon, but Ohn shook her head, conveying a different message: *What if we just protect him instead of destroying things? If any strong people get too close, we'll use our poisonous mist. Everybody falls in the end if they get poisoned, whether they're a lion or a swordmaster.*

Oh! Good idea!

Oblivious to this vicious exchange, Cale nibbled on a cookie. He didn't notice the surreptitious glances the children snuck at him from time to time.

The fiery thunderbolt… Cale gazed out the window, lost in thought. He'd lost consciousness last time after using the thunderbolt at its maximum power.

In that case, I'll only use half. If activated at night, even a bolt at half power would make a significant flash. *I shouldn't faint if I halve the output, right?*

Cale grimaced as his heart beat faster.

Is that thing going completely bonkers now?

He shook his head at the voice that had been reverberating in his skull since the early morning, like an alarm he couldn't turn off.

"Are you planning to destroy it?" It was the stone guardian.

Cale couldn't fathom why the Scary Stone's owner was acting this way. *Is this because I decided to use the fiery thunderbolt?*

"Is there no mute setting on this thing…?" he mumbled.

The children went stiff, their silent conference ceasing. Cale didn't so much as spare them a glance. *This stone guardian sure is useless.*

Perhaps prompted by Cale's thought, the Scary Stone's owner said something different this time. **"Do you seek to eradicate all traces of the fire's eternal rival?"**

What now? Whose eternal rival? The Fire of Destruction's?

Cale knew what he meant to destroy: the lake tied to the legend of the god's tears. But what was this about a rival? His eyes narrowed.

Curious as to what had grabbed Cale's attention, Raon turned—and froze. In the direction Cale was looking, he spied a street vendor selling apple pies. When Cale remained still as a statue, Raon slowly pulled out his piggy bank and plucked one silver coin from inside. Ohn and Hong each took out a single coin as well.

Naturally, Cale wasn't looking at anything in particular; a new topic had jumbled his thoughts. *The fire's eternal rival… Huh. Well, there's no way the Scary Stone's owner would lie.* That being the case, the ancient's words gave Cale an idea.

Did the legend's protagonist possess an Ancient Power?

No matter how unhinged the Fire of Destruction's owner might've been, Cale doubted he would've picked a fight with a god. The most obvious conclusion was that someone with a water-aligned Ancient Power was the fire's rival.

Cale recalled a myth he'd heard about from Taylor Sten in the past.

The stone guardian.

The guardian had protected the northeastern region in ancient times. According to the story, that guardian was the defender of the Land of Boulders. Cale found it odd that the old tale had popped into his head unbidden.

Why did I think of that old story out of the blue?

Cale heaved a sigh and stood, making up his mind. *It's none of my business.*

The Scary Stone's owner didn't recite its usual line about sacrificing himself, so surely Cale had nothing to worry about. There was no reason to rack his brain over this.

Raon zoomed through the air toward him. "Human! Human! Are you gonna get apple pie?"

Apple pie?

Cale studied Raon, wondering what in the world he was talking about. The dragon and both kittens stood before him with their chests puffed up, as if awaiting his answer.

He shook his head. "No."

Raon chuckled with conspiratorial flair. "Oh, I get it, human! I know you picked this restaurant for us! Look forward to your apple pie!"

"We have lots of money now!"

"We've gotta repay the favor."

What the…?

Since Cale couldn't comprehend what the three children were babbling about, he chose to ignore their comments. "Let's just finish eating."

The children hurried to polish off the pile of food on the table. Seeing their excitement, Cale figured he didn't need to worry and let his mind wander.

A short while later, Raon took his leave. "Okay, human! I'm gonna go see Choi Han for a while!"

Cale was too absorbed in his thoughts to even notice.

***

Knock-knock-knock.

Cale sat up at the sound of someone rapping on the door. The time had come for this VIP room, reserved in Flynn Merchant Fleets' name, to open its door once again.

"Come in."

Choi Han entered, followed by the others. Cale turned to look out the window, where the plaza glowed crimson in the dwindling rays of sunset. With that, he rose to his feet.

"Looks like it's time."

The street vendors gradually closed up shop as soldiers cleared the grounds. A large wooden post was propped up in the center of the plaza.

"Do they burn that post while they dance, Mr. Cale?"

"They do."

The moment the wooden post was set on fire, people would sing and dance until midnight, some even playing instruments they'd brought with them. When the clock struck twelve, they would mark the end of the celebration by dousing the fire with water.

Boom. Boooom. Boom.

The wooden post went up in flames to the pounding of drums.

"Let's burn this night into our memories!" someone shouted, voice reverberating through the plaza. A chorus of cheers rose up in response.

Booooom. Boom. Boom, boom, boom!

The drums grew louder as other instruments and voices joined in.

Tap, tap.

Bit by bit, Cale looked down to see Raon, Ohn, and Hong awkwardly dancing in sync with Faern's people. He watched this fascinating performance until night fell, then removed his outer robe to reveal a black outfit beneath.

"Let's go."

Without waiting for a response, Cale gathered wind at the tips of his shoes. He slipped onto the terrace and hopped effortlessly up to the roof.

Tap, tap.

‹Human, let's go together!›

Cale felt Raon's magic boosting his speed as he vaulted over the roof. He and his allies sped away from the plaza's blazing light to the darkest and quietest spot in Bago.

When they arrived, Choi Han approached to give Cale a brief report. "I determined the patrol route earlier. Please follow me." He adjusted his scabbard with a *click*, then took the lead.

Rosalyn fell into step with Cale. "There were no magic devices near the lake. Based on what I read in the library, Faern doesn't have many mages. They're weak when it comes to spellcasting." With full confidence, she added, "There's no need to worry about magic."

Despite the festivities, Cale's allies hadn't been playing around all day. Next, he glanced at the two whales standing guard behind him.

On cue, Faseton made note of his observations during the day's celebrations. "Many nobles reserved restaurants with good views. I think the reaction will be bigger than we expected."

"The Seca manor was quiet," Archie said. "It's confirmed that Clope is at the royal castle."

Just as Archie finished, Cale came to a stop at the forest east of the lake. He then slipped inside the most discreet point of entry. Only a handful of lamps dotted the basin; he didn't see any people.

He looked to the north, picking out the shapes of the temple and soldiers. After he'd instructed Choi Han and Archie to bury the catalyst in the center of the lake early this morning, they'd used the entire amount taken from Myple Castle.

"Should we light it with a magic bomb, Lord Cale?"

"No." Cale understood Rosalyn's confusion. They hadn't brought the timed magic bomb, so they needed an explosion to destroy the orb.

"Then how—"

"I'll do it."

"You will?"

Ignoring the bewildered looks coming from Rosalyn and the whales, Cale resumed walking. They needed to act before the patrol got here.

Noticing Cale's movements, Choi Han called out, "Mr. Cale…" He remembered that one of Cale's abilities resembled a magic bomb: the thunderbolt that had bathed the entire valley in the Ten Finger Mountains in red light. While Rosalyn and the whales hadn't seen it, Choi Han had witnessed its power—as well as Cale losing consciousness afterward.

"Choi Han," Cale said, stopping Choi Han from drawing near. Relaxed as ever, he went on, "Once I use my power, take Ohn, Hong, Raon, and me to the Seca manor immediately, no matter what. Got it?"

Choi Han bit his lip, then eventually nodded. "Understood… I know the plan."

Between his response and Cale's directions, Rosalyn couldn't make sense of things. *Isn't that the obvious course of action? Why is he going over it with Choi Han again?*

No one had an answer for her.

With both hands stretching out toward the lake, Cale turned to look at the burning wooden post in the plaza. His face scrunched up in a frown. "It's brighter than I expected."

The flaming post was both taller and more vibrant than he'd anticipated. A small thunderbolt might not be visible from the plaza.

Oh well.

Cale decided to use a pinch more power than originally planned—just under the threshold that would make him faint.

Then Choi Han will carry me to Seca manor.

Thinking no more of it, Cale gathered the Fire of Destruction into his fingertips.

“So you are destroying it after all,” said the Scary Stone’s owner.

At that moment, Choi Han raised his head.

Rumble, rumble.

Thunder rolled through the night sky, clearly audible amid the utter stillness of the lake.

“Is he…?”

Like Choi Han had before her, Rosalyn looked up. It sounded like the heavens were crying. When she dropped her gaze, she saw Choi Han moving up behind Cale while Ohn’s mist enveloped the group.

‹Take out a potion, Little Rosalyn,› Raon said directly into her mind. *‹I’ll create a shield.›*

That instant, the thunder grew more aggressive. *Rumble, rumble!* The priests and soldiers at the temple emerged to look skyward.

“Soon.”

Cale’s allies heard Raon’s quiet voice. The black dragon rarely spoke aloud while invisible; this was one occasion among few.

“It’s coming.”

What is? As one, their gazes darted up to the sky before shifting down toward Cale.

“Oh.”

Red light exploded before their eyes, leaving them momentarily blinded by its rose-gold flare. For the space of a heartbeat, the entire sky was suffused in scarlet. Then an earsplitting sound cracked through the air.

Bang!

One word was lodged in everyone’s mind: *thunderbolt*. After a spell of blindness that felt like an eternity, Rosalyn regained her

sight. A giant column surged into the sky.

"My goodness…"

The pillar of flame had shot up from where the red thunderbolt struck. She could hardly catch her breath, still reeling at the colossal natural power that had burst out of Cale just now.

A shout—almost a shriek—tore from her throat. "L-Lord Cale!"

"Rosalyn," Choi Han said, surprisingly calm. He lifted the staggering Cale onto his back with ease, then faced the dazed Rosalyn and the whales. "What should we do?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Cale replied, his voice weak but still clear. Though his exhaustion was plain for everyone to see, he croaked out, "Follow the plan."

His response snapped Rosalyn and the whales back to their senses.

"Understood, sir." Choi Han set off for the Seca manor with Cale on his back. Raon, Ohn, and Hong followed behind him. After watching them for a moment, the others moved out as well.

During their return to Bago, Cale noticed that the city was utterly still, without a peep of music or laughter. The red thunderbolt had struck the capital silent. Yet the only thought running through Cale's head in that moment was *I'm starving.* Beyond that, he felt fine; he could even walk unassisted if he wanted to. This just wasn't the time to stop for a snack.

It was then that Raon, Ohn, and Hong crept toward him.

"What's up with you?" Cale asked feebly. "Shouldn't you get a move on?"

Far from being offended, Raon retrieved something from his subspace and handed it to Cale. The three children had pooled their money to buy ten slices of apple pie. "You're hungry, aren't you, human? That's what you said as soon as you opened your eyes last time!"

Cale opened his mouth, and Raon fed him a bite of pie. Choi Han continued to chauffeur Cale about on his back. Munching away on the apple pie, Cale steadily made his way into the plaza, where the astonished people of Bago awaited.

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Choi Han might as well have been jogging along a flat plain, even as he vaulted across rooftops with Cale on his back.

This is comfier than a carriage, Cale thought, admiring Choi Han's perfect stability. All the while, he savored each hunk of apple pie that Raon popped into his expectant mouth. The aroma and the texture of the apples, along with the pie's delectable sweetness, relaxed him significantly.

Upon finishing a slice, Cale licked his lips. *Much better.* The Fire of Destruction's only downside was the extreme hunger it left in its wake. *This went way better than that time at the Ten Finger Mountains. I didn't cough up any bloo—*

A spasm seized him mid-thought, and he coughed violently. Blood seeped into Choi Han's clothes.

Damn it. Seeing that he was hacking up blood after all, Cale made a connection. *There's always blood when the Energy of the Heart works in a hurry.*

The same thing had happened during the Plaza Terror Incident, the events at the Ten Finger Mountains, and the recent uproar in the Empire when he deployed the shield. Whenever he exerted significant strength, the Energy of the Heart cranked into overdrive to restore his health. This invariably resulted in a single bloody cough.

But I feel leagues better now.

He always felt refreshed afterward. Cale glanced at Raon, relieved that he hadn't spit up blood with a mouthful of apple pie. That would've been a disaster.

"What are you doing?"

"…Nothing, human."

A piece of apple pie floated away like dust in the wind. At the same time, a poisonous mist exuded from the two cats. Disconcerted, Cale patted Choi Han's back. *I should at least apologize for getting blood on the guy, right?*

"Sorry."

"It's not a problem," Choi Han responded at length. Cale had to assume that Choi Han had taken a moment to suppress his irritation at the bloodstain on his back; Cale would've been disgusted if he were in Choi Han's place, after all.

Cale didn't want to be anywhere near an angry Choi Han. Now that he'd filled his belly with apple pie, he could probably walk on his own. "I should be okay to get off now. Put me down, and we can keep going."

"…Forget it, sir."

"Forget it"? Cale thought, baffled.

"It's like carrying a broom on my back," Choi Han hastened to add. "You're lighter than a bundle of straw. Besides, I can move more efficiently and covertly than you can, Mr. Cale."

Did he just compare me to a broom and *a bundle of straw?* Cale knew Choi Han was merely being honest, but he couldn't help feeling offended.

"Listen to Choi Han, weak human," Raon said, offering him another piece of apple pie.

"But—"

Raon stuffed the pie into Cale's mouth. Cale gaped at Raon in disbelief, but the black dragon's face was unyielding.

"I don't care what you have to say, human. Listen to us this time."

What's that supposed to mean? Cale was flabbergasted, but he swallowed the rest of his retort with the piece of pie. *Well, that makes things easier for me.* He relished in being carried and fed as they headed up the hill to the duke's ivory residence.

Below, the streets of Bago buzzed with growing chaos. Cale peered down at the maze of roadways. Though it was late, the city teemed with life. The wooden post still burned, but there was no more laughter or music. Everyone was looking in the same direction: toward the lake of legend. They couldn't see the basin from here, but the fire shooting into the sky loomed large in the distance.

A nobleman who'd been enjoying his meal in a VIP room stumbled onto the terrace in shock. "Th-there's a pillar of fire at the l-lake!"

The noble no longer had attention to spare for the wooden post in the city center—not when that giant pillar of flame was practically poised to decimate the plaza. He broke into a nervous sweat, recalling the red thunderbolt that had descended onto the lake. It was as if…

"It's a god."

To him, that fire resembled a god's rage. The noble's hands trembled at the thought. *Our god left that lake behind. Why would it bur—*

He never finished his thought.

"Aaaah!"

"F-f-fire!"

The noble looked down at the people below the terrace. Previously stupefied by the unexpected turn of events, they were finally reacting. A tableau of responses played out before his eyes: Some fled, while others fell to their knees in prayer. If the plaza descended into chaos, people could end up getting hurt.

And yet, the nobleman wasn't worried about that.

Psssh.

Steam billowed into the air as the plaza fire was doused. The mages had poured water on the pole, leaving only charred wood behind. At the sound of the flames being smothered, people stopped moving.

A booming voice amplified by magic echoed throughout the plaza. “Fire can be extinguished.”

At last, Duke Rok Seca had made his appearance. Earlier that day, the nobleman had learned that the duke would be visiting the wooden post in the plaza. He looked over to see the man standing on a terrace, addressing the crowd below. The people still venerated him as the Guardian Knight.

With a resolute expression, Rok continued his speech. “This is Faern. Fire cannot defeat our kingdom.”

Faern was in the coldest region of the continent. This had little to do with subduing the flames; in fact, Faern’s dry climate actually made it more susceptible to fires. Nevertheless, hearing this from the man they believed to be the Guardian Knight soothed the people’s fears.

“Fire can never triumph against water.” Rok pointed at the wooden post. “Listen to the knights, everyone. The fire will soon be contained.”

With help from the duke’s personal knights, the forces stationed at the plaza quickly dispersed among the people and restored order.

Watching all this as he passed by, Cale said, “That’s a relief.”

He meant it, and he was a little surprised to boot. *I didn’t know the duke would come to the plaza.* He’d expected some noble or other to placate the crowd, but he’d never imagined it would be the duke himself.

“This makes things more interesting.”

Staring intently at Cale, Raon asked, “Human, why are you - smiling like that again?”

Choi Han startled, already picturing the look on Cale's face. Cale paid him no mind, too preoccupied with the duke's final proclamation. *"The fire will soon be contained,"* Rok had told the crowd, as if it were an irrefutable truth.

Soon? That was nonsense; the pillar of fire wouldn't go out no matter what they did. After a few days, thoughts of the Empire's alchemy would dominate their minds. Since Faern and the Mogor Empire were allies, they had to know about the pillar of fire the Empire had used on Myple Castle. The duke would break his promise to the people in the end.

Satisfied by the course of things, Cale turned his gaze not toward Seca manor but toward Faern Castle, where Guardian Knight Clope was currently stationed.

Cale wasn't the only one with his sights set on the castle. Rok likewise looked in that direction—toward his son, Clope. Any moment now, Clope would head to the lake with his subordinates. Rok was confident that his son would resolve this problem.

As if responding to the duke's trust, the castle's main gates opened. *Screech!* The immense entrance gaped wide as knights on horseback appeared from within. A knight bearing a white banner rode at the front, with Guardian Knight Clope behind him.

"Let's go." With this curt order, Clope rushed toward the Lake of God's Tears.

He'd been taking a break from his business in the castle, gazing out toward the brightly lit plaza, when the red thunderbolt had struck the ground and set the lake aflame. Considering Clope's plans to advance south as soon as spring arrived, this was more than a little inconvenient.

Though he was calm on the surface, his heart pounded in his chest. *What is going on?*

As his snowy hair whipped in the breeze, the other day's events took on an even greater significance. That white-haired priest he'd met a few days ago… The man had disappeared into thin air as

if by magic, and the identification card Clope had gotten his hands on turned out to be a fake.

The priest's words monopolized Clope's thoughts. *"I pray that the lake fills again soon."*

While he first listened to the priest, a thought had occurred to Clope: *The look in his eyes made him seem certain of it.* The priest had said he would pray, yet his eyes shone with conviction. Everything he'd said spun through Clope's mind.

"Human greed prompted their esteemed god to take back that gift to humanity and leave this land behind. Rather than lashing out in anger, the god shed tears of sorrow… All will become clear in due time."

Clope's fingers trembled around the reins, and his head snapped up—he needed to stop his horse. "Whoa!"

However, he needn't have done anything at all; the horse stopped on its own. The animal stood rooted to the spot, unable to go a step farther. Clope was similarly struck dumb by the sight of the lake ahead—or, more specifically, the raging pillar of fire that filled the basin and consumed his vision.

"How can this be?"

The column of flame did not breach the lake's edges, spewing straight into the heavens. When Clope saw it, a single word came to mind.

Fury.

Clope's heart thudded wildly.

Before long, the mages under his command caught up. "Captain!"

Expression grim, Clope ordered, "All units, focus on putting out the fire. Knights, cut down the trees and bring over heaps of dirt to slow the spread. Mages, commence spellcasting."

"Yes, sir!"

The team from the castle sprang into action. The fire was difficult to approach, but they couldn't leave it be. Clope eyed the flames before turning toward the forest to the east—the same forest where the white-haired priest had vanished. Clope stared at the forest for a long time, still as a statue.

Meanwhile, Cale—the white-haired "priest" in question—put an end to his sloth impersonation and slid down from Choi Han's back. He stretched, sighed, and addressed the fierce gazes directed at him. "I told you, I'm fine."

"I'll protect you."

"I'll keep you safe, human!"

"I'm gonna surround our enemies with poison."

"I'll obscure their vision with my mist!"

Cale shook his head at everyone's declarations before facing the white manor crowning the Seca family's estate. Despite the late hour, the pale house wasn't wreathed in shadow; lights glimmered throughout the building. That worked to their benefit, since it was harder to track something down in the dark.

"Raon."

"What is it, human?"

"Turn Ohn and Hong invisible."

"All right!"

As Raon, Ohn, and Hong winked out of sight, Cale retrieved a mask.

Choi Han put on a mask as well, but not without a sigh. "Mr. Cale?"

"What?"

"Why don't we make better outfits for next time?"

"You mean these Arm uniforms?"

"Yeah."

"I don't want to." Cale grinned wickedly, which gave his companion pause. "Say, Choi Han."

"Yes, sir?"

"Think about it from Arm's point of view. Which would make you angrier: someone causing trouble while wearing a cheap imitation of your uniform that's clearly fake, or someone causing trouble with a flawless uniform?"

"…I see."

Cale used shabby-looking outfits on purpose, knowing it was bound to irritate Arm even further.

After a few seconds of silent contemplation, Choi Han remarked, "The amount of thought you put into things amazes me."

"This is nothing," Cale said breezily. He looked down at his hands.

Hwoosh.

The Sound of the Wind coursed in a single direction. Following the gale, Cale proceeded downward. As they'd started off on top of the Seca estate's main building, this was an odd choice.

"Mr. Cale, why are you going that way?" Choi Han trailed after Cale, confusion plain on his face. They were moving away from the well-lit area.

Cale was walking toward the corner of the property, which housed the original structure that secured the first duke's reputation as a humble person. He could see a small abandoned field in the area. As the wind guided him to that field, Cale grinned beneath his mask.

‹You're smiling right now, aren't you, human?› Raon guessed, floating in his wake like a ghost. *‹I know what you're thinking! It's exciting!›*

Cale's steps were light as he searched for the divine artifact he'd come to pilfer. He did have one question, though: If the

protagonist of the legend about the God's Tears was a human with an Ancient Power, what form would the divine artifact take?

At that moment, the Scary Stone's owner piped up, **"Are you trying to sacrifice yourself?"**

Chills shuddered through Cale, and his smile vanished in an instant.

Chapter 39:
I Did Pick It Up, But…

THE SCARY STONE'S OWNER went silent as soon as Cale alighted in the field.

"Isn't this just a field?" Hong asked, still invisible.

Cale approached the quietest spot in the estate. "No, this is the place."

‹There're no magic devices!›

He could move without hesitation because Raon had confirmed this in advance.

Cale had acquired as much information as he could concerning the Guardian Knight household of Seca. That was how he'd learned of this spot—and he immediately recognized the "field" he'd read about.

The man who became the first duke of the Seca line, as well as the first Guardian Knight, had set up a front garden, a rear garden, and a small field in this corner of his property. In his old age, he maintained the field himself, personally handling the fertilizing, watering, and pest control duties to keep his wide selection of vegetables healthy.

His diligence in caring for his little field evoked such an impression of simplicity and modesty that people associated those traits with the man himself. Thus, the Seca family continued to cultivate the field even after his death.

As the years passed, the number of people tending to the field diminished. In the end, it served only as a historical landmark, neatly maintained but no longer in use. Still, the fact that they'd preserved this useless field for its historical value was praiseworthy.

"This is nice," Cale said, noting the field's decent condition as he passed through.

‹Are we gonna dig, human?›

Ignoring Raon, Cale focused on the Sound of the Wind.

Hwoosh.

Cale scanned his surroundings. He could pick out the rear garden, as well as the bright glow of the buildings. In contrast to the hectic plaza, these areas remained peaceful—though the people inside probably couldn't sleep. His eyes passed over the field before coming to rest on a small shed nearby. It was an old, compact structure.

"This must be it."

Grinning, he made a beeline for the shed. The building was so cramped, he'd have to crouch to enter. Choi Han watched Cale scrutinize the shed for a moment before positioning himself in the field to stand guard.

Tap. Tap. Feeling something prod his shoe, Choi Han looked down. There was nothing there.

"Meow."

With Ohn's cry, mist materialized and blanketed the area. Choi Han extended a hand to his reliable, unseen ally, and Ohn climbed up his arm to perch on his shoulder.

Cale paid no heed to the dark and murky environment as he stooped down in front of the shed. Spotting a rusty door, he tried with all his might to pry it open.

Creak, creak!

Even when he was grunting from the effort, the door didn't budge. It appeared to be rusted shut. Raon sighed in tandem with Hong's meow of disbelief, but Cale overlooked it.

Letting go of the knob, he called out, "Raon."

‹I've got this, weak human. I don't even need to use magic on this—my front paws are enough.›

Cale was intrigued. Could the dragon really open doors with those stubby paws of his?

Crack!

Evidently, he could.

A pair of imprints shaped like Raon's paws appeared on the door as it popped open—or rather, *broke.* Cale watched as it dangled on its hinges.

"We should erase those pawprints."

‹All right.›

Crack, crack, bang!

Raon grabbed the door and pummeled it a few more times. Soon, a gaping hole replaced the imprints. No one would ever believe this was the work of a dragon's paws; it looked more like someone used a mana orb to bust the door down.

"I could've melted it with poison."

Cale snubbed Hong's laments and left the two children behind, entering the shed. He couldn't even stand up straight inside.

"Raon, light."

A tiny, luminescent orb appeared, bathing the shed in its glow.

Cale made a face. "Farming tools?"

As far as he could see, the shed only contained farming implements: a shovel that looked reasonably new, a hoe with a few years of wear, and a pickaxe that was well past its prime, along with a heap of other miscellaneous tools. He picked up the hoe, though he already had one in his magic bag. As much as he wished that this old hoe was the divine artifact, the wind pointed to the corner.

Cale stared at the hodgepodge of objects piled up there. With a heavy sigh, he squatted to clear the area. He became absorbed in

his task, looking far from elegant as he shuffled the old tools aside. Before long, a wrinkle formed in his brow.

"Time to earn your meal ticket."

Hong padded over to help. "Meow."

"Human, let's just blow it away with the wind! Or will the shed fly away too if we do that?"

"Yes, it will."

"Okay! But there's something weird here!"

Weird how? Tossing a copper plate to the side, Cale looked at Raon. The black dragon's feelings had led them to the divine artifacts last time.

"What's weird?"

"Anger! Destruction!" Raon answered happily.

What?

"And a grudge!"

Now there's a grudge?

"Those are the impressions I'm getting!"

The tongs in Cale's hand clattered to the floor—he'd just found the object the Sound of the Wind was nudging.

"Yes! That's the source, human! It's oozing resentment as cold as winter! It feels like the revenge of the snow! Ooh, that's a good name: the Snow's Revenge!"

Shit.

Cale examined the item Raon was calling "the Snow's Revenge." It was a blue watering can. It looked like any other watering can, albeit with an outdated design that betrayed its age.

He covered his face with both hands. This didn't seem to be the divine artifact he sought. *Anger? Resentment?* That sounded more in line with "God's Rage" than "God's Tears."

"Huh?" Cale lowered his hands. There was no reason to assume the *entire* legend was factual. "Wait a second."

Cale looked at Raon. The black dragon blinked his round eyes a few times, then appeared to catch on to Cale's train of thought. "Oh! I don't think it means us any harm! It's not getting mad at us!"

With Raon's reassurance, Cale wasted no time in picking up the watering can. He inspected it thoroughly, finding nothing on the outside, the bottom, or the top of the can—no markings whatsoever. He didn't see any writing.

"Was I wrong?"

He had expected to find words scrawled on the object, as he had in the God of Death's book. Then again, there *were* cases like the God of Sun's divine artifact, where he couldn't see anything.

Cale lifted the watering can's lid with a *click*, and his heart sank. There was nothing inside. *Is there really nothing here?* He closed the lid with a sigh.

"Oh?"

He opened it again and flipped the lid over. A snicker slipped past his lips, and then he burst out laughing. There was an ultra-faint line of text underneath the lid; it almost looked like a lacework trim.

Pointing to the words, Cale asked Raon, "Can you enlarge this with magic?"

"Of course I can! I *am* great and mighty!" Raon peered at the design on the lid. "They're words!"

"Read it," Cale said promptly.

Raon slowly started to read. "The same thing keeps repeating over and over! It must be here at least a hundred times!"

The contents of this tiny text, hidden within a decorative pattern, sparked Cale's curiosity.

"'Life ends with nothing.'" Raon's voice reverberated throughout the small shed. "'Even if you build a dam, the water will eventually overflow. I created a river for this frozen land, but you stemmed its flow.'"

Cale realized he'd been operating on a false assumption from the beginning. The Lake of God's Tears wasn't actually a lake at all. It was a *river*.

"'For all of you who chased away my precious child to satisfy your greed, there will be only one conclusion.'"

Precious child? According to the legends, the god had left the Guardian Knight behind.

Raon read the final line. "'Just as the river shall flow once more, so too shall all things return to normal.'" His task completed, the dragon peered up at Cale.

"What kind of letters do you see?"

"It's a runic language!"

"Really?"

The runic letters Raon had read were similar to those in the God of Death's book. The fact that this runic message had appeared on a nonmagical item suggested it was truth—the truth from the god's perspective, at any rate.

Cale considered the facts of the tale one at a time.

In the beginning, the god created a river for the frozen north. Yet the land's inhabitants wished to hoard the water for themselves, so they chased away the god's precious child and dammed up the river to form a lake. Their actions enraged the god, who left this divine artifact behind. If all this was true, the modern version of the legend had been altered a great deal.

At the very least, the Guardian Knight never had the god's blessing. The Guardian Knight, whom Faern's citizens depended on, likely had a different origin story. Clope believed himself to be the god's chosen one, but that wasn't the case.

And is that "precious child" the Fire of Destruction's rival?

It brought to mind what the Scary Stone's owner had said: ***"Do you seek to eradicate all traces of the fire's eternal rival?"***

The situation felt like a complex web of disparate threads woven together. Regardless, Cale didn't rack his brain over it for long. He didn't need to solve everything this very moment; this was neither the time nor the place.

He looked down at the watering can. "Let's pack this away for now, Raon."

"Okay! It won't hurt us!" Raon swiftly deposited the watering can in his subspace.

Cale crawled back out of the shed, only to discover a soupy mist engulfing the area. When he raised his head, he noticed that Choi Han had walked over to him.

"Is it almost time?"

"Yes, sir. I think they'll be here soon."

Turning to Ohn and Hong, Cale said, "We should get started."

"Meow."

The mist around the field seeped outward. It turned stark-white, infused with poison that would make anyone affected lose their sense of direction. This toxic mist enveloped Cale and the field he stood in, but it didn't touch him at all; it merely provided a protective shroud.

‹Are we dealing with Arm now, human? Will we nab their stuff?›

Cale shook his head. "Not yet."

Choi Han looked toward the main gate, where he felt a strong presence making itself known as it approached the door. "They've arrived."

That was enough to change Cale's answer.

‹They're here! Is it time now?›

"Yes. Let's go say hello to Arm and help ourselves to their things."

Choi Han flinched at his phrasing, but Cale was relaxed as always as he asked Raon to use flight magic. Still encircled by the poisonous mist, he floated into the air.

Boom! Boom!

Loud banging sounds echoed across the grounds, throwing the whole Seca estate into disarray. Cale landed on a nearby roof, watching the scene play out before him.

"Ha ha ha ha! How pathetic!"

A man in a black mask and a shabby Arm uniform cackled with glee, stomping on the shattered wyvern sculptures he'd just destroyed. It was Archie, who'd decimated those ugly sculptures with his bare hands.

Earlier, Cale had instructed him, *"Do whatever your temper compels you to do."*

Archie swung his fists at the knights advancing on him. *Boom!* The final wyvern, the symbol of the Guardian Knight, collapsed in a heap of rubble.

"Wow, was that a wyvern or a fly? Adorable! If you so much as poke them, they break just like that! Ah ha ha ha!"

For the first time in ages, Archie was free to do as he pleased. Cale smiled with satisfaction at the sight of Archie acting like a lunatic. Rosalyn and Faseton, both dressed in the same shoddy outfits, stood behind the killer whale.

"Excellent."

Enjoying the cool breeze, Cale observed the knights and the male lion closing in on them. The lion wore leather armor instead of Arm's uniform. "H-how dare they wear such offensively fake

outfits?!” he bellowed, glowering at the intruders. “They must be the same bastards from before!”

Cale’s mood lightened even further. “The night air is so refreshing.”

And the night was still young.

Not everyone could kick back and enjoy the evening air, however. On this final night of the festival, the residents of the duke’s estate were wide awake. When the master of the household and his son both couldn’t sleep, the rest of them suffered the same fate. The raucous celebrations were the least of their worries now that a radiant pillar of flame seemed fit to burn away the very night sky.

The estate’s elderly butler couldn’t believe his eyes. “Wh-what a l-lunatic!”

Although the knights and soldiers blocked his view, he could still make out the demolished wyvern sculptures. Those statues had been the symbol of House Seca for generations.

Crack, crack!

Such historic monuments were being ground into dust—all because of a single person.

“Oh my, it just falls apart when I put my hand on it!”

A madman in all black snickered while crunching the pieces of a sculpture into powder. Needless to say, it was Archie.

“Wow, this is a blast! Stepping on it feels *great*.”

Pow! Pow!

Fragments of the sculptures crumbled every time he stomped on them. Archie was in his element; he could see in the knights’ eyes that he was getting on their nerves. After behaving himself over the past few years on Seakeller’s orders, Archie felt liberated.

‹Human, that killer whale’s acting like a total scumbag! Amazing!›

Cale agreed with Raon, thinking Archie was being nothing short of a bastard.

One of the duke's knights—not the captain, but perhaps the vice-captain—began shouting. "Who are you?! What in heaven's name is this?"

Archie snorted. Filled with bravado, he bellowed, "We're the secret organization!" More mad laughter bubbled out from him.

Enraged though the knight was, he couldn't move. The duke was on his way, while Clope had rushed to the lake. He'd already dispatched a messenger to notify both of them. As vice-captain, he had the authority to make a call, but he didn't dare.

One of the interlopers was strong enough to destroy a giant wyvern sculpture with a single blow, and his strikes lacked any trace of mana or aura whatsoever. He relied on pure physical strength. An impressive undercurrent of mana emanated from the other masked person behind him. It was Rosalyn, of course, but the vice-captain had no way of knowing that.

Biding his time, the vice-captain glanced sidelong at the man with golden hair resembling a lion's mane. Everyone else knew this man only as a guest of the duke, but the vice-captain was aware of his true identity: Edrich, the Lion King's second son. Hoping to get a handle on the situation, the vice-captain faced the powerful lion head-on.

Voice dripping with disdain, Edrich said, "They must be those nutcases I've heard so much about."

The vice-captain's eyes narrowed. *These intruders have a reputation?*

Unaware of the vice-captain's perplexity, Edrich roared, "Do you bastards have any idea who you're barking at?!"

Though he outwardly berated Archie, Rosalyn, and Faseton, he was secretly amused. *I didn't expect to see those infamous punks here.*

He recognized the makeshift uniforms. The magic spearman and the tamer had suffered at the hands of people wearing those same outfits. What's more, these people had derailed both the whale-mermaid conflict and the attack on the elf village in the Ten Finger Mountains. Arm had reported them to the higher-ups a while back.

At a time when the organization was already busy investigating the Empire's schemes, these troublemakers kept increasing their workload; it was quite the headache. *And they're strong.*

Edrich sensed that his foes matched him in power, or perhaps even surpassed him, just as the magic spearman had described. Yet he couldn't afford to stand down now; he was the grand and majestic heir to the Lion King's throne.

Acknowledging his enemies' skills, Edrich demanded, "Who the hell are you?! Reveal yourselves!"

Cale raised his hand, signaling to Archie. The killer whale took note of the gesture and replied as Cale had directed: "Would you do that if you were in our shoes? Those broom bristles around your head must go straight to your brain."

As Edrich's features twisted, Cale cheerfully told his party, "We should get moving too." He slowly vanished into thin air, turning his back just as Edrich resumed shouting.

"How dare you look at my beautiful golden mane and call it something so mundane!"

"What? Why're you throwing a fit when this isn't even your house?"

"Y-you insolent…!" Edrich sputtered at Archie's retort. The nearby vice-captain winced, then tried to calm himself.

Cale had to commend Archie on his goading skills. "You see Archie's technique?" he said to Choi Han. "That's how it ought to be done."

"…I'm not really interested in learning that."

"No problem. We only need one person who's good at it."

Choi Han shot Cale a look that said, *Is Archie seriously the only one?* but Cale was already moving on.

Once Cale was completely invisible, his group entered the next phase of their plan.

"Enough talk," Archie said. "Come at me."

Without waiting for his opponent, he charged straight at Edrich. Rosalyn and Faseton rushed toward the knights in the killer whale's wake.

While they advanced, Cale told Choi Han and Raon, "Follow me closely. Don't leave my side." He needed them to protect him and the kittens, as the other lion and Arm's remaining members had yet to show themselves.

‹I understand, human! I'll always be with you!›

Tuning out Raon's happy voice, Cale snuck into the duke's manor.

***

A gust of wind coursed through the manor. *Hwoosh.* The sound caught the attention of Gronica, the other lion. She was in the last room on the residence's fifth floor, one door down from Clope's study.

"Is a window open?" she asked.

Confused, the Seca knight beside her replied, "Sorry?" A split second later, his face hardened. There *were* no open windows.

The members of Arm drew their weapons. *Schwing!*

As soon as word of the intruders had reached them, they had closed off all the fifth-floor doors and windows and assigned Seca knights to guard them. No breeze should've been able to seep through—yet the wind swept past them once more.

Hwoosh.

Everyone gripped their weapons. That was when they saw it: a thick mist creeping toward them from the end of the corridor, where the wind had come from. It looked as if a white wave was splashing toward them in the night.

"Get back!" Gronica said, then rushed at the mist. She held a golden whip—one that matched her hair.

Her whip lashed out at the mist. *Crack!*

A tiny cry rose up from within. "Meow." It was a cat.

Some time ago, Gronica had attended a meeting of Arm's various battle brigades. She vividly remembered the childlike tamer —who was far older than he looked—grinding his teeth and muttering, *"I'm going to kill those cats."*

"There are two of them," the magic spearman had reported. *"They're skilled with poison."*

When Gronica heard another meow, she struck at the mist again. *Thwack!* A blade parried her attack, knocking the whip off course. Then a man appeared from within the mist. His eyes shone the same shade of black as his outfit, and a dark aura permeated the air around him. Right then, Gronica remembered some key intel Arm had acquired on the assailants.

"It's poisonous!" she warned her subordinates, then faced her foe. "You must be the aura-wielding swordmaster."

At that, the masked man's black eyes crinkled in a smile. Gronica didn't miss it, flicking her whip once more. *Thwack!*

The windows in the hallway imploded. Shards of glass hurtled to the ground outside, startling the forces below.

"Wh-where'd this glass come from?"

"What the…?!"

They quickly realized something was happening on the fifth floor.

Watching the poisonous mist spread beyond the windows, Gronica cocked her head to one side. One of the intruders was shouting outside. "What are you doing? Are you scared? You're no better than these wyvern-flies! Hey, bristle-brain, are you running away? Ah ha ha ha ha! Good luck running!"

