
My Favorite Song
The Silver Siren
Vol.1
Kairi Aragusuku
Illustration by Ako Tenma

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Afterword

My Favorite Song *The Silver Siren*, Volume 1

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My Favorite Song *The Silver Siren*

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Cross Infinite World

contact@crossinfworld.com

www.crossinfworld.com First Digital Edition: May 2016

ISBN-10: 1-945341-00-9

ISBN-13: 978-1-945341-00-7

Character Page



Renforcer Arc: Legend Becomes Reality

Chapter 1 An Unfamiliar Place

--Come here.

Return to me.

And sing for me once more.

Silver Siren

“AAAAH!” I open my eyes to a piercing scream; I don’t even remember closing them.

“Huh?” A quiet utterance of confusion escapes my lips. I look up from the ground—a mob of strange people, who are obviously not Japanese, gather around me. I’m the center of everyone’s attention for some reason. The mob’s gaze is wary, almost fearful.

“No way! It can’t be!” someone screams.

“It’s the Silver—” another person chokes out.

“This country is doomed!”

The voices I hear through the commotion are filled with terror. Something else bothers me more than that, though—where am I?

All I can gather from glancing around is I’m in the middle of a street. Wooden buildings beautifully line both sides of the street, giving it the feeling of a main street downtown in some European country. The town looks more like what is shown on TV and in magazines about Europe, rather than any scenery in Japan

I'm familiar with.

Is this some sort of theme park? But the buildings aren't the only weird thing about this place. The people surrounding me at a cautious distance are dressed oddly as well. I can't spot a single person dressed in a suit or a school uniform. Everyone's wearing strange clothing as if they stepped out of a fairytale.

The ground isn't made of asphalt either, but cobblestone. *Why am I sitting here*? I think back to my last clear memory: I was in my high school's music room. With graduation right around the corner, I wanted to reminisce in the music room where I have many fond memories of my high school life.

That's right. Not too long ago, or more like moments ago, I should have been at school. And yet—where am I now?

I slowly stand and dust the dirt from my knee-high socks. The people circling me draw back. Some scream, while others flee from my slight movement.

I have a bad feeling about this. Why are these people paying so much attention to me? And why do they look like they just saw a ghost? Is there something strange about me?

Unnerved, I carefully examine my clothing. I'm dressed like a typical Japanese high school student. Nothing is particularly strange or off about my appearance. I notice a torn paper under my foot when I check my shoes. I pick it up and flip it over to see what it is.

Why is sheet music here?

Oh right, I remember I found this untitled old sheet music in the music room. I was drawn to it and began to sing the unfamiliar melody. The next thing I knew, I was here.

The whole situation is too strange. I don't remember walking off with the sheet music. I'm still wearing the indoor shoes assigned by my school too. No matter how I think about it, I can only come to the conclusion I was suddenly brought here.

"What's all this commotion over?" The crowd turns from me to the owner of the sudden shout.

Two men in ostentatious attire push their way through the crowd. They're clad in western plate armor and helmets, and swords hang from their waist.

Soldiers—is the first word that pops into my mind. The soldiers arrive with an air of authority, but the moment they spot me, they act as unnerved as the crowd of people.

The two men exchange glances before they march right in front of me. The men are easily more than six feet tall. Incidentally, I'm five foot three inches. I instinctively step back from the intimidating soldiers.

"Where did you come from, girl?"

"Um?"

"I asked where you came from!" I shrink back startled by his angry snarl.

"F-From Nihon?" I quietly respond after wondering for a moment whether I should tell him what prefecture. But as expected, he doesn't like my answer.

The man raises an eyebrow and shouts louder, "*NIHON?* Never heard of such a place."

"How about Japan?"

"Don't know it."

"What about the United States of America?"

"....." My feet go numb at the soldier's silent scowl.

This has to be a joke. Apparently, I wasn't wrong in assuming I'm not in Japan anymore. The only places in Japan people are okay walking around in fantasy clothing would be an amusement park or a reenactment event, and I doubt they would be this horrified by a normal person intruding on their event.

A foreboding suspicion races through my mind. Are there even any countries in the modern age that wouldn't know about the United States or Japan? A small village would be one thing, but at a glance, this looks like a prosperous city. Don't tell me this place is—

"E-Excuse me..." someone speaks up from the crowd of people watching from a distance. The soldiers slowly look in the direction of a middle-aged man.

“That girl wearing foreign clothing suddenly appeared out of nowhere,” the man says anxiously, pointing to the area at my feet. Some people in the crowd raise their voice in agreement, while others nod.

“C-Could this girl possibly be the legendary...Silver Siren...?”

Silver Siren?

The man’s voice trailed off, but I’m certain I heard him.

“He’s got a point!” yells someone from another section of the crowd; a woman this time. “I mean the girl has silver hair!”

“Huh?” I say, dumbfounded by her comment.

My hair has always been brown. Both my school and parents are strict, so I never dyed it. At least not that I can recall.

I gingerly reach my hand behind my head and grab my hair tied in a ponytail. I doubt my eyes—my hair is a magnificent shade of silver-blond. This isn’t a color obtainable from dyeing. Each strand glows a brilliant silver color in the evening sunlight.

“What the heck?” My hands and voice tremble.

Suddenly appearing in a strange place is too surreal. To make matters worse, I’m astonished by the changes to my own body.

But I don’t have time to let my shock linger; the moment I checked my hair the crowed broke into another uproar. The soldiers stare at me wide-eyed.

I guess that’s to be expected—for the silver radiance instantly fades leaving my plain-old brown hair in its place. I *freeze* on the spot as I watch my hair change color. The city that was in an uproar only moments before falls deathly silent.