Bristle-brain? Gronica chuckled at the insult before charging at her opponent—Choi Han. As she ran past her subordinates, she barked, "Guard the door." Then she flicked her whip at Choi Han anew.

Swish. Boom!

It wasn't the sound one would expect from a sword blocking a whip. The windowsills shook from the impact. With a short dagger in her grip, Gronica sprinted at Choi Han. Her blade slipped in close, and their eyes met.

At that moment, Gronica heard the intruder speak for the first time. "Too weak."

Her eyes widened. *What?!*

Then a familiar voice reached her ears. "Gronica!" Her cousin Edrich appeared at the other end of the hallway, flanked by knights. His face was swollen from an earlier punch, but he threw himself into battle nonetheless.

Cale observed all this from the hallway entrance, still invisible. *They're all here.*

‹When do we do it, human?!› Raon asked, excited. Of course the dragon hadn't forgotten his desire to get revenge on Arm. Still, Cale took his time gathering the Sound of the Wind beneath his feet.

Edrich threw a punch at Choi Han, sounding equal parts angry and shaken. "Son of a bitch! Who the hell *are* you?! What in the world…?!"

Gronica coordinated her attacks with his. The two of them worked together in perfect sync, striking high and low as if they'd

planned the maneuver in advance. Unfortunately for them, their opponent was Choi Han.

Whap. Whap. He blocked both the fist and the whip with ease. Undeterred, Gronica jabbed her dagger at Choi Han's shoulder while Edrich aimed a kick at his knee. Their agile movements were difficult to follow with the naked eye.

That was when an unknown voice spoke up. "Break it."

Gronica froze. *Who is—*

A loud hiss, like the sound of a sudden downpour, drowned out her thoughts. Glancing about, she saw the mist roiling in the hallway again—only this time, it was the color of blood. The cloud of mist slowly expanded.

"Getting distracted?"

Gronica snapped out of her stupor and redirected her strike. *Clang!* Her blade clashed against Choi Han's aura-covered hand. No sooner than their weapons clashed did the masked man seize Edrich by the neck.

"Ugh!"

"Edrich, no!"

Edrich flailed around. "Y-you dare lay hands on this future king?! Let—ngh! Let go!"

As the Lion King's second son, Edrich was Gronica's ticket to power in her family. She moved to save him but stopped short. The hissing sound was getting closer; something was coming. She jerked her head toward it, thinking of the owner of that unknown voice from before.

Wreathed in mist, the figure sprinted their way, bringing with him a fierce gale that absorbed vapor and poison alike. White, red, blue, and black—a kaleidoscope of noxious miasmas surged together.

It's going to explode! Gronica thought.

"I'll let him go," said Choi Han, and Edrich went flying through the air.

"Dodge!"

The same instant, the cloud of mist detonated.

Boom!

The massive cyclone enveloped the members of Arm. The force of the explosion demolished the windowsills, blasting them out of the hallway, while cracks splintered across the walls.

Edrich rammed directly into the whirlwind. "Augh!"

He was somewhat resistant to poison, but the vortex was formidable. His body hit the ground. *Wham!* Despite the powerful impact, he seemed unhurt and swiftly regained his footing.

"Urgh!"

"Huh? M-my eyes!"

The lions showed no concern for the cries of the poisoned knights and members of Arm, making haste toward the room at the end of the hallway. The knight stationed in front of the door was paralyzed by the poison, uttering feeble grunts.

Choi Han swooped in to block their advance, earning a sigh from Gronica. The figure behind him turned the knob with a *click*. As the mist dissipated, the figure's cloak of invisibility gradually unraveled, from his feet on up. He faced the lions, glee dancing in his eyes.

After that, Cale opened the door and stepped into the room as if he owned the place. The door clacked shut behind him, and Choi Han barred the lions from entry.

"You'll have to get through me first," Choi Han said cheerfully. He infused his sword with his aura; from this point on, he would fight without holding back.

"Meeeow."

"Meeow."

With twin meows from the cats, the mist reappeared in the hallway.

***

Heedless of the chaos around him, Cale was grappling with a problem of his own.

‹This is weird, human,› Raon said, equally disconcerted.

Cale held a small box. This was what the lions strove to protect—the same thing they'd sought to covertly pass on to House Seca. Now that Cale had seen what was inside, he was at a loss.

It was a crown, though that wasn't the shocking part.

‹Human, I'm sensing your power in this thing—you know, the one that makes you seem as strong as my front paw every so often! I feel the same thing here! Did they steal something from you? They're terrible people!›

The crown was white.

"Raon…doesn't this crown look familiar?"

‹Hmm?› Raon fell silent for a moment. Then he was so shocked that he dropped his invisibility, shouting, "The black swamp!"

Yes, this white crown had belonged to the dragon corpse in the black swamp. The moment he'd touched it, Cale had obtained the Dominating Aura, the Ancient Power that seemed designed for scammers.

A different voice from the stone guardian's resounded in Cale's mind. Though he hadn't heard this particular voice for a while, he did recognize it. Cale recalled what it had said before: ***"Do you know the easiest way to take away your enemy's breath? The answer is fear. Use it well! Sometimes even bluffing can save your life. Mwa ha ha ha ha ha!"***

The voice belonged to the former owner of the Dominating Aura. For the first time in months, it spoke up. **"That crown has a taste for dragon blood."** It said nothing more after that. The Scary Stone's owner also remained silent.

Cale glanced at Raon.

"What's up, human?"

"Let's throw this away."

"What?"

"Actually, never mind. We don't want them picking up our trash."

Raon had never seen Cale scowl at a valuable item. The crown was even adorned with a large gemstone.

When the black dragon tilted his head in confusion, Cale asked gravely, "Should I smash it?" This was the first time he'd picked up something he didn't like.

Startled, Raon placed his stubby paw on Cale's shoulder. "Human, this is worth at least a thousand—no, *ten thousand* apple pies!" He pointed to the gemstone. "Look at this jewel!"

Still, Cale's frown persisted. Raon cocked his head this way and that, unable to make sense of it.

"Your aura is flowing out of this crown! I'm sure it'll help you! You're weak. You need to get stronger!"

Why the hell would I want to get stronger? Cale grumbled inwardly, his brow creasing at Raon's words.

"I don't need it. Won't you always be with me?"

Choi Han, Ohn, and Hong as well—he had plenty of strong people to take advantage of. Why would he level up and spill his own blood in combat?

When the black dragon didn't respond, Cale looked pointedly at him. Raon flinched, then burst out, "Of course I'll be here! If you go somewhere without me, I'll never forgive you!"

He's six now, but he hasn't changed since he was four.

Cale pushed away the dragon invading his personal space, closed the box, and stuffed it into his bag. He didn't lay a finger on the crown.

This is just baggage. Cale made a mental note to show it to Erhaven when he went home, after completing his business in Karo. He did have one question, though. *Why does Arm have this crown?*

Now that he thought about it, the ones who'd taken dead mana from the black swamp had also belonged to the secret organization. An idea flashed through Cale's mind, bringing with it an unexpected stab of annoyance.

Would Arm really have given Marquess Sten a remarkable creature like a dragon as a mere bargaining chip? Those bastards have connections with the Empire and the northern alliance. Why would they care about networking with a noble from a tiny kingdom like Rowoon?

"Human, why are you frowning so much? You look like a squashed apple pie!"

Cale's scowl deepened at Raon's comment as he continued to think this through. *What if the secret organization planned to snatch the dragon away once he grew up?* Arm was definitely capable of that. When Cale considered the matter in those terms, this crown and even Raon were probably pawns in a sinister plot.

"These scumbags might just be even worse than I am," Cale mumbled, irritated.

Raon's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Hey! You may be a scammer, but you're reliable and good deep down! Don't go thinking you're a bad person!"

Cale held back a sigh at Raon's nonsense. Ignoring the dragon's persistent glances, he turned the doorknob. *Click.*

On cue, Raon turned invisible again. Cale's next command gave him a shock: "Blow this room away."

Blow it away?! Raon thought, wings fluttering.

"On second thought, don't do it."

Cale had considered destroying this place, then changed his mind. There were innocents working for the duke's estate.

He threw the door open to find a mess waiting for him.

"Urgh!"

A strike from Choi Han's scabbard wrenched Edrich's shoulder. Gronica took the opportunity to flick her whip at Choi Han, but the worn-out weapon was easily sliced in half. She cried out as the pieces clattered to the floor.

Meanwhile, one of the knights lost his sense of direction and collapsed. "I-I can't see anything!"

He groped about in search of solid ground, and his hand landed on someone else—his quivering comrade, who'd been paralyzed by the poison. When the man groaned, the fallen knight gasped and yanked his hand away.

As he did, he heard a meow eerily reminiscent of laughter. "Mee-hee-heow."

With a muffled cry, the knight clamped his hand over his mouth to avoid inhaling any poison.

Mist shrouded the fifth-floor hallway, obscuring the knights' vision. Yet for Cale alone, the mist parted to create a path. As Cale strode ahead, Choi Han alighted beside him. "You're back?"

"Return what you stole!" Edrich hollered. "It's not meant for you classless riffraff!"

For fighters at Edrich and Gronica's level, the mist didn't present a serious challenge; they swept through the miasma, making a beeline for Cale and Choi Han. A patchwork of injuries covered Edrich's body, while Gronica's left shoulder was bleeding.

Cale glanced sidelong at Choi Han, who smiled. "It was just a light workout."

The man didn't have a scratch on him. *This maniac is main character material, without a doubt.*

Sighing, Cale shifted his attention to the male lion barreling toward them. Their eyes met. Without thinking, Edrich bellowed, "You crazy bastards! Don't you know who we are? Give it back if you value your life!"

These scoundrels kept interfering with his organization's plans. Edrich couldn't imagine they would dare to do such a thing if they knew the organization's true identity.

As Edrich watched, the masked man's eyes curved into the shape of crescent moons. "It sounds to me like *you're* the one with a death wish."

The man's voice was calm, but something about that placid tone made Edrich freeze. Gronica also jerked to a stop. Their animal instincts were warning them that this man was *dangerous*—that this interaction was life-or-death.

Gronica studied the man's nonchalant posture. He was the only person here without a drop of blood on him.

Choi Han's gaze shifted toward him as well. Every so often, Choi Han felt an undeniable charisma emanating from this man, Cale Henituse. Yet he'd never sensed such an overbearing aura coming from Cale until this moment.

How could a weak person manage this? he wondered. How could an aura like this radiate from someone who'd never fought for his life or even picked up a weapon in the first place? Choi Han kept his question to himself as he regarded Cale.

Meanwhile, Cale's mind was bombarded with noise. *‹Human! Wh-why do you seem so intimidating? It's like you're as strong as my front paw—no, as strong as one of my wings!›*

Cale disregarded Raon's babbling, unleashing the Dominating Aura without restraint. Eyes trained on the two lions staring at him,

he spoke up at last. “Aren’t *you* the ones who don’t know who *we* are?”

The lions flinched, and Edrich recalled what he’d just said: *“You crazy bastards! Don’t you know who we are? Give it back if you value your life!”*

He gulped. The masked man in front of him was difficult to approach, just like another distinguished individual he knew. In contrast to the man’s composure, Edrich’s hands were shaking. The man’s casual air, along with the way he seemed to look down on Edrich despite being eye to eye, left a deep impression on the lion.

“Just who do you think has spared your lives?”

The lions had no answer.

Never taking his eyes off them, Cale continued, “Your ignorance of certain matters puts you in more danger than you know.”

Ignorance? That was true. Edrich knew nothing about the people in front of him.

At last, he began to grasp his situation. These people were stronger than he was. Their forces included cats with the strength of the Mist Cat Tribe—the strongest tribe of cat beastfolk, to his knowledge—in ability. Most important of all, however, was the mysterious man in front of him, who treated him like an inferior.

Why am I still alive?

The answer to that question slowly dawned on Edrich. The second-born prince of lions had never known fear, but now his expression changed in an instant.

When their eyes locked again, the masked man was laughing. “You look scared,” he said.

Without a hint of concern, he turned his back on the lions. Edrich couldn’t find it in himself to charge; the masked man’s back seemed as broad as the mightiest mountain.

Choi Han observed all this in silence. As Cale walked by on his way to the window at the end of the hall, he whispered an order in a voice infused with authority. "That bristle-brain? Chop off that hay bale he calls a hairstyle. I think short hair would look good on him."

"What?" Choi Han asked, perplexed. Then he met Cale's exasperated gaze. "Will do, sir. I'll join you when I'm finished."

Raon cast flight magic on Cale, and Choi Han bade him farewell—then rushed toward the lions. Floating away from the manor, Cale caught a glimpse of Edrich's terror-stricken face.

"Ahhh! M-my precious hair! My golden locks!"

Choi Han had zero fashion sense; his slashing left Edrich's hair in shambles. As Edrich shrieked in dismay, Cale savored his distressed wails.

"Human, you're finally smiling!"

Ignoring Raon, Cale started to clap. Then another sound devoured his applause.

Boom!

The towering wall that surrounded the estate buckled under the combined force of Archie's punch, Faseton's sword, and Rosalyn's magic.

"What wonderful allies I have."

The Seca estate's imposing outer wall had stood for nearly a millennium. As Cale watched it begin to crumble, he went right on clapping. Next, using Raon's magic to amplify his voice, he issued a command.

"Withdraw."

Everyone faltered at the sound. His voice reverberated from the duke's estate all the way across the entire noble district. It was then that Duke Rok Seca arrived on the scene—and nearly fainted.

When Archie saw the man's reaction, he scoffed. "Is this wall really a thousand years old? No wonder it broke so easily! Ah ha ha

ha ha ha!”

The killer whale made his retreat, followed by the rest of the group. In a matter of moments, Cale’s allies vanished from the Seca estate via their predetermined escape routes.

Guardian Knight Clope had taken his time returning, believing Arm and the Seca knights capable of handling things. When he reached the estate grounds afterward, his expression crumpled.

***

“So much happened in a single day.”

“Right? Who would’ve expected a thief to hit the duke’s manor?”

The citizens of Faern gossiped about the events at the Seca estate, only glancing at the pillar of fire on occasion.

An eavesdropper was eager to share what he knew. “I heard this wasn’t just your average thief.”

“Really?”

“My cousin works in one of the nobles’ mansions nearby. He said the estate’s walls and manor are in ruins. You think a mere thief would be able to do that?”

“Goodness, that sounds like a big deal.”

“Seriously! They even wiped out those wyvern sculptures!”

“They destroyed the sculptures? How? Oh no, the Guardian Knight household is in trouble this time!”

Another citizen who’d been listening gruffly chimed in, “Is that really our biggest problem right now?”

That shut the others up. All three of them faced the Lake of God’s Tears, where the massive column of flame raged on. It burned brightly despite the duke’s claim that it would be swiftly contained. Due to the sheer size of the conflagration, its heat was palpable

even from the plaza. It was so warm, in fact, that the citizens' palms were sweating.

"Are we really safe?" one man asked.

He was concerned for the capital's welfare. Although the fire had yet to advance beyond the lake, he couldn't help but worry. They'd never seen anything like it before. A giant fire of unknown origin burning in this cold, arid climate made them all nervous.

Guardian Knight Clope felt the same way. As he stood gaping at the pillar of fire, without a thought to spare for the estate's restoration, one of the knights under his command hurried over. It was the same man he had ordered to search the eastern forest.

"Captain!"

"What's—" Clope stopped short, the greater situation forgotten when his eyes snagged on something the knight held. "What's that in your hand?"

"We found it at the heart of the eastern forest," the man said awkwardly. "It seems to have belonged to the person you were looking for."

Clope accepted the garment. It was a white priest's robe, elegant in its simplicity. No crest adorned it. It was something one could purchase anywhere, but for Clope, it held a different meaning.

Both he and the knight had seen this robe a few days prior. This was definitely the outfit that white-haired priest had been wearing when Clope met him not long ago. "This wasn't there when you searched a few days ago, was it?" he asked the knight.

"No, sir. We happened upon it by chance today."

The knights hadn't found this robe during their initial sweep of the forest. With another glance at the pillar of fire, Clope shook out the robe.

Whish.

A small sheet of paper slipped from its folds. Clope looked at the fallen page.

Your god has not forgotten.

"Ah, I'm the only one who read the note," the knight piped up. "I found it strange, so I brought it to you right away."

Clope picked the piece of paper up with halting fingers, reading the next line of text.

The lake will someday flow into a river.

"How odd," Clope remarked. "You said you're the only one who read it?"

"Yes, sir. I remembered you told us to be discreet, so only I read the note. Isn't it peculiar?"

"It is. Anyway, good work. Let me know if anything else comes up."

"Yes, sir!"

The knight bowed and ran back to the forest. As Clope watched the man leave, he tossed the piece of paper into the fire. With a crackle, the flames devoured the note.

Clope then spoke in a hushed whisper, just loud enough for the trusted subordinate beside him to hear. "Kill him."

"…As you wish."

Understanding that this would be the last day of his own subordinate's life, the man dipped his head. He didn't know why Clope had told him to kill the knight, but it was his job to obey.

Unheeding of the look on his trusted subordinate's face, Clope faced the pillar of fire once more. His heart thundered in his chest. *Boom. Boom. Boom.*

"The lake will someday flow into a river."

How did the priest know the Seca family secret? Was the man really a divine messenger? The true history of Faern was known only to the successors of House Seca, passed down through generations. Because of this, Clope had believed he was the one who'd inherited the god's will.

He thought back to the other note he had found while tracking down the white-haired priest.

Only the birth of a new legend will keep the glory alive.

Clope had considered himself the main character of that legend.

His eyes bored into the flaming column that seemed to scorch the very skies. The people whispered among themselves that it was a manifestation of the god's rage, but Faern's greater powers suspected the Empire's alchemy and were investigating accordingly.

"Your god has not forgotten."

As the words on the note he'd burned swam through Clope's mind, he struggled to steady himself. He had gleaned a deeper meaning from that sentence.

Your god has not forgotten his wrath.

Clope watched the fire for a moment longer before closing his eyes. Even then, the unease within whirled on.

***

Cale opened his eyes. He was back in Rowoon, having zipped through multiple magic teleportation circles before riding a carriage to the meeting spot.

Click. Someone opened the carriage door from the outside.

"Young master," Ron greeted him, "you've gotten so thin."

Frizia, the assassin responsible for the sculptures resembling a demon and its hellhound, welcomed Cale too. "Gosh, it's been ages!"

Rosalyn and Choi Han had already returned to the stone guardian's villa, but Raon remained with him as always. Ohn and Hong were also present.

"Meeeow."

"Meow."

The three children, Ron, and the intelligence group led by Frizia—as well as Vice-Captain Hilsmann, who should have arrived in Guiller territory by now—made up the team for the next operation. They had come here to smother Antonio, the future duke of House Guiller and the most powerful man in the southwestern region.

"Is everything ready?" he asked Ron.

Though Ron spoke in his usual kindly tone, his answer came as a surprise. "Mm, there was a bit of a problem."

Cale's face stiffened. "What kind of problem?" One of the Guiller family's vassals had commissioned a kidnapping, and Cale had hoped to use this fact against Antonio. What could have happened?

Ron gently explained, "I strolled through the area to check in, and it seems the vassal in question is now involved in human trafficking."

Oh. Cale understood the dilemma. He'd planned to use a *past* criminal offense to their advantage, but now the guilty party was doing something ridiculous in the present.

Cale furrowed his brow and said to Frizia, “But all the groundwork is complete, right?”

“Indeed, young master,” Ron replied in her stead. “Everything is in place for us to gut them.”

For once, Cale didn’t find the vicious assassin’s response unduly savage. “I’m sure you prepared exactly what they deserve.”

Ron’s years of experience did not betray him; he had arranged every aspect perfectly.

Chapter 40:
That's Our Mr. Cale

RON AND FRIZIA had done an excellent job of assembling all the pieces. Cale had them join him in the carriage before heading into Guiller territory, driven by one of Frizia's assistants.

"Explain it in detail."

Frizia spoke up as soon as Cale's gaze found her. "About fifty years ago, a household of barons became vassals to the Guillers." House Krish, to be precise. "This was before Duchess Sonata, Antonio's grandmother, gained control of the territory. Back when she was merely a potential candidate for the title, her opponents brought in vassal households to expand their own influence. The Duchy of Guiller accepted multiple new vassals, and the Barony of Krish was among them."

"Isn't the Krish family a famous line of scholars?" Cale asked.

The Krishes had been instructors to the crown two hundred years ago, hence the Duchy of Guiller welcoming a barony without land or wealth as their vassal.

"Past glories do not always carry into the present," Ron said in a genial tone.

"I guess that's true."

Regardless of their former reputation as a household of scholars, the Krishes were a family of reprobates now. If they hired people to kidnap children, they couldn't be in their right minds.

"You see, young master, it happened just two nights ago."

Cale shot Ron a withering look. The butler had recovered quite a bit since receiving his powerful artificial arm. Still, Ron's commitment to his benign old man persona made Cale uncomfortable.

"Perhaps it's because I'm getting up there in years, but I couldn't fall asleep that night. I thought I'd take a little stroll through the back alleys of Guiller territory."

Are the back alleys really a good place for a walk? Cale wanted to ask, but he held his tongue.

"I happened to see some children pulling a carriage toward a corner of the slums."

Kids pulling a carriage? Confused, Cale asked, "They were actual children?"

"Ah, they were sturdy youngsters who appeared to be in their thirties."

Since when do burly gangsters count as children?

As Cale stewed in silence, Ron went on, "Anyway, the youths intrigued me, so I followed them. Naturally, I did so with stealth so they wouldn't notice me."

Cale pretended not to catch the admiring glimmer in Frizia's eyes.

"While covertly tailing them, I noticed a few houses near the bridge at the edge of the slums. Many people were being held captive in the basements of those houses." The joints of Ron's artificial left arm cracked as he clenched his fingers. He then said mildly, "They were doing unspeakable things even assassins would disdain."

Cale averted his gaze from the assassin. "And?"

At Cale's urging, Ron got to the core of the issue. "Last night, I noticed a butler from House Krish entering one of those houses. The buildings function as regular lodgings for families in the slums during the day. Once the sun goes down, however, those so-called families turn into employees."

"We kept an eye on the butler until early the next morning and verified his meeting with a merchant," Frizia said.

Chances were high that the merchant was associated with a guild that dealt in the slave trade.

"I have one of my people tailing the merchant," Frizia hurriedly went on. "Soon we'll receive our first report as to the guild's identity, which will give us a good idea of who they are. We'll know for certain after the second report."

Tapping away at his armrest, Cale turned back to Ron. The elderly man realized his young master had caught on to something.

Cale spoke, his words slow and deliberate. "A merchant guild illegally purchasing people as slaves…"

Where would they go? Slavery was forbidden in Rowoon. Unless House Krish had truly abandoned their wits, they wouldn't sell slaves within the kingdom. So, who needed slaves—and who had to employ a merchant guild to gather them without detection?

By now, Cale had a solid idea. "Those bastards must've built a Bell Tower because they wanted bells to toll for them."

"What?"

Cale's crude comment puzzled Frizia, but he waved her off. "That merchant guild is probably from the Mogor Empire."

"The Empire?"

Frizia's expression turned serious. Not only did this guild sell Rowoon's citizens as slaves, but they sold them off to a foreign nation to boot? This would only be possible for people completely immune to fear. It wasn't something a mere baron would dare to even attempt—hence Cale's next question.

"Is House Krish acting alone?"

"Our findings suggest that the Duchy of Guiller is not involved." Frizia wet her lips. "House Krish had very little to their name when they came in as a vassal. After Sonata Guiller became the duchess instead of their preferred candidate, they were left in a state of uncertainty. They tried every possible means to expand their influence."

"They would've needed money for that." Cale had only one more question: "Does House Krish know where the merchant guild is from?"

"I'm not sure about that." By contrast, Cale seemed certain that the merchant guild was from the Mogor Empire. Hesitantly, Frizia told him, "We don't have intel on the merchant guild yet, Lord Cale. Why don't we wait for more information before making a decision?"

Cale sighed in lieu of a response. Meanwhile, Ohn and Hong batted at his thighs with their paws. *Tap. Tap.* It was their way of saying, *Let's beat those bastards to death*.

Raon also took the chance to voice his thoughts. *‹Slavery… I can't let them get away with it. Locking someone up for no reason is unforgivable.›*

The black dragon couldn't stand for the depravity of House Krish. After spending the first four years of his life chained up in that pitch-black cave, Raon detested slavery and imprisonment with every fiber of his being.

"Ron."

"Yes, young master?"

Cale turned toward the gate leading into Guiller territory. "Change of plans."

***

Early the next morning, Cale was lying on a soft, comfortable bed, enjoying his sleep, when a hand patted him on the shoulder. It felt like the warm touch of an exhausted parent…

Cale's eyes snapped wide open. "Ngh!"

"Young master, you're awake."

It was Ron. Cale was so shocked, he huddled underneath the blanket.

"Meeeow!"

"Meow!"

The kittens were laughing at him.

"Wake up, human! Don't sleep in!" Raon demanded.

Serenaded by this never-ending quartet, Cale got out of bed. Ron handed him a teacup. "They didn't have lemon tea. I can't say I think too highly of the Duchy of Guiller."

Cale's lips twitched as he lifted the cup.

With the exception of Frizia and the information guild, all the members of Cale's group were staying at the Guiller estate. They had arrived late last night, but thanks to Cale sending Vice-Captain Hilsmann to notify the duchess ahead of time, they were permitted to spend a few nights at the family's property. It would be strange if a duchess couldn't host a passing noble at her home for a few days. Furthermore, Cale wasn't just any noble—he was the crown prince's close confidant and the recipient of a medal from the Mogor Empire.

"They don't have lemon tea? How disappointing." Despite his words to the contrary, Cale sounded happy as he took a sip. "Ugh!"

"The Guiller territory seems to favor bitter blends, though," Ron said good-naturedly. "Ha ha!"

Damn it. Cale grimaced at starting his day off with bitter tea. Once he was dressed, he left the room right away.

"Lord Cale!" Vice-Captain Hilsmann had been waiting outside the door. He fell seamlessly into step behind Cale. "Heh heh! You're looking very handsome today, young master!"

Hilsmann meant Cale looked like a proper noble this morning. Though his outfit wasn't fancy—just decently luxurious—he still fit the image of a promising young lordling.

"Is that so? Good."

Cale's guileless smile startled Hilsmann. A smile that pure? It didn't suit Cale at all.

I thought I heard he was going to punish House Krish? Ron had told Hilsmann about Cale's plans, so he found it strange that Cale looked so wholesome. The vice-captain didn't yet know about the human trafficking.

"Where is he?"

Hilsmann recovered quickly, answering Cale's question. "He's usually in the garden around this time. I heard he likes to take a walk after eating an early breakfast."

"I guess we can stop by the garden on our way to the main gate."

Cale headed to the garden without delay, and Hilsmann trailed after him. He glanced back at Ron, who simply followed them with a smile. Hilsmann found the kittens' absence peculiar as well, but he didn't question it for the time being.

Once Cale arrived at the garden, he met up with Antonio Guiller—though he pretended it was a coincidence.

"Oh, hello, Lord Cale. Did you sleep well?"

"I didn't expect to see you in the garden, Lord Antonio. I slept well, thanks to your gracious hospitality."

Antonio eyed Cale as the pair exchanged a cordial handshake. The count's son was dressed like a typical noble, not a hair out of place. This man was the crown prince's close confidant, as well as the person who'd foiled the terrorist attack in the capital. He'd even done something remarkable enough to earn a medal from the Mogor Empire.

Such a man had sent his guard in advance to request a few nights' stay in the Duchy of Guiller—and he'd asked for something else on the side.

"Can we have a discussion?"

It was obvious what Cale, an intimate friend of the crown prince, would want to discuss with Antonio, the man in charge of the kingdom's southwestern territory and the trusted counselor to a

different prince. It was bound to be a very greedy conversation. Based on the way Cale had requested this talk, Antonio felt that the count's son was just as power-hungry as any other noble.

That chat would take place in secret tonight.

"Have you had breakfast yet?"

Antonio casually offered an innocuous conversation topic, watching as Cale responded with a trademark aristocratic smile.

"I haven't."

"Oh dear, you're walking before breakfast? You should eat."

"I'm fine. I'll be dining soon." The peaceful back-and-forth took a turn when Cale gracefully added, "I heard that there's a famous bar nearby, so I'll have my breakfast there. I'll see you later."

"Excuse me?" Antonio was taken aback, but Cale pressed on without a care.

"I happen to enjoy a bit of drinking, and alcohol tastes best in the early hours of the day. I think I'll drink some beer as a breakfast soup! Ha ha!"

Antonio recalled that before Cale was known as Lord Silverlight, he had a different moniker: "Cale the Lout." Right in front of Antonio's eyes, Cale announced his intention to behave quite loutishly indeed.

"I have nothing scheduled for today. Since I'm still in recovery, I figure I can spend the whole day drinking. Isn't that wonderful?"

Cale was supposedly recuperating after using his Ancient Power in the Empire. He'd claimed he was passing through the Guiller territory on his way to the warmer southern region.

Should a man in his condition be drinking? After a pause, Antonio found his voice. "Will you still be able to talk after that?"

"Don't worry, Lord Antonio. Alcohol makes the words flow smoothly, in fact. Now then, if you don't mind, I'll be on my way."

Cale remained respectful and polite until the end, even when he was speaking nonsense. A pale Hilsmann and an unruffled Ron departed behind him.

Antonio wore a complicated expression as he watched Cale leave. “I can’t figure him out.” Still, his eyes betrayed a hint of disappointment. The Guiller heir judged people according to how nobly they comported themselves. Cale had just lost a few points on Antonio’s personal nobility scale.

“Was that really wise?” Hilsmann asked Cale, concerned, but the lout tuned him out.

As soon as Cale got to the bar, he ascended to the third floor. He sat at a table by the window and watched the flowing river for a time, then turned to the approaching waiter.

Meeting his gaze, the waiter asked warily, “Would you like to order?” Cale’s gallant appearance and regal bearing suggested he was the son of a count, if not someone higher—he had to be treated with great care.

Yet Cale replied without consulting the menu even once. “I’ll take all of it.”

That powerful statement hung in the air.

“Excuse me?”

Cale repeated his order for the bewildered waiter. “Give me a bottle of every alcohol you have. Oh, and bring out your most expensive snacks too.”

The waiter shuffled away, visibly shocked by the exchange.

When Hilsmann blinked at Cale’s extravagant order, Cale asked bluntly, “What are you looking at?”

Contrary to Cale’s expectations, Hilsmann beamed. “You really haven’t changed, Lord Cale! That’s right—Choi Han isn’t here! Let’s get wasted! Ha ha ha ha!”

Cale shook his head, but Hilsmann opened a bottle, humming all the while. Ignoring him, Cale looked out the window. The nearby river wound through Guiller territory, separating the poorer district from the rest of the area. There was a bridge as well, with the slums just beyond it. He picked out ten shabby houses across the bridge: the buildings where the kidnapping victims were contained.

‹We're gonna break those houses! No, we'll completely flatten them!›

With Raon's brutal commentary in the background, Cale bypassed the glass Hilsmann had filled for him and picked up the bottle instead.

Hilsmann grew anxious. "L-Lord Cale…"

Clack!

The sound of the empty bottle being placed on the table snapped him back to his senses. Cale's face had turned red.

Sporting flushed cheeks even though he wasn't drunk, Cale grabbed another bottle and pushed it toward the stunned vice-captain. Hilsmann recoiled, recalling the way Cale used to throw bottles in the past, before accepting the bottle with hesitant hands.

Cale really did spend all day eating and drinking, never saying a word. It wasn't until the sun began to set that he finally broke his silence.

"Hilsmann."

"Yes, my lord?"

As Cale's guard on duty, Hilsmann had limited himself to one or two drinks. Then he'd simply observed, marveling that Cale's reputation as a lout wasn't for nothing. The count's son really could drink the day away.

"Ron."

"Yes, young master?" Ron asked, rising to his feet.

Both men waited for further instructions. Cale turned to the two of them, then toward the window, caressing an empty bottle as he watched the setting sun. Beneath the blazing sky, Frizia sent a signal from the bridge. The merchant guild did indeed hail from the Mogor Empire, just as Cale had predicted.

Cale stood, his chair creaking. "I'll be using the shield today," he said.

"What? Where's this coming from?" asked Hilsmann. *Is he drunk?*

The vice-captain thought the day's indulgence had addled Cale's senses, but Cale smiled as he went on, "I need to destroy them."

He was talking about the ten houses.

"Destroy? Destroy what?"

Ignoring his baffled vice-captain, Cale made his way out of the bar. A number of other patrons—mostly locals—watched as he strode directly from the bar's third floor to the exit without a single misstep. They couldn't believe Cale could walk straight after drinking all day.

Hilsmann was equally amazed, but then he noticed the empty bottle in Cale's hand. He rushed after Cale in horror. "L-Lord Cale!"

"What is it?"

"P-please, put the bottle down first!"

"Ah."

Cale had forgotten; he hadn't even realized he was still holding it. *Fwish!* He raised it aloft, much to the vice-captain's horror.

"Eek!"

Memories of a scene from two years ago flashed through Hilsmann's mind: A certain degenerate had lobbed bottles at the gangsters in Henituse territory, and Hilsmann had been forced to clean up the aftermath.

"Are you drunk?"

"Pardon?"

Cale frowned at Hilsmann, who'd raised both arms in the air, before handing the bottle to Ron. "Take it."

"As you wish."

Free of the bottle, Cale exited the bar. Ron passed it to the waiter along with payment for Cale's drinks, then followed his young master with unhurried steps. He made sure to grab the dazed vice-captain, who hadn't budged from his spot.

"What is Lord Cale planning to destroy, sir?" Hilsmann asked. Ever since he had learned of Ron's abilities, he'd behaved more respectfully toward the assassin. He considered Ron to be a fearsome expert hiding in plain sight.

"I'm not sure," the assassin said lightly. "Houses, perhaps?"

"What?"

"Come now, let's be off."

Hilsmann chased after Cale, Ron trailing behind him. By the time the vice-captain caught up, Cale was standing in the middle of the bridge, looking stone-sober. Hilsmann came up beside him, thinking, *Lord Cale's plans tend to get way out of hand!*

Again and again, Cale claimed he would do something small, only to wreak havoc in the process. Hilsmann was familiar enough with this pattern that it had him waffling on what to do.

Cale's voice interrupted his dithering. "Vice-Captain."

"Yes, my lord?" Hilsmann looked up to find Cale peering down at the flowing river. It made for a picturesque sight: the redheaded noble standing between the river and the sky, both dyed crimson in the sunset.

Few people crossed the river at this time of day; the bridge between the slums and the shopping district saw little foot traffic to begin with. Yet Cale kept his voice so soft, only those close to him

could hear. “A butler from a noble household visits the slums every so often to bring food for the poor.”

The topic had sprung up out of the blue, but the vice-captain listened and shared his sentiments. “What a virtuous butler.”

“Yes, he would be—except he works for the household that kidnaps citizens from the southwestern region and sells them into slavery.”

“Excuse me?”

Cale faced the slums across the bridge. “That butler just passed through here. He was headed for the ten houses that have citizens imprisoned in the basements.”

“I need to destroy them.”

Vice-Captain Hilsmann gradually pieced together Cale’s plan.

“Hilsmann.”

“Yes?”

“What are your thoughts?”

Cale didn’t have to wait long for his answer. “A knight never turns a blind eye to injustice.” When Cale looked at him, Hilsmann added, “But if our lord is involved in the matter, we shall hold ourselves back regardless of the outcome.”

“Is that part of the knights’ creed as well?”

“No. It’s my personal philosophy.”

A knight took action when faced with injustice unless his charge was an active participant. Contradictory though it might’ve seemed, Hilsmann lived and worked by this principle. Cale didn’t find Hilsmann’s values unpalatable; the man had climbed his way to vice-captain of the Henituse forces, where such consideration was valued.

Pushing off of the railing, Cale said, “Then we won’t hold back now.”

“Yes, my lord!”

Cale turned to the shopping district on the other side of the river, where Frizia was sending him another signal. This time, her message was that the people tailing Cale had returned to their master—who was, of course, Antonio Guiller. Cale had made his move out in the open, fully anticipating that Antonio had eyes on him.

Setting his sights on the first shabby house across the bridge, Cale walked off. The ten houses were arranged in a zigzag pattern, starting from the first.

When Cale came to stand in front of the building, a middle-aged man in the front yard addressed him warily. "Hello?" His eyes darted between Cale, who appeared to be a noble, and the knight beside him. Noticing Cale's red face, he slumped in despair; it seemed he'd realized he was dealing with a drunk lordling.

"Do you live alone?" Cale asked.

"Sorry? No, I live with my family."

"Is that so?" Cale smirked. "Bring your entire family outside."

"Come again?"

"I'll give you ten seconds. Ten… Nine…"

Cale's counting made the middle-aged man anxious, yet he didn't snap to it right away. That is, until Cale added, "I guess you think a noble's orders aren't worth obeying." Then the man raced into the house without delay.

Their interaction could be seen as far as the shopping district across the way. The slums' other residents hurried into their houses and locked their tattered windows and doors. They were all thinking the same thing: *Looks like a crazy noble is causing trouble.*

The middle-aged man felt the same way as he walked outside, bringing his family with him: a wife, two sons, and a daughter.

"This is my family, my lord."

He was trembling, and his family struck Cale as pitiful. Yet Raon seethed with fury as he told Cale, *‹There are people in the basement—lots of them. Kids as well. They all look so thin. I think they've been starved. They're dirty too. I don't think they've been able to wash themselves for a while.›* A sorrowful note to his voice, he added, *‹These young ones were beating the people in the basement until just a moment ago. I want to slaughter them all.›*

Cale examined the two sons and the daughter that the middle-aged man claimed were his children. They lowered their heads under his scrutiny, as if frightened of the noble.

"So it's just the five of you?"

The middle-aged man flinched, then bowed in a deeply respectful manner. "Yes, my lord! I brought out my entire family as you requested!"

‹They're not his family. They were calling each other "Boss" and "Deputy" inside. Now they're lying too! How awful! They're despicable!› Raon served as a lie detector without Cale even needing to ask.

Cale showed little reaction as he stared down at the middle-aged man. When the man peeked up from his bow, the noble's face unnerved him. Cale was *smiling*. This madman of a noble, who was likely drunk, had a smile on his face.

Has my luck run out? The middle-aged man could see House Krish's butler in the distance. The butler shook his head, a sign that the man was on his own.

Just then, the noble's voice reached his ears. "Since your whole family is out here, there shouldn't be anyone inside the house, right?"

The middle-aged man knew the slaves were inside, but he kept silent as he contemplated how to appease this noble. However, Cale defied his expectations.

"The house is old. It's quite shabby." With no more care than he would take in tossing a pebble into a river, Cale added, "I'm going to demolish it."

"I beg your pardon?" The man thought he must've misheard, but the noble in front of him was serious.

"What's the matter? I'll give you a new house. Is there some reason I can't knock it down?"

"Well, you see…"

As he groped for an excuse, the nobleman's knight stepped forward. The man hadn't spoken even once, but he pointedly clicked the sword in his scabbard a few times, eyes locked on the middle-aged man.

What the hell? What's going on here?! the middle-aged man thought, shocked beyond belief. While the house was run-down, its position right across from the shopping district made it a decent property by the slums' standards. Why would this noble destroy the place out of nowhere?

"I'm going to demolish it in five seconds."

The human trafficker was losing his mind. He couldn't tell this noble to stop because there were people inside, but if the house collapsed, the slaves in the basement would die.

Cale counted down. "Five… Four…"

House Krish's butler turned his head.

"Three…"

It was his way of saying, *Forget about those slaves.*

"Two…"

A question occurred to the trafficker. How did this young noble intend to destroy the house? Could the knight do it all by himself?

"One…"

He was about to find out.

"Time's up."

As Cale announced the end of his countdown, the black dragon piped up, *‹I put a shield on the basement and its entrance.›*

Cale burst out laughing, which only puzzled the traffickers further. Just as they heard a low rumbling sound, the noble stretched out his hands. *Whoosh!* A pair of wings appeared, accompanied by a broad shield.

"Huh?"

The winged shield enveloped the house, as if to conceal the building from prying eyes. *A silver shield.* Though the southwestern region was far from the capital, both the middle-aged man and the baron's butler recognized its form.

"Could it be…?" the Krishes' butler muttered.

A single person flashed through his mind: a nobleman celebrated in Rowoon, famed not for his strength or his abilities but for his honorable beliefs. Because Guiller territory was close to the Empire, the man's identity came easily to the butler.

"Cale Henituse?" The instant the name left his lips, the butler gasped. A sharp blade prodded his back.

Ron, his features obscured by a mask, poked the Krishes' butler with his dagger. "You mustn't utter our young master's name as you please."

Something's wrong. At last, the butler had realized something was amiss. His hunch proved true soon enough.

"M-my lord, are you really going to tear down our house?" the middle-aged man asked Cale, his complexion drained of color. When he met Cale's eyes, he clamped his mouth shut. Distracted by the noble's flushed face, he hadn't looked Cale fully in the eye until that moment.

Those weren't the eyes of a drunkard.

Under Cale's cold gaze and the curious stares of the crowd from both the slums and the shopping district, the middle-aged man could find nothing else to say.

Cale finally gave him an answer. "It's been five seconds."

Now that the deadline had passed, the large shield plunged downward.

‹I'll support it with my magic!›

Fortified by Raon and shrouded by the wings, the silver shield smashed into the house. First, there was a *crack* as a fracture crept across the roof. Then the noise grew louder and louder—until the house collapsed.

Boom!

The earth trembled, causing the middle-aged man to stumble and fall. He watched the house crumble through the translucent wings and shield, wind and dust whipping past his blank face.

Those stupid slaves!

Surely the slaves he needed to sell had been crushed beneath the house. The basement was crudely built, so he was certain they hadn't survived. He couldn't even hear their screams over the din of destruction.

What should I do? How could something so terrible happen? His and the other traffickers' faces contorted in despair.

At the same time, Antonio Guiller and his knights were approaching on horseback. Still holding up the Unbreakable Shield, Cale glanced over at the Guiller heir.

"Lord Cale!" Antonio dismounted and marched to Cale's side, glowering at him. "What is the meaning of this?"

Antonio had been out on business when he heard Cale was drunk and trying to demolish a house in the slums. He'd considered Cale a somewhat decent man, but it seemed the rumors about the lout of the count's family were true.

Even now, after smashing a house into smithereens, Cale was composed. "You got here faster than I expected."

"Ha!" Antonio exclaimed, flabbergasted. "Lord Cale, do you understand what you've done?"

"Of course. I destroyed a house."

"You know that's not what I—"

"A den of human trafficking, to be precise."

Antonio's mouth snapped shut. The spectators on the bridge, the nearby knights, and even the human traffickers themselves were struck dumb.

The silence didn't affect Cale one bit. *Whoosh.* His silver shield floated up and drifted to the neighboring house. As soon as the shield moved, Cale approached the wreckage.

‹It's right here! Human, over here!›

Cale stopped at a spot above the rubble and began to clear the area. As he wordlessly dug through the debris, Hilsmann approached him.

"Hilsmann, move this beam."

"Will do."

The vice-captain effortlessly lifted the hefty beam, and Cale spotted the basement entrance. The door was completely intact, unmarred by even a single dent. Cale bent down and tugged it open.

Creak.

Inside the cramped basement, Cale found a group of people curled up without any space to move. Their emaciated faces wore matching looks of bewilderment.

"You're safe now," Cale told them.

He climbed back to his feet and turned to the Guiller heir, who realized Cale's gaze was clear and lucid.

"Lord Antonio."

The shield opened its wings above the next house. Screams rang out as the remaining human traffickers ran out of the other houses, having seen more than enough to know what awaited them.

Cale pointed to the unfolding chaos. "Let me borrow your knights."

Antonio gasped, then deployed his knights to capture the criminals. He also dispatched one knight to the castle. Meanwhile, Cale signaled for Frizia and her team to move toward the other houses.

With a pair of quiet meows, Ohn and Hong also took action. They would block most of the escape routes with poison mist. Ron, still wearing his mask, waved at Cale; he had House Krish's butler by the neck.

That vicious old man. Cale shook his head, listening to Raon's griping.

‹How disappointing. I didn't know he'd come this fast. We only destroyed one house!›

Right? Cale wished Antonio had waited until he'd destroyed all ten of the houses. "One more," he said.

‹Really?! All right! I put a shield over the basement, so the kidnapped people are safe! My shield is great and mighty!›

Boom!

Another house bit the dust.

Since Antonio had arrived so quickly, Cale had no reason to destroy the house—but he chose to do so anyway. The sight of those pale faces in the basement had rage pumping through his veins; he *wanted* to destroy something.

Whoosh.

The silver light emanating from Cale's hand winked out. His shield dissipated soon after, and a breeze rose up from the wreckage.

Cale let out a cough before wiping away the dab of blood trickling from his mouth. *This is nothing.* With the Unbreakable Shield and Raon's magic put together, there hadn't been much strain on his body. He didn't stagger or hack up blood. Yet it seemed the shield was getting stronger for some reason.

He had no complaints about one little cough and a pinch of blood as the Energy of the Heart worked to heal him in short order. Raon flapped his wings with a murderous glare, but Cale missed it as he turned around.

"Lord Cale."

Cale made eye contact with Antonio Guiller, who stood stiff. "Shall we have a discussion?" The discussion topic, as well as its beginning and end, were firmly in his hands.

Antonio looked around. Guiller soldiers were rapidly approaching from the distance, and droves of citizens were standing in the shopping district across the bridge. Most importantly, the denizens of the slums still hiding in their homes would be keeping their ears open.

The guard captain strode up to Antonio, accompanied by an administrator. "My lord!"

Cale handed Antonio a piece of paper with the ten houses marked on it. "The human traffickers have people confined in those buildings."

"I… Thank you very much." Given the clarity in Cale's gaze, Antonio was convinced that the man wasn't drunk at all. He'd obviously carried out this plan with a sound mind. When Cale passed him another document, Antonio's face tightened. "This crest…"

He recognized the crest at the top—it belonged to Baron Krish. Then he noticed a person being dragged over by Vice-Captain Hilsmann.

"This is the butler of House Krish."

"Lord Cale," Antonio all but groaned. A terrible possibility flashed through his mind, and there was a high chance it would turn out to be true.

"Listen here, Lord Antonio." Cale stepped closer. Taking stock of Antonio's tense expression, he said, "Beating around the bush isn't a talent of mine."

Antonio felt his mouth go dry. The naive noble from this morning—the dim-witted lordling who'd boasted about drinking that day—was nowhere to be seen. The man standing before Antonio now was the same Cale Henituse known throughout the kingdom as the crown prince's close confidant.

"I went out of my way to make a scene."

Cale laid it out plainly for Antonio and the Guiller estate's representatives. He had deliberately acted in the open, and there was a deeper motive behind his conduct. Had he shared this information with the Guillers in advance, they would have handled everything in secret. That would have been preferable for House Guiller; they could have concealed the fact that such atrocities took place in the heart of Guiller territory, practically on their castle's doorstep. As things stood, it was no longer possible to clean up quietly.

But why? Antonio didn't understand. If Cale had used this incident as leverage by promising to keep everything under wraps, Antonio would've had no choice but to agree to any condition he wanted. Cale had acted publicly by design, so surely he had a reason.

The redhead's lips parted, perhaps to deliver the answer. "I need the southwestern region."

The crown prince. Prince Albert rose to Antonio's mind unbidden.

Cale declined to elaborate, however. "I'm sure you have much to do. Let's chat later." He sauntered past Antonio, toward the castle.

The Guiller heir watched him go, then sighed and returned his attention to the fuss ahead. He had to overcome this unexpected storm first. "I need a few knights to come with me to the Krish estate this instant!"

"They're not following me, right?" Cale asked as Ron stealthily materialized beside him.

"No, young master. His Lordship seems focused on resolving this incident for the moment."

Antonio was a domineering man who tended to fixate on a person's qualifications, but at least he had the basics down. As Cale passed this judgment on Antonio's character, he took his time walking back to the castle to attract onlookers and spark some gossip.

Cale hoped that the incident would take the southwestern region's influence down a notch. The north would descend into pandemonium come spring, so shouldn't the south be peaceful, at least?

The southeastern region's border with the Kingdom of the Whipper, ruled by Commander Tunka, kept them occupied. They probably lived in perpetual anxiety wondering if and when Tunka might do something crazy again.

It's weird that Tunka is so subdued these days too. The barbarian had gone quiet after his war with the Mogor Empire. Cale opted not to worry about it for now, though.

"I'm starving." The Energy of the Heart's repair work always left him famished. He picked up the pace.

"You must have a hearty dinner tonight, young master."

"Yeah, I will. Too bad Vicross isn't here."

Though he'd said it without thinking too deeply, Ron's reply grabbed his attention. "Why…I'm so proud of you."

Cale's expression pinched, a stark contrast to Ron's benign smile. He hadn't forgotten how happy Ron looked while clenching

the Krish butler's neck earlier. It had been a while since he'd seen Ron this energetic—someone might even think the assassin had recaptured his youth.

What a scary old man.

Cale took a slow half step away from Ron and then made a beeline for the castle.

Watching Cale hurry away from him, Ron said to himself, "He's the same as ever."

His young master had matured into a fully grown pup—no, a *tiger*—but the lad still didn't know how to control his facial expressions.

"Meeeow."

"Meow."

When the two kittens sidled up to him, Ron scooped them up and trailed after Cale.

***

Antonio Guiller walked down the castle halls late that night, pausing to peer out the window. Droves of people with torches wound across the castle grounds. As Antonio watched them scurry about with urgency, he thought of his grandmother, Duchess Sonata.

"Cale Henituse… Find out what he and the crown prince backing him are after."

For the first time in ages, he'd seen his grandmother angry—at herself, no less. The documents provided by Cale's knight, combined with the Guillers' findings upon storming the baron's estate, had given the duchess quite the headache.

Antonio shared her feelings. *Crazy bastard.*

One of their vassals had gotten involved in the slave trade. The Guillers had yet to get the full details, but that alone was enough to embarrass them. To make matters worse, the citizens had witnessed

the whole thing. House Guiller was bound to face punishment from the crown, a loss of their people's trust, and criticism from other nobles.

All of these things made Antonio's head throb, but he had yet to meet with Cale Henituse. That was the mountainous task he had to overcome. Of course, the *real* mountain he needed to scale was the crown prince, whom Cale Henituse represented. Albert was poised to inherit the throne; there was no way he would sweep this incident under the rug.

And Cale Henituse is a noble himself. He'll use this to blackmail us for his own benefit.

Antonio had seen countless greedy wretches hiding behind noble titles, each one the same as the last. He always strove to comport himself as a prim and proper noble; he didn't want to give anyone a chance to find something to use against him. He ranked people according to his own set of qualifications for the same reason: It made them easier to deal with.

Arriving at the door of the reception room, Antonio cleared his throat. Hilsmann, the knight serving as Cale's guard, greeted him with a bow. When Antonio motioned to the door, Hilsmann cautiously knocked.

"Lord Antonio has arrived."

"Tell him to come in."

Upon hearing Cale's response, Antonio stopped the guard and set a hand on the knob. "I'll let myself in, thank you."

Antonio had never felt nervous entering this room before. Was this what it meant to be at someone's mercy?

I'm curious as to what he'll demand of me.

Just what concession would Cale Henituse exact from him? That question loomed large in Antonio's mind. At most, he assumed Cale would want House Guiller to lend its support to the crown prince, so his anxiety dissipated as he opened the door.

Creak.

As soon as he stepped over the threshold, he saw Cale Henituse looking out the window. As the Guiller heir, Antonio hadn't been faced with someone's back for quite some time. Frustration and annoyance needled him as Cale slowly turned around.

"Hello, Lord Antonio." His tone casual, Cale asked, "Are they all right?"

Antonio froze mid-stride, staring at him.

Cale repeated his question, as if he thought Antonio hadn't understood. "Are the people who were kidnapped doing okay?"

"I didn't think you'd ask such a thing," Antonio muttered in a daze.

"Pardon?"

Beneath Cale's expectant gaze, Antonio closed the door with a sigh. "We managed to rescue all of them."

"That's a relief." Cale smiled a moment, then his usual stoic expression returned.

The whole thing gave Antonio a peculiar feeling. Was Cale asking after the citizens as another strategy to force the Guillers into submission? Or had he truly been concerned? *I guess I'm about to find out.* Everything would be revealed by what Cale asked of him.

Antonio had urgent business to attend to, but he maintained his calm exterior. He made himself comfortable on a couch and gestured for Cale to sit across from him.

Cale didn't take him up on the offer. "I'm sure you're busy with territory matters, so I'll keep this short," he said, not wanting to drag things out. "As I already mentioned, I have no knack for beating around the bush. I'll get straight to the point."

"I'm curious to hear what you have to say." Antonio lounged on the couch, but his back was stiff. *What will he ask for?*

Cale withdrew something from his chest pocket and dropped it on the table. *Thwack!* It was a thick stack of papers.

Are these his conditions? Antonio wondered.

"This document describes how House Krish hired an assassins' guild to kidnap a child."

Antonio's face hardened. The slave trade wasn't the end of it; there was more. Cale had two cards up his sleeve, and Antonio had just learned of the second one.

The redheaded noble smiled at him. "I didn't bring this up in front of the citizens. Only I know about it."

Antonio rubbed his eyes. This one day had brought more than its share of fatigue. "I'm not one for dancing around the issue either. Nor do I have the time to do so," Antonio said, urging Cale to get on with it. "What is it that you want?"

In lieu of a response, Cale threw another stack onto the table. *Thwack!* Antonio looked down at the documents.

"This is information about the merchant guild that House Krish sold the slaves to."

Antonio stuffed down a groan. He had assumed Cale was famed for his honorable actions, but the count's son was more meticulous than he'd expected. Cale possessed intel that House Guiller hadn't yet uncovered—the incident had only just occurred today, after all. Antonio had no choice but to let Cale drag him around, but the man's next reveal nearly knocked him out.

"It's a merchant guild from the Mogor Empire."

Antonio closed his eyes, internally cursing Baron Krish. *That damn crazy bastard!* Not only had the man enslaved his countrymen, but he'd also sold them off to a merchant guild from the Empire. It was challenging enough to move a person from one region of the kingdom to another, but Baron Krish had smuggled them to a foreign nation.

If this got out, it would prove detrimental for House Guiller. Antonio was grateful that Cale had brought this information to him first, but he also felt suffocated. Cale had House Guiller in a choke hold.

It was then that one of his grandmother's lessons rose to mind: *"Antonio, the so-called nobility would be thrilled to stab each other in the back to satisfy their own greed. That is why you must learn to wield the sword as well."*

A sword was pressed to his neck. He was in dire straits.

"Lord Antonio," Cale said, and Antonio opened his eyes. "Please guard the southwestern region's gate."

What? Antonio certainly hadn't expected that.

"Ensure that an imperial merchant guild will never darken our kingdom's doorstep for such atrocities again. Don't let even one of those damn rats in."

Pinned by Cale's steadfast gaze, Antonio felt his hands go numb. He couldn't look away.

"As the southwest's gatekeepers, House Guiller must keep it safe. That is what I want from you."

The only thing Cale himself required of the Guillers was for Antonio to keep the Empire at bay while war raged in the north. Essentially, he needed them to do their job correctly.

Antonio swallowed hard. While Cale was only asking him to carry out his duty as a noble, the Guiller heir felt the overwhelming weight of those words. He had never seen a noble express such a straightforward wish before.

Alcoholic. Indulgent. A lout. As various descriptors tumbled through his mind at once, Antonio realized he'd had the wrong impression of Cale. This man was different. He didn't seek power, nor was he motivated by greed. He was no impostor wearing the guise of nobility.

"Lord Cale—"

"One more thing." Cale wasn't finished; there was something else the crown prince wanted. "When the kingdom asks it of you… open the gate."

The alliance of the four realms and the beastfolk tribes wouldn't let the Empire's crimes go unpunished.

"This is our request."

He left those words hanging in the air, and silence settled over the reception room.

Antonio clenched his fists. *This is nobility.* In Cale, he saw true nobility—the same kind of nobility Antonio himself aspired to emulate. He had learned something about himself over the course of their discussion. Why had he assumed Cale Henituse intended to extort or manipulate him, when the only thing Cale had asked for was a conversation?

Looking down at his hands, Antonio let his fingers go slack until he could see both his palms. He felt as if a mask rested in his empty hand—a mask called "nobility." He, too, was an impostor wearing a noble mask.

"What do you mean by 'open the gate'?" Antonio's unease bled into his question.

We're to open the gate to the Empire when the kingdom asks for it. Taken the wrong way, this was a dangerous request. Doing so could be interpreted as Rowoon pointing its blade at the Empire.

Cale answered with a query of his own. "Are you worried that His Highness is looking to wage war against the Empire?"

This was indeed the case. Antonio was afraid that Prince Albert might want to declare war on the Mogor Empire or another foreign nation.

"I thought I made myself clear." Lips quirking upward, Cale reiterated, "When the kingdom asks it of you."

Not the crown prince but the *kingdom*. There was a significant difference between the two, but Antonio hadn't picked up on the

distinction until now.

Once Antonio caught on, Cale added, "House Guiller serves the kingdom. You should understand what I mean, right?"

To serve the kingdom… Antonio's expression turned pensive. The kingdom encompassed the collective will of the crown, the aristocracy, and the common citizens. If the entire population of Rowoon wanted House Guiller to open the gate, the Empire must have committed an offense so heinous, the kingdom could not simply brush it aside.

What did the Empire do?

The Guillers were custodians of the southwestern region, which bordered the Empire. Despite being the next family head, Antonio couldn't figure out what the Empire could have done to bring about such a scenario.

Realizing the serious problem his lack of information posed, Antonio began, "What—"

"Figure it out yourself."

Cale's response drew a line, preventing Antonio from asking about the Empire's actions. He could speak no further on the matter. With his weakness in Cale's grasp, he had to obey. In any case, if the Empire's crimes impacted Rowoon, it was only right for the Guillers to unravel the situation for themselves. Antonio could investigate on his own…or choose another option.

"Then I shall ask His Highness."

He needed to go to someone above the ducal level. When Cale accepted this as the obvious solution, Antonio made up his mind to discreetly gather intelligence about the Empire and review the southwestern region's defensive strategies.

That was the response Cale had hoped for. He wanted Antonio to be wary, to quietly investigate the Empire's movements. Antonio would also take an interest in Rowoon's affairs beyond consolidating

his own power. Given that he had authority over one of the main regions of the kingdom, his attitude would work to Cale's benefit.

Cale straightened in his chair and locked eyes with Antonio. "I hope you'll make the right decision once you've given it some thought." He had nothing more to discuss; requests were best presented in a succinct manner. That said, he didn't forget to threaten Antonio in closing. "These documents are all copies, by the way. I have the originals. As you consider your options, I trust you won't forget that your undoing remains in my hands."

Antonio let out a sigh and smiled. His reaction elicited a frown from Cale. *Strange. What's that look for?* Who smiled after being threatened? Here Cale thought Antonio had understood him, but Antonio looked more relaxed than ever.

While Cale stewed in confusion, Antonio felt only relief. *Not everything Grandmother said is true.*

Leveraging the weaknesses of one's peers on the kingdom's behalf was a hallmark of true nobility. After meeting this bona fide noble, Antonio felt as if the clouds in his mind had dispersed.

"You really are a noble, Lord Cale."

"Obviously…?"

Puzzled as he was, Cale could see he'd reached an understanding with Antonio. *I guess I meet his criteria.* Since Antonio had acknowledged Cale as a noble, he must have developed a very positive impression of him.

The crown prince will take care of the rest.

Albert would know how to keep Antonio in check once Cale handed over the documents. Cale was satisfied that all was proceeding as planned. For the most part, anyway.

"I know you're busy, so I'll take my leave."

As he made to exit the reception room, he heard Antonio say, "You have my gratitude, Lord Cale."

Cale spun around in surprise. “Sorry?”

“Thank you for everything.”

A sense of renewed energy seemed to emanate from the beaming Antonio. Cale was disconcerted to see Antonio looking far more cheerful than he’d anticipated.

Should I have threatened him seriously and taken something in the process?

In his effort to act like a “proper” noble, Cale hadn’t requested any material goods from the Guillers. He regretted that a little, but he forced a smile for Antonio before he walked out of the room.

Cale had all but completed his goals for the day. One task remained, but it was technically for tomorrow—he couldn’t do it until after midnight.

***

In the castle’s largest guest bedroom, Cale reclined on the comfortable bed and faced a communication sphere.

‹I connected it!›

Thrummm. When the magical display lit up, Raon flew to the corner where Ohn and Hong sat. There was a pile of food in front of the three children. Cale watched Raon gnaw quietly on some meat for a moment before shifting his gaze back to the sphere.

“Lord Cale.”

Cale was speaking with none other than Crown Prince Albert. His final task was to bring the prince up to speed; it was his duty to report in after making a mess.

Albert’s nose wrinkled. Cale knew full well that Albert would find his lounging posture disrespectful. Recently, the crown prince had been working frantically without a moment’s rest. No wonder he was irked to see the count’s son lazing around in bed, warm and cozy with a belly full of good food.

Taking pity on Albert, Cale began, “Your Highness—”

Albert cut him off, scowling deeply. “You truly are Rowoon’s star,” he said, tone almost thoughtful. “No, its shining light.”

What? Cale stiffened. Albert paid him no mind, putting his glib tongue to use for the first time in a while.

“You’re more than just a star. You’re the brightest star in our kingdom. With you to light our way, Rowoon needn’t fear even the darkness.”

What’s wrong with him? Cale’s satisfaction ebbed away, and displeasure took its place. “Shall I sit up, Your Highness?” Cale suggested, about to prop himself up.

“No need. I heard all about it.” His strange musings apparently over with, Albert smiled—so brilliantly, he might as well have been cherishing a field of beautiful flowers. Then again, a gorgeous meadow paled in comparison to Albert’s current position.

“You coughed up blood and almost fainted while trying to capture human traffickers in Guiller territory?”

“That’s partly true…” But Cale hadn’t actually hacked up blood, nor had he grown faint.

“You exhibited amazing charisma to entrap those human traffickers, destroyed their buildings with your silver shield, and rescued the imprisoned citizens?”

“…I suppose so?” That *had* happened, to be sure, but Albert’s description was a tad exaggerated.

“Pretending to be drunk, you observed the criminals through a restaurant window before boldly confronting them with just a single knight by your side?”

“Could you please stop?”

This time, Cale was the one scowling while Albert smirked. The crown prince was in high spirits despite the fatigue etched on his

face. It then occurred to Cale that he wouldn't need to give Albert a detailed account of the day's events.

"It sounds like you've already heard about most of it, Your Highness."

Albert was nothing if not thorough. While Cale had expected the crown to have an informant in the Duchy of Guiller, he was surprised that so much information had reached Albert so quickly.

"Indeed. My informant told me of the rumors making the rounds in Guiller territory."

The sensationalized version he'd relayed was spreading like wildfire, and the Guillers were powerless to stop it.

After hearing the gossip for himself, Albert had come to a conclusion: "What an upstanding crazy bastard." He took no pleasure in Cale's resulting grin.

The other information Albert had received indicated that while Cale hadn't coughed up a lot of blood, he *had* bled a little—hence his lying down to recover. He could've rested and reported to Albert in the morning, but he was needlessly diligent, waiting to call in just past midnight. This was why Albert found Cale easier to work with than anyone else, even if he didn't personally like the bastard: Cale reminded him of himself.

"What is it you need to report?" Albert wasn't so cruel that he'd detain a convalescent. Plus, the redheaded rascal would soon be headed to Karo's auction house in Albert's stead.

"It's just a brief update. I'll send you the documents soon, but the merchant guild that traded with House Krish is from the Mogor Empire. There's also evidence that the Krishes previously hired an assassins' guild to kidnap a child."

Albert felt a rapid headache coming on. "That's the short version?"

"Yes, Your Highness. The Guillers will contact you soon. I've got them collared and leashed. You can use them however you

wish."

"…Suddenly, I feel exhausted."

Contrary to his own words, Albert was brimming with energy. Cale noted that the crown prince seemed happiest when he could manipulate people to his advantage.

"I'll keep a tight grip on that leash."

"Naturally. I'm sure our kingdom's wisest star can see to any issues that may arise."

No sooner had Cale finished his sentence than he sensed something was off. He quickly realized the reason for his unease: Albert hadn't cut the call short, not even after Cale finished his report and started flattering him. Cale went still, wondering if Albert had something else to say.

Is he going to put me to work? The fulfillment Cale had experienced at tossing the Guiller territory issue into the crown prince's lap slowly disappeared.

With the look of a man who'd been forced to eat something unpalatable, Albert said, "Sleep well." Then came a *click* as he hung up.

Nope, something's still not right. Cale hurriedly shoved the communication sphere away.

Before lying back down, he called out for the black dragon. "Raon."

"What is it, human? You should sleep well like the crown prince told you to!"

"I will," Cale said. As Raon tugged the blanket up to his neck, he decided he'd screen Albert's calls for the time being. "Ignore any calls from him for a while."

"All right!"

That done, Cale steeled his resolve once more. *Within this year—no, by the end of next year—I'll deal with the north and the*

Empire so I can relax in the villa.

Cale fell asleep to this simple desire. The children let him be and whispered among themselves.

"We only got to see the desert last time we went to Karo, but this time we'll be able to see all of it!"

"I really like traveling!"

Raon and Hong couldn't contain their excitement about their next destination. Ohn wordlessly polished off a slice of cake, listening to her younger siblings chat.

"Our house is great, but traveling is nice too!"

"I agree. It's fun going on adventures together!"

"Yeah! I'm also curious about the Eastern Continent. Let's travel everywhere! We're great and mighty, so we can do it!"

The things they said would've made Cale faint. Glancing over at the sleeping Cale, Ohn shook her head. But she wanted her younger siblings' wishes to come true, so she kept her mouth shut. As Hong and Raon discussed their plans to travel the world, Ohn simply sat there in silence.

That night, Cale had an awful nightmare about traveling the world with living, breathing baggage.

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"You're not looking too well, Lord Cale."

"I had a nightmare."

Cale shivered as he recalled his terrible dream. The Energy of the Heart couldn't heal psychological damage, so he was pale for the first time in a long while.

His visitor, Bilose, took in Cale's pallid complexion. "Speaking of nightmares, I'd say Bago fits the bill."

A smile flitted across Cale's face, gone as quickly as it came. The Lake of God's Tears was burning in Bago even now. Faern's citizens said this was their god's will, or perhaps a manifestation of his rage. Though the fire hadn't harmed anyone or damaged any property, it had sparked fear and uncertainty among the populace.

Bilose was half convinced that Cale's group had been responsible for it.

"The fire still isn't out?"

Cale's response confirmed Bilose's suspicions: Cale Henituse had caused trouble again.

"Lord Cale, what exactly did you do?"

"Why do you ask?"

Bilose started getting frustrated with Cale's blasé attitude. "The north is a mess. A disaster. A total catastrophe!"

"Good."

At that, Bilose heaved a rare sigh in front of Cale. "My goodness."

Paying him no mind, Cale climbed into the nearby carriage. "Let's head to Karo right away, Bilose." He was bound for the auction house, but not to bid on any item. He meant to hook a person in the auction—and earn some money in the process.

Chapter 41:
A Modest Goal

CALE'S GROUP had a slight delay in their departure.

"Leaving so soon?"

Antonio Guiller was walking toward the carriage with a radiant smile on his face. Cale's brow furrowed as he watched him draw near.

They don't get along?

Bilose thought it likely that the two nobles wouldn't see eye to eye, considering each was closely aligned with a different prince. Furthermore, Cale had caused a disturbance in the territory by uncovering a human trafficking operation in the Duchy of Guiller, thus exposing the Guillers to pressure from the crown and the other nobles in the southeastern region.

Yet one aspect of the situation struck Bilose as odd. *Strange… Why only pressure the southeast?*

The northwestern and northeastern regions were peaceful. Central Rowoon was under strict scrutiny after the enraged crown prince had personally dispatched an investigation squad. Why were the other regions so quiet?

It clicked for him then. *Ah, I get it.*

There were no dukes or marquesses in the northeast, so that region had no true leader. Yet all the nobles in northeastern Rowoon were wary of what Count Deruth Henituse would think of their actions.

On the other side, Marquess Sten's household held full control of the northwestern region. Taylor Sten, who had established his dominance of House Sten, was one of the crown prince's people.

Bilose's uncle, Odeus, was the kingpin of the northwestern underworld. When Bilose had sought to establish safe houses in the Mogor Empire and in Faern, Odeus had been more than happy to oblige. His offhand comment resurfaced in Bilose's memory.

"If Lord Cale's involved, of course I'll cooperate. That's the only way for me to survive in the northwest."

Bilose hadn't thought much of it at the time, but now it struck him like a sucker punch. Though he had worked with Cale on several occasions, he wasn't privy to everything Cale had done or the extent of his connections.

Have I ever worked with someone I knew so little about?

The thought sent chills down Bilose's spine. He then overheard Cale muttering under his breath, his eyes still glued to the incoming Antonio.

"So annoying."

Bilose's expression changed a bit at that. Cale's irritation seemed genuine, but it wasn't the resentment of a man running into his enemy and finding himself in an unpleasant situation; it felt more akin to frustration with someone who'd woken him up.

The Guiller heir's behavior also surprised Bilose. Antonio and Cale definitely weren't on good terms—or so Bilose believed—but their interaction wasn't quite what he'd anticipated.

"Shouldn't you check up on things before you leave, Lord Cale?"

Cale observed the rules of etiquette, disembarking from the carriage to stand before Antonio. "House Guiller took care of it. I'm sure you handled it well, so is there any reason for me to follow up?"

"I see. You trust my family." Cale expressing confidence in the Guillers made Antonio feel peculiar indeed.

"We're planning to lock the gate for a while," came a voice from behind him.

Antonio turned around. Everyone present bent into respectful bows, Cale included. The duchess, Sonata Guiller, walked up to Cale. As she did, Cale thought, *They'll be keeping it shut for some time, she says.*

The crown prince and Duchess Guiller had decided to hide the fact that a merchant guild from the Empire had purchased the slaves. Word would spread as soon as they caught the guild responsible, but for now, they sought to keep the news contained.

House Krish had sold captives to the merchant guild on three separate occasions. The timing of these transactions corresponded with Albert solidifying his position as Rowoon's future king. With Albert's influence expanding beyond that of the prince House Guiller supported, Baron Krish had determined it was most expedient to boost his financial power.

Although Albert hadn't let his feelings show when conversing with Cale, learning about all this had filled him with fury. He was engaged in a covert investigation as to whether the slave trade had infested the kingdom elsewhere—hence his decision to suppress the intel about the Empire's merchant guild.

Regardless, this did not erase House Guiller's sin. They had neglected border security to the point that Rowoon's citizens were being sold into slavery. After striking a deal with the crown prince, Sonata had made up her mind. This was the first time she had spoken about it to anyone other than her grandson.

Cale's condition was that they secure the gate, but the gatekeepers' duties involved more than locking it up tight. Sonata touched on this aspect as she said, "House Guiller will also temporarily pause its international activities and summon all our family members and vassals back home."

Ceasing international activities. Recalling the family. Everyone's face went taut as they realized the implications.

Though she'd used the term "international activities," House Guiller's so-called *activities* involved increasing the duchy's influence.

The individuals responsible for this were family members embroiled in the central region's politics. Sonata's announcement that they would halt these activities essentially meant that House Guiller would let go of any power they held in central Rowoon. Even if the pause was temporary, as she'd said, it was still a significant decision.

Permitting the slave trade was a major sin, but it didn't necessitate this harsh self-punishment from the duchess. Since a vassal household had carried out the human trafficking, she could have feigned ignorance. She would've had to accept some responsibility, but such was the cruel nature of the world.

But why?

While everyone else wrestled with their confusion, Sonata, Antonio, and even Cale remained calm. However, Sonata's next words dropped an even bigger bombshell. "I will also be passing the title of duke to Antonio by the end of the year."

"Grandmother!" Antonio cried out in astonishment, but she was impassive—no, her gaze was downright frigid.

This was my fault.

House Guiller would suffer further aftershocks when the identity of the Empire's merchant guild got out. By choosing to take responsibility and step down, Sonata could mitigate the backlash they might face in the future. Furthermore, she planned to punish House Krish and force the baron to relinquish his title, ensuring that any Krish descendants never dared to show their faces in public again.

Still, worry gnawed at her. Her failure to notice the gap in the kingdom's gate was a major concern. She'd believed that to survive, one had to secure power—but she was wrong. While House Guiller was locked in a power struggle, the gate to their home had been breached. This was unacceptable.

Sonata looked at her grandson. She had always told him, *"Nobles are greedy creatures. If you want to survive, you must know how to wield your own sword. You cannot show any openings. You*

must always pass judgment upon them and use those judgments to your advantage."

It may have sounded harsh, but her grandson had never opposed her. He never failed to conduct himself with the demeanor and authority befitting a noble. Even so, she had noticed how he truly felt: Despite his imperious bearing, her grandson took no small amount of pride in his noble title.

"Your Grace, I believe we should lock the gate."

Antonio was the first to suggest that House Guiller abandon its quest for power and focus on fixing its internal affairs. She realized then that the time had come to make him the duke and lend him her support in becoming a reliable gatekeeper for the southwest.

"Grandmother…"

When Antonio called out to her once more, she chastised him. "I am speaking as the duchess. Address me by the proper title."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Her stern manner made her decision clear. Once she'd reached this point, Sonata never changed her mind. Even though it pained Antonio to know that his grandmother blamed herself for this incident, he held his tongue and watched her move toward Cale—yet her next words to the count's son made him gasp.

"Do you know who best holds their liquor in this household?"

The duchess hadn't lost one bit of her backbone.

Cale, for his part, was flustered. He had expected House Guiller to lock the gate, but the duchess making a personal appearance to announce the family's seclusion and her own abdication in favor of her grandson was beyond anything he'd anticipated. And why was she suddenly talking about drinking?

Uncertain of the answer, Cale replied, "I'm not sure."

A smile softened Sonata's wrinkled face. "Me."

"…Sorry?"

"I'm the family's top tippler. Let's drink together next time."

Her statement blew Bilose away. It was widely known that Sonata rarely socialized outside an official capacity because she didn't trust many people. Yet here she was, offering to share a table with someone who had no power or influence to offer her.

What in the world did Lord Cale do this time?!

Sonata and Cale, who should have been bitter enemies, seemed so friendly with one another. Bilose regarded Cale with reverence—but Cale himself didn't like how things were progressing.

What's gotten into her? Cale had no desire to sit with any of the Guillers, but he plastered a tender, respectful smile on his face before responding to the duchess. "Should we be fated to meet again, I'll bring some delectable spirits with me."

Fated to meet again—meaning he wouldn't come without a good reason. Sonata was amazed that he hadn't leapt at the chance to befriend her. *He definitely isn't your average punk.*

The crown prince had said that when it was time to open the gate, he would send someone to notify her. She felt certain that person would be Cale Henituse.

"Yes. Let's meet again when the time comes."

The old woman's eyes sparkled in anticipation of their reunion, but Cale had no intention of following through. Avoiding her gaze, he slowly dipped into a bow. *There won't be a next time.*

Antonio smiled, glancing between Cale and his grandmother. He alone realized that his grandmother had acknowledged Cale Henituse as a true noble.

"If that's all, I'll be on my way." After bidding farewell to the duchess, Cale moved to reboard the carriage. A sudden thought held him back. "Is everyone safe, Your Grace?"

Although Cale didn't specify, Sonata immediately understood he was talking about the kidnapped citizens. "Yes, they're safe. They're getting healthier all the time."

"That's a relief."

When his lips quirked upward, Sonata knew it was his real smile. *He's a decent kid.* Cale was a better person than she'd imagined, and the crown prince she'd chatted with on this occasion was a good boy too. Now that she would be letting go of the reins, she thought it best to lay the groundwork for her family's eventual return to power.

I should leave all communications with the crown prince and Cale to Antonio.

Sonata's gaze intensified as she watched Cale, but he heaved an internal sigh of relief that she wasn't trying to hold him up. Upon completing one more round of farewells, he finally managed to leave Guiller territory.

Bilose, who joined Cale in the carriage, realized that Cale possessed many talents in addition to his knack for stockpiling wealth. Their trip to Karo filled the merchant with a sense of anticipation.

Just then, Cale flopped down inside the carriage with a huff. "So tiring." A deep crease marred his forehead; he seemed to find everything annoying.

"Meeeow."

The silver kitten snagged a pillow between her teeth and dragged it next to Cale. He tucked the pillow under his head and lay down across the seat. Bilose blinked in confusion, finding Cale truly unfathomable.

"I'm going to sleep," Cale said. "Don't talk to me."

Bilose nodded and kept his mouth closed.

Who would call him Lord Silverlight if they saw him like this?

As he thought about Cale's growing reputation as an honorable noble in Guiller territory and the southwestern region at large, he chose to brush off this display of extreme laziness.

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"Hello, Lord Cale," came a voice reminiscent of a GPS from beneath a black robe. "It has been a while."

"That it has. Good to see you again." When Cale waved a lazy hand in response to Mary's greeting, the necromancer joined him in the carriage.

Albert's aunt, the dark elf Tasha, climbed in after Mary. "Hey there, Lord Cale! Long time no see!"

Bilose was no longer present. As soon as they'd arrived at their destination, he had disembarked for Flynn Merchant Fleets' local branch.

The city known as Vegas, located in the southern part of Karo, existed solely for holding auctions. It boasted the largest auction house on the Western Continent. With bards, plays, auctions, and casinos, it was overflowing with pleasures of all kinds.

Currently, Vegas was decorated to commemorate the auction's opening season, which kicked off in February. A profusion of red and blue lights adorned the already stunning city, making for an incredibly beautiful sight.

Once Tasha was seated, she flashed an awkward smile. "Fabulous place, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

In contrast to Cale's mild expression, Tasha made a complicated face as she eyed a corner of the carriage. It made sense to her that Cale would keep his cool while taking in the scenery, but the others' reactions exceeded her expectations.

"Wow! I want that shiny sculpture!"

"That hat is so pretty!"

"I'd look so cool strutting around with that cape!"

The black dragon and the two kittens were practically drooling as they peered out the carriage window, gripping their piggy banks. The children cradled their savings, pointing out all the things they wanted to buy.

With a *fwish*, Raon's head whipped toward Cale, Tasha, and Mary. Tasha jumped as the dragon accosted Cale. "Human! I have a lot of money in my piggy bank! I'll pay for everything I want!"

Vegas and all its glamorous wonders had captured the heart of the six-year-old Raon. Ohn and Hong were no different; the kittens followed Raon's gaze and turned to Cale, seemingly ready to jump out and make Vice-Captain Hilsmann do their shopping if Cale gave them permission.

Tasha stared at them in a daze, but Cale's response made her eyes go wide. "I'll buy them for you."

A moment of silence settled over the carriage.

"Wh-what did you say?" Raon asked.

Cale casually repeated himself. "I'll buy you anything you want. Pick out whatever you like." After all, how expensive could it be if a child wanted it?

"A-are you sure?"

"I-I'm gonna buy a ton of stuff!"

"You're acting weird!"

The three children's thoughts were jumbled, but they formed a cautious circle around Cale. Tasha sat there, disoriented, until she heard Mary's mechanical voice.

"You really are a warm and kindhearted person, Lord Cale."

Tasha bobbed her head in agreement, but she felt a little funny about doing so.

"You're the best! Our human is the greatest!"

"I'll also increase your allowance," Cale said. "You'll get twenty silver coins now."

"Y-y-you generous human!"

Raon spewed compliments at him, but Cale said nothing more. He was on the verge of earning billions of galleons, thanks to the red necklace and black jewel tucked in his magic bag. And how many things could children really ask for, anyway?

Tasha gazed warmly upon the giddy children, then turned that same look on Cale. "Are we stopping at the inn first?"

Cale met her brimming warmth with a blunt response. "Yes. Then I'll go for a stroll."

"A stroll?"

"Yup."

"Where to?"

"The casino."

"Wait, what?"

A building shaped like a giant golden tree was the continent's largest legal casino. Four times a year, the secret VIP auction took place on its top floor. Cale's modest goal was to sell his items at exorbitant prices to the two people who would meet him there.

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‹Wh-what are these things?!›

"Meeeow."

"Meow!"

True to his word, Cale swung by the casino on his walk. He went along at a leisurely pace, taking in the fancy fountain, the magic gambling devices, and the tables to one side of the first floor.

The invisible six-year-old dragon's eyes darted all over the space. *‹H-hey, human, did you see that?! He put in a copper coin, and the magic device gave him a gold one!›*

Both magic and alchemy produced an equivalent to whatever was sacrificed. The creation of fire or wind, for example, required sufficient mana in exchange. Similarly, there was no magic spell to turn one copper coin into numerous gold coins.

Raon quickly discerned that the magic gambling devices rewarded those who lined up all the pictures of the same fruit. This wise dragon, seasoned by his two years of experience in the world, solemnly shared his thoughts with Cale. *‹Do you want to grab one of those magic devices, human?›*

"Oh my."

Cale was equal parts stunned and impressed. The dragon didn't want to try out the devices that resembled the slot machines of Kim Roksu's world for himself; instead, he wanted to steal one and break it open to see how it worked.

Dragons really are different.

Hiding his pride beneath a veil of ignorance, Cale asked, "Why?"

With all the hustle and bustle, nobody paid any attention to Cale, who was chatting with Ohn in his arms. Only Vice-Captain Hilsmann, who was carrying Hong, and Bilose behind him shot Cale confused looks. Naturally, Cale took no notice of either of them.

‹What do you mean, "Why?" We need to figure out how they work! How could you not realize that?›

Oho.

‹Then I'll take all the money this place has! I'll use one silver coin from my piggy bank and rake it all in!›

Cale's face stiffened. *Dragons truly are amazing.* Raon's thought process was even more pragmatic than Cale's.

For a moment, Cale seriously considered Raon's suggestion. But after watching someone put one copper coin—or one cound in Karo's currency—into a machine, he turned away. Resignation, anticipation, desperation, obsession, despair… Cale didn't want to take money that had been accumulated through the buildup of all of these emotions. If he was going to rob someone, wouldn't it be better to steal from the rich?

"Look, Lord Cale," Bilose said, pointing discreetly. "Over there."

Cale's gaze shifted toward the innermost section of the first floor. Karo's only legal casino was constructed in the shape of a large golden tree. Since one could "strike gold" inside, they'd named it the Golden Tree. Anyone could gain admittance for the price of one silver coin, or ten counds.

Fountains adorned the center of the first floor, visible all the way from the entrance. Beyond them, a golden doorway led to a path connecting the main floor to the upper levels, which were known as the Fruit of the Golden Tree.

Someone was making his way along that path at this very moment. He was one of the two people to whom Bilose had sent invitations to the auction, per Cale's instructions. The man looked to be in his fifties, with a solemn and dignified countenance. Despite his distinguished bearing, however, he didn't make a positive impression.

He looks like a politician who's neck-deep in corruption. That description fit the man perfectly.

While Cale remained calm, Bilose sucked in a breath, gaping at the middle-aged man in the passage. "I didn't expect the guildmaster to actually come."

The middle-aged man was Plavin Sinten, leader of a merchant guild counted among the top five in the Mogor Empire: the Sinten Merchant Guild. They had superb business acumen, but more importantly, their considerable political sway had driven them up the Empire's ranks over the past ten years.

Bilose was shocked that Plavin had appeared in response to Cale's anonymous invitation. Then he gasped, realizing the greater implications. *Lord Cale must really have the Fire Crystal.*

As Bilose had personally written the two invitations, he knew what Cale had used to entice each person to show up. One of them, the Fire Crystal, was a pendant said to be in the possession of the Sinten Merchant Guild. Discovered long ago in a pit of lava, this mysterious gemstone could not be harmed by fire. The dwarven architect who'd designed the Magic Tower had crafted it into a beautiful necklace.

According to rumor, the Sinten Merchant Guild had purchased it from the Golden Tree's auction house here in Vegas about ten years ago. *So how did it end up in Lord Cale's hands?*

Bilose couldn't figure out how Cale got ahold of it, but the necklace had to be in his custody. The young noble's abilities left Bilose in awe. *Then I suppose he has the Night's Exultation as well.* This was the jewel Cale had dangled as bait for the second recipient.

Recalling how Cale had called this a jackpot, Bilose licked his lips. His chubby face shone with anticipation. *We'll get twenty billion for everything, minimum.*

Ten years ago, the Fire Crystal sold for fifteen billion. Since Cale planned to trade the necklace in secret, it would doubtless fetch close to that amount—but only if the Sinten Merchant Guild wanted it. The fact that the guildmaster himself had shown up suggested that he desperately desired the jewel.

"Lord Cale," Bilose whispered, excitement plain in his hushed voice, "it looks like you'll make at least fifteen billion."

"What are you talking about?"

"Huh?"

Bilose could see that he'd taken Cale aback—and indeed, Cale's astonishment was genuine.

Fifteen billion?

"Bilose."

Cale's serious expression made Bilose stand up straighter. "Yes, my lord?"

"I don't understand how some things can be auctioned for millions, even billions." The winning bids for jewels and artwork defied Cale's comprehension. "But I'm sure the prices they sell for reflect their true value."

Whether that value was purely artistic in nature, a form of investment capital, or something completely different, Cale respected its worth completely. Thus, he'd set an appropriate price for his own offerings. The final value of the Fire Crystal left Cale's lips.

"Thirty."

"Pardon?" When Bilose heard the number, his mind went blank. *Did I hear that right?*

Cale claimed not to understand how things sold for such astronomical amounts, but then he went and named a price that doubled the item's value. The amount was no joke either. Thirty billion, Cale said—and thirty billion he meant.

The currency used in the Golden Tree was the Karo cound. The Kingdom of Karo was by all accounts a thriving economy; thirty billion counds equated to about thirty-five billion galleons in Rowoon's currency.

He's not usually prone to speaking nonsense!

Bilose started getting frustrated. Cale wasn't one for mindless drivel. Though he acted carefree, he was conscientious when it came to calculations and personal profit. Therefore, the number he chose was bound to be reasonable.

"Lord Cale."

"Yes?"

"I'll always be by your side!" Bilose declared, gazing at Cale with the eyes of a sycophant. Cale dismissed his flattery with a snort.

That stoked Bilose's curiosity, but this wasn't the time to pry. He knew Cale preferred to share only the information his allies absolutely needed to know, allowing them to piece together the rest along the way as long as they stuck by him.

But I'm still curious… Should I ask? He's not one to give an easy answer, though.

Bilose was correct. Even if he did ask, Cale couldn't explain it to him.

Ron and Frizia had provided Cale with extremely detailed intel about the merchant guild involved in the slave trade. He didn't recognize the guild named in the first report, but the second identified its real owner. Ron's absence from the Golden Tree and Tasha joining their group had been arranged after they uncovered the merchant guild's true identity.

Cale had passed along the first report's findings the night he chatted with the crown prince, then shared the second report with the crown prince as well. Albert would claim a portion of the profits earned from this venture—though handing him Antonio's leash allowed Cale to bump the ratio from fifty-fifty to seventy-thirty in his favor.

"That guild is a front for the Sinten Merchant Guild?" Albert had asked.

That was the true mastermind of the slave trade—the same guild Cale would meet with to trade the Fire Crystal. The crown prince found the nature of its involvement intriguing.

"Your information network is incredible."

It couldn't be anything less. In addition to having Ron in his employ, Cale had Frizia and other assassins formerly active in the southwestern region. They had witnessed an employee of the

merchant guild entering a Sinten branch near the Empire's border, only to emerge with a large amount of money. This event encouraged them to look into that particular branch. After that, they managed to intercept a secret missive the branch manager had sent via messenger bird.

"Won't you consider introducing me to your informants?"

"Absolutely not, Your Highness."

The process only went so smoothly because Ron and the other members of Cale's network had never been exposed to the public.

"Now, how should I proceed?"

In light of this new information, Cale had wanted to know how to handle the upcoming trade with Sinten's guildmaster. Yet Albert had just lobbed the question back at him.

"How do you wish *to proceed?"*

"I say we follow the original plan."

"And what might that be?"

"I sell the jewel to the Sinten Merchant Guild and make a killing. As for you, Your Highness, keep gathering the evidence you need to catch them."

"Take a fortune from their coffers before we capture them and bleed them dry, you mean?"

"Correct."

"Marvelous. We'll go with that."

Cale had believed the original plan was a good one—and once he had the crown prince's approval, he could do as he pleased.

"Excuse me, Lord Cale?"

Snapped out of his reverie, Cale looked down to find Bilose watching him cautiously.

"I-I'm just very curious about how you plan to sell it. Could you give me a tiny hint?"

‹I-I wanna know too! Thirty billion counds?!› Raon shouted in Cale's mind. *‹Human, you're great and migh—no, I'm the one who's great and mighty, but you're still amazing!›*

Cale winced at the stunned six-year-old dragon's yelling, which in turn startled Bilose, who wondered if he shouldn't have asked. Raon and Bilose weren't alone, however; Hilsmann, Ohn, and Hong had their heads on a swivel, every bit as interested as the other two. The incessant cacophony of the gambling devices continued to blare throughout the building, and there were no potential eavesdroppers close by.

At length, Cale gave his response. "Think about how the Sinten Merchant Guild reached their current position. That's your answer."

Bilose hung on every word, but he was still visibly confused. Cale merely smiled at him.

How had the Sinten Merchant Guild achieved their success? The guild had shot up through the ranks over the past decade. Thanks to their unmatched relationship with Mogor's imperial family, they had significant political sway. Both Bilose and Cale knew about this, but Cale had an additional piece of information.

We found the Fire Crystal in the pope's secret stash.

Though the necklace was widely known to be in the Sinten Merchant Guild's possession for the last ten years or so, Cale had discovered it among the pope's belongings. What could that mean? *Either Sinten offered it to the pope, or the pope ordered the guild to procure it in the first place.* One of those two options was bound to be the truth. Either way, that revelation would plunge the Sinten leader into uncertainty.

The current relationship between the Church of the God of Sun and the Mogor Empire explained everything for Cale. *Word has it that the Sinten Merchant Guild's got a great deal of political clout. They've got their fingers in two major pies: the church and the Empire.* And that would prove their greatest vulnerability from here on out.

As Cale thought things through, a certain image sprang unbidden into his mind: the leader of the merchant guild flopping like a fish caught on a hook. Cale wasn't about to settle for taking a ton of the man's money; he couldn't give up a bargaining chip so easily. Plus, he had his hands on two of the guild's pressure points this time: the necklace they'd offered to the pope and their participation in the slave trade.

It didn't take a genius to deduce how the Sinten Merchant Guild had risen rapidly from where it stood a decade ago. That was precisely when the Alchemist's Bell Tower stopped using orphans and children from the slums. It was reasonable, then, to assume the Sinten Merchant Guild had been one of the primary sources of the alchemists' next experimentation subjects. That perfectly explained the guild's rapid growth.

‹I'll collect about that much too, human!› Raon said in Cale's mind, still reeling. *‹Where do you plan to spend that money? Buy me some apple pies!›*

Cale idly nodded. *Sure, why not?* He'd already decided how to use a portion of the profits.

He had created two copies of the information he'd gathered through Ron and Frizia regarding the Sinten Merchant Guild. One was the copy he'd provided to the crown prince; the other was intended for the alcoholic alchemist and the cat knight Rex, both currently lying low in the Empire while gathering their forces. Needless to say, Cale would pass on their copy much later.

Before that, I'll take them for everything they've got.

Cale would take his time squeezing every last coin from the Sinten Merchant Guild. That was the only way he could forget the abject despair he saw in the faces of the people imprisoned in the traffickers' basements.

I'll be getting more than just money out of this. Fantastic. It was quite a favorable plan.

‹Human, why're you suddenly smirking like a scam artist? I only need one apple pie!›

As usual, Cale tuned out Raon's commentary, instead directing his attention toward the other figure whom Bilose had pointed out.

"It seems that's the person they sent for it."

Cale's eyes locked on the individual baited by the other jewel, the Night's Exultation. The man was a priest on the younger side, dressed in the robes of his station. Based on the heap of implements he carried as he rushed through the golden door, he seemed to be a healer. Adorning his robes was the crest of the God of Sun.

Karo had the second-highest number of the God of Sun's believers on the continent, though nowhere near as many as the Empire. Most people were under the belief that the Night's Exultation was stored in the God of Sun's church in Vegas. The jewel had quite a deep meaning to it.

But the bishop offered it to the pope in exchange for his position.

The second individual snagged by Cale's bait was the bishop of Karo's Church of the God of Sun: representative of the church's Karo branch and the most likely candidate to succeed the pope in the coming years.

This man would become a guiding light for Saint Jack in the future, as well as his reliable supporter—though not by his own free will. Cale wouldn't give him a choice. After all, Jack would be the next pope of the Church of the God of Sun.

‹Human! What kind of con are you cooking up that's got you grinning so much?›

Perhaps influenced by the vibrant city around him, Cale couldn't help but laugh. Now that he was in a festive mood, it was time to take action.

The VIP auction took place every February to welcome the New Year. The three-day event was held behind closed doors on the

Golden Tree's top floor. One would be hard-pressed to call it a truly "secret" auction, given that the dates and participants were easily uncovered. While attendees wore a mask as a matter of course, it was still possible to determine their identities by consulting Vegas's guest log.

This auction was referred to as "secret" because no one had any idea what would be auctioned until the event began. The Golden Tree's management never discussed the items in the catalogue; the Vow of Death they had taken before a priest of the God of Death kept their lips sealed.

But there are bound to be rumors.

If someone discovered a rare item in the Western Continent prior to the secret auction, and no one could determine its owner, the secret auction immediately came to mind. Accordingly, all sorts of rumors spread among VIPs and regular citizens alike. That was why Cale had leaked some intel to the Sinten guildmaster and to Karo's bishop of the God of Sun.

"Vice-Captain, come here."

The vice-captain trotted over when Cale beckoned to him. Though he was swift as ever, the only thing on his mind was the price Cale had revealed to them. *Thirty billion counds? Thirty… Thirty! Should I report this to the count?*

Because of the daunting amount involved, Hilsmann was debating whether to inform Deruth about it. He hadn't expected it to be such a hefty sum. Even for a wealthy family, this was astronomical.

Cale whispered in his ear, "Now, Hilsmann…"

"Y-yes, sir?" he stammered, betraying his distraction.

Still, Cale wasn't the sort of liege lord who made a fuss about such things. They hadn't even conducted a ceremony for Hilsmann to swear an oath to Cale, so the vice-captain's greater fealty was only official in his own mind.

"Don't tell my father about this. I'm collecting this money as an emergency fund."

Hilsmann couldn't believe it. *An emergency fund? Isn't this too much to save for a rainy day?!*

"You already have some idea of what's going to happen later this year, don't you?" Cale added.

The vice-captain gasped. *This upcoming year…* Though he couldn't know all of Cale's intel, he'd caught on to a few tidbits while serving as his escort. The topics Hilsmann gathered the most about were the Empire, the northern alliance, and those bastards in Arm.

At last, Hilsmann realized what the emergency fund was for. He suddenly felt as if he understood Cale's thought process. *He's stockpiling funds in case Henituse territory or the kingdom itself ends up in dire straits during the war!*

Now he appreciated why Cale needed such a large sum of money. Those riches were meant for Henituse territory and Rowoon as a whole. A modest profit wouldn't suffice for such an issue.

Hilsmann felt Cale truly deserved the title of Lord Silverlight. He never would have experienced something like this if he'd chosen to dedicate himself to becoming captain instead. *I made the right decision.* He was satisfied with his choice to follow Cale and hone his own strength.

"Very well, Lord Cale. I won't report it."

Ohn shook her head at Hilsmann's energetic reply. She then peeked at Cale, who seemed to think the vice-captain's acquiescence was business as usual. Hilsmann was touched that Cale trusted him enough to expect his cooperation, but Ohn could guess the real reason Cale was preparing this emergency fund.

I need to make a ton of money before the war so I can live in peace later.

When the war was over, Cale planned to erase the word "work" from his life's vocabulary and replace it with "slacking off." He had

long since decided to make this a reality, and for that, he needed to make more money.

His exchange with Hilsmann gave Bilose an uncanny feeling. The pair seemed to be discussing a future much bigger than what he'd imagined. *So Lord Cale isn't just stockpiling money because he likes it? I know about the Empire, but is there something else?*

Bilose's intuition as a merchant told him that an opportunity or a disaster would soon strike. When he caught Cale staring at him, he flinched.

"Say, Bilose, why do you think I went to the north? Look for the answer. Then you'll find the money."

After hearing Cale's hint, Bilose felt a light wink on in his head. It only gave off a faint glow, but that was enough for him to realize how he should proceed.

"Please continue to reach out to me if you need anything, Lord Cale."

The blatantly flattering smile on Bilose's face signified his resolve. Cale brushed it aside, looking down at Ohn and Hong. The two kittens had grown quite a bit over the last two years to become juvenile cats. They bared their sharp fangs in matching grins to show that they were ready for their tasks.

"Ohn, Hong, go call Ron over."

"Meeeow."

The corners of Hong's mouth twitched as he meowed; he suspected that Cale would give him an interesting task.

He was right.

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Later that night, Hong sat in Cale's arms, peering down at the rooftop below. Cale petted Hong's fur, which was soft after receiving Cale's—well, mostly Hans's—thorough care.

"My, Sinten's guildmaster does seem to be in a rush, doesn't he, Bilose?"

"Y-yes, sir," Bilose blurted out, then shuddered. He followed Cale's gaze to the roof beneath them.

Bilose was sitting down while hanging from a rope; Cale, on the other hand, stood at ease atop the roof with the Sound of the Wind gathered at his feet.

Lord Cale has been hiding his strength.

The shield wasn't the only Ancient Power this young lordling possessed. A normal person would find it challenging, even scary, to stand at the roof's peak; Bilose himself had needed Hans to carry him up here.

I didn't know enough about him.

Cale Henituse, the lout of the count's family. Bilose reflected on the man's past. He already knew Cale had only pretended to be a degenerate, but at this moment, the truth of the matter overwhelmed him.

That's right… How would he know so much about the Western Continent if he was really just a lout?

Cale commanded a wealth of knowledge about the Western Continent's various countries, its famous locales, and its notable people. For someone from a remote corner of Rowoon, learning all of this information would have required extensive study.

He must've studied in secret.

Bilose assumed Cale had gathered these powers during that time as well. In fact, he thought Cale a better man, considering Bilose himself had gathered his strength while living as a bastard son.

What is he looking down at?

Putting the potential profits aside, Bilose tried to get a sense of Cale as a fellow human being. Cale's actions over the past two years

had told him something. He found himself thinking that the moment a man who'd hidden his abilities began to reveal his true power, the world was bound to change.

Bilose clenched the rope he was hanging on to and turned toward Cale's target: the residence where Plavin Sinten was staying. An eerie mist surrounded the building.

And it wasn't just his own strength he was hiding.

While it was a known fact Cale traveled with cats, Bilose had never imagined they could control mist.

I didn't realize he had so many experts around him either, not to mention such a stealthy information guild.

The masked members of the information guild were flitting about on Cale's orders at that very moment. As a merchant, Bilose had his own sources, but he'd never encountered such discreet informants before.

They approached Sinten's guildmaster without attracting attention. That means they have someone on par with top-tier assassins.

Not that Bilose had a clue who that person could be. Had he known that the assassin in question was Ron—the same man who'd served him honey lemon tea only yesterday—Bilose would have been blown away.

Yet there was someone who would've been even more astounded by that than Bilose: Plavin Sinten, the owner of the residence Cale had his eye on, the same man responsible for elevating the Sinten Merchant Guild to its present glory. He dreamed of running the top merchant guild in the Mogor Empire, then on the entire Western Continent.

At present, he was tapping his wooden chalice of wine against the table, his features arranged in a frown. "How did they know?"

Even the persistent noise of the chalice clacking on the table couldn't disturb his thoughts. *That damn Fire Crystal!*

Some time ago, he had given the Fire Crystal to the pope. Unable to decide whether to forge a connection with the Mogor Empire's leadership or with the pope, he'd opted to tie himself to both sides.

The pope pretended to be a virtuous man, but in truth, he was utterly materialistic. By presenting the Fire Crystal to the pope as an offering, Plavin had established a close relationship with the Church of the God of Sun—without the Empire's knowledge, of course.

I didn't expect it to put me in such a rut!

Plavin Sinten's gaze drifted toward a corner of the table, settling on an unfurled invitation.

The Fire Crystal will appear at the next auction. If you wish to see it first, please come to this location at the designated time.

"Crazy bastard. Just wait until I get my hands on you."

Plavin ground his teeth in fury. This invitation had forced him to come to the auction in Karo despite his packed schedule. Furthermore, to prevent the Empire from getting wind of this information, he couldn't bring many people with him—not even the personal assassins' guild he'd been cultivating.

The imperial prince has eyes everywhere. I can't risk my guild showing up here.

Imperial Prince Adin had been keeping all clandestine organizations under a close watch ever since the attempted murder of Vice-Master Metelona and the damaging attack on the Sun Palace. Under the circumstances, Plavin hadn't dared to attempt something as dangerous as crossing the border with his entire assassins' guild in tow. He couldn't reveal his full arsenal just yet.

But there's no reason I should be in any danger, right?

For his guards, he'd brought along the assassins' guild's second-in-command and two highly skilled swordsmen. Provided no aura-wielding swordmaster came to call, his safety was all but assured.

The rhythmic tapping of the chalice continued.

First, I need to capture the crazy bastard who sent the invitation and take the Fire Crystal from them, if they really do have it.

He couldn't leave such a weakness out in the open.

Tap, tap, tap.

Clang!

"Hmm?"

Hearing an unexpected noise, Plavin set down his chalice.

Clang!

It happened again. Something had collided with his window. Plavin turned around to face the window, where the curtains were half drawn. Only then did he notice the unusual phenomenon.

"Mist…?"

The thick mist caught Plavin's attention. Karo had an arid climate, and it wasn't raining. His palms began to sweat. The mist was red—that couldn't be normal.

Creak. The door opened.

"Boss?"

It was the assassins' guild's second-in-command.

"Go check it out."

At Plavin's order, the assassin made a beeline for the window. As the swordsmen rushed to surround Plavin, he grabbed an antidote and an item enchanted with shielding magic.

Clang!

The pounding on the window reached his ears once more. His swordsmen gripped their blades while the assassin, dagger in hand, yanked open the curtains in one swift motion.

Shhhkt.

The curtain opened, but there was nothing there. Plavin loosed a groan.

Just then, the assassin discovered an item on the empty terrace: a small invitation. It wasn't the cause of the sound they'd heard, so the source of that was still a mystery. The assassin promptly handed the invitation to Plavin, who opened it, only to find a short message: *R-3.* It was a seat number for the VIP auction.

Seething, Plavin glared at the assassin and the swordsmen. "What were you useless wastes of space doing?"

He was seconds from flying into a rage. When the mist had encroached on the house, and someone had infiltrated the grounds, his guards had done nothing.

"I apologize, sir," one swordsman said. "I was out on patrol, as we discussed. I ran over as soon as I saw the mist, but I didn't sense anyone's presence."

His response made Plavin stiffen. They had gone over how to guard him prior to leaving for Karo, and Plavin had verified the plan himself—hence his anger at what he perceived as their slacking off. But laziness had nothing to do with it.

The assassin quietly gave his own report. "Sir…I didn't detect any intruders whatsoever. The only things I noticed were the mist and that sound against the window."

Plavin finally grasped the severity of the situation. The person responsible must have been a master infiltrator if the assassins' second-in-command and two highly skilled swordsmen failed to perceive them. That same person had left this invitation just for him.

He swallowed nervously. Goosebumps prickled all over his body as he stared at the seat number listed on the invitation. Now

he had another reason to attend the first day of the VIP auction: fear.

***

"I've returned, young master," Ron reported, his voice muffled by the mask he wore.

Cale peeled his gaze away from the residence. "Then let's be off."

When the red mist receded, the grounds went quiet once more. Cale hoped that the Sinten guildmaster sitting in that silence thoroughly understood his situation.

He set out for the Golden Tree the next morning, carrying a newly purchased magic bag. Naturally, the bag was empty—ready to be filled with thirty billion counds.

***

The Golden Tree's top floor—the highest spot in Vegas—was as quiet as a theater waiting for a play to start, although some whispers were audible down below.

Plavin, leader of the Sinten Merchant Guild, opened the door to R-3. *Click.*

The venue for the VIP auction contained five rows of seats, as well as additional VIP sections. The "R" designation indicated terraces from which one could see the auction platform and the seats below. There were eight of these terraces in the auction house, all labeled with the letter R. In addition to a comprehensive view of the platform, each had soundproofing, providing another layer of discretion beyond a regular seat.

Plavin approached Terrace 3, his features concealed by a mask encrusted with beautiful jewels. The curtains rustled as he tugged them open. Despite the short notice, he had little difficulty finding a seat in section R-3. The original seat assigned to the Sinten

Merchant Guild—one of the top five merchant guilds in the Empire—was already among the eight terraces, so the number itself was unimportant.

"Shall I bring some tea, sir?" came a voice from behind Plavin, prompting him to turn around.

Auction participants could each bring one servant with them, but knights and mages were not permitted. Hence, the assassins' guild's second-in-command had accompanied Plavin as his attendant.

"No need."

Plavin didn't even bother to sit on the luxurious couch as he scanned the terrace, consumed by a single thought: *Is he on Terrace 4? That bastard. Really, where could the lunatic with the Fire Crystal be?*

The eight terraces were arranged in sets of two, but the thick walls between them made it difficult to know who was on the other side.

Just how are we going to meet?

Plavin's tongue darted out to wet his lips. He had no indication as to how the other party would approach him. "Is Flynn Merchant Fleets on Terrace 4?" he asked the assassin.

"Yes, sir. They say the representative is Bilose, who's second in line to take over."

As guildmaster, Plavin had used every last connection in his information network to figure out who was on each of the eight terraces.

Is that Flynn heir the madman responsible for this?

Bilose, the bastard son of Flynn Merchant Fleets' leader, was still young. More to the point, he'd never gone near the Empire's Vatican, nor had he ever interacted with the pope.

Though it's possible he did so without my knowledge…

Perhaps Plavin was underestimating Flynn Merchant Fleets, but his veteran instincts told him they weren't involved. They simply weren't at that level; he was all but certain of it. The "bastard" he sought had to be someone lurking in the shadows, someone whose identity would be much harder to suss out.

"It's nearly time, sir. Why don't you sit down for now?"

"Sure."

The assassin's comment made Plavin realize he'd been overly anxious. His face beneath the glamorous mask was taut with nerves.

Flynn Merchant Fleets' successor has already entered Terrace 4, then.

Plavin had been the last person to enter the terraces; as soon as he'd stepped inside, the auction house staff had closed the door behind him. Talented swordsmen were due to stand guard outside the door.

They're probably no match for that crazy bastard. Plavin resented the person blackmailing him, but he was desperate to find out who it was. *Is this what it feels like to be led around by the nose?*

After the events of last night, the merchant guild leader had changed his goal. Originally, he'd planned to expose the blackmailer and steal the necklace back, but now he wanted a deal. A *mutually beneficial* deal. If he could accomplish that, this meeting wouldn't be too bad. Plavin made up his mind to put his years of mercantile know-how to good use.

He had no idea that the other party also anticipated a win-win in the exchange to come.

Drumbeats boomed through the auction house.

"It's starting, sir."

"Right."

At the assassin's remark, Plavin straightened and peered casually down at the platform. The event's auctioneer, also wearing a fancy mask, walked onto the platform to the rhythm of the drum. "Pleasure to meet you, everyone," he said into the magic amplification device. "Thank you all very much for joining us for this VIP auction in celebration of the New Year."

Though the auctioneer spoke politely, his posture was by no means deferent. He oozed confidence as he launched into brief descriptions of the day's wares, stoking the audience's anticipation.

"Our VIP auction is famous for presenting one top item every day for each of the three days." He then went on to outline the concept of this particular auction: "The theme this year is 'beastfolk.' Ah, but of course, we won't put living people up for auction. We despise barbaric institutions such as slavery. Ha ha!"

The assassin snuck a peek at Plavin, who had risen to his position through the barbaric slave trade. Studying his charge's calm demeanor, he pretended to be unaffected by the auctioneer's quip.

"Now, we'll start with item number one!"

As the audience applauded the start of the auction, the first item was carried up to the platform. Plavin did not clap, his gaze fixed firmly on the auction.

Clap, clap, clap.

Tap.

When he heard a distinct sound amid the applause, he froze. The assassin immediately slipped behind Plavin, clenching the dagger concealed in his chest pocket. The faint noise had come from the railing—as if someone had landed on it in order to enter the terrace.

"The starting bid is one hundred million counds!"

Just as Plavin heard the auctioneer's enthusiastic voice… *Whish!* The curtains closed, seemingly of their own volition. He couldn't tear his eyes away from them.

Click.

The lock on the terrace's inner door clicked into place by itself as well. Still, he didn't see any intruders. He clung to the magic shielding device in his chest pocket.

Though there was no one in sight, a voice reached Plavin's ears. "You don't need to activate your shield."

He's young. Indeed, it was the voice of a young man. Plavin's hand trembled around the magic device in his grip.

Unconcerned, the man continued, "Bringing an assassin as your servant—isn't that too vicious? Put that dagger away."

The assassin behind Plavin sucked in a breath. The two of them were thinking the exact same thing: *He's a master.* This invisible man had to be a skilled and powerful practitioner.

Plavin gaped, wide-eyed, as the table in front of him began to move. *Clunk.*

"Why are you so shocked?"

A white-haired man materialized out of thin air, arms crossed as he sat on the edge of the table. Beneath a mask the same snowy shade as his hair, the man's clear, blue eyes regarded Plavin.

Damn it! He's got to be at least a highly skilled mage.

Plavin's anxiety surged when he realized the man had been using invisibility magic, but the assassin was even more apprehensive.

He's both a mage and a warrior.

This interloper had noticed that the assassin was about to draw his dagger; that alone signaled his familiarity with martial arts. He was a high-tier mage at minimum, and a fighter to boot. When the assassin thought about the man's stealthiness, not to mention the red mist from the night before, he felt a headache coming on.

Unbeknownst to them, the intruder—Cale—was simply remarking on everything Raon reported in his mind.

‹Aren't I great, human?›

Raon had explained all of it to Cale: the magic device, the invisibility, and the dagger. *This dragon sure is useful.* He didn't even need instructions from Cale anymore.

Setting aside his satisfaction at Raon's growth, Cale smiled at Plavin. His mask only covered the upper half of his face, making his wide grin completely visible.

Plavin's first words to him were useless nonsense. "H-how did you get in—"

Shaking his head at this unimportant drivel, Cale plucked a necklace from his shirt pocket. *Clink.* He dangled the necklace on his index finger and swung it back and forth. Plavin's eyes followed the Fire Crystal's every move—until the white-haired man's spoke up again.

"Thirty."

That snapped Plavin back to his senses. He clenched the armrests of his seat, his expression crumpling. "Who the hell are you? How *dare* you do this to me!"

Cale sighed. "How tiresome."

"What?"

Cale had no intention of acknowledging such a banal response; he simply said what he needed to say. "Thirty billion counds."

Thirty. Thirty billion counds.

Finally, Plavin understood what Cale meant. In his shock, he blurted out, "Th-that's preposterous!"

"Then shall I go to the imperial prince?" the white-haired man retorted, his tone equal parts arrogant and annoyed. He gave off an aura of unapproachability. Though Plavin was itching to rebuke him, the man's gaze made it hard for him to even breathe.

"Listen up, Plavin Sinten," Cale said, activating a bit of the Dominating Aura as he addressed the man and his assassin. Plavin

could only stare as Cale twirled the Fire Crystal like a toy. He had no idea what the man would say next. "Which has the longer history, the Mogor Empire or the Church of the God of Sun?"

Though unexpected, it was a simple question anyone could answer. It was the Church of the God of Sun. The church had been around longer than the Empire because the God of Sun had existed long before the Empire's establishment.

Plavin's expression shifted, but the man in the white mask dispassionately went on, "When something survives for so long, there's a reason for it."

The Church of the God of Sun had *survived* much longer than the Empire. In fact, the church had put down roots before the Mogor Empire even laid its foundation in the Western Continent.

Plavin recalled the many religions and nations that had disappeared throughout history. Not too long ago, he had included the Church of the God of Sun on that list; that was why he'd jumped to the Empire's side, planning to retrieve the Fire Crystal and terminate all connection between himself and the church. Yet the man standing before him spoke as though the church were still alive and kicking—and that struck him as odd.

Why does he make it sound like the Church of the God of Sun isn't done yet? He's speaking as if it'll be around much longer than the Empire.

Plavin's visible rage and anxiety receded, replaced by the look of a merchant intrigued by a potential opportunity.

"They say you're known for your political acumen, Plavin Sinten."

The guildmaster agreed with that. He had a knack for the political dance.

"In that case, you should understand the implication of the Empire's bad news."

A different emotion flashed across Plavin's face. Seeing as much, Cale held back a snort; the Sinten leader was probably thinking about the Sun Palace's partial destruction and the assassination attempt on the alchemists' vice-master.

As Cale expected, that was exactly what occupied Plavin's thoughts. The Mogor Empire had smothered the details of the incidents, but the fact that the culprits included a royal servant, a royal maid, and a knight had still spread quite far.

Could it be…?

Were the culprits somehow involved with the Church of the God of Sun? Was it possible that the church had infiltrated the palace and installed spies? The moment that idea occurred to Plavin, another question arose in his mind.

Why did they aim for the vice-master? Could they have found out about the slave trade? Do they know about my involvement too?

His eyes wavered at the ramifications of it all.

‹That merchant's eyes are all flickery, human.›

Raon pointing that out served as a signal, at which Cale donned his gentlest smile. "Who do you think I am?" he asked, a note of laughter in his carefree voice. "Think about it carefully, leader of the Sinten Merchant Guild."

Plavin did as he was told. *Just who is this man?* Somewhere along the line, his perception had changed—such that his mental address had switched from "that crazy bastard" to "this man" instead.

The man in the white mask was telling Plavin to think hard about his identity, but Plavin couldn't figure it out. His white hair brought the Kingdom of Faern to mind, but Faern had nothing to do with the Church of the God of Sun. Fortunately, the man's next statement brought Plavin much closer to understanding.

"Think about why I came to find you."

Why did *this man seek me out?* He didn't seem like the type to merely threaten Plavin with the necklace. He had the aura of someone with his sights set on a bigger prize.

"Consider whether the amount I named reflects the pendant's value. Think long and hard."

Thirty billion counds.

A revelation zinged through Plavin's mind. He realized what the thirty billion counds represented: It was the cost of reestablishing his connection with the Church of the God of Sun. That was what the money was for. Which would he choose: the Mogor Empire or the Church of the God of Sun? Or would it be both?

No. The Sinten Merchant Guild's future is on the line here too.

What if this man and the people working for him spread the information about the slaves to the other kingdoms—or what if he gave that intel directly to Karo? So many people were currently held captive in the Empire. Would Plavin be able to cover it all up? Between risk and reward, everything crashed upon him at once, like a torrent of waves.

Cale piped up again, this time with a pinch of derision. "Does it really take that much contemplation? Just follow your usual methods." Then he shared another truth with Plavin: "The strong are those who manage to survive."

The haze in Plavin's mind cleared in an instant.

There was a *clack* as the man placed a magic bag on the table, gradually turning invisible all the while. The curtains were drawn with a final rustle, and Plavin heard nothing further after that.

He sat back in the chair and contemplated for a while. After wandering the maze of his thoughts for an extended time, he grabbed the magic bag.

"Here's our fifth item!"

Ignoring the auctioneer's comments, Plavin opened the door and left the terrace.

At the same time, Bilose, who was on Terrace 4, felt someone tap his shoulder. Though Ron was the only other person nearby, Bilose said aloud, "The priest is on Terrace 1."

Cale smiled. He planned to hold his own private auction on the last day. He hadn't set a price for the Night's Exultation yet, as his customer's sense of urgency would see to that.

I'll take as much as he's willing to give me.

***

On the second day of the VIP auction, Bilose had to wonder what in the world he was doing.

"A-are you resting today, Lord Cale?"

"I am," Cale replied, then clicked his tongue. "Agh, I got some on me." He wiped away the sauce on his mouth. It dawned on him then that during his stay in every country, he ate skewers. He munched on his chicken skewer, standing in front of a toy store.

"Meeeow!"

"Yes, yes. We'll start with the toy store."

Cale and his companions were in the southern district of Vegas, which was the area most densely packed with shops. Hordes of tourists walked this street daily.

Bilose snuck a peek at Hilsmann. The vice-captain stood behind Cale, holding an empty magic bag. *This isn't his style.* As far as Bilose knew, the man was an uptight and authoritative person aiming to become captain—yet that same man was standing by with a bag to carry gifts and souvenirs for the cats. Bilose couldn't believe it.

When their eyes met, Bilose caught a faint smile from the vice-captain. *Why does that smile evoke the sorrow of a worker with one very eccentric boss?*

Unaware of his subordinates' troubles, Cale reached for the door of the toy store, the first establishment they'd be hitting on this southern street. Even though the auction was already on its second day, Cale didn't have anything special to attend to. The magic bag he'd handed to Plavin Sinten contained a note with further instructions, so Cale didn't need to worry about that anymore.

When it comes to that guy, Mary and Tasha should be on the move already.

He didn't want to attend a beastfolk-themed auction. What could they be auctioning off if not beastfolk themselves?

While the auction's catalogue did contain a few weapons and items that once belonged to famous beastfolk, the majority of the lots were the remains of beautiful or unique beastfolk: a white lion's snowy hide, accessories made from a whale's exquisite blue hair, and other things of that nature. Cale couldn't take beastfolk children into an auction like that.

Humans are the cruelest of all the races.

Scowling, he made to open the door. *Whap!* A kitten's paw slapped the back of Cale's hand, hard enough to sting.

"Meeeow."

It was Ohn. *What's her deal?* When Cale realized the culprit was her and not Hong, he stared at her in confusion; Ohn never behaved this way. There was a strange shimmer in her eyes—as if she thought he was pathetic, even pitiable.

Feeling odd about receiving such a look from a twelve-year-old, Cale quickly looked at Hong instead. Hong just seemed happy, ears twitching as he checked out the toy store.

‹What are you doing, human?› Raon asked. *‹Hurry up and buy whatever you want!›*

Cale flinched. *Whatever* I *want?*

Something didn't add up. Cale had assumed he'd be buying toys for these kids, but for some reason, Raon seemed to think he

wanted something here for himself. Cale's grip on the doorknob went slack.

‹Hmm? Don't you want to buy toys, human? Hurry up and go in! I'll be out here people watching. Just make it fast.›

How strange. Cale glanced back at Ohn. She pointed her paw at something, leaving Cale no choice but to look in that direction.

"I should've known."

These children were every bit as vicious as he'd believed. Ohn was pointing at an alley that featured a weapon store and a magical goods shop.

Cale had misjudged the situation. As he reflected on his mistake, he thought about the members of his close circle. Including his sister Lilly, who had turned nine this year, the kids around him all preferred weapons over toys. This was true of the tigers and the wolf children as well.

Damn it.

This fantasy world truly did defy imagination. Cale turned away from the door.

At his sudden change in direction, Bilose called out, "Lord Cale?"

Cale didn't respond as he made his way to the alley. Hilsmann followed, looking a bit more relaxed. Bilose, however, paled upon entering the weapon store. His gaze darted in the wake of Cale's pointing finger.

"This. This. That."

Cale singled out several different swords like it was nothing—though he was only pointing out the ones Raon had told him to pick.

The store's owner blanked out when confronted with Cale's rapid-fire selection. "E-excuse me?" Some of the weapons Cale had chosen included a dagger of the highest grade and a greatsword

imbued with fire magic. He had accurately pinpointed all of the quality items in the shop.

Frowning at the owner's vacant expression, Cale tried a simpler method. "From there to here."

"Sorry?"

"Give me all of them."

"Huh?!" the owner blurted, flabbergasted that his first customer of the day was a wealthy noble.

The man gaped at Cale, only to see the redhead motioning for him to snap to it and calculate the price. He gathered up the weapons in a rush and scurried over to the counter. Bilose watched these proceedings in silence, blissfully unaware that this was only the beginning.

‹Human! Human! I wanna go to the magical goods shop.›

Damn it.

Cale didn't let his emotions show as he headed to the next establishment. The owner of the weapon store felt as if Cale was radiating a golden glow, but the only thing on Cale's mind was Raon's voice.

‹Mary and Rosalyn would like that magic item.›

Damn it all.

As Cale stood in front of the item Raon spoke of, he quickly realized what the children had been exposed to as they grew up. For the past two years, they'd been surrounded by luxury items. He'd been trying to use their allowances to teach them about controlling their finances.

‹Mm… That's disappointing. Five gold coins is too expensive. You don't need to buy it for me, human. Get me something cheap.›

Cale huffed. Brow creasing at Raon's comment, he gestured to the item the dragon had pointed out. "That one, please."

Raon doubled down, trying to stop him. *‹Wait, you can buy a mountain of apple pies with five gold coins! I'm okay without it!›*

"Meeeow."

Ohn and Hong also batted his arms in an attempt to restrain him. Far from dissuaded, Cale added, "Ah, I'd actually like three of them."

‹Why are you buying three of them, human?!› In his shock, Raon's cry turned to a shout. *‹Are they for Rosalyn and Mary? Your problem is that you're too nice. And you value friendship too much! This is why I have to stick around to supervise you!›*

The six-year-old's concern made Cale's frown deepen.

"Doesn't he seem angry?" Hilsmann whispered in Bilose's ear.

Bilose had been watching Cale in astonishment, but he smiled at Hilsmann's comment. "Oh, yes. He does."

"He always makes that face when he's doing something for someone else, but he pays close attention to ensure that everyone around him is well taken care of. It's quite easy to tell what his true feelings are."

Bilose now understood why Hilsmann was playing the role of a pack mule without complaint. His own gaze also warmed up a bit as he regarded the young noble.

Raon, on the other hand, was worried about Cale. *‹Human, are you okay? This is such a waste! I don't need that many toys!›*

It seemed the black dragon perceived magic devices as toys. Cale snorted at that before mumbling to himself, "It's not at all wasteful."

The expense didn't upset him; compared to his fortune, it was mere pocket change. He had no issue spending what Raon would consider enough money to fit in his paws. It was the thought of all the baggage he needed to tend to these days that gave him a headache.

Raon went quiet. Ohn and Hong calmed down as well, no longer pawing at his arms. Assuming he'd appeased them by buying everything they wanted, Cale nodded in satisfaction. Now that this issue was out of the way, he could do what he came here to do.

"Bilose, where's the armor store?"

"Armor?"

"Yes. I need martial arts uniforms too."

"You do?"

"That's right." Those were for the wolves and the tigers.

Cale swept through the stores without breaking a sweat. Splurging for the first time in a while left him feeling refreshed.

It really is nice to flex.

He finished his shopping spree by buying some apple pies, then turned toward the others. "Let's go back."

Cale returned to the inn at an unhurried pace with his companions quietly trailing behind him. Everyone in the group shared the same thought as they looked at Cale: The only thing he'd purchased for himself was the chicken skewer.

While that fact engraved itself in their memories, Cale had a different thought on his mind. *Now that I blew some cash, it's time to rip somebody off for a lot more.*

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Cale's mindset carried into the final day of the auction. He sat on the couch on Terrace 4 with the curtains closed.

"Will the bishop really go to Terrace 1?" Bilose asked warily.

A priest of the God of Sun had been standing guard over Terrace 1 for the past two days, and Bilose had heard that he'd entered again today. That being the case, Cale was supposed to meet with the bishop—not the priest.

Not seeming the least bit worried, Cale took a sip of wine. "The Golden Tree is the biggest donor to Vegas's Church of the God of Sun. Their ties are probably stronger than we expected."

He didn't think that it would be difficult for the bishop to stealthily enter Terrace 1. Although Bilose seemed to have some connections among the Golden Tree's staff, a staff member had only so much access to information.

"Do you really have the Night's Exultation?"

"Why? You can't believe it?"

Bilose answered Cale's mischievous look with an awkward nod. The jewel known as the Night's Exultation had immense significance to both Karo and the Church of the God of Sun.

Their current location, the Land of Death—also known as Death Desert—was one of the Five Wonders. Its sands were red as blood during the day and as dark as a moonless sky during the night. It had also been the site of the ancient battle against the last necromancer and his army of corpses.

The last necromancer had a black gemstone embedded in his heart: the Night's Exultation. That jewel represented the Kingdom of Karo's honor and joy, as well as one of the Church of the God of Sun's proudest moments.

As a matter of course, Cale had asked Mary to take a look at the jewel when he first arrived in the kingdom.

"Do you feel anything?"

"Am I supposed to feel something? I feel nothing."

Nothing within the jewel was beneficial to a necromancer, so Cale had no reason *not* to sell it. What would he gain by keeping such a beautiful paperweight?

When Cale took the jewel out of his chest pocket, Bilose groaned. He had researched the Night's Exultation ever since Cale first mentioned it. It was supposedly stored in Karo's local church

branch and put on display for one week each year. *Does that mean the gem they always show off has been a fake this whole time?*

"I'll be heading out now."

‹I'm going with you, human!›

Bilose bowed as Cale's body faded away. "I'll await your return."

The curtains opened with a rustle, and Cale floated toward Terrace 1, its own curtains only partly drawn.

Right then, the auctioneer began his spiel about the day's goods. "Today, we'll close out our event with another fascinating piece! We took great pains to acquire this one. Why, it's probably the most precious item in this beastfolk-themed auction!" The auctioneer's confidence seemed to reach new heights. "I'll give you a hint: the Wolf King."

Hmm?

Cale's magic-powered flight to Terrace 1 came to a sudden stop, his gaze darting toward the platform. The auctioneer in his fancy mask whispered to the crowd as if sharing a secret, but the amplification magic made it possible for everyone to hear.

"We have the remains of the last Wolf King."

Cale let out an appreciative grunt. *How interesting.* He chuckled as he entered Terrace 1, spotting the priest inside. He yanked the curtains closed behind him, removed the invisibility spell, and strode up to the priest's servant.

When the priest saw Cale appear out of nowhere, he gulped in distress and covered his shaking hands with his sleeves. Cale didn't pay the priest any mind, however; he was busy recalling what Jack had told him. He'd asked the saint about the bishop before he left for Faern.

"The bishop is a coward, but he's very greedy."

Jack had also described the bishop's appearance.

The elderly servant, dressed in shabby clothes, glared at Cale's masked face. Cale held his gaze and offered a respectful greeting. "Nice to meet you, Bishop."

He was genuinely happy to meet the clergyman. After all, he was about to get rich off the man and put him to work.

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The bishop remained silent, looking Cale up and down.

Meanwhile, the auctioneer's voice resonated from beyond the curtain. "Lot Number 1 is a fountain pen with a lovely feather. The feather is, as you might expect, the remains of a beautiful beastfolk individual."

The voice was loud enough to break the silence in Terrace 1.

"How much do you want?"

The servant's dry voice echoed inside the terrace. He'd broached the topic of the deal almost arrogantly, his question all but confirming that he was indeed the bishop. He said nothing more after that. For the bishop, who'd lived through all sorts of experiences, the questions of who Cale was or if he truly possessed the item weren't important; the only thing that mattered was a single line in Cale's invitation.

Do you wish to own a divine artifact?

The sentence written underneath it lent the invitation further credibility:

I am in possession of the Night's Exultation that the pope had hidden away. Buy it from me.

The bishop had known the late pope to be a greedy man, hence his offering up the Night's Exultation. He also knew the pope kept all his treasures in a secret location. Was it possible that a divine artifact had been stashed there as well? The bishop yearned to succeed the pope; he was just waiting for the right opportunity to seize the position.

He continued to observe the man in the white mask. His guest had yet to answer his question about the item's price.

Slowly, Cale's lips parted. "They say that unlike normal items, which are corrupted when they come into contact with dead mana, the Night's Exultation shines even brighter."

The bishop sighed; the masked man was spewing nonsense. "What? You want to take your Night's Exultation and test it against the fake one in the temple?"

Cale scoffed and shook his head. "What a terrible personality you have, old man."

"It's a natural consequence of getting older."

The priest flinched, but he didn't turn to look over his shoulder. Instead, he stood there without making a peep, pretending to be unaware of the chat between the bishop in servant's clothes and the intruder.

"How much do you want?" No sooner had the bishop repeated his question than the Night's Exultation appeared before his eyes.

"I guess you don't suspect that I'm a spy from the Empire?" Cale asked.

The bishop's answer was blunt. "Spy or not, you're still a merchant offering his wares in this exchange."

That was true enough. Whether Cale was a spy from the Empire or not, the bishop cared more about the chance to recover the Night's Exultation and purchase a divine artifact.

This guy is smart.

Cale liked the bishop quite a bit. Nevertheless, he didn't correct the man's misjudgment. Cale was no merchant—he was a *hunter*. He would toss out pieces of bait one by one and lure his prey into a trap.

The divine artifact was his first proffered temptation. The bishop would definitely purchase the Night's Exultation to get his hands on a divine artifact. He needed to forge a connection with Cale.

It was then that Cale asked, "How much?"

"What?!" The bishop cackled in disbelief—this punk was telling *him* to suggest a starting price. Deep down, the bishop approved. Why? Because the merchant understood who held the upper hand in this discussion. The masked man knew he was the one in control, so he was putting pressure on the bishop. And the bishop liked a man of intellect. Rational people recognized what they stood to gain better than anyone else, which made them easier to handle.

"Five billion."

He'd started out with five billion, a reasonable sum for the Night's Exultation. The jewel had cost the same amount when it was originally found, so if one considered how long ago that discovery took place, the bishop's offer was astronomical.

Yet Cale stood firm. "How much?"

"Six," the bishop shot back without missing a beat.

Thus, the bidding between the two of them began.

"How much?"

"Seven."

Negotiations were even-keeled. From beyond the terrace, they could hear the auctioneer's voice.

"All right, we have three hundred million counds! Any other bids? Oho! An extra thousand counds!"

In perfect rhythm, Cale asked again, "How much?"

The two words Cale kept repeating over and over made the priest anxious. Though he kept his eyes glued to the curtained-off section in front of him, he practically jumped every time Cale spoke.

"Eight."

The priest gasped at the bishop's response. Both the bishop and the intruder were making it hard for him to breathe.

"How much?"

The bishop could tell that the man in front of him was growing bored. "Ten billion."

Ten billion counds. Although this offer doubled the original selling price, the bishop could see in the masked man's eyes that it wasn't enough.

Before Cale could open his mouth, the bishop spoke again. "Fifteen." He was bidding the value of the Night's Exultation in exchange for the divine artifact and the pope's position. "However, I can't give you any more than a lump sum of ten billion."

"How much?"

Sucking in a breath, the bishop gave Cale a sour look. "Is that the only thing you know how to say? You're supposed to respect your elders, you little punk." While his words were chastising, the bishop's tone was gentle. Affectionate, even.

Nevertheless, Cale wasn't one to be fooled by such an act. Tired of speaking, Cale asked with his gaze alone this time: *How much?*

The bishop raised his hands in defeat. "Twenty."

They heard the priest gulp, no doubt flabbergasted by the price.

"That's my limit," the bishop said with a tired shake of his head. He wanted to convince Cale that he was telling the truth, but Cale had learned something during his time as Kim Roksu. His

former team leader had given him this hint: *"The corrupt can handle one more push."*

It was sound advice and almost always turned out to be right.

"How much?"

"You son of a bitch."

The bishop swore, but Cale didn't care; he'd heard all sorts of curses directed at him when he was Kim Roksu. Corrupt bastards always resorted to profanity in a pinch.

The bishop closed his eyes before he spoke again. "Twenty-two billion."

"Twenty-three."

"You coldhearted scumbag."

The sale of the Night's Exultation was settled at twenty-three billion counds. The bishop rubbed his weary face.

Cale remembered one more thing his team leader had said during his time as Kim Roksu…

"If they're corrupt and they have a lot of money, you can try hitting them one more time, just to see what happens."

But Cale didn't plan to do so with the bishop.

"If you can use them later, though, make sure to give them some breathing room."

Since he intended to put the bishop to use, he had no reason to rip him off entirely and destroy their relationship. His thoughts focused on the future, Cale watched the bishop call the priest over. The priest turned around at last and handed over a small coin pouch.

"Here," the bishop said, tossing the pouch to Cale. "Ten billion counds."

"You came prepared. I expected nothing less, Your Excellency," Cale said politely, as if he had never ditched formalities in the first

place.

The bishop clicked his tongue in response.

Then Cale tacked on one more comment: "I'll see you once more in the future."

That brought a smile to the bishop's face. To his ears, Cale had promised to meet him again and bring the divine artifact.

Cale took a piece of paper out of his pocket and placed it on the table. It contained the address to send the remaining thirteen billion counds. *Rustle.* The curtain opened, and Cale disappeared from the terrace with the coin pouch in hand.

The priest, who'd pretended to be anxious throughout the interaction, calmly rose to his feet. His composed expression matched the frigid look on the bishop's face—in fact, it was even colder.

"Go investigate that white-haired man."

The "bishop" posing as a servant bowed his head. "Yes, Your Excellency."

Click, click. The servant activated a magic device in his chest pocket, and his features changed into those of a forty-year-old man. His scarred face looked as if it belonged to an assassin.

The "priest" settled into the chair and leaned back, accepting the magic device from his servant. With a single *click*, his appearance morphed into the elderly bishop's.

Brushing his cheek with his fingertips, he griped, "I hate touching this wrinkly mug." His voice had taken on the throatiness of age as well. "It's also rough pretending to be old. But he doesn't seem to know I killed the former bishop, right?"

"No, Your Excellency."

"Start the investigation in Faern, since he has white hair."

"Yes, sir."

With that, the bishop touched the magic device once more.

***

Meanwhile, Cale had to deal with Raon's questions as he flew back into Terrace 4.

‹Human, why did you pretend not to notice that he used a magic device to disguise himself? That kind of magic device is hard to acquire! It's valuable!›

Cale merely grinned, peeling off his mask.

"Welcome back," Bilose said, smiling as he closed the curtains. "Did you resolve things to your satisfaction?"

"That I did," Cale replied, nodding.

‹I'm curious, human! Why'd you act like you didn't know? And even though the bishop pretended to be scared, his eyes didn't waver at all, just like you said!›

Disregarding Raon's ramblings, Cale thought back to what Saint Jack had told him. Jack had described the bishop's appearance—not the look of the old bishop but of the one who'd taken his place.

"Karo's bishop is a skinny woman in her thirties with a sharp stare. That's what she really looks like."

Cale chuckled. "This really is scary." Absorbing this reminder that a fantasy world was truly fearsome, Cale suddenly got chills. *Hmm?*

"Here, young master." It was Ron, handing him some lemonade. Cale looked into Ron's eyes, a few more shivers prickling his spine.

At the same time, Raon chimed in, *‹By the way, human, are you done with the busy errands?›*

Just about.

When Cale nodded, the dragon continued, *‹I've been ignoring the crown prince's calls ever since you told me to.›*

Cale felt a sense of foreboding. *Hmm? He really ignored them?* He'd never expected that Raon would actually reject Albert's calls. He'd had no idea Raon took everything he said so seriously.

While Cale felt as if the room's temperature was plunging into the single digits, Raon chattered away in blissful ignorance. *‹He's been trying to reach you ever since you started talking with the bishop! This is his tenth call.›*

Wait, what? Crown Prince Albert had called ten times? That busy man?

‹He left you a voicemail. I'll let you hear it.›

Cale clenched the cup of lemonade as the crown prince's voice resonated in his mind. *‹The northern alliance is starting to move.›*

What? Why? He thought he might've misheard. Faern was taking action? It was only February—the waters hadn't even thawed yet.

"Son of a bitch."

He chugged the lemonade in a single gulp. The sour taste brought a frown to his face.

Bilose gaped at him in surprise. "Wh-what's wrong, my lord?"

Cale chucked the bishop's coin pouch at Bilose. When the confused merchant caught it, Cale gave him an order. "Buy the Wolf King's remains."

"Sorry…?"

"There's ten billion in there, so make it happen."

"Excuse me? T-ten billion?!"

Having sent Bilose into a state of shock, Cale continued, "Ron and I are leaving now. Ron, lead the way."

The elderly assassin took the lead as asked, despite the fact that he was attending the auction as Bilose's servant. Cale then winked out of sight, preparing to set out for the inn.

‹You've got another voicemail, human,› Raon said as Cale speedwalked toward the inn. *‹Why don't you pick up his calls? Seems like he's got something to discuss with you.›*

Cale's brow furrowed again. *Why does the crown prince need to talk to a degenerate noble like me?* Annoyance surged within him. His back was clammy, a sour taste plagued his tongue, and unexpected events were taking place.

I'm going to lose my mind.

Chapter 42:
Destroying It!

THE MAN ON THE OTHER SIDE of the call—Albert Crossman—did not look well. The typically majestic and immaculate crown prince slumped in his chair, his hair a disheveled mess.

"It pains my heart to see you like this, Your Highness."

"Bullshit. You—" Albert held his tongue, noticing that Cale didn't look too good either. Instead, he got down to business. "We have intel that Faern's knights have entered Norland."

Faern, Norland, and Askosan were the three kingdoms in the northern alliance. Norland in particular was north of the Dark Forest. If not for the forest, it would share a border with Rowoon.

"After delivering the report, my informant destroyed his communication sphere." The spy sent to Norland was one of the crown prince's dark elves. He had to be in dire straits if he'd smashed his communication device. "His elemental hasn't returned, though, which suggests he's still alive."

"He'll come back safe."

Albert smirked at Cale's response, then returned to the topic at hand. "I'm collaborating with Brek to see if some of Faern's knights traveled to Askosan as well."

Askosan was the closest kingdom to Brek, with Death Canyon separating them.

"That seems likely."

"Indeed."

The prince's informant had said the troops numbered in the dozens. Faern had a reputation as the northern kingdom of knights,

but even a nation with *legions* of knights wouldn't send out so many. Albert found the whole thing suspicious.

"There's something fishy going on here. It's still too early to cross the sea… What could they be thinking?"

There was a reason Rowoon and Brek had prepared for a springtime assault. Although Askosan and Norland were the southernmost nations of the north, they sat higher than Rowoon in the northeast; their shores were probably still frozen. This was especially true in early February, some of the coldest days of the year.

If the knights are on the move, the soldiers will soon set out too.

If Rowoon's leadership hadn't known about the northern alliance's goal, they might have thought Faern's knights were merely doing some training drills.

"Any attempt at sailing would be premature. Some of the ice will melt by mid-February, but they'd need a lot of manpower to clear it. That would be a waste."

So why move now? Did the northern alliance want to declare war so soon?

Albert bit his lip; the alliance's decision surprised him. Other countries had been bound to notice that Faern had sent dozens of knights to both of its allied kingdoms. Yet Faern had chosen to do so openly regardless, so there must've been a reason for its confidence.

He thought about the construction of the naval base on Rowoon's northeastern shores. This information had already spread throughout the continent. Though they'd kept it under wraps for as long as possible, something like that was difficult to contain indefinitely. Most people believed that the naval base was still in its initial stages, but this was a misconception: Rowoon had completed dozens of ships. Mages kept them concealed with spells in preparation for the war.

That's all thanks to this punk too, Albert thought, watching Cale closely.

There was also Cale's subordinate, the dwarf-rat fellow. Before returning to Henituse territory, he had lingered on Uvar shores to look over their blueprints. With his help, they'd been able to start building the ships earlier than expected. Nevertheless, their timetable assuming a springtime conflict needed to change—especially now that the informant in Norland had been exposed.

What did I miss?

Albert realized that he'd overlooked a single unknown factor—just one thing. He couldn't organize the jumble of information in his head without knowing this crucial point.

"Can you figure it out, Cale?" Albert asked, voice rough with frustration as he yanked his tie loose from his throat. Cale was the only person to whom he could reveal his aggravation. He'd called Cale in hopes that the young noble's trademark detachment would soothe his nerves, but soon he chuckled in disbelief. "No, how could you know?"

"Wyverns."

Albert stopped laughing. From the other side of the screen, Cale saw the crown prince staring at him with a piercing gaze.

"The wyvern knight brigade has been revived."

Albert's eyes widened. *The Guardian Knight of Faern's legend, and the wyvern knight brigade he commanded…*

His mind cleared at once. "They're airborne."

They weren't using ships. No, they *would* use ships, but not until later. First, they would travel through the sky. But what could Rowoon do about that?

Troubled, he asked Cale, "When did you find out?"

"Did you hear about the fire in Faern's lake?"

"Was that your doing?"

"Yes, Your Highness. I found out then, but I forgot to report it."

"You son of a…" As Albert heaved a sigh, Cale shrugged. The casual gesture reinforced something for Albert—Cale seemed a bit too calm. "I needn't inform our brilliant Lord Cale that if they come by air, they'll be flying over the Dark Forest. Will Henituse territory be okay?"

The corners of Cale's lips twitched. He had been waiting a long time for this. At first he'd been flustered because things didn't match what he'd read in the novels, but this was already a completely different world from the *Birth of a Hero* Kim Roksu knew. That was why he'd doubly prepared for the upcoming days.

He had no reason to wait any longer.

"Your Highness."

"Yes?"

"Please draft an order giving me command of the northeast region's military."

"Ha!" Albert barked a laugh. Cale had asked for something outrageous in such an offhanded manner. *Yes, this is how it should be. This is the Cale Henituse I know.*

Cale piled on his requests. "Also, please put together a knight brigade and one of your mage brigades for me as well." He grinned. "And then just wait."

Albert swept a hand across his eyes. *Just wait, he says?* Did that mean Cale intended to stop the wyvern knights on his own? *Crazy bastard.*

Smiling, he asked, "Just what the hell have you been up to?"

Cale answered his question with another shrug.

"You cheeky bastard." Contrary to his choice of words, Crown Prince Albert grinned brightly. As he combed his fingers through his messy hair, he realized what he needed to do. "So there was a

reason you called that necromancer back to your side. Do whatever you need to do. I'll take care of the rest."

"You focus on gaining power, Your Highness."

"Don't worry. Once the war begins, everything will be in my hands."

Seemingly back to his usual self, Albert plotted a way to push his plans forward with a clear mind. He was so deep in thought, he missed Cale's flinch.

‹They want to destroy our house while riding some stupid wyverns? Really?› Raon's voice echoed in Cale's head.

The dragon's intensity chilled Cale to the bone. He did his best to ignore the six-year-old dragon's mutterings.

"Anyway, I'll do what I must, so you take care of your business."

Click. Cale abruptly hung up and leaned back on the couch, eyeing the communication sphere. Once again, he had plenty on his plate.

The next day, he promptly set out for home with the Wolf King's remains in his possession.

***

"Well, Father?"

"Ah, yes."

The atmosphere between the long-separated father and son was as pleasant as one would expect. Count Deruth sipped some warm tea to settle his nerves. Cale had already caught him up to speed with a video call.

"So," he began, "Faern's knights went to Norland?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you think they'll invade on an army of wyverns?"

"I do."

"They'll also enter Brek and our northwest side via Askosan?"

"That's correct."

Clack. Deruth set his teacup on the table, glancing at the flag displayed in the office. It depicted the golden turtle, the Henituse family crest.

He answered his son with two simple words: "All right." That was approval enough. He then added, "The Henituse family was originally a martial arts clan anyway, the shield to Rowoon's northeastern region."

Deruth was not a warrior, but he knew how to handle a sword, and he hadn't forgotten the art of combat. Why else would he have toiled to assemble a knight brigade in such a remote territory? The golden turtle represented the Henituses' core principle: One must thoroughly prepare in order to live a long and peaceful life.

The count regarded his son. Cale was the only one in the household with red hair—his mother's hair.

"This territory's affairs are my business, as is helping my son." Recalling the things Cale had asked for in their call, Deruth extended a hand. "Let's give it a try."

Cale had said the same thing to him some time ago: *"Let's give it a try, Father."*

Deruth remembered it well. Ever since late fall, he'd been recruiting more soldiers, and he'd stocked the warehouses with food supplies. He also made sure the walls were well equipped and ready to defend, along with the rest of the lands in his domain.

Cale clasped Deruth's hand. "Please be discreet, Father."

The count's response came through in the firm squeeze of his hand. That sufficed for now; there was nothing else Cale needed to

tell his father at present.

Thus, Cale exited the castle and headed straight to the Dark Forest.

***

Standing where the black swamp used to be, Cale stared at the dry ground. The necromancer Mary, dressed in her black robe, stood beside him.

"It has been a while since I've been here," she said. "This is wonderful. I missed it so much." Her mechanical voice carried the slightest note of joy.

"You did?" Raon asked from beside her. "I like coming here with you and the weak human too! Our front yard really is the best."

Both the black dragon and the woman in the black robe kept sneaking peeks at Cale. He had said very little since he'd learned Faern's knights were on the move.

Raon scrunched his nose in thought, then said, "Don't worry, human. Nobody will get hur—"

"Mr. Cale!" someone cut in.

Choi Han, Gashan the tiger shaman, and Lark the wolf boy were all approaching the swamp. Cale had summoned them here. Their expressions were grim now that they knew what was about to happen, though Gashan in particular felt a twinge of anticipation as well.

Even as they walked up to him, Cale never peeled his gaze from the swamp. He seemed to have no intention of moving.

"Lord Cale?" Gashan called out to him.

At length, Cale pivoted to face the confident Choi Han, the poised Gashan, and the hesitant Lark. "Choi Han. Gashan."

"Yes, Mr. Cale?"

"Speak freely, my lord."

Cale's gaze shifted toward the west. "Prepare yourselves. We're going to Death Canyon."

He then focused on Lark. The wolf flinched when their eyes met, but his gaze held more spirit than before. He seemed nervous about traveling with Cale for the first time in ages.

Lark had clearly gotten stronger after training with Choi Han, but it still wasn't enough. Though the Wolf Tribe treasured the bonds of pack and family, wolves only grew in solitude. They needed loss and loneliness, which they could only experience alone, to help them discover one other vital trait.

The auctioned item known as "the Wolf King's remains" sat in Cale's pocket. In truth, it was more of a *remnant*, not actual remains. The item in question was a diary—but this diary was written in blood.

Reflecting on this, Cale addressed the young wolf nervously awaiting his orders. "You're coming too, Lark. Be ready."

"Y-yes, sir!"

It was high time for the Wolf King's name to spread throughout the world once more.

"Mary."

"Yes?" The black robe fluttered as Mary moved toward Cale, but a sound from the swamp caught her attention.

Fwoom.

Something had materialized from Cale's subspace satchel, a customized bag courtesy of Raon.

"Ngh…" Lark jerked back a step, his eyes locked on the heart of the swamp.

Gashan gasped, then muttered in disbelief, "It's a dragon."

A dragon's white skeleton rested in the middle of the dry swamp. Despite having been reduced to bones, the massive, ancient

dragon exuded an overwhelming aura. This was the dragon corpse Cale had seen when he found the Dominating Aura two years ago.

Mary breathed in sharply, and she swiveled back to Cale. Facing her head-on, he commanded, "Control it."

After a few seconds of silence, a confident answer sounded from within her hood. "I can do it. No, I *will* do it."

"Good."

Mary clenched her fists at Cale's response; he acted as if he expected nothing less from her.

Cale looked up at the blue expanse above. This dragon would gobble up the wyverns and dominate the eastern sky.

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Cale opened his eyes to see a magic teleportation circle under his feet. Frigid night gusts whooshed past his ears. Death Canyon was extremely windy, but Cale ignored the blustering gale and turned to the person who'd come to greet him. "Wonderful to see you after so long apart, Your Highness."

Fenn, Rosalyn's youngest sibling and Brek's fourth prince, awkwardly returned Cale's respectful greeting. "Ahem. Yes, it's good to see you again." His gaze drifted down to the vicinity of Cale's chest, where Cale held a certain item in his hand.

It was a cookie.

That triggered flashbacks of the drenching Rosalyn had given Fenn when he previously went to visit her in Henituse territory. The crunching sound of Cale munching on the cookie accompanied the memory as if it were a live background track.

"Do it right, little brother. Otherwise, you'll lose your life on the battlefield."

Recalling Rosalyn's advice, Fenn shivered, feeling cold all over. When Cale smiled gently at him, he forced an uncomfortable smile in

return.

‹If that crybaby whines again, it's a fiery thunderbolt instead of water for him,› Raon declared. *‹I'm practicing the thunderbolt right now.›*

Cale ignored Raon, of course, and looked past Prince Fenn. There were five or six tents behind him. The wind howled again, blowing toward them from Death Canyon. This gorge was known for its never-ending gales. Powerful natural gusts had transformed the valley's steep sides into a cradle of death. Tonight, the formidable winter winds of February even carried sheets of snow, making it difficult to see.

As Cale watched the white snow flutter through the darkness, he heard another voice.

"Are you *the* Lord Cale? Of Henituse territory?"

Cale's gaze found the person next to Prince Fenn: Count Ecross, the number-one disciple of Brek's royal mage. People considered him the royal mage's obvious successor.

‹Human, why is that stupid-looking guy giving you the stink eye?›

Count Ecross was indeed staring at him.

"That is correct, Lord Ecross," Cale responded in a genial, aristocratic manner. "Cale Henituse, at your service."

"Ahem! So you *do* know of me, yet you didn't greet me first."

"I apologize. This is my first time visiting Death Canyon, and I was awestruck by the sight."

Fenn felt disconcerted. For some reason, Cale was behaving like a respectful gentleman. *Why is he acting like this?* He looked at Count Ecross, silently begging him to stop.

Unfortunately, Ecross didn't catch Fenn's signal. He sneered at Cale, casting one judgment after another. *A twenty-year-old.* Ecross frowned upon Rowoon sending a twenty-year-old punk as their

representative. He also didn't like the way Cale used his Ancient Powers to play at being a hero. Those abilities could be acquired with just a bit of luck, as opposed to magical talents, which required years of effort to hone.

He's just a typical punk who relies on his connections to make himself look good.

What the count disliked most was that this talentless son of a noble had such a strong personal network. Although he didn't know the details, Ecross had heard that this punk was close to former princess Rosalyn, Crown Prince Albert Crossman, and even Commander Tunka.

The count clicked his tongue at Cale, who remained courteous despite Ecross making no secret of his disdain. He'd determined Cale was an expert suck-up.

Ecross then went out of his way to introduce the people around him. "These are the *mages* from our side. The one over there is a baron, and that one is a viscount."

He'd emphasized the word "mages" on purpose. Rowoon's dearth of magical talent was well-known, yet they had summoned Whipper's mages and Princess Rosalyn to their country to teach their mages.

Master was happy about it, but…

The royal mage had been pleased, saying it was a great opportunity for all of them. Ecross didn't deny the advantages either. *Still, we cannot let go of this power.* Brek had to take the initiative.

Ecross examined Cale's retinue. *He didn't bring many people with him.* At Cale's side, there was only a man who appeared to be a knight and a feeble boy.

We need to live up to Brek's reputation.

Rosalyn had told Fenn and Ecross to take good care of Cale, but Ecross wasn't her brother. He had no obligation to obey Rosalyn, who was no longer royalty and now lived in Rowoon. *Prince Fenn*

gets weird whenever she's involved, so I've got to step up. Otherwise, there was no reason for Ecross to come to Death Canyon and clean up after this titleless punk.

Turning back to Cale, Ecross cleared his throat. "I heard about your plan from Rowoon's leadership. You're thinking about installing magic bombs in Death Canyon?" Behind him, the baron and viscount stared Cale down as though trying to intimidate him.

Upon seeing as much, Fenn frowned. *This is why my sister should return.*

Ecross had only become the royal mage's number-one disciple because he'd gotten lucky with his knack for magic. Even if Fenn had no chance of succeeding the throne, he couldn't believe Ecross would disregard him. At the same time, he was amazed at his sister's foresight.

"Lord Ecross won't listen to you."

"Then what should I do?"

"You? Nothing. Just let it be. At least he cares quite a bit about Brek."

"What about Lord Cale?"

Rosalyn had laughed at that. Once her giggles subsided, she'd told him, *"You don't need to worry about him. He's got the world's strongest mage for protection."*

The world's strongest mage. Those words lingered in his mind. Fenn already knew the knight beside Cale, so his gaze drifted to the feeble boy. When they made eye contact, the boy flinched and turned away. *Is he the mage?*

Brushing his question aside for the moment, Fenn returned his attention to Cale and the count. Ecross had spread his arms wide, full of bravado. "You don't even have a mage with you, so how are you going to install the magic bombs? We're mages, and we're more familiar with Death Canyon. We'll do it."

Ecross was dead serious. This was a matter of protecting his kingdom. Even if he wasn't trying to take charge, it still made sense for him to do it himself. *Though I do feel bad treating someone who just arrived in this manner…*

He felt a bit guilty for acting this way when Cale had yet to leave the magic teleportation circle, but time was of the essence; he needed to take care of this and return to the capital as soon as possible. The count kept his arms open as he awaited Cale's reply.

Just then, the mage responsible for the teleportation circle piped up, "Hmm? Are there more people in your party?"

With a loud hum, the magic teleportation circle lit up once more. Ecross locked eyes with Cale.

"There are a few more people coming," Cale said lightly, stepping away from the circle. The count shuffled back in confusion and watched as the magic circle slowly lit up until the entire array was shining brightly.

Whoosh!

Ten hulking figures appeared. They all wore black robes, and each seemed as large as a mountain. Cowed by their presence, the count couldn't help but groan.

With a rustle of fabric, the one in front tugged down his hood. The old man's voice echoed through the area. "I am Gashan, shaman of the Tiger Tribe."

More rustles sounded as the others pulled off their hoods as well. Ten pairs of feline eyes glinted in the darkness. The count had never seen someone from the Tiger Tribe before, but he knew their reputation as one of the strongest beastfolk tribes.

"Lord Ecross," Cale called out, prompting Ecross to whirl toward him. "I'll leave the cliffs and other high areas to your mages. We'll take care of the depths."

The winds were wildest in the depths of the gorge, making it difficult to pass through with flight magic.

Ecross's face fell. He had assumed they would only install magic bombs around the edge of the cliff, but Cale was saying they'd place the bombs *within* the gorge. "You're going to go beneath the Verge of Death?"

Death Canyon was split into distinct sections. The top portion began at the cliffs and stretched dozens of meters—maybe even a hundred—below the edge of the gorge. The Verge of Death marked the mouth of the gorge, the point where one could see the rough river at the bottom.

Anyone interested in escaping with their lives needed to avoid that area—but Cale planned to go down there?

Cale's confident voice filled the air. "Yes, sir. That's where we're going."

The count finally took a moment to really *look* at Cale's party. All their faces were grim and grave, which made Cale's composure stand out even more. Cale's declaration that Rowoon would handle the deep parts of the gorge stuck in the count's mind. He couldn't figure out what to say.

At that moment, Fenn stepped in to respond. "We shall leave it to you, then." His tone polite, he continued, "We'll figure out the best way for you to descend. Do let me know if there's any way we can assist."

As Cale offered Fenn a friendly smile, he thought to himself, *I'm going to unload all the magic bombs on these bastards.* He intended to install the Dragon's Rage deep within the gorge; he couldn't let others find out about that precious pillar of fire. *Plus, it's not like I'm going to be doing the work.* All Cale had to do was sit back and watch—how easy was that?

"Then we'll head out first."

"Huh? You will?" Fenn gaped at Cale in shock, but the redhead simply turned on his heel and headed toward the gorge.

"It's dangerous at night," Ecross cut in. "You should wait till daylight!"

"Do you want the northern alliance to see what we're doing?"

That shut the count right up.

Ecross had heard about the approaching wyvern knight brigade. They were bound to patrol during the day, so time was of the essence. When the twenty-year-old's gaze fell upon him, Ecross found himself tongue-tied.

The count said nothing more, so Cale turned back to the gorge. *Let's get this over with and leave.*

Plowing ahead, he asked the tigers in his wake, "Is it really dangerous at night?"

Gashan laughed. "We prefer the darkness." Tigers were nocturnal creatures, and they had brought only their best warriors; it would be easy for them to climb down the gorge.

Brek's mages rushed over. Cale came to a stop in front of the first cliff and passed a magic bag to Ecross. "There's a map of where to install the magic bombs inside, along with the bombs themselves. I'll leave it in your capable hands, Lord Ecross."

Seeing Cale maintain his respectful demeanor, the count felt strange. He accepted the magic bag. "Thank you."

Cale flashed a self-assured smile, then cracked out an order for his group. "Let's go."

Fwup. Fwup. The black robes all fell to the ground, revealing that the tiger warriors were in their berserk state.

"Ah…" Ecross stepped back; their auras were considerably more overwhelming than before. Each of these tigers had once ruled over a mountain. Their bare bodies shone black and gold in the darkness.

All those huge warriors turned to Cale, who simply said, "Jump down."

Gashan, the only white tiger, let out a throaty chuckle as he sprang from the ledge. His leap marked the beginning, and soon all ten tiger warriors were hurtling toward the bottom of the cliff.

White snow and golden flares of light captivated everyone watching. Just as the gilded rays began to dissipate, a racket reached their ears.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

A rumbling filled the cliffs. The tiger warriors were punching or kicking at the rock walls, their roars chasing the winds up the gorge.

"Groooar!"

Tigers reveled in the thrill of danger.

"Mr. Cale."

Cale looked over to see Choi Han standing there.

"I'll be back soon."

"Sure."

With that, Choi Han also jumped off the cliff. Watching him go, Cale moved his hand. *Pat.* His palm came to rest on Lark's shoulder. The wolf boy was now taller than he was.

"Watch closely, Lark."

Lark stared at the cliff, unable to dredge up a reply. The vivid image of the berserk tiger warriors wouldn't leave his mind.

That is, until Cale spoke up again. "I need someone to protect Death Canyon until I return."

As Lark observed Cale's composed expression, an idea occurred to him. Yet Cale said nothing more. He merely held Lark's gaze for a moment before turning away. Next, Cale swept a glance around the others present, all of whom were watching him—including Brek's mages.

Ecross flinched under his scrutiny, and a question popped into his mind: *Why do influential people like Rosalyn, the crown prince,*

and Tunka keep someone like Cale at their side?

He didn't have long to ponder the matter, however, as Cale made his next request.

"Please get started, if you would."

Ecross winced, standing there in silence as the others moved away.

***

Early the next morning, the sun shone brightly as it crept into the sky east of the gorge, immune to the winter snow.

Boom, boom!

Cale smiled, watching a furry white hand grasp the top of the cliff. A white tiger hopped up over the ledge.

"I've returned, Lord Cale."

"How was your late-night walk?"

Gashan laughed. "It was quite enjoyable, sir—but maybe that's because you're out here to greet me."

The other tigers soon jumped up as well. Choi Han was the last to appear; he landed next to Cale. "I'm back."

"Good. You did a grea—"

Beeeep.

Cale cut short his praise of Choi Han and looked around.

Beeeeeep. Beeeeeeep.

A blaring sound akin to an alarm was coming from one of the tents, where a communication sphere glowed red. That meant this was a high-priority call. Cale entered the tent, with Fenn and Ecross hot on his heels.

"Hurry up and answer it," Fenn told the mage responsible, and the call was quickly patched through.

The contents were enough to make Cale scoff.

"Faern, Kingdom of Knights, is a land of chivalry. Our knights abide by the knight's creed—we scorn cowardly acts."

Faern's assertion echoed not just in this tent in Brek but throughout the entire Western Continent.

"We wish for land untouched by frost."

Here and now, the northern alliance was declaring war.

I didn't know they would pull something like this. Cale hadn't expected them to announce their intentions so openly. *But why do it this way?* It probably had less to do with their chivalric code and more to do with some deeper scheme. That wasn't nearly the most appalling aspect of the declaration, however.

"On this day, February 15th, Faern, Norland, and Askosan, as well as the Bear Tribe and the Flame Dwarves, announce that we will begin forging our path of conquest to the unfrozen lands, starting now."

Fenn and Ecross turned to Cale. *The Bear Tribe and the Flame Dwarves?* They hadn't known about this. They sought answers from Cale almost subconsciously, but he wasn't looking at them. Instead, he glared daggers at the communication sphere.

"What a crock."

While everybody balked at his comment, Cale gave an order to Choi Han behind him. "Contact the territory." They needed to pick up the pace. "Tell them to gather all of the nobles of the northeastern region."

Cale had requested a meeting of every noble house in northeastern Rowoon, where Henituse territory was situated. This land boasted more boulders than anywhere else in the Kingdom of Boulders.

It was time for a leader of the northeast to appear at last.

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The message arrived with the rising winter sun: "We of the Indomitable Alliance officially declare that we will claim the unfrozen lands openly and fairly."

The northern alliance, the Bear Tribe, and the Flame Dwarves had banded together, calling their coalition the Indomitable Alliance. The arrival of this information made the Western Continent's late winter weather feel warmer than ever.

Calls flooded in, delivering news of further developments to the tent where Cale and Fenn waited.

Beeeep.

"The Mogor Empire expresses its sympathy and states that it will work toward peace on the Western Continent!"

Yet there was little cheer to be found in the faces of those listening.

The Empire, striving for peace? Cale thought. "What nonsense."

Many flinched at that, but no one dared to comment on his actions or words. For his part, Ecross felt a mysterious pressure emanating from Cale, as if the man were a commanding regional lord. *I feel like I'm facing down my master.*

The calls continued to pour in. *Beeeeeep. Beeeep.*

"The Kingdom of Karo says it will close all its auction houses and casinos!"

Karo had chosen to lie low for now.

"The two principalities in the north and the conurbation have sent their support of the Indomitable Alliance's open proclamation!"

"The principality by the Empire and the free city have chosen a neutral stance! They echo the Empire's desire for peace!"

What a mess.

With that brief observation, Cale stood up. *Clunk*. The others reacted to the barely audible noise as if it were a deafening bang.

Ecross got up as well. “Lord Cale, did Rowoon know about the Bear Tribe and the Flame Dwarves?”

He’d spoken reproachfully, but one look from Cale made him flinch and snap his mouth shut.

‹Human, why do you let him get away with that? You really are a good person. Even if you pretend you’re not, I know the truth. Goodness, I guess I need to try harder.›

Raon’s earnest voice didn’t provoke a comment from Cale. He knew he was a bad person. There was no need to argue with the count, as Cale would work him to the bone later on.

As Ecross cowered from him, Cale held back a sigh and answered like a proper noble. “We did not.”

His short reply lingered in the air. At that moment, the tent flap shuffled open and someone walked in. It was the white tiger, Gashan, still in his berserk state. “What’s going on?”

Those present were soon absorbed in thoughts of the Tiger and Bear Tribes. Sunlight seeped in through the open flap, leaving only Cale in shadow as Gashan stood before him. The contrast made Cale’s bright-red hair stand out in the darkness.

“Lord Cale,” Gashan asked again, “what is going on?”

Slowly, Cale answered, “Nothing much.”

Beeeeeep.

Through the din of incoming emergency calls, Cale calmly went on, “We just need to follow our original plan.” His gaze shifted toward Prince Fenn. “We’re plenty strong ourselves.”

As soon as Fenn heard Cale’s remark, he knew what he had to do. Their alliance had originally included four realms and one tribe—now two with the tigers involved. Although some unexpected events had occurred, they were far from weak. Fenn, the one representing Brek here and now, had a clear task ahead of him.

The prince found his voice. "The mages responsible for the communication spheres shall record all incoming messages. Lord Ecross, report our current status to the others."

"Y-yes, Your Highness!"

"I heard there are still some magic bombs remaining. Resume the operation." He reiterated Cale's prior statement: "Everyone will focus on their individual duties."

Fenn then glanced at Cale, remembering what his sister Rosalyn had told him: *"He's someone you can trust—no, someone you can't help but trust."*

Her remark stuck in Fenn's mind as Cale spoke up. "I'll be on my way as well, Your Highness."

At Fenn's nod, Cale took his leave. The prince watched the cool and collected redhead disappear into the light. Once he was gone, Fenn rubbed the back of his neck. *I feel like I can finally breathe.*

Now that the pressure Cale exuded was gone, Fenn took a gulp of the cold morning air. Contrary to the icy atmosphere, though, his heart pounded hot and fast.

Everyone inside the tent that Cale's group resided in felt an equal sense of heat and urgency, but there was no conversation occurring.

***

Cale's pointer finger tapped against the armrest as he thought of what he'd gleaned from *Birth of a Hero.*

The Bear Tribe is shrewd, according to the novel. How annoying.

It was finally starting to sink in for Cale that the fifth volume of *Birth of a Hero* was over. From this point forward, Cale was stumbling blind. He massaged his temples, feeling a headache coming on.

Raon hovered around Cale with a look of concern. As only the members of their group were inside the tent, he was no longer invisible. “Does your head hurt, human? Are you sick?”

Gashan observed the situation in silence, then said slowly, “The Flame Dwarves… I’ve never heard of them.”

Cale had never heard of them either—in fact, he’d never even met a dwarf other than Müller. This was partly why his thoughts were a convoluted mess. The reason for his consternation leaked out of his mouth. “There’s more.”

“Excuse me?” Gashan said.

At last, Cale felt his mind clearing. Dwarves were known for making things. The wyvern knight brigade… Dozens of ships… If dwarves were added to the mix, the north’s invasion via sky and sea would change drastically.

There had to be more.

Cale was certain that there was another factor at play here. He had no choice but to think that way—after all, he knew the truth about Faern’s Guardian Knight bloodline, as well as the real story behind the Lake of God’s Tears. The ungrateful people of Faern had dammed the flowing river into a lake in order to monopolize it.

Faern isn’t a fair and open kingdom.

Cale’s lips parted, and he announced, “We’ll return immediately.”

“Yes, Mr. Cale. Understood,” Choi Han said, unconcerned. He was the calmest person in the room, but his eyebrow twitched at Cale’s next words.

“Lark, have you given it some thought?”

Lark? What’s he supposed to think about? Not knowing what Cale meant, Choi Han looked at Lark. For a while now, the young boy had seemed more uncertain than anyone else present.

Lark flinched as all eyes fell upon him, then hung his head. He knew exactly what Cale was asking; Cale had mentioned it when the others jumped off the cliff yesterday.

"I need someone to protect Death Canyon until I return."

The stupid Death Canyon didn't scare Lark. He'd grown stronger so he could protect others, and he was still progressing. But even so, he didn't want to be by himself. Lark had never been alone. He needed someone to spark his courage, like his family or his siblings.

Lark kept his head bowed as thoughts flew through his head. *I want to go back with you.* He didn't want to be left behind, but the admission wouldn't come out so easily. What was going on?

"Spit it out."

Lark's head snapped up. "Sorry?"

He'd heard this phrase before: after his first berserk transformation, when he went to thank Cale and ask the young noble to take care of his younger siblings. While Lark fidgeted nervously, unable to speak, Cale had said the same thing to him.

"Spit it out."

And then he'd said something else—exactly what he was saying now.

"When you talk to someone, you should make direct eye contact like this. Did you forget?"

The last three words pounded in Lark's ears, and he was flung back to that pivotal moment. He had stuttered as he answered Cale back then.

"I-I'm the oldest. I need to take care of my younger siblings. I was also a younger sibling myself. And a nephew. That's why I have to get revenge."

Confronted with those statements, Cale had responded, *"You're a wolf."*

A wolf, Lark thought to himself now.

"Mr. Cale?" It wasn't like Choi Han to interrupt Cale's conversations, but Lark was like a younger brother to him.

"What?"

"Could you please tell me what you asked Lark to do?"

"I asked him to watch over Death Canyon and protect it until I come back."

"Alone?"

Cale didn't so much as spare Choi Han a glance. "Some of Brek's mages will stay behind for emergency contact, but yes, he'll be the only one from our group staying here."

Choi Han looked back and forth between Cale and the quiet Lark. After a moment's hesitation, he said, "He's a lonely child."

Lark had experienced traumatic events at a young age. His family, his neighbors, and his entire village were all massacred in front of him. After enduring so much hardship, this boy was only now starting to relax. While Lark did need to get stronger, Choi Han didn't want his heart to grow hollow or for Lark to go down the same path he had.

Choi Han knew the pain of a shriveled, empty heart. Each and every drop of water that fell on his heart's parched soil was precious. He didn't want Lark to be lonely like he was.

Abruptly, Cale looked at Choi Han. "Is Lark really alone?"

"Pardon?"

Cale turned back to Lark and addressed the fifteen-year-old wolf. "You have a family. You have a home to return to and a new hometown. Are you lonely?"

The Wolf Tribe cherished family, but all wolves needed to realize something: They had to determine and shape who they were *solo*—without a pack or tribe behind them. The Wolf King was one who understood that.

"Well, *are* you?"

To Lark, that question contained so many others: *Are you still scared? Do you want to relax in a peaceful dream forever? You said you wanted to get stronger, so why are you still so timid and indecisive?*

Lark looked Cale straight in the eye. "I'll stay here."

For the first time today, Lark saw a gentle smile on Cale's face. "You've grown up."

The wolf boy couldn't find the words to respond.

"I trust you," Cale told him.

At that, Lark simply bowed to Cale. When he raised his head, Cale was offering him an old, bloodied leather notebook.

"It's the last Wolf King's diary."

The Wolf King?! Lark's heart hammered in his chest. His uncle, chief of the Blue Wolf Tribe, had died just before becoming the Wolf King. The diary brought back memories of his uncle, but it confused him at the same time. *Why is he giving this to me?*

Like magic, Cale answered his question before he could even ask. "I believe in you."

The statement was simple, yet it left Lark in a daze. He accepted the diary, feeling the old leather in his hands, then clutched it tightly in his arms.

Cale watched Lark for a moment before giving an order to the rest of the group. "Let's go back."

It was high time to return to Rowoon.

***

The domain closest to central Rowoon was Whilsman territory, which also marked the start of the kingdom's northeastern region. Eric Whilsman, the son of Count Whilsman, strode through the

banquet hall with an awkward smile on his face. He could hear the northeastern region's nobles chatting behind him.

"Even if they *are* the Henituses, can they really tell us when to come and go in this state of emergency?"

"I agree. Furthermore, it's not the count who summoned us but Lord Cale. To think a child with no title is ordering us around… My word!"

Northeastern Rowoon lacked a duke or marquess to take charge, so there were several factions vying for power. One such group included the Whilsmans, the Uvars, and the Chetters—collectively prioritizing powers in the northeast, with a grasp on Rowoon's northeastern shores. The rest of the factions opted to tie themselves to a duke or marquess in one of the other four regions of the kingdom.

"I also don't know why the crown hasn't said a word about it."

"Good point. If they sail in, it'll be through the northeastern region. It's not like they can travel by air…"

The factions tied to the southeastern and central regions were the most outspoken. No baron or viscount would dare speak so poorly of a count during times of peace, but they were loose-lipped in this tense period, relying on the backing of their higher-ranking associates. Each wanted to seize control of the northeast for their own faction.

Eric had expected as much, so he paid them no mind. If anything, it was strange that the factions tied to the southwestern and northwestern regions were so subdued.

How odd.

House Sten in the northwest was now being run by the marquess's eldest son, Taylor Sten, while Lord Antonio had taken over the Duchy of Guiller in the southwest. The nobles following those two families kept quiet, wearing serious expressions. In fact, they seemed a bit frightened.

What's going on?

Strange though it might've been, Eric was merely the son of a titled noble and not part of the overall gathering. He hastily removed himself from the banquet hall.

As he closed the door behind him, he overheard one of the nobles grousing, "Since we all keep praising him as Lord Silverlight, he thinks he can run amok at a time like this."

It was a complaint about Cale.

The door clicked shut, and Eric frowned. *Really, what in the world is about to happen?*

Count Deruth Henituse had arranged for this gathering of the northeastern region's nobles, declaring, *"Let's choose a leader."*

The nobles had been all too keen to oblige. War provided an opportunity for a new power to step in. However, the very count who had summoned the nobility had sent Cale in his stead.

When Eric first heard about this, he couldn't sleep. Although Cale didn't seem like such a lout anymore, Eric still worried about him. He had sent Cale a message every day, but he'd never received a response.

At his wits' end, Eric decided to ask the House Henituse representative standing at the entrance.

"Vice-Captain Hilsmann, when is Lord Cale coming?"

"I'm not sure, sir."

The vice-captain's calm response made Eric's head throb. He remembered a discussion he'd had with Lady Amir, who was responsible for the naval base.

"Lord Eric, you needn't worry about Lord Cale. To be honest with you, I'm excited to see what he does."

Her gaze had been sharp, as if she was looking forward to the war.

Unable to hide his anxiety, Eric sighed and mussed up his hair. "Goodness… Cale, you little punk. Just what're you—"

"What about me?"

Eric froze, hearing the *tap-tapping* of shoes striking the marble floor. He turned around to see Cale sauntering in from the entrance, calm and collected as ever. Those leisurely strides of his suited him better than anybody else, in Eric's view.

Cale approached Eric, who'd sent him daily letters full of anxiety about the war, and walked right past him. "I'll see you later."

Watching him go, Eric thought, *He seems different.* Though he couldn't tell how, he felt there'd been a shift in the Henituse lordling. The notion had him struggling to respond, and Cale was happy to avoid his fretful nagging.

When Cale reached the banquet hall's large door, he grabbed the handle himself. The knight guarding the entrance scurried over, saying, "Allow me, my lord!"

"No need. I'll do it myself."

Cale pushed the door open with all his strength. *Creak. Bang!* As the impact resounded through the banquet hall, Cale strode inside.

Tap. Tap.

The eyes of every northeastern noble tracked Cale as he made his solitary way across the marble floor, looking down upon those seated at their tables.

Tap. Tap.

He came to a stop at a long, oval table, the head of which was reserved for Count Henituse. Rather than sitting down, he searched out Eric's father, Count Whilsman. Cale greeted the count with his gaze; the two of them had discussed things ahead of time.

‹Human,› Raon piped up in Cale's mind, having arrived there beforehand. *‹Those bastards said rude things about you! It's*

amazing—don't they value their lives?›

What a vicious six-year-old. Contrary to his thoughts, Cale's expression was tranquil as he coolly surveyed the group. A few aristocrats coughed, uncomfortable with the mere son of a titled noble looking down at them.

The first to speak was a viscount known to have aligned himself with Marquess Ailan—the same marquess supposedly ruling the southeast from behind the scenes. This viscount had a reputation as a reasonably intelligent and respectful man. "The north's Indomitable Alliance will come for Rowoon." Rather than ignoring Cale, the viscount addressed him and Count Whilsman equally. "The northwest has banded together around Lord Sten, and the southwest is said to be expending a lot of money and manpower, with the newly risen Duke Antonio Guiller at the center."

His viscount's gaze slid to the head of House Uvar. Everyone knew about the naval base in Uvar territory and that the crown prince's influence had expanded to their shores. However, neither the viscount nor any other noble realized that the Henituses had a strong interest in the base as well.

"Ahem. While we of the northeast have the naval base in Uvar territory, it's not ready yet. The southeast, meanwhile, moves around Lord Ailan."

The nobles in the capital's faction glared at the viscount, who made no secret of his loyalties.

"It is well-known that Lord Ailan's territory has the largest and strongest knight brigade in the kingdom."

At the present time, no other family in Rowoon exceeded House Ailan's knightly heritage.

A smile curled the viscount's lips. "Our region needs an anchor. With one of our foes being a land of knights, wouldn't it make the most sense for us to follow a knight-centric region?" He looked at Cale, who had yet to sit. "Lord Cale, doesn't Count Henituse share our sentiments?"

The viscount had heard about Henituse territory fortifying its walls, but no further intel from the territory had reached him. There was no justification for the other nobles to rally around the Henituses.

"We have to think ahead," the eldest viscount in the hall cut in. This man, who had turned eighty this year, belonged to the capital's faction. "We must align ourselves with the strongest region. If I may be frank, this situation is too difficult for us to handle on our own. I agree that the northeast needs someone to lean on."

The old man's stubborn gaze landed on Cale.

"While Lord Silverlight may be reliable, reality isn't so simple," he went on, appealing to the crowd's pragmatism. "To ensure things go smoothly, we need to join forces with Duke Orsena in the central region."

In the end, he was suggesting that they cooperate with central Rowoon. The barons and viscounts wanted to be heroes, but while wartime was a birthplace for heroism and a catalyst for new powers, it was also a time of crisis one had to survive through.

"Most importantly," he added, "aligning with the region closest to the crown gives us a better chance of survival."

"Yet the southeast has the strongest knights and infantry."

"Ahem. I've walked this world a long time. You must trust in the wisdom my years have earned me, Viscount."

Of course, these barons and viscounts all wanted to be heroes for their own factions—not for the kingdom.

‹Are they stupid, human? If Rowoon gets destroyed, won't all the nobles disappear too?›

That's right. Cale agreed with Raon. He scanned the room to see which nobles accurately interpreted the current situation, even if they aligned themselves with the southeast or the central region. He had no other reason to deal with this useless nonsense.

It was then that Cale made eye contact with someone: Countess Uvar, the head of House Uvar and Lady Amir's mother. Her gaze was fixed on Cale.

The other nobles began raising their voices.

"What would a greenhorn viscount like you know? You're barely thirty! War favors experience. I'd rather listen to someone with more expertise!"

"Do the crown or the central region have any real strength? Logically speaking, we'll only survive if we stick with the strongest group!"

"He's right. It'd be best to work with the southeastern region, since we're both on the eastern side of Rowoon."

Countess Uvar spoke over the chaos at the table. "Lord Cale."

Everyone looked at her in tandem. This woman possessed the strongest force in the northeast, thanks to the naval base in her territory. With it, she ruled over both land and sea. Furthermore, the northern alliance was expected to invade by ship, which made Uvar territory all the more important. The leaders of the southeast and central regions had told their respective factions to win over House Uvar at all costs, hence their rapt attention.

"What do *you* think about the current situation, if you wouldn't mind?" she asked Cale, treating him with respect.

As Cale stood quietly without an immediate response, the old viscount scoffed. "Lady Uvar, Lord Cale is young. It isn't as if he can protect the entire northeastern region with a single Ancient Power. The ignorant citizens may call him Lord Silverlight, but what would a youngster like him know?" He then motioned toward Cale with a humble flourish, as though to make up for his critiques. "Lord Cale has a bright future ahead of him, of course. I truly believe he is an amazing young man, but this is something for seasoned folks like us to contend with."

"I agree."

The nobles of the southeastern and central factions nodded, and a chuckle escaped Cale's lips.

"…Are you laughing right now?"

Those who'd been bobbing their heads went stiff. Even if Cale was the son of a count, their factions had marquesses or dukes behind them—and unlike Cale, they had official titles. What they *didn't* know was that Cale had the crown's support.

He took a silver plaque out of his chest pocket and chucked it onto the table, treating it like junk. Not that it meant much more than that to Cale.

Clang!

The plaque struck the surface and spun in circles, coming to rest at the center of the table. Everybody stared at the silver plaque and the royal family's crest emblazoned upon it. The item's significance was basic knowledge for the nobles present: A silver plaque represented military control.

Why does he have this? they wondered. *None of the factions' leaders possess one, so why is it here?*

The nobles' faces fell. While they gaped wordlessly at the silver plaque, Cale cut in, "When a sword goes up against a shield, which do you think will win?"

His demeanor had changed, as had the look in his eyes; any semblance of respect had vanished, and all that remained was a cold, scornful gaze.

He then answered for the silent group: "It will always be the shield." It had to be that way. "From now on, the shield will win every time."

Cale planned to use his embarrassing "Shield Lord" nickname to his full advantage. Showmanship was vital in times of war, and survival came down to a battle of wills. Cale needed to boost morale and instill a strong willpower in the hearts of Rowoon's citizens.

He'd decided to kickstart his plan in the northeastern region and create heroes for Rowoon along the way. *And that doesn't include me, obviously.* After the war, Rowoon would be so full of new heroes that everyone would forget all about the Shield Lord. There was no other way.

"Without question, the shield must win."

The shield had to win no matter what. Right when he thought that, his heart hammered wildly in his chest. *Boom! Boom!*

What's going on?

It was an Ancient Power. One of the abilities within him was stirring.

"You are exactly right. The shield always wins."

The voice belonged to the owner of the Unbreakable Shield: the gluttonous priestess. It had been a while since Cale last heard her speak; this marked the first time since he earned the power.

"I lost back then, but I'll win this time. It's possible."

What is she talking about?

Cale hid his surprise at this unexpected development, but the shield tattoo over his heart heated up.

"But I sure am hungry," the gluttonous priestess declared. **"More. I need to eat more!"**

Again? Cale thought, unruffled. *Does she want more bread?*

"I want to eat other people's talents!"

…What?

His heart rioted against his ribs. *Boom! Boom!* Although there was no visible reaction, Cale sensed movement from the Unbreakable Shield.

‹Why did you suddenly get stronger, human?›

What's happening to me? Despite Cale's confusion, he maintained his outward composure. Without another look at the

nobles, he turned toward the open door, activating the Dominating Aura at its maximum capacity.

"Vice-Captain."

As soon as Cale called for him, Vice-Captain Hilsmann brought over a mage.

"What in the world…?" one of the nobles said, and others frowned. The aristocrats tied to the southwestern and northwestern regions, on the other hand, watched Cale with pale faces.

Naturally, Cale ignored the noble who was trying to speak to him. "Connect the communication sphere."

"Where shall I connect you to?"

"The palace."

The nobles quailed at that. But before the mage could even place the call, the device glowed red—an emergency communication.

Beeeeeep.

It was from the palace, intended for all of Rowoon's nobility.

The mage projected the video onto one of the banquet hall's walls. The call was being transmitted from the capital's plaza for everyone to hear. Rowoon's current king, Jed Crossman, stood on the platform.

"I, Jed Crossman, will entrust all duties to Crown Prince Albert Crossman and pass the throne to him next year."

"Huh?"

"What the…?!"

Some of the nobles jumped to their feet with cries of shock. What in the world was going on? They looked over at the nobles of the southwestern and northwestern factions, who hadn't said a word. Those nobles sat at the table in silence, their complexions ashen.

At that moment, the projection zoomed in on Albert Crossman, who still had the air of a gentle and virtuous sovereign. "Turn on the video," he said.

A video?

Upon his request, a video appeared behind Albert, broadcast by magic.

"Roooooar!"

"Grrrrr…"

Monstrous roaring filled the banquet hall. The nobles stared raptly at the image of beasts flying through the air. Though the video shook, as if the informant had been in hiding when he filmed it, they could still count dozens of monsters soaring across the sky.

They were wyverns. And atop each wyvern sat a knight.

"It can't be…" one noble uttered, lips trembling. He didn't catch the quiver in his own voice.

"Skreeeee!"

A few nobles gasped as a wyvern swooped toward the informant. Abruptly, the video went black.

The wyvern knight brigade was an entity of legend. Now the nobles realized that the legend had become reality.

Most likely, the northern alliance knew their secret weapon had been revealed. Thanks to Rowoon, the entire Western Continent was now aware of the wyvern knight brigade. The crown prince had played that video in the plaza to make it so.

Albert peered into the communication sphere to continue his speech. He knew Cale would be listening somewhere. Though he'd been grappling with this decision for a while, Cale's prior remark had convinced him how to proceed.

"Your Highness, everyone in this kingdom will become a hero."

It was then that the crown prince and the rest of Rowoon found their resolve. If Faern wore a facade of fairness and justice,

claiming to be a land of chivalry, Rowoon could do the same.

"It isn't as if we're doing anything immoral, Your Highness," Cale had told him. *"We're simply pretending to be a kingdom built on equality and righteousness."*

Funny bastard.

Rowoon had made its decision: The kingdom would use its strength to fairly and openly suppress the Indomitable Alliance.

Albert resumed speaking, his voice echoing throughout the banquet hall where Cale was listening. "Rowoon has the longest history of any kingdom on the Western Continent."

Though Rowoon might not have boasted any particular specialties, it had the greatest number of years under its belt. Of all the kingdoms, only Rowoon had kept mum since the Indomitable Alliance's proclamation. It was the last to make its stance known to the rest.

"We will show them the strength of survivors."

As the crown prince confidently addressed the entire Western Continent, the nobles in the banquet hall were silent—or rather, dumbstruck. They had only just comprehended the true danger they faced. They'd been complacent, letting the involvement of the Bear Tribe and the dwarves lead them to believe that the northern alliance would come from the sea. But wyverns? This was now a question of life and death.

Then someone's voice reached them. "About those wyverns…" It was Cale. He gazed down at the nobles looking at him and declared with certainty, "The wyvern knight brigade will not get past Henituse territory. Not ever."

He walked to the center of the table and picked up the silver plaque.

"As of today, I, Cale Henituse, will take command of the northeastern region's military." He spoke respectfully, but he left his

audience no opening to object. “You shall all follow my orders from here on out.”

Cale looked around at the nobles of the southwestern and northwestern factions, who avoided his gaze, and at the ones belonging to the other factions, who were practically in shambles.

Those who sought power on the eve of war did not deserve to be heroes. Cale was using this day to determine who would become heroes and who would survive by leeching off of those stronger than they were. That information was essential for him to put them to good use.

“If it’s a mark of nobility to align oneself with the strong,” Cale said, smiling at the nobles, “then you will soon have to decide whom to align yourselves with to survive.”

Without the slightest hesitation, he turned on his heel and made for the door. Behind him, the chairs creaked and shuffled. Countess Uvar, Count Whilsman, and Lord Gilbert—here on behalf of his father—stood up and followed after him. Together, this group was responsible for Rowoon’s northeastern shores and the entrance to that part of the kingdom.

Creak. Bang!

Only after the door closed behind them did the rest of the nobles realize they had been left behind. That, and one more thing.

The wyverns were coming…and soon.

Chapter 43:
There's a Dragon?

THE CLOUDS OF WAR hung low over Henituse territory. While the Western Continent had been outwardly peaceful ever since Rowoon's proclamation, that was merely the calm before the storm.

In Weston, home to Henituse Castle, the frightened citizens hunched in on themselves. Whether they walked alone or in groups of three or four, they all wore dark expressions. Worry, dread, and something more lurked in the contours of their faces.

One man, who'd been walking with a friend, pulled his jacket tight against the chill as he looked around. He could see the newly fortified wall, looming tall and thick, with soldiers and knights milling about the ramparts. Then his gaze slid skyward. "I can't believe someone so feeble is accomplishing so much."

His friend stopped and looked up as well. The imposing wall surrounded the entirety of Weston, but even that wall couldn't reach the heavens.

As the citizens stared at that winter sky blanketed by gray clouds, fear wormed its way into their hearts. They couldn't believe wyverns would soon burst through that gloomy curtain. Yet something captured their attention even more than the cloudy sky: a silver light.

Though Weston wasn't especially large, it was still impressive that the faint silver shield enveloped the whole city. The other emotion painted on the citizens' faces, along with their dread and their anxiety, was *relief*.

"They say he coughs up blood whenever he uses the shield, don't they?"

"That's right," the man's friend replied as casually as possible. Eyes fixed overhead, he said, "It's already been three days."

Now that Albert had exposed the wyverns and claimed Rowoon would come out victorious, the kingdom's northern territories faced the greatest danger. The northeastern region in particular was the most likely target.

The enemy kingdom of Norland was on the other side of the Dark Forest. Because Henituse territory was the closest to Norland, its people were on tenterhooks. They had no idea when war would break out. Yet ever since the night of the proclamation, Weston had been covered by a silver light. The shield's shine hadn't wavered for a second over the past three days.

"Won't using a shield that big make him faint? Why doesn't he just wait and activate it when those northern bastards get here?" the man asked, and his friend shook his head.

"Don't you get it? He doesn't want to see anyone or any area of the territory come to harm whatsoever."

The man couldn't fault his friend for that. One glance at the sky told him it was true: Even the towering walls couldn't stop the wyverns, and only a few mages in Rowoon were capable of attacks on airborne enemies. That was why the frail Lord Cale was overusing his Ancient Power.

As the man looked on, deeply moved, one of his other friends added flippantly, "And to think you called him a lout."

"Hey!" the man blurted out, rounding on him. "Don't say that!"

"I asked around," a third friend put in, "and I found out he used to throw bottles at gangsters! How is that degenerate behavior?"

"Didn't he break stuff too? I heard he even busted down some store doors."

"Ahem… Well…"

He had no rebuttal. In all honesty, Lord Cale was indeed a lout. No one could erase or change the past, but that was no reason to dismiss his current sacrifice.

"He must have come to his senses. He's our Lord Cale now!"

"You're right about that. Lord Henituse is a good person, so his son must've picked up some good habits from him."

The man nodded his agreement as he glanced at the notices plastered all around Weston. He was one of the few citizens who could read. The message was as follows:

Henituse Castle will provide all citizens with food until peace returns to the territory.

Indeed, the Henituses had opened their storehouse to the public. They had such plentiful stock that they'd provided no end date other than peacetime.

The man turned his eyes to Weston's main gate. Droves of citizens had flooded into the city after hearing about the silver shield. Though the wyvern knight brigade would no doubt target Weston rather than nearby villages, people had chosen to gather under the local lord's protection.

Furthermore, wagons full of food from the Henituse storehouse were being ushered to different parts of the territory, some also carrying farming tools. While distributing tools to the citizens, the count had declared, *"We'll need to start working the land in the spring."* This spread like wildfire, and in the minds of his people, it carried a deeper message. After the war, when late winter turned to spring, they would be able to return to their normal lives.

The man returned his gaze to the sky. "I hear he's working hard even though he's in pain."

I pray he's doing well.

Cale Henituse—the one serving as the military commander of the northeastern region—kept the shield up despite his apparent struggle. This rumor had spread beyond Henituse territory and the northeastern region, to every corner of Rowoon.

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"So annoying." Naturally, Cale Henituse had spread this rumor himself. Inside his bedroom in the castle, which currently doubled as his office, he reclined on a comfortable couch. "Lord Eric Whilsman should be doing well, right?"

"I'm sure he is."

Confronted with Ron's smile, Cale was frightened of the elderly man all over again. Not that Cale was an angel himself. As the military commander, he'd only been dishing out orders. Eric and Countess Uvar had obediently produced detailed guidelines to send to the territories. Ron had performed the first check of those guidelines, while Albert handled the second.

Ron had once led one of the Eastern Continent's top five assassin households, and he had more experience in military matters than Cale. Albert, meanwhile, was focusing his full attention on the northeast, which was the most likely invasion entry point.

It really is nice when other people do things for you, Cale thought, feeling perfectly at ease.

As soon as Cale's gaze drifted away from Ron, the assassin's smile turned cold. His eyes remained riveted to Cale, who practically drowned in documents as he thoroughly read the guidelines and gave appropriate instructions with the big picture in mind.

Ron could see how pale Cale's face was. This had been going on for three days now.

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.

In a corner of the room, Raon's tail smacked the floor. The black dragon was bubbling over with complaints. "You stupidly good

human!”

Ohn and Hong lashed their own tails in agreement.

“He’s right. You’re stupid.”

“This is so frustrating!”

While the kittens griped away, Raon’s stare burned a hole in Cale’s back. When the dragon had offered to step up and wipe out their enemies, Cale’s response had been *“No. You could be in danger if you show yourself.”* He’d sounded quite stern.

“Who or what could possibly threaten a great and mighty dragon?!” Raon had shot back.

Yet Cale wouldn’t dare to expose Raon without knowing more about the crown that drank dragon blood. He hadn’t had any time to meet with Erhaven to discuss it.

Also, he had to create heroes in the present to set everyone up for a peaceful future. That would make Rowoon stronger too.

A dark elf. A necromancer. The Tiger Tribe. And finally, Henituse territory itself. Those were the heroes Cale planned to develop. He wanted to rattle the hearts of the kingdom and the continent. To do that, he needed an emotional story.

Cale skimmed the final document before sagging back against the couch. The Unbreakable Shield had definitely gotten stronger since he’d last deployed it. Simply holding it up like he was now wasn’t particularly taxing, perhaps because it didn’t need to block anything at the moment. That was all thanks to the Energy of the Heart. He felt fine these days even with minimal sleep; just one or two hours was enough for him to feel refreshed.

He looked out the window, satisfied by the sight of the cloudy sky and the faint shield.

“Isn’t it tiring, Mr. Cale?”

Upon hearing Choi Han’s abrupt question, Cale glanced sidelong at him. *Why doesn’t this punk ever age?* Though he

wondered how Choi Han still looked like a high school student, he brushed the thought aside, deciding it was too annoying to contemplate.

"It's not that bad," Cale replied. "I'm writing a new history of the kingdom right now."

And so he was. The course of the original novel had been completely altered, hence the need for a new history. Taking up this task would be cumbersome, but it wasn't that hard on his body.

Having said his piece, Cale turned back to the window. Choi Han watched the way Cale sprawled out on the couch, his face gaunt as he stared outside. Nose wrinkling, Choi Han thought, *How can someone be like this?* He didn't understand it. Reflecting on the concept of this "new history," he idly ran a hand over his scabbard.

Cale paid him no mind, lifting the warm cup of tea Ron had brought him to his lips. *Hmm?* Judging by the aroma, it was a sweet tea—one he actually liked. Cale snuck a peek at Ron, but the assassin was wearing his usual benign smile.

I guess the old man must be tired too.

For once, he hadn't brought Cale bitter tea.

A touch concerned, Cale peeled his gaze away to drink his tea. Since it was sweet, he took a large gulp…

"Pffft!"

…and promptly spat it back out.

A black dot had appeared in the sky. With a stomp of one stubby paw, Raon sprang into the air, ready for action. Seconds later, a deafening impact shook the heavens.

Boom!

Cale leapt to his feet, scrubbing the tea from his face. Almost instantaneously, another black dot flew over and crashed into the shield. Then more and more, a whole flock hurtling at the barrier around Weston.

Boom, boom!

The wyverns had come. The enemy was here. This casual afternoon would mark the beginning of the war.

Weston's emergency siren rang out. *Wee-ooo! Wee-ooo!*

"Everybody remain calm! Move according to the soldiers' instructions!" a Henituse knight shouted as he shepherded the terrified citizens to safety. The soldiers helped the people take shelter in their homes, just as they had practiced.

House doors slammed shut. Armored knights and armed soldiers marched across the walls and all throughout the city. Yet no one heard the clicking of locks, the pounding of boots on stone. It was all drowned out by the din of the wyverns ramming into the shield. That, and the bellows of the beasts themselves.

Boom!

"Roooar!"

Weston's citizens were pale-faced; this was their first time seeing wyverns with their own eyes. Even the smallest ones were at least five meters long. Though Faern's mounted knights in their snow-white armor were mere specks from afar, they seemed accustomed to steering the ferocious monsters. The troops in Weston gulped nervously at the sight.

The citizens peeked out their windows, peering fearfully at the walls. Would the shield break? If it did, would they all perish?

Before she could think better of it, a woman watching from home shouted, "It's Lord Cale!"

Cale had appeared on the wall, a bright silver light radiating from both hands. He walked to the center and stretched his arms skyward. The knights and soldiers, thrust so suddenly into their first war, had the closest vantage point to watch him.

A firm, booming voice soon reached their ears. "The shield won't break!" It was Deruth. The mellow and unassuming count

wore a full suit of armor, jaw set in a fierce expression. "Everyone, focus!"

The pounding on the shield and the roars of the wyverns were no match for the count's volume. Cale listened to Deruth with a smile. *He's surprisingly talented.*

Just as he was evaluating his father's abilities, the loudest noise yet cracked through the commotion.

BANG!

Cale's smile disappeared.

A gargantuan wyvern—a good fifteen meters long—glared at Cale through the shield's silvery shroud and opened its mouth. No normal wyvern reached that size, suggesting it was a mutant.

"You're here," Cale said, greeting his highly anticipated guest. He'd been waiting for the man mounted on the white wyvern: Faern's Guardian Knight, the white-haired Clope Seca.

Clope pulled the wyvern back, staring down at Cale. When the two of them locked eyes, Clope declared, "Once we destroy the shield, everything else will fall."

He, too, had seen Rowoon's video. After watching it, he had sworn to lay waste to this ancient yet powerless kingdom first and foremost. He was too proud to start his conquest anywhere else; if he did, it would seem as if Rowoon's proclamation had intimidated him. Accordingly, the Indomitable Alliance had selected Rowoon as their first target.

Clope also knew of a moderately famous individual from Rowoon: a noble's son who used a silver shield. He now examined the shield, which gave off a faint silver light. "How interesting."

Getting rid of this shield and the red-haired punk who wielded it would start the invasion off on a good note. Clope had come here personally to use his overwhelming strength to write a new legend.

He blew into a flute.

The Henituse soldiers gripped their spears in fear as dozens of wyverns swooped toward Clope, rapidly closing the gap. *Fwoosh!* A multitude of wyverns beyond what they'd seen in the video blotted out the sky over Henituse territory.

Clope looked down at the red-haired man. *Was his name Cale Henituse?* Regardless, he would die soon. All Ancient Powers had their limits.

He raised a hand. "Descend."

At his command, a burly group leapt off the wyverns behind him, opening previously unseen parachutes that carried them safely to the ground. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* The massive individuals landed one by one, forming a line outside Weston's walls. There were easily over a hundred of them.

A soldier in Weston gasped. "It's the Bear Tribe!"

The Bear Tribe was one of the strongest beastfolk tribes, and they boasted the largest numbers. As they alighted using the parachutes the dwarves had made for them, the enormous bears went into Berserk Mode and surrounded the city.

Clope watched them land, lowered his hand, and relayed his next order. "Attack."

The wyverns rushed the silver shield, his own white wyvern among them.

Even from here, Clope could see the expressions of the people standing on the walls. The soldiers were pale, and he assumed the civilians were similarly haggard. He was certain that this would be an easy victory. Their combined assault eclipsed that of any magic bomb or crumbling palace. It wasn't their strongest attack by a long shot, but it would be enough to destroy this small territory.

Clope met Cale's gaze once again. This was the end.

Bang! Bang!

The barrage was so loud, the defending troops feared their eardrums might shatter. One of the more cowardly soldiers collapsed

to his knees. “What can we do…?”

That shield is going to break! He sought out Cale, as did many others. The lordling’s face was bone-white; he looked like he would drop at any moment.

Cale himself was thinking, *The north is really OP.* The northern alliance’s forces were certainly formidable, but there was something Cale had on his side that the north did not.

‹Those wyverns may have big bodies, human, but they’re just small fry. These puny little things are actually kind of cute!›

He had a dragon.

I can’t expose Raon, but I can still put him to use.

Raon’s barrier overlapped Cale’s silver shield, making it unbreakable. A mere wyvern wouldn’t even be able to crack it. The wyverns rammed into the shield over and over, pounding against it like a drum. *Boom, boom!*

All the while, Cale kept his shield in place.

The kneeling soldier sucked in a breath. One strike. Ten strikes. Almost a hundred strikes. No matter how many times the wyverns bashed into the shield, it didn’t break. In fact, it only shined even brighter. The soldier found himself repeating the count’s previous words: “The shield won’t break.”

Though Cale looked like he might buckle any second now, he stood strong.

Clope barked an incredulous laugh. “Ha!” The shield was tougher than he’d expected. Contrary to his feeble appearance, that young noble had a stronger Ancient Power than Clope had given him credit for. Nothing had changed Clope’s mind, however. Any shield would break eventually, and they had plenty of other targets to choose from.

The Guardian Knight maintained his cool as he looked down at Cale. It was then that he noticed…Cale Henituse was *smiling*. Clope felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. *Behind me!*

He wheeled the white wyvern around. At first, he thought what he saw was a white cloud, descending from the sky, but he was wrong. “Are those…bones?”

The “cloud” was really a horde of skeletons—*hundreds* of them. This flock of monstrous remains swooped down from the sky, their ghoulish forms filling the air.

Cale grinned. “Too bad. This is just the beginning.” With his eyes on the sky, he couldn’t contain his glee.

At the same time, an entity rose from the Dark Forest’s black swamp. It was the only skeleton with bones of pure black. Bony ebony wings, absent of any hide, began to flap. Soon enough, the legion of airborne skeletons parted to reveal this gargantuan presence.

Clope’s eyes opened wide. “That’s—!”

It was a dragon. Though the creature was just a collection of bones, it was close to twenty meters long. A pair of pitch-black wings, each spanning several meters, stretched across the sky. This mighty being was an overlord, even after death. Merely looking at it made Clope’s breath snag in his chest.

As Cale watched the draconic skeleton spread its wings, he thought to himself that a battle with an overwhelming advantage was bound to be entertaining.

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Beeeeep. Beeeeep.

A sea of communication spheres pulsed and blared in a never-ending symphony of red. Bassen Henituse, Deruth’s second son, stared out the window of the communications center.

While this room in the estate’s tallest tower should have been the busiest place around, everyone stood rooted to the spot with blank expressions. Bassen in particular was standing with his mouth agape, clutching a communication sphere in his hand.

Another person's voice could be heard through the device. "Ha ha ha, my goodness."

It was Albert Crossman. While observing the events in Weston through the device, he had seen Cale's shield, as well as the higher-than-expected number of wyverns. He'd also witnessed the hundreds of monster skeletons, to say nothing of the dragon corpse.

That crazy bastard.

Even as he reflected that Cale truly was a lunatic, Albert felt the tips of his fingers tingling as he watched that madman through the screen.

"Your Highness, everyone in this kingdom will become a hero."

It was possible. That "crazy bastard" had never promised anything he couldn't deliver, so Albert had chosen to believe him—and this surpassed his expectations.

"From this moment on, Henituse territory will ignore any and all communications from spiritual leaders." So Cale had said as he called forth the necromancer.

The crown prince had immediately replied, *"I'll take full responsibility."*

Watching the flying skeleton brigade advance on the wyverns, he muttered to himself, "Looks like I have no choice but to step up." A smile rose to his face.

Someone else had virtually *no* reason to smile, however: Clope Seca, the Guardian Knight who dreamed of bringing the legend of the Sky Conqueror to life. His lips twisted in a grimace.

Skeletons? He'd never encountered such a sight in his life.

One of the wyvern knights shot toward Clope. "Captain!" He peered at Clope through his helmet, but Clope only had eyes for the man's mount. The wyvern screeched, shaking its head from side to side. It seemed afraid.

Fear.

The concept prompted Clope to look past the approaching skeletons at the giant, black-boned beast. That dead dragon was the source of the wyverns' distress.

"Grrrrr."

Clope lowered his head to check on his mutant wyvern mount. This one bared its fangs at the bone dragon, behaving as if it had prey in its sights. Clope gripped the reins around the wyvern's neck.

"Captain!"

When the knight called out to him again, Clope finally spoke. "They have a necromancer."

Only the long-lost necromancers could accomplish such a feat.

"A necromancer? Those accursed beings?!"

The knight was aghast, but Clope was already turning around. With one last look at Clope, the knight drew back.

Clope's eyes found the smiling red-haired man. That smirk of his made Clope seethe with rage. *That bastard is no hero.* A hero would never employ a necromancer who used dead mana.

The Guardian Knight drew his sword from its scabbard. *Shiiing.* Aura flowed out of the blade. Flaring his swordmaster aura, Clope shouted, "Snap out of it!"

His aura hummed in the air, his voice audible between the flaps of the skeletons' wings. Faern's other mounted knights squeezed their reins, and Clope blew his flute once more. In a flash, the look in the wyverns' eyes changed. All their fear ebbed away.

Glancing down, Clope muttered under his breath, "The bears will find the necromancer for us." He spoke louder, his aura-amplified voice echoing even inside Henituse Castle. "Our undead foes are merely puppets on strings!"

The enemy forces did seem like nothing more than a collection of flimsy bones. The bone dragon, too, was just another puppet. To Clope, it appeared that Cale had prepared the necromancer as a

secret weapon, but the wyvern knight brigade was beyond his calculations.

In that case, what an incredible opportunity this is. It's a chance for me to become a holy hero! I can be a legendary figure—a god among men.

A necromancer, a wielder of dead mana, was the perfect prey.

Clope spoke even louder. "They have no will of their own! Henituse territory has dared to call forth a filthy, nefarious necromancer!"

The soldiers on the wall gasped; the knights were especially appalled. As educated individuals, they knew the fear and loathing historical necromancers had inspired in the populace. They turned to Cale in spite of themselves, then wrenched their gazes away when the Guardian Knight's pure-white aura soared into the sky.

Whoosh!

As the Henituse knights were forcibly reminded of this swordmaster's presence, their expressions turned grave.

"Our Indomitable Alliance will show you the meaning of justice!"

Clope snapped the reins. With a great roar, his white wyvern charged the flying skeleton brigade. Clope swung his sword, and his snowy aura sliced through the sky.

Fwoom.

The skeletons that couldn't dodge vanished without a trace. Their swift obliteration all but conveyed that resistance was futile. Though the skeletons numbered in the hundreds, Clope had culled dozens of them in a single strike.

Faern's other knights jerked their reins as well, and their wyverns roared anew. Without a doubt, they looked as if they deserved to be called conquerors of the sky. Believing they'd seized the momentum, Clope glanced back at Cale. When he saw Cale's indifferent expression, his lips twitched in anticipation of a smile.

At the same time, the bears stomped the ground. *Thud! Thud! Thud!*

A bear with reddish-brown fur bellowed, "Half of you go find the necromancer! Sniff them out and rip them to shreds!" Laughing, the brawny bear stomped again. *Boom! Boom!* "The other half will destroy the walls!"

Clope's grin took shape at last.

While the Guardian Knight was pleased, the people of Henituse territory looked hopeless. The contrast was even more apparent after the bear's bellowed orders. That is, until another curious sound rose up from afar, catching the attention of the troops on the walls.

"Huh?"

It was the sound of roaring.

Henituse territory was surrounded by hills and stone mounds. Even Weston, the county's central city, rested within a cradle of mountains. The cries came from those mountains. They were animal roars.

The trees shuddered, and gusts rustled their leaves. One of the soldiers with a white-knuckled grip on his spear heard someone comment on the beastly snarls.

"They're late."

Late? Who's late? The soldier made to turn to Cale, then froze. Large animals were barreling toward them—no, beings who were both human and animal. The Tiger Tribe had arrived.

All the tigers were coming down from their mountains, blocking off the bears' assault. The soldiers heard the knights exclaiming behind them, many of whom were saying the same thing: "It's the Tiger Tribe that moved into Harris this winter! They're our neighbors!"

The knights drew their swords. "The enemy shall not breach this wall! We won't let them get past us!"

Brandishing their blades, the knights looked to Deruth. The count turned to Violan, who had emerged in her own suit of armor. Deruth's eyes then fell upon the man the countess held by the collar.

"We can get started, right?" Deruth asked.

Müller, sole descendant of the bloodline that had developed the Magic Tower, bobbed his head. "O-of course, sir. I-I've got everything ready! Hee hee!"

The knights lowered their swords, and the count gave them the signal. "Commence defensive formation!"

With a chorus of shouts, the knights and the few soldiers who had been training since last year surged into motion. Soldiers armed with spears and bows followed them, jumping to their respective positions.

There was a low, loud rumble as a shape appeared atop the bulky walls—a catapult. Before long, several catapults were slotted into place. These catapults, equipped with all sorts of magic devices, were Müller's masterpiece. The huge weapons took aim at the bears, and the mood along the wall took a rapid turn.

"We're stronger on the ground!" the knights hollered.

Clope watched the scene, a deep wrinkle creasing his forehead. *What in the world?*

What was going on? While his sword—or rather, the aura surrounding his sword—swept forward to decimate even more skeletons, the bone dragon flanking the flying skeleton brigade hung in the air without taking action.

No, these skeletons aren't important right now!

The more Clope thought about it, the more flabbergasted he became. Tigers weren't native to the Western Continent, yet here they were. And what were those catapults? Why did a rural county in northeastern Rowoon—an unrefined territory with nothing but rocks to recommend it—have all of these things? It wasn't the ruling

hub of the kingdom, but it was better equipped than most capital cities.

One of the smaller skeletons, down a wing after Clope's attack, flapped its remaining wing as it circled him. *Clack, clack.*

Anger simmered in Clope's chest. He wouldn't stand for this. As he wheeled his wyvern around, noting the numerous skeletons still in the air, he could see Cale smiling once again.

I need to get rid of that bastard first. It was all a matter of momentum.

His wyvern's black eyes flared a fiery crimson. Clope pressed low to the wyvern's back as the creature flew faster and swept into a dive, hurtling toward Cale at incredible speed.

Even then, Cale didn't falter—he kept on smiling at them. Watching the white wyvern's rapid descent, he uttered a single word: "Come."

The bone dragon finally jolted into motion. At the same time, the invisible figure behind Cale got to work. Mary's face was pale as she controlled the bone dragon with hand motions, but there wasn't even an ounce of hesitation in her actions.

All the other corpses were mere decoys. As the flying skeleton brigade dispersed with a spontaneous bout of screeches, something else silently took their place. The bone dragon's empty eye sockets ignited with a black glow. Then it shot through the air toward the shield. Opening its toothy maw, the bone dragon aimed for the white wyvern's neck.

"No!" Clope cried.

His white wyvern roared, flashing its fangs as it tried to fight back. Yet despite being a pile of bones, the black-eyed bone dragon was not repelled. Clope grunted, yanking frantically on the reins.

The bone dragon spread its wings in front of the wall. *Flap, flap.* Anyone watching would think that bag of bones was guarding the city.

Snow-white aura clashed with pitch-black light.

Bang, bang!

Clope's white wyvern rushed the bone dragon with claws and teeth at the ready, but the dead mana merely trembled; it didn't disappear. The bone dragon didn't sustain a single scratch.

The shield creaked, quivering anew as the wyverns rammed into it again, fixated on its destruction. Their eyes now glowing red, the wyverns tried ripping it apart with their claws.

Cale, for his part, remained calm and commenced the final stage of his plan. "Choi Han."

"Yes, sir?" Choi Han asked from beside him, then waited as Cale snuffed out the silver light from one of his hands.

"It's your turn."

"You have a job for me?"

Cale hadn't given Choi Han any instructions, so the swordsman had been hovering by Cale's side like a shadow to protect him. But Cale had determined Choi Han's role a long time ago. "Use your full strength this time."

"Is this part of that 'new history' you mentioned?"

A smile formed on Cale's pale face. In a steady voice, he replied, "Yes. It's the history you'll will write for yourself in this place."

The history I'll write for myself in this place—my second home. Those words echoed in Choi Han's mind.

Soldiers nearby eyed the pair in confusion, wondering why they were engaging in chitchat with things so dire.

Then Cale took a sword out of a magic bag and pointed the handle at Choi Han. It was a weapon forged by Müller. "It's yours."

Cale was giving Choi Han his original role, the one he had in the novel. This would be the moment Choi Han became a hero. The fifth volume of the series might have ended, but all Cale had to do

was create a new opportunity for that hero to be born. This was it: *Birth of a Hero*.

"I'm sure you know best what you have to do." Facing Choi Han head-on, Cale added, "Come back soon."

Choi Han accepted the sword. He didn't deliberate long before drawing it from the scabbard. Unlike the scabbard itself, the blade gleamed brightly.

Beaming at Cale, Choi Han said, "I like this sword."

At that moment, a rumbling sound emanated from the sword. An aura enveloped the blade; it was the same shade of black as the hair and eyes of this young man, who still looked like a teenager. Shortly thereafter, the aura shot into the sky.

"A-an aura-wielding swordmaster!" one soldier cried out, then clamped a hand over his mouth.

The young man they knew as Cale's guard was actually a swordmaster. A *real* one. Not only that, but this swordmaster, a necromancer, and the Tiger Tribe all took orders from Cale. The soldier who'd shouted got chills, but they stemmed from something other than fear.

Meanwhile, Choi Han calmly voiced what he needed to do. "I'll return after I kill him." His role was to neutralize the Guardian Knight—to kill Clope, or at least the white wyvern he rode upon.

But then Cale beckoned him over out of nowhere, stuttering as he said, "L-let's embrace before you take the field!"

Embracing in the middle of a battle? Wondering when Cale had developed such an affectionate side, Choi Han gave him a light hug. With one arm wrapped around Choi Han and the other keeping the Unbreakable Shield aloft, Cale shouted loudly enough for everyone to hear, "I believe in you!"

Suppressing a surge of emotion, Choi Han replied, "Thank you so much. I'll definitely bring you his head."

Why does this punk keep saying things like that?! Cale wondered, then lowered his voice to a whisper. "Don't kill him."

Yes, why waste such a useful pawn by putting an end to him now?

Cale regarded Choi Han, who somehow held on to his innocence despite hanging around the lout for so long. When Cale spoke again, he oozed wickedness. "Collect both those white pawns for me."

Choi Han gasped. The way Cale looked at him said it all: If he had any hope of learning how to control the wyverns, they couldn't dispose of Clope just yet. Plus, there was so much money to be made by capturing that bastard.

"I'll make this mission a success."

With that, Choi Han leapt from the wall through a gap in the shield that Cale had opened for him. He landed lightly on the bone dragon's spine. *Tat.* Then he stood up straight, his eyes seeking the two "white pawns." With senses that exceeded the limits of normal human hearing, he caught the sound of Cale's faint yet firm voice.

"Begin."

Together, the hero yet to be recognized and the dragon forgotten by time moved to carry out Cale's orders, a maneuver that would go down in history.

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Guardian Knight Clope couldn't believe his eyes. A black bone dragon and a black-haired swordmaster barred his path, guarding the city.

Now there's even a swordmaster?!

How could such a nonsensical place exist? The fact that none of these forces bore Rowoon's royal crest suggested they all belonged to the Henituses.

As Clope's expression hardened, one of his subordinate knights approached him. It was the same man who had addressed him when the flying skeleton brigade first appeared; he was the only person permitted to speak to Clope directly.

"Captain."

Clope didn't tear his gaze from Choi Han. "What?"

In a voice full of trust, the knight replied, "A man like you, destined to become a legend, will always have towering walls to climb."

Clope's face slackened, fear and greed rising to the fore. He then ordered his subordinate, "Devote all of our strength to destroying the shield."

"Yes, sir. Understood."

The armored knight fell back as Clope raised his sword into the air. Clope's dazzling white aura shot even higher into the sky than the black one from Choi Han. An aura was a swordmaster's identity; it reflected the wielder's personality. The Guardian Knight trusted his own strength over that black-haired punk's. His white wyvern roared as well.

Raising his voice over the snarl, Choi Han shouted, "Come at me!"

"Ha! What an arrogant whelp!"

Clope's white aura condensed into a ball, which launched at Choi Han. At the same time, the black bone dragon darted forward. *Boom!* It felt as if all of heaven and earth were shaking. Black light clashed against white with an earsplitting screech.

"Roooar!"

The white wyvern's claws scraped against the dragon's skeleton. It attempted to bite down on one of the dragon's wings as well, but to no avail.

"Graaaah!"

Its claws couldn't scratch the dragon's ebony bones, and the skeletal wings didn't snap. This entity lorded over all others. The race of whale beastfolk, the sovereigns of the sea, as well as the bear and lion beastfolk, who sought dominance on land, were all referred to as "tribes." Only dragons were collectively called by their name alone, not the Dragon Tribe. This distinction had nothing to do with their superior size or strength; they simply occupied a different echelon of existence.

The white wyvern shrieked as one of its claws broke off, its foot bleeding from the wound. This creature was a mutant, more powerful than the other wyverns. Clope's knights had initially believed it could defeat the bone dragon. While a living dragon might have proven challenging, only bones remained of this one.

Unfortunately, no monster could break a dragon's bones. The wyvern was a lower-level life-form—and it wasn't alone in its inferiority. Choi Han easily deflected Clope's white aura with his sword, studying the Guardian Knight's expressions.

Clope's wyvern refused to give up. It body-slammed the skeleton full force, trying to bash the bones to dust. On impact, the two swordsmen clashed once more. Clope was wily; his white aura hissed and slithered like a snake as it charged toward Choi Han. Choi Han's black aura shot zipped straight ahead, instantly cutting off the head of the writhing white aura.

"You're not too bad!" Clope jeered, still confident in his brighter and more expansive aura.

Choi Han remained stoic, unbothered by the provocation.

His lack of response made Clope frown. "I guess even I need stepping stones like you to pave the way for my legend!"

This time, Choi Han's brows twitched as their beastly mounts separated once more. When Clope saw he'd gotten a reaction out of his foe at last, he smirked.

"I was going to take care of you quietly, since you're so annoying," Choi Han said. "But now you're just spouting nonsense."

"…What?"

Choi Han's blatant disdain had the Guardian Knight at a loss for words. The dark-haired swordsman was looking down on him for being an arrogant bastard. Choi Han's aura became a consuming void, its black depths growing vast and dim enough to swallow the light.

As with any aura, his matched its wielder's personality. A lightless void was the true essence of darkness, as well as the true nature Choi Han had developed in the Dark Forest. Thanks to a certain someone, Choi Han had since chosen to accept this aspect of his character. His aura continued to darken.

After hearing the drivel this clueless man was spewing, Choi Han couldn't sit still. *He thinks* he's *the one who'll create a new legend?*

Choi Han pointed the darkness at Clope. "You're not the author of this legend. That role is reserved for someone else."

A legend. A new history. The history Choi Han would write in his second home, with his second family. That narrative already had an author—and he was the only one who deserved that right.

"Excuse me?" Clope asked in disbelief. Then he felt a sudden icy sensation on the back of his neck.

Only the slightest amount of light remained on Choi Han's blade. This was his current limit. He knew that on the day he could make his sword go completely dark, the next stage in his journey as a swordsman would begin.

Choi Han shared the future he had in mind with Clope. "*I'll* pave the way for *him* to get there." He would pave that man's path to become a legend with his own two hands. That was his resolve.

The only one who overheard this conversation was Mary. The necromancer's face was ashen as she manipulated the bone dragon, a creature on a higher tier of existence. A dragon's bones changed colors based on its attributes; these bones were special, which made

it difficult for her to control them. Yet Mary had managed to use her dead mana to dye the dragon's skeleton—the same form upon which the white crown had sat, prior to bestowing the Dominating Aura upon Cale. She had succeeded.

Now that she had a unique connection to the remains, she listened as the dragon's ears. And through that, Choi Han's voice had reached her loud and clear. "I'll *pave the way for* him *to get there.*"

Mary fixed her gaze on Cale, who stood before her. While he kept the shield in place, he muttered under his breath, "What the hell are they prattling on about instead of fighting?"

He spoke so quietly that only Mary caught his words. Although his comment made him sound unreliable, Mary had a front-row seat to what he was going through. Sweat soaked his back, and his shoulders trembled. Mary knew Cale was struggling more than anyone right now. He was always like this.

Cale was, in fact, having a hard time holding this position with his arms outstretched, pretending he was forcing himself to keep the shield active. As his weakened arms throbbed with pain, he felt like he was being punished.

Watching his hands shake, Mary remembered what he'd told her when he activated the shield three days ago. *"Don't leave our side. The number of people who wish you harm will surge the moment you use your powers for our territory."*

Even so, Mary had already made up her mind. She was more than willing to do this much for the people who'd shown her the beautiful world on the surface. Besides, shielding her presence and hiding was her specialty.

But what Cale had said next changed her perspective. *"No need to worry, though. You don't have to lurk in the shadows forever. I'll let you live however you want."*

Cale's words had touched her heart.

With a flick of her wrists, Mary's black-latticed hands moved again. *Hwoosh.* A strong winter breeze swept past, fluttering the hem of Mary's black robe. It felt as if the wind might blow off her hood, but she didn't reach up to secure it. She had something more important to do.

No one could see her while she was invisible, but one person could sense it: Choi Han. He glanced down at his feet. Black orbs of light solidified in the skeletal dragon's bones. It was dead mana—Mary's power. The black glow, which had previously lurked only in the bone dragon's eye sockets, expanded to cover its entire body and converged at its heart.

Choi Han instantly understood what Mary was trying to say. *You feel the same way. You and I are trying to walk the same path.*

At times like these, Choi Han felt certain he wasn't alone. How could anything scare him in this situation? He reached out a hand, and the bone dragon synchronized with his movement, as if it were an extension of his body. The swordsman and the dragon were acting as one. They surged forth in this silent, coordinated attack.

Fwoom.

With a great roar, the dragon sank its fangs into the white wyvern's neck. *Whish!* The white aura was severed. Clope's eyes went wide as the dark void consumed his vision.

"Skreee!"

Blood spurted out of the white wyvern's neck. The bone dragon's claws pierced through the spray, lodging a tight grip around the wyvern's throat.

Choi Han grabbed hold of the bone dragon's neck. "Let's rise, Mary."

The necromancer responded right away. Her dead mana stretched out from the dragon's wing bones, weaving membranes like spiderwebs. *Flap, flap.* Even as veins resembling black threads spread through her eyes, Mary didn't stop. She was growing rapidly,

about to break through a wall. Then her hands clasped around the neck she couldn't see. Bit by bit, the white wyvern's throat was dyed black.

"Ugh!"

Clope yanked on the reins to regain his balance, then launched his aura at the bone dragon's front foot. The dragon flapped its wings, flying up and out of the way. It climbed higher and higher, with Choi Han at its head and the wyvern clenched between its feet.

One of the knights atop the wall couldn't hold back his amazement. "A dragon knight…" Upon uttering the words, his heart thudded wildly. The title carried an immense weight incomparable to that of a wyvern knight. His rapt gaze never left the sky. The tide of the battle was solely dependent on the outcome of the bone dragon's clash with the white wyvern.

Boom! A deafening rumble made the knight's eyes widen.

Cale watched from afar, staring with his mouth agape in stupefied wonder. One of the stony mountains had lost its peak. The bone dragon had just slammed the white wyvern into the mountain.

‹Dragons really are strong! Wyverns are as weak as a tiny tree branch! But I, the great and mighty Raon Mir, am even more amazing than that bone dragon!›

Tuning out Raon's background chatter, Cale chuckled in disbelief. *I hope they didn't kill him.* He kept a fretful watch over the mountain, hoping he didn't hadn't missed out on a pile of gold.

Blood seeped out of the wyvern's mouth. It growled as it flailed about helplessly, unable to get up. *That stupid bone dragon!* Clope thought. The infernal creature had not only bashed his wyvern into the mountain, but now the dragon stood on his wyvern's head, peering down at it.

"Ugh!"

Clope, on the other hand, was unharmed; he had jumped away from the wyvern the moment it was thrown and managed to

land safely. And yet, he was still powerless.

Slash!

Again, his white aura was hacked to pieces. No matter how hard he tried to coil his aura around Choi Han like a serpent, he couldn't cut his foe.

"I see your sword is a white snake. It suits you better than the wyvern."

Clope trembled at the sound of Choi Han's calm voice. A white serpent, not a wyvern, was the true symbol of House Seca. The qualifications to become a Guardian Knight rested with such snakelike characters.

"Y-you nameless bastard! How dare you oppose a Guardian Knight!"

Clope's sword struck out at Choi Han once again, but Choi Han only had two words for him.

"So annoying."

That was the end. When the void swooped in toward Clope once more, the white snake was gobbled up by the darkness. *Clang!* Clope's sword clattered to the ground.

"Augh! M-my arm!"

Clope's arm was missing below the shoulder. His black-haired foe crushed his throat in a choking grip, just as the bone dragon had done to the white wyvern. Clope couldn't breathe. As the pain of suffocation overwhelmed even the agony of losing his arm, a cold voice reached his ears.

"Tell the wyverns to stop," Choi Han commanded. He took the flute from Clope's pocket and stared pointedly at him.

Choi Han had captured both the white wyvern and the Guardian Knight, keeping both of them alive. With that, he'd successfully fulfilled Cale's order; all he had left to do was to return.

"Ghk… Ngh!"

When Choi Han heard the Guardian Knight gasping for breath, his expression changed. The Guardian Knight was shaking his head, crying like a baby all the while—perhaps because he couldn't breathe.

Suddenly, Choi Han found himself questioning the facts. *How could a white snake control a wyvern?*

Auras were a reflection of their wielders. A white snake could never command a wyvern.

Choi Han turned his head. He wasted no time in leaping back onto the bone dragon. "We need to go back!" he shouted to Mary.

This wasn't the end after all—there was more to come.

As the bone dragon rose back into the sky, Choi Han found what he was looking for. The helmeted knight, the only one allowed to confer with Clope Seca directly, was blowing a whistle no human could hear.

It's him.

"Graaah!"

The wyvern under the bone dragon's feet thrashed violently, its veins bulging with the effort. Where once it had been devoid of energy, it now writhed as though it had forgotten the meaning of fear or death, attempting to drag itself across the ground.

"Damn it!"

Choi Han and the bone dragon shot toward their target, but the helmeted knight was too quick. All the other wyverns charged the shield in one fell swoop.

Baaaaang! Baaaaang!

Though the wyverns' wings, claws, and limbs were smashed to pieces, they didn't stop. They kept scrambling to break through the shield as if they'd gone mad. Bright-red blood dripped down the protective barrier.

‹Seems like the wyverns have lost it, human! How cute!›

But Cale couldn't hear Raon's voice. *The Guardian Knight isn't the one controlling the wyverns? It was him in the novel.* Cale realized that there were things *Birth of a Hero*'s first five volumes hadn't revealed. The helmeted knight, for instance—Cale had no knowledge of the man.

That knight mounted a wyvern and made a beeline for Cale, though he had no weapon. And then…

‹Human, something's off. I sense the power of nature on him.›

What? The power of nature? Did that mean he had an Ancient Power?

An object materialized in the helmeted knight's hand, and Cale knew right away what it was. The knight had summoned a sword—or rather, an Ancient Power shaped like a sword. The blade grew longer and longer until it resembled a spear.

Cale's heart pounded in his chest. That was when he heard the voice of the gluttonous priestess. **"You will block it."**

The Unbreakable Shield began to shrink.

"What the…?!"

Cale could barely speak. His entire body flared hot. Though he wasn't in pain, it was getting hard for him to breathe. The Ancient Powers clamored inside him, and the tattoos marking his body seared his skin. And all the while, the shield grew ever smaller.

Soon it was tiny, and the silver wings had vanished completely. Raon's barrier was now the only thing keeping the wyverns at bay.

The helmeted knight's mouth curled in a smile. "Try blocking this." He drew back his arm, then hurled the sword. The giant blade—now virtually a polearm—shot toward Cale.

‹Human, there's something weird about it! I'll make more shields!›

Raon created shield upon shield to protect Cale until there were four layers in total. Something still felt off to him, however; it

felt as if magic wouldn't work on the sword.

Nature's deadliest events were known as "natural disasters." These included hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, and hailstorms. The sword was reminiscent of a natural disaster in that it contained the destructive forces of nature.

The six-year-old dragon's instincts told him it would take more than magic to deflect an attack from the blade. The only thing that could stop it was a dragon, by using either Dragon's Breath or their very body. Halting its advance would require the strongest entity in the natural world.

Only a few seconds remained before the sword would hit Cale. In those few seconds, Raon's eyes stayed locked on Cale, and he moved without a thought.

Before he got far, he heard Cale's voice. "Damn it!"

That shout jolted Raon back to his senses. *‹Mary! Call the dragon!›*

Raon increased the number of shields to five, then six. This black dragon, who had yet to experience his first growth spurt and couldn't use Dragon's Breath, was reaching his limit.

Crack!

The natural disaster smashed effortlessly through the shields the moment it touched them. Those barriers might as well have been paper. One by one, the shields dissipated without a sound. Every time a layer was destroyed, Raon created a new one. He just had to endure until Mary's dragon arrived.

Then Cale spoke again. "Enough."

Raon paused and whirled toward Cale.

Baaaaaang!

The people on the wall were powerless as a massive crash and a flash of blinding light washed over them. The last thing they saw was the black bone dragon ramming into the massive sword.

Once their vision returned, they could see the dragon's skeleton crumbling. Those ancient, lifeless bones were not enough; though the undead creature had cracked the blade, it had failed to destroy it.

Raon knew it on sight. For the first time in his six years, this inexperienced baby dragon sensed real danger. Again, his body moved on its own.

"Ha… Ha ha…"

Cale's abrupt laughter reached his ears. Raon looked over, frozen in place. Cale was coughing up a large amount of blood. As he cackled on, more blood leaked from his mouth, nose, and ears.

A voice in Cale's mind piped up, **"Isn't that my sword?"**

The speaker was the previous owner of the Dominating Aura.

"That's the Dragon-Slaying Sword."

A dragon slayer? It clicked for Cale then. If the helmeted knight's Ancient Power was the Dragon-Slaying Sword, that explained how it had shattered the dragon's skeleton, vanquishing the beast a second time.

Next, Cale thought about the crown he'd stolen from the north. The white crown looked similar to the one that had vanished when he gained the Dominating Aura. That crown, currently stowed away in his magic bag, had a taste for dragon blood. Cale realized that the sword and the crown had to be a pair. That was why the crown had been in the north.

Then one more possibility occurred to him, as if whispered by his instincts. The World Tree had told him three hints about its vague vision of the future. Aside from its statements about Raon's family and the Water of Judgment, there was one more thing it had said.

‹The person collecting Ancient Powers has gathered three.›

The World Tree must have been referring to this helmeted bastard.

Cale clenched his fists. His whole body was shaking. "You son of a bitch." Turning on the invisible baby dragon, he shouted, "Raon, don't move!"

Another voice in his mind snagged his attention. **"Are you trying to sacrifice yourself?"**

No! I'll never hurt myself for someone else's sake. Cale pushed the stone guardian's question aside, instead focusing on the words of his fellow glutton—the gluttonous priestess. He zeroed in on her voice.

"This is enough."

The tattoo on Cale's chest had changed when he obtained the Energy of the Heart. A heart had appeared on the silver shield. Now that red heart slowly turned silver. The shield had devoured its first ability.

Cale channeled as much power into the shield as he could.

A natural disaster clashed against the Energy of the Heart, the recovery ability of a human who yearned to live. Humanity's power to overcome natural disasters came from their vitality and their desire to survive.

Baaang!

The massive, cracked blade rammed into the miniature shield. A blaze of light infinitely brighter than the last enveloped the entire area.

A split second before the whiteout, Cale saw Choi Han vaulting toward the helmeted knight's back like a vengeful demon. As Raon's paws supported him from behind, Cale heard the priestess's voice. **"Good job."**

Cale knew right away that he'd blocked it. The power of restoration, the will to live… This was the strength of humans, who managed to survive all manner of nature's offensives.

The shield had not broken.

***

Bassen Henituse was still in the communications center, the highest room in the castle tower.

"B-Brother!" Bassen cried out. He clutched the railing with one hand, as if he was about to leap from the tower and rush to Cale's side.

The light dimmed, and soon his vision recovered.

Crrrack!

At the sound, Bassen's eyes flew open.

Prior to landing this last blow, the gargantuan sword had been damaged. Fractures crept along the sword's full length—and then it dissipated. When the floating specks touched a few nearby wyverns, they instantly turned to ash.

Bassen grappled with his fear, working to process what had happened. Then something else caught his attention: the shield. While that minuscule shield hadn't broken, there was a crack where the sword had struck it. Several, in fact, to the point that it looked like it might shatter at a single touch. It seemed fit to fall apart at any moment.

Then he saw his brother, Cale Henituse.

Beeeeeep. Beeeeeep.

All sorts of emergency calls were flooding into the communications center. Quite a few of them came from other areas of the northeastern region. With so many communication spheres broadcasting live from Henituse territory, the other regions could see the battlefield through the screen.

Yet Bassen heard none of the racket around him; he was fixated on his brother, who could barely stay on his feet. As he

watched Cale cough up black blood, the seventeen-year-old Bassen experienced the horror of war for the first time in his life.

"…use. Bassen Henituse."

Albert was calling out to him. Bassen hadn't heard it properly the first time, but the man's sharp tone snapped him back to his senses.

"What did your brother tell you to do?"

Bassen raised his head. He thought back on Cale's order, sweeping a glance around the room. Information was the most important factor in a war—and this chamber was currently the central information hub for the entirety of Rowoon.

"If you don't want to embarrass yourself—no, if you don't want to regret this in the future—do not forget your task."

Although Albert directed this comment at Bassen, he was speaking to himself as well. His eyes bored through the screen, bloodshot as he focused on every minute movement in the Henituses' domain.

He then told Bassen something else: "The first company of royal knights and the mage brigade are on their way to you."

Cale had asked Albert to wait, but the crown prince had begun to play his part to avoid future embarrassment or regret. At long last, Rowoon's mage brigade was stepping forward to reveal itself to the world.

Bassen then addressed the dazed knights responsible for the communication spheres. "We're going to relay detailed information about the enemy to every corner of Rowoon."

His brother had told him something three days ago, on the night of the crown prince's proclamation.

"We're on the front lines."

Cale's voice was still vivid in Bassen's memory.

"They say starting something is half the battle. If people hear about how we survived and protected the castle, the kingdom's morale will change. We need to etch the image of victory into the people's minds. That's the way for us to win this war."

Bassen's brother had been his usual calm self as he'd added, *"That's the way for all of us to survive."*

The man who'd said all that was barely hanging on right now.

With that in mind, Bassen declared to the mages, "We'll tell them exactly how we win this battle."

He firmly believed Rowoon's morale would surge from here on out. Lowering his head, he looked back toward the wall.

***

Müller was stationed on top of the wall. Like Bassen, he had opened his eyes upon hearing a sound.

Crrrack!

This noise came from the walls. Cracks were forming on the stone structure.

No! Not the walls I so carefully designed!

An emotion other than fear sparked in the eyes of this cowardly yet prideful half-blood. As the countess still had her hand on his collar, however, he could only wheeze. Müller gasped as he was flung aside and fell to the ground.

A scream tore through the air. "Cale!" It had come from Violan.

"Everybody focus!" Deruth shouted.

Müller raised his head. The count, always a calm and gentle man, wore a look of utter devastation. Veins bulged on his forehead.

"Activate the catapults on the double!" The count drew his sword and approached the edge of the wall, peering down below. In a voice hoarse with anger, sorrow, and uncertainty, he cried out, "Don't let a single one of them live!"

At the same time, Müller heard something else.

Baaang!

The first thing he saw was a silver light—but not the light of Cale's shield. This silver light spreading out above Weston looked like the Milky Way. Yet it was still a shield all the same, one that seemingly mimicked Cale's. Then it began to multiply. One, two, three, four, and still more layers of silver shields materialized, blanketing the sky over and over again.

Although he was a half-blood, Müller's dwarven ancestry clued him in to the source: a dragon. Somehow, he knew deep down that only a dragon could accomplish this. He thought about the juvenile dragon that lived in this territory. That youngling must have created these shields.

Another familiar figure loomed far overhead, near the many shields: Choi Han. The swordsman was engaged in a fierce airborne duel with the helmeted knight, his black aura convulsing viciously. Though his aura retained a flicker of light within the darkness, it raged with more turbulence than ever before.

"Ha… Ha ha!"

Despite Choi Han's efforts, the sword easily repelled his aura. The helmeted knight laughed as he used the sword-shaped Ancient Power—newly reformed after its destruction—to parry Choi Han's attacks. He didn't appear to be struggling even though he'd already lost his weapon once.

Baaaaang!

As their weapons clashed against one another, Choi Han stumbled a step backward. *Tat.* The flying skeleton brigade had returned from its retreat, helping support Choi Han in the air.

Mary had brought them back to create a path for Choi Han to tread in midair. He and the numerous skeletons were locked in combat against the wyvern-riding helmeted knight. The sheer

number of flying skeletons made it difficult to see the two combatants in the center.

One person with a good view of the proceedings was Mary herself. If anything, she saw things *too* clearly. Dead mana enveloped her body as her hands shook.

Right then, Violan arrived to hold Cale upright; he was on the verge of collapse. "Cale!" As soon as she reached him, Cale tottered and fell into her arms.

She swallowed another scream. Trails of black blood seeped from Cale's eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. He was coughing up so much blood that it looked as if he might choke on it.

Violan could feel Cale's body growing colder. As all the warmth drained from her son, a doctor and a priest hurried over to them.

"Just a little more, Cale. Hold on just a bit longer." She massaged Cale's body and arms. He was losing so much blood, she worried he wouldn't have any left.

Then Cale said weakly, "I…I'm okay."

What? Her vision swam as she looked at Cale. The priest and the doctor approaching him flinched.

Not one of them could hear the voice echoing in Cale's mind right now. *‹You're bleeding way too much, human. This is different from usual. Human! Please, human. Please stop bleeding. I'll even let you get away with it! If you die, you'll regret it!›*

"Stay here," Cale said, his hand rising to grasp at air.

Watching her son reach for nothing, the countess squeezed her eyes shut. Cale was probably hallucinating because of his unstable condition. Upon reopening them, she caught a glimpse of Deruth's distraught face. She turned away from Cale for a moment and composed herself with an effort; at least one of them had to think straight.

Yet Cale's next remark nearly destroyed her. "If you go, you'll get hurt…"

When she heard the words he forced out, she struggled to hold back her tears. He was still saying things like that, even while coughing up blood—even though his mind had to be a mess. In that state, he was worrying about other people. The countess felt as if her heart was breaking.

Cale finally managed to speak again. "Stay by my side and—ghk!"

He coughed up another handful of blood as his body bled fresh. He couldn't complete his intended remark: *Stay by my side and beat him up.*

Only one creature understood what he meant to say. There was no rain, yet clear droplets dappled the legs of Cale's trousers from above. The entity drenching Cale's clothes with his tears knew exactly what he'd meant to say.

‹I'll kill him.›

Another rumble reverberated through the cloudy sky. While Raon couldn't replicate that natural disaster of a sword, he could produce a disaster to imitate it: a tempest. It wasn't hard for Raon to mimic such things. After all, he was a dragon.

The sky turned black as the dragon used his powers to sweep everything away. At the same time, Raon finally figured out why Cale was acting like this. The young dragon recalled something he'd heard from the Erhaven—a casual remark the venerable ancient dragon had dropped during one of his lessons.

"Have you heard of the dragon slayers, youngster? They're sometimes called 'dragon catchers' too."

Raon didn't like that term one bit. How dare they catch the great and mighty dragons?

"Well, you'll probably never have to deal with a dragon slayer trying to kill you. In fact, I suspect the dragon slayer would do everything in his power to keep you alive."

Erhaven believed Cale was a descendant of the dragon slayer clan. He hadn't said those things with a day like today in mind; he'd only shared some common knowledge with Raon.

"Dragon slayers are unique individuals who've overcome their human limits. They're close to nature."

The concept of humans close to nature had prompted Raon to reply, *"Our weak human is close to nature too!"*

"That's why I'm saying your weak human punk is a dra—oh! Well, I guess I should pretend not to know, since he's trying to hide it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing. Anyway, listen to me, youngster. If a dragon slayer comes after you, run." Raon had snorted at that, but Erhaven was dead serious. *"Those bastards are humans who devour dragons to get stronger."*

Dragons were said to be the entities closest to nature, and they had myriad colors and attributes. Hence, people could consume dragons to become closer to nature themselves.

"Young dragons like you have to be especially careful. Your body hasn't grown up yet, and you can't use Dragon's Breath. Well, as long as you have that unlucky punk by your side, you'll probably be fine growing up slowly."

"There's no way the great and mighty Raon Mir will get hurt!"

Erhaven had chuckled as he responded, *"No being in this world is truly great and mighty, youngster."*

Today, Raon finally understood. *I'm not great and mighty at all.* He still had a long way to go.

Raon looked at the hand holding his invisible paw. Blood dripped down Cale's fingers. Right then, Raon poured all his emotions into his magic. Beginning with one drop, then two, rain fell upon the battlefield.

The remaining wyverns rushed the silver shield, while the bears dodged catapult projectiles and arrows as they charged the cracked walls. The tigers tried to attack the bears from the rear, but there were at least ten bears to every tiger.

Rumble, rumble!

The rain took a dramatic turn. First the gentle shower whipped into a storm; then it evolved into a roaring tempest. Lightning split the sky.

Ker-crack!

Dozens—no, *hundreds* of lightning bolts struck the wyvern knights and the bears, targeting the enemies without the slightest margin of error. The lightning resembled the sword from earlier, trying to strike down everything in its way.

One person was able to knock the bolts aside without breaking a sweat. "This place is a hoot. Is a mage trying to copy me? Who is it?" The helmeted knight licked his lips as he carved his way through the torrent of hail and lightning, scanning his surroundings.

That Ancient Power Raon sensed earlier had reminded him of natural disasters. The knight's sword, containing the essence of hurricanes, hailstorms, and volcanic eruptions, easily dispatched these pale imitations.

The helmeted knight turned his gaze on Choi Han, chuckling as Choi Han spat out blood. His black aura rioted in a mirror of its wielder's emotions. Their eyes locked.

"If you'd achieved pure darkness, maybe you would've had a chance. As it is, you're still a long way off."

The knight lightly swung his sword. The back of his hand was bleeding slightly—an injury inflicted by Choi Han's black aura. Still, the knight showed no fear. Dwarven armor protected his body: the brainchild of dwarves who wished to kill dragons. It was sturdy enough to serve as a dragon catcher's uniform. *Still, I can't lower my guard around him.*

Their swords met again. *Clang!* The black aura abruptly materialized in front of the knight to nick his left cheek, and his volcanic Ancient Power slammed down onto the black aura.

Baaaaang!

The impact was loud enough to drown out the thunder.

With another laugh, the knight said, "I told you, you can't win."

Choi Han clenched his teeth. Even he knew the knight had a point. His black aura wasn't enough. The battle would have gone differently if he'd accomplished total darkness. *If only I'd managed to complete it!*

Just what *was* that sword? It seemed to be on a completely different level; his aura couldn't win against it. The knight was strong—stronger than Choi Han. If only he'd advanced a tiny bit further, he could've defeated the helmeted knight!

Choi Han stood on one of the few skeletons left, struggling to catch his breath. He heaved, winded from the fight. How long had it been since he'd been this short of breath? It had to have been at least ten years. He couldn't even wipe away the blood that oozed out every time he inhaled. Coughing up blood for the first time in ages felt so strange.

In that instant, he realized something: Cale always coughed up way more blood than this.

Choi Han's face crumpled. His foe was strong, but he shouldn't entertain any thoughts of losing. His brows furrowed deeply as the helmeted knight continued mocking him.

"I came because I heard there was someone here with Ancient Powers, but I didn't think he'd actually cough up blood like they said he would. His body is weak. You're telling me he gathered those powers despite not having the vessel to support them? I can't believe nature allowed that punk to gain access to them."

The knight's comments got on Choi Han's nerves. He spoke as though Cale had taken things he had no right to touch, and it sent

Choi Han spiraling into rage.

Deep down, the helmeted knight found Cale Henituse most fascinating. Only those who enjoyed nature's permission—those who had the vessel to support them—could earn Ancient Powers. The people of this world believed that one needed heaven's mandate to be lucky enough to find an Ancient Power, but nature itself calculated who obtained access. That being the case, the knight couldn't fathom how someone like Cale could have two Ancient Powers.

He had sensed two abilities when he struck Cale's shield: the power of wood and the power of regeneration. *Did nature really hand this punk two abilities with a vessel as weak as his?*

After Cale, the knight considered Choi Han to be the second most interesting person. This young man's vessel was almost as impressive as his own. The knight found it bizarre that nature hadn't bestowed any Ancient Powers upon him.

Taking advantage of the knight's momentary distraction, Choi Han charged. Their blades locked for the umpteenth time.

Baaaaang!

The vibrations rattled the air and pulverized the surrounding skeletons. The translucent sword shoved against the black aura as the two men stared each other down. Choi Han could see a pair of brown eyes behind the helmet. The knight grinned at him.

This is dangerous, Choi Han thought. It had been a while since he'd experienced this sensation; it reminded him of Erhaven. He tried to take a step back.

Looking deep into Choi Han's eyes, the helmeted knight whispered, "You've lived a long time too."

Choi Han flinched. *"Too"?*

The knight's smile broadened at his foe's hesitation, and his hand snapped out.

"Ugh!"

He'd snagged Choi Han by the neck—and that was only the beginning. Even as Mary's monsters hurriedly bit the knight's wyvern to help Choi Han, the knight stabbed his sword into Choi Han's shoulder. The blade pelted the wound like hail, battered it like a hurricane, and scorched it like a volcano.

The knight grinned, squeezing Choi Han's throat. Choi Han looked pitiful as the knight relentlessly choked him. "This was fun. It was worth coming out for the first time in a while. I'm sure we'll meet again."

Choi Han's distorted expression, twisted with anger and pain, made the knight chuckle. Without looking away, the knight slowly let go. The moment he did, however, all emotion leached from Choi Han's face. His hand on the wounded side wrapped around the knight's wrist. His other hand grabbed on to the sword stabbed into his shoulder.

Everything happened in the space of a heartbeat.

Kssshhh!

Choi Han's palm burned as if he'd plunged it in hot lava. For a split second, he studied the helmeted knight with a completely blank expression. This was Choi Han's true face. His earlier flinch had been deliberate, and now he revealed his real expression: the absence of any expression at all. After living for so long, his features had stiffened such that they showed no emotion whatsoever.

Pow! Choi Han kicked the wyvern's neck with his foot and leapt down, keeping his grip on the knight and sword.

After a pause, the skeletons scattered. The now-riderless wyvern immediately suffered a lightning strike.

Ker-crack!

"Skreee!"

The final wyvern plummeted to the ground.

Having killed the last one, Raon emerged from within the silver shield he'd created. He was the only one left in the sky; Choi Han

was tumbling down with the helmeted knight.

"Are you crazy?!"

The helmeted knight kicked Choi Han, trying to pry himself away. When that didn't work, he drew upon more of his Ancient Powers. Yet Choi Han had no intention of opening his aura-covered hand and dropping that sword-shaped Ancient Power.

It wasn't the fall that had the knight in a panic; the source of his concern was behind him. Dead mana—the antithesis of nature—was condensing into a giant orb, with a small monster skeleton at its center.

The knight scowled. Though the power he sensed was weaker than he was, it continued to build, feeling like a small arrow aiming for his back. The necromancer was gathering her strength; the dead mana surrounding the small monster took on a sharp edge, like a sword.

There was another power bolstering the dead mana: the same magic that produced imitations of the knight's combined hailstorm, hurricane, and volcano Ancient Power. Still invisible, Raon used his power to support Mary's efforts. The small blade of dead mana transformed into an arrowhead, which Raon's powers expanded to the size of a ballista bolt.

Clutched in Choi Han's hold, the helmeted knight could see the veins standing out on the backs of Choi Han's hands. The young man's eyes shone with his resolve to never let go.

If this goes on, I'm actually in trouble!

Grimacing, the knight shouted, "Hey, are you nuts? Getting hit by that thing won't kill me—you're the one who's going to die!"

The dead mana targeted the helmeted knight's back with precision, gradually assuming the shape of a full arrow. It looked as if it could easily pierce both the entwined fighters. Choi Han's gaze shifted from the arrow back to the knight.

"I've been crazy for ages already."

He'd lost his mind a long, long time ago, when he was in the Dark Forest. How could anyone avoid going mad after decades of living alone in that hellish place? Not only that, but Choi Han didn't like how relaxed this knight was. To vent some of his anger, he needed to see this man suffer.

A slow smile brightened his dispassionate face. He was thankful that Mary had understood his intentions. People definitely were stronger together.

Then Raon's voice reached Choi Han's mind. *‹Stupid Choi Han. You definitely won't die.›*

The arrow fired.

"Son of a…!"

Boom!

That cacophonous noise harmonized with the helmeted knight's shout, resounding outside the city.

When Cale bore witness to this newest blinding explosion, he snorted. "You unbelievable fools."

One of his own Ancient Powers, the Energy of the Heart, was working to expel all of the dead blood in his body. Ever so slowly, he clambered back to his feet.

Cale hadn't fallen just yet.

***

"Grab on to the wall!"

At Deruth's order, the troops rushed to grip the wall or flatten themselves against the floor.

The explosion shook the entire area. Although the blast had occurred in the sky, the aftershocks rattled the walls.

"This war goes beyond mankind," Deruth muttered. Indeed, the conflict far exceeded the traditional hostilities between people.

He looked over at his wife and son—then loosed a half gasp, half laugh. Cale, who had gotten back up at some point, had deployed a small shield to protect the countess, the doctor, and the priest. At the sight of it, realization dawned on Deruth. *This is a war beyond human capabilities, and my son is at the center of this battle.*

Seeing his son on his feet and looking much better left the count with a complicated feeling. He pushed off the wall and stood up.

Cale, on the other hand, had no idea what Deruth was thinking as he stared into the burning darkness, spotting a momentary flash within the explosion. "What the hell is that?"

Like most people without martial arts training, Cale didn't have enhanced vision; he couldn't make out any details. What he'd seen was Choi Han's power. Choi Han's all-but-perfect darkness had absorbed the dead mana, and the combination of light and darkness had resulted in a detonation.

As for what remained at the site…

Drip, drip.

Rain continued to fall. Few drops landed directly on the ground, instead drenching the corpses of wyverns and bears, mixing with their blood. As the wind and the rain washed away the dust and debris in the air, the full scene finally came into view.

Audible fractures skittered across the helmeted knight's armor, and pieces began to chip off. Soon the set of armor, forged by a dwarf who dreamed of seizing a dragon, shattered and fell to the muddy ground.

"You bastards!" the knight swore, gritting his teeth. "Ugh!" He hacked up blood as he hobbled to his feet, staring straight ahead with red-rimmed eyes.

The white tiger, Gashan, had used his incantations to protect Choi Han. Holding his wounded shoulder, Choi Han regarded the

dragon slayer—but the dragon slayer wasn't looking at him.

"Ha… Ha ha…"

Though the helmeted knight was spitting blood, Choi Han could see that he was otherwise unharmed. That armor of his had been truly incredible. And Raon had destroyed it all the same.

The knight's glare turned ice-cold. A pack of natural disasters roiled inside his body, enveloping him as if he'd turned into the Dragon-Slaying Sword himself.

With a mad cackle, he mumbled, "There's a dragon here. Right this minute."

Only a dragon could destroy an item forged by the Flame Dwarves. He'd assumed a talented mage was imitating him, but now he knew a dragon was somewhere nearby, looking down at him over its snout. It had probably lent his foes its power just this once to eliminate him.

The dwarf who'd given him the armor had said the following: *"This cannot withstand Dragon's Breath, but it should be able to guard against your average mature dragon's magic."*

"Even a dragon lord?"

"Why bring up something that doesn't exist? The dragon lord is the emperor of magic; this armor wouldn't hold up against it. If there really were such a thing as a dragon lord, would we be doing this? Anyway, it should deflect an ancient dragon's magic at least once as well. That's the limit."

The dragon slayer's instincts told him an ancient dragon, or one beyond that level, was present. *But isn't there only one?* He only knew of a single ancient dragon, and that one was close to death. Was there another?

More laughter bubbled out of him. *These scaly bastards sure are persistent.* The ancient dragon had probably bided its time, watching with a haughty expression as these forces of nature clashed. It had no other reason to step in when it did. Had it been

involved from the beginning, it would have used Dragon Fear and Dragon Breath to kill him. Since he hadn't completed his development, it would have had no trouble bringing him down.

"Ghk!"

The knight spewed out more blood. The moment the armor cracked, he had yanked the sword-shaped Ancient Power out of Choi Han to guard himself. Still, Choi Han's aura and the dead-mana explosion had battered his internal organs. It felt as if his insides were all twisted up. He hadn't experienced this for quite some time.

If only I had the crown! That was the only reason he'd bowed his head to that crazy bastard in the first place.

As the knight thought about the reason for his incomplete state, he ground his teeth, stewing in disappointment. He couldn't achieve his full power because some lowlifes had stolen the crown.

Furthermore, his weapon—the Sword of Disasters—had shattered and reformed a couple of times, so he was reaching his limit. He could only use the sword once more in this battle. His vessel couldn't take more than that.

While he possessed one more dragon catcher ability, it was a pitiful power he didn't need: the Dominating Aura. Only a scammer would use that laughable power; it didn't suit the dignity of a dragon slayer. The aura it produced was an illusion without any real might.

Looking around, the knight made up his mind to capture the ones who had stolen the crown, no matter what it took. "These bastards don't know when to quit."

Another arrow mimicking his power hovered in the air. The swordsman's black aura yet lingered. Then, with the smack of shifting mud, the wyvern and bear corpses clambered to their feet. The Tiger Tribe flanked them, with the white tiger at the center, and the humans on the wall aimed their arrows and catapults at him.

The knight closed his eyes. "Looks like I lost."

Anybody could see that the battle was over.

Even after the knight flashed a self-pitying smile, Choi Han remained alert. His left shoulder still bore the wound from the Sword of Disasters; if the knight hadn't pulled back the power to defend himself, Choi Han's left arm would have been rendered useless. He clenched his right hand into a fist.

Just then, the final piece of the armor—the helmet—toppled to the ground. *Plop.* The moment his face was revealed to the world, the knight made his move. His power took on the shape of a sharp blade, which pointed at a single target.

"Stop him!" Gashan bellowed, and the tigers rushed forward. Choi Han likewise lunged for the knight.

Screeching, the dead wyverns darted over to block the knight's attack and restrain him. The dead bears charged through the muck, pursuing him as if they'd never been allies. Though the undead creatures frantically dogged his steps, they disappeared the moment they came into contact with his Ancient Power. Nothing could stop him.

The knight continued his unyielding advance, heading toward the wall—or more specifically, toward Cale. Reinvigorated, he burst out laughing again. "Bwa ha ha ha! Ha ha ha! I knew it would be like this!"

The arrow imitating his natural disasters hung in the air, unmoving; it didn't fly toward the wall.

As the knight made eye contact with Cale, he shouted, "So you're under a dragon's protection!"

He already didn't approve of Cale possessing Ancient Powers, and now this human had a dragon looking out for him! He deserved to die. Profound hatred filled the knight's eyes as a power more potent than ever before encircled his body.

"I'll destroy you and this castle!"

The arrow shining in the air winked out of sight. In its absence, Cale felt a small form clinging to his torso. The invisible

Raon stuck to Cale like a shield, embracing Cale with his wings as if prepared to absorb the power of the disasters himself.

‹I won't let go.›

Warmed by Raon's body heat, Cale took a look around and then gave the dragon a pat on the back.

Choi Han had been sprinting in their direction, but he stopped in his tracks. *Something's off. If Mr. Cale is this calm, then he can't be in any danger.*

At that moment, the knight vaulted into the air, his Sword of Disasters poised to pierce through the wall. Then he, Raon, and everyone else speeding toward him heard the sound of laughter.

It was Cale, laughing in disbelief. When he finally spoke, he sounded completely at ease. "I knew those damn bears were shrewd."

The knight's eyes wavered.

Only a moment ago, Cale had heard Mary's voice. The necromancer had kept quiet in her invisible state, but she'd broken her silence to convey an urgent message. *"Some bears I'm not controlling are on the move!"*

Cale chuckled as he eyed the bear corpses racing over as if trying to stop the knight. There were some live ones in the mix—bears who had been playing dead.

He shifted his gaze to the knight pretending to rush at him. "You're a clever bastard too."

The knight was charging at Cale as if he'd abandoned all hope, but it was just a farce. "Oh, you saw through it?" He grinned, the hatred vanishing from his eyes. This, too, had been an act all along.

As he withdrew a magic scroll from his pocket, the bears sprang into the air, taking out scrolls of their own. They were about to teleport away.

"Catch them!" Gashan urged his men.

At the same time, the count bellowed, "Fire!" The catapults and archers started shooting at the bears.

"I may have lost, but I'm not ready to die just yet." A smile formed on the knight's serpentine face. The features revealed after his helmet's destruction were decidedly snakelike, reminiscent of an imugi—a lesser dragon—that had yet to become a full-fledged dragon.

Still laughing to himself, Cale faced the one person who had caught on. While everybody else made a mad dash for Cale, Choi Han alone had realized something was amiss. Now he used the dead wyverns as a stepladder as he bounded into the air, almost perfectly in line with the knight's movements. If he stepped on just one more wyvern corpse, he would reach the knight.

Raon separated from Cale, casting magic with a forepaw.

Choi Han pushed off the final wyvern's head and launched at the knight, whose attention was still focused on Cale. He took full advantage of the man's distraction.

The knight ripped the teleportation scroll, and he began to disappear. "This is for you, the bastard who has received a dragon's protection…"

This time, his smile twisted with genuine rage. A human protected by a dragon deserved only death.

He swung the Sword of Disasters to block Choi Han's flying assault, still speaking to Cale. "I'll be back soon to finish you—ugh!"

Something had lanced him straight through.

The knight let out a moan, slowly lowering his head to see what had hit him. "Is that…my sword?"

It wasn't the Sword of Disasters, though it was similar. He sensed the power of hurricanes, hailstorms, and volcanoes in this sword. Though it was fake, it resembled his own quite closely.

A childish voice sounded in his ear. "You'll die first."

The knight couldn’t see anyone at first. Then two eyes appeared from thin air—dark blue and shimmering brilliantly, with the slit pupils distinct to dragons. These eyes alone materialized to greet the knight.

Crackle!

A spark ignited, and the knight started to teleport. Even so, the sword impaling him drilled into his body.

Those dark-blue eyes opened wide, refusing to let him escape.

“Augh! Ghk!” The knight coughed up blood once again.

Choi Han didn’t miss that momentary opening. In the split second that the Sword of Disasters weakened, he used his black aura to lop off the knight’s arm.

Slash!

The severed arm reappeared as it moved out of the magic’s sphere of influence. Yet the knight had no time to focus on this. The Sword of Disasters returned and surrounded him once again. It destroyed the fake blade, but Raon’s power had already invaded his chest. The magical faux sword took on the shape of a dragon’s foot and sank its claws into his heart.

Crackle!

As the knight clutched at his chest, his Ancient Power born of natural disasters—the power that most closely resembled a dragon’s, which could only be defeated by Dragon’s Breath or a dragon’s bodily attack—smashed Raon’s magic sword.

Clang.

As the magic broke, a serpentine essence emerged from the knight’s stomach, around the spot where his energy center would be. His other Ancient Power had finally stirred to life.

Mary gasped, and a chill shook Cale to the core. At the same time, he saw the knight whistling soundlessly. *Could it be…?*

A shout tore from Mary’s throat. “I-I can’t control them!”

Cale read the movements of the knight's lips: *I told you, I can't die yet.*

Something clutched Choi Han's ankles, and he glanced down to find a wyvern corpse. Even in death, the wyverns were slaves to the dragon slayer; the creature could never escape. The wyvern corpse shook violently, its skin hissing and popping like boiling water.

"Dodge it!" Cale snapped.

The creature was about to explode.

Those wyverns had chased the knight all the way to the wall. If they erupted, the wall and the tigers would be in danger. Cale couldn't extend his shield to cover the catapults and the archers; if he did, they wouldn't be able to attack the bears. There were also quite a few soldiers stationed along the wall.

Cale grimaced. This was why he hated wars.

Finding Cale's consternation entertaining, the knight couldn't hold back his mirth. "Ha ha ha!"

Crackle.

His form faded. This was the moment he'd been waiting for—with Choi Han restrained, Mary unable to control the wyverns, and Cale with no energy left to use his Ancient Powers. The dragon also continued to use nothing but magic.

The knight had planned for all of this.

Boom!

One of the wyvern corpses exploded, and that marked the beginning. The troops closest to the knight—those who were trying to escape with him—got caught up in the blast.

"Ahhh! Why are you doing this to us?!"

The wyvern's explosion didn't differentiate between friend and foe. Bears were also killed in the blast.

"Aaaugh! How could you?!"

"N-no! Ahh!"

The tigers retreated, gaping at the bears in horror. The knight was slaughtering the wyverns and the bears alike to carve a path for his escape.

He's killing his own allies?

As dozens of wyverns exploded simultaneously, Cale hastily activated his shield to cover the soldiers.

Watching the chaos, the knight laughed. He didn't know why nature had granted Ancient Powers to someone so weak, but the powers usually chose masters with similar temperaments to their own. That was why most average humans could only handle one.

Weakling scum.

There had to be an explanation for why a shield Ancient Power had selected this punk as its master. Everything in this world had a reason behind it. He scoffed at the redheaded fool, who overused his power to save the soldiers when he should've been focused on catching his enemy. Then the knight raised his head one last time.

"Skreee!"

A shadow swallowed up the ground near the wall. It belonged to a creature everyone had been too preoccupied to worry about: the fifteen-meter white wyvern. Even it had been unable to resist its master's summons, dragging its injured body all the way to the wall.

The wyvern's master then gave it one last order: "Die."

With a great shriek, the wyvern fought against the command. Yet the beast was bound and had no choice but to obey. Nearly the size of a dragon, the monstrosity surged toward the wall—or, more specifically, toward Choi Han. He was its one and only target, the one most likely to get in its master's way.

Choi Han's shoulder was already injured, and Raon had no methods left to combat a dragon slayer. If that dragon slayer was already running away, though…

"Raon," Cale said at last, "help Choi Han."

Beside him, Gashan roared, "Duck!"

Cale squeezed his eyes shut, bracing for the impact.

BOOM!

***

A gust of wind swept past Cale—the aftershock of the explosion. Once it died down, Cale reopened his eyes.

Devastation greeted him. The trees, boulders, and everything else in the vicinity had been utterly demolished, and corpses of wyverns and bears littered the battlefield as far as the eye could see. The dragon slayer was gone.

The tigers pushed themselves up off the ground. Meanwhile, a bubble with Choi Han at its center floated toward the wall.

Cale tilted his face up. The clouds had dispersed, leaving behind a clear sky. A ray of light shone down on them.

"Mr. Cale."

Looking in Choi Han's direction, Cale asked, "Did you leave a mark?"

The response came not from Choi Han but the invisible dragon. *‹I did.›*

Cale walked off. His excessive use of his Ancient Power had left him staggering, but there was still something he needed to do. He put one foot in front of the other until he stood beside Deruth.

"Father."

He helped the count to his feet, which prompted the soldiers to rise as well. They all turned their eyes to the heavens. Beneath that pure-blue sky without a single cloud, the silver shield that had protected the soldiers still shimmered in the air.

They were *alive*. That thought blazed through every soldier's mind.

Weston's citizens began unlatching their doors. When they saw no sign of the enemy, the citizens realized they had won—they'd blocked the Indomitable Alliance's invasion of their territory.

"Father," Cale repeated.

The count could see the fatigue on Cale's face. He knew this was only the beginning.

Beeeeeeep.

Deruth's second son, Bassen, sprinted toward them with a communication sphere cradled in his arms. "Enemy ships have been spotted at the first boundary of the northeastern ocean!"

The count's expression hardened. Their victory here had been a one-off; the Indomitable Alliance was sailing south, cutting through the still-frozen shores. It was a two-pronged attack. The force approaching by ship was probably much larger than their wyvern knight brigade had been. Subconsciously, Deruth turned to Cale—and paused when he saw his son smiling.

Cale was listening to Raon's voice in his head. *‹The traces of my magic moved to the northeastern sea.›*

Raon had left his mark on the dragon slayer's heart.

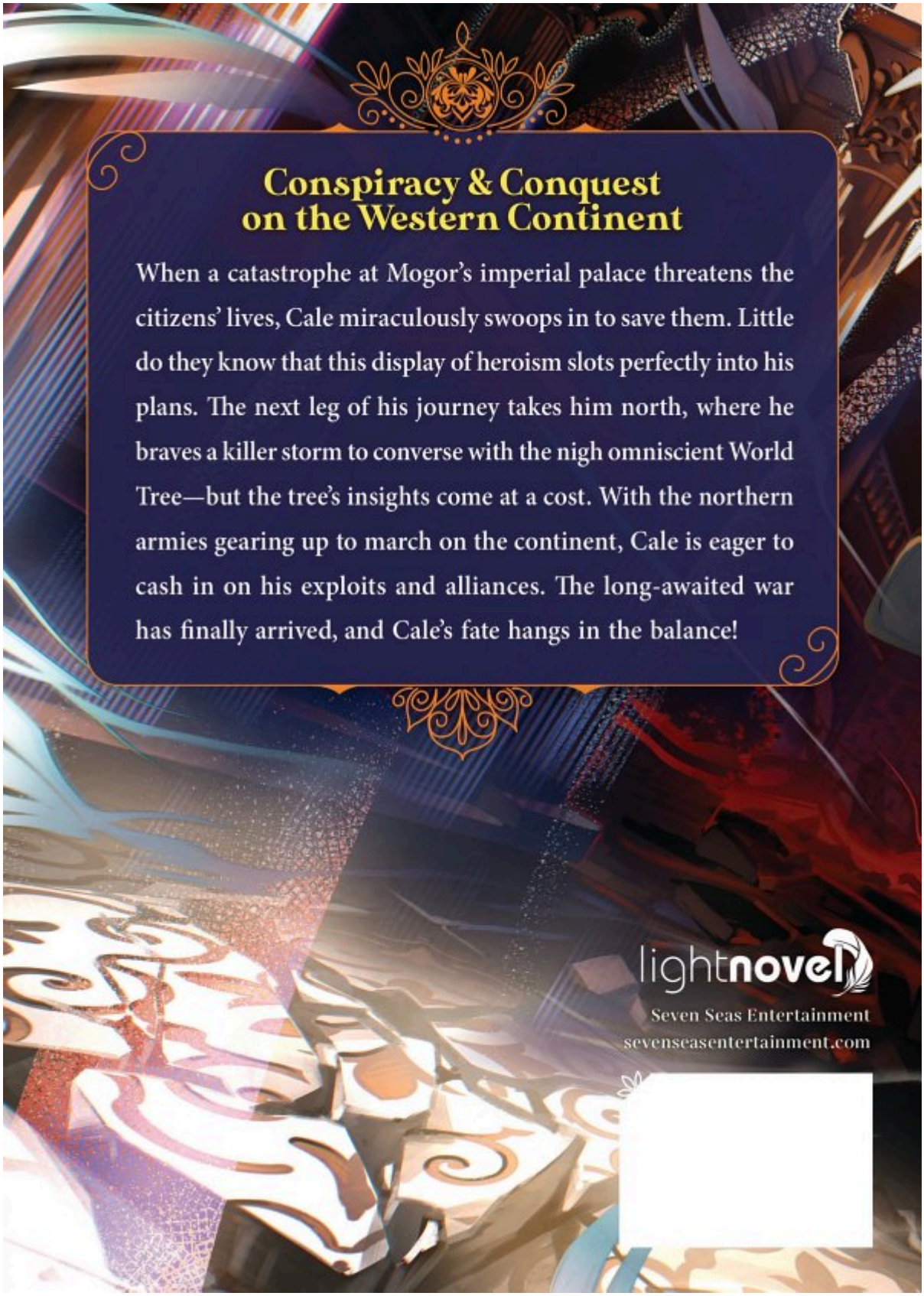
Cale glanced over at Choi Han. "Time to go hunting."

On the open sea, there were no citizens or soldiers to protect. So what if the opponent was a so-called dragon catcher? That distinction wouldn't matter when they beat him to death.

Nonchalantly shifting his gaze back to his father, Cale made an observation. "The shield didn't break."

Deruth's concern eased from the creases of his face, his hand shaking as it clasped his son's. In lieu of a response, he simply squeezed Cale's hand.

Although Cale hadn’t meant for it to happen, the communication sphere in Bassen’s arms had carried his words to the entire kingdom.


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