“W-We are going to investigate this girl at the castle!” the soldier’s bellow breaks the silence.

“Under no circumstances are any of you to make a commotion in regards to this until we do! Understood?” the soldier demands of the stricken crowd.

I’m restrained by the soldiers before I can figure out what’s going on.

***

“BEHAVE quietly here until we finish our investigation,” a soldier says, tossing me into a dark, cramp room. The heavy metallic sound from the other side of the door confirms I’ve been locked in.

A pungent musty stench tickles my nose. Being surrounded on all four sides by stone walls is more than enough for me to recognize I’m in a jail cell. The only exits from the room are the sturdy metal door and the small window near the ceiling.

Obviously, the small window is located where I couldn’t reach it no matter how much I stretch. A dull orange light seeps through the window. I stand dazed in the center of the room devoid of any furniture, aside from a single tiny candle stand attached to the wall.

“They’ll let me out when I need to go to the bathroom, right?” I whisper, my words coldly echo off the stone walls.

I’m locked inside a castle—or to be more accurate, a dungeon within a plain building separated from a castle. When I passed through the large and imposing gates and looked up at the nearby castle, my mouth fell agape at its impressive magnitude. The castle is reminiscent of medieval European architecture. Thick walls surrounded the castle grounds and the buildings within it.

“I would’ve preferred to come as a tourist instead of a prisoner.” I let out a long sigh and sit on the ground. I need to organize my thoughts.

Alone in the gloomy dungeon cell, I replay everything that happened until now. I was undeniably in my high school in Japan a half hour ago. I found sheet music there—which got snatched away by those soldiers—the next minute, I was in this Western-style city.

Crowds of people clothed in unfamiliar attire, and soldiers who say they don’t know about Japan or the United States, are the only people I’ve had contact with. An impossible and disturbing theory has been on my mind since I got here.

“Could this possibly be another world?” I’m dizzy, and I’m the one who came up with the idea. It’s a common plotline in novels and manga for the main characters to suddenly find themselves in another world. Oh, and there are also stories where the protagonist is sent into the past.

But there's no denying this is happening to me.

I can't believe this is happening—or rather I don't want to *believe* it, but thinking about what to do from here comes first. Whether I'm in another world or the distant past or whatever, I'm still stuck alone in an unfamiliar place, locked in a dungeon. No matter how I wrap my head around it, nothing good is going to be waiting for me if this series of events continues.

Oddly enough, there's no language barrier. That's the one saving grace to this whole nightmare. I would cry if I couldn't understand what they said and vice versa.

Actually, I already feel like crying, but there's too much I don't understand I can't even take the time to cry. People in the city were clearly disturbed when they saw me earlier. My hair turned silver too. Plus—

"What the heck is the Silver Siren, anyway?" I cry out in a voice that even I deem pathetic.

I want to return to my own world this instant. But with no knowledge of how I got here, how am I going to figure out how to get back?

"Oh yeah, the song!" That's right. I sang the song on the sheet music. The next thing I knew, I was here. I can only think of that as the cause for me being here!

But I don't have the sheet music anymore. I hold my head and shut my eyes as I try to recall the melody of the song I sang once before, when—

"There's no point in trying to sing," says a voice out of nowhere.

My eyes widen—a person is floating in the previously empty space. And that's not the only reason I'm startled.

Wow!

The person has bewitching blond hair and stunning emerald-green eyes. I can tell from his figure that he's a man, but for a second his elegance made me mistake him for a woman.

He gazes down at me with a gentle smile. I'm entranced for a moment by this handsome man who definitely does not belong here. But I immediately notice his

unnatural appearance—not only is he floating in the air, but his body is transparent.

“A gh-ghost?” I say hoarsely.

Why aren’t I afraid of him when I’m terrified of ghosts, monsters, and anything supernatural? Maybe it has to do with the calming aura he gives off.

The man chuckles and says, “I’m a bit different from a ghost. But...a bit like one too.” His voice holds a lyrical tone.

“My physical body is elsewhere. I merely sent my mind forth to speak with you.” I’m charmed by his bewitching smile to the point I ignore the bizarre things he’s saying.

I notice a pattern on his forehead that looks like a tattoo. At first I thought the mark was a decoration, but it’s carved into his skin.

Wait, this isn’t the time for me to be entranced by him!

I warn myself to be careful, before asking him, “Excuse me, why did you say there is no point in trying to sing...?”

“Indeed, it’s a pointless endeavor. You were trying to sing the song you used to get to this world, correct?”

“To get to this world, you say? Then you know that I came from another world?” I raise my voice hopefully.

He might save me! I feel as if I’ve seen the first ray of hope since coming to this unfamiliar world. But—

“I don’t know all the details,” he continues with a smile, “the song you just tried to sing is one used to come to this world. You can’t use it to go back.”

“Then how do I get home?”

“It’s simple. Just sing the song necessary to send you home.”

“The song necessary to go home...?” The man nods with satisfaction when I repeat his words with surprise.

No matter how simple he thinks it is, I obviously don’t know the song to return. He smiles faintly at my reaction.

“I possess the sheet music with the necessary song.”

“You do?” I find his inconceivably simple answer all too anticlimactic. But as long as I have that I can go home! I can escape this confusing world and the nightmarish situation of being locked in a dungeon!

“Please teach me the song, then!”

“Sure...but on one condition,” he replies with a smile. My shoulders droop with disappointment. I should have known it wouldn’t be that simple.

I’m starting to view this handsome man’s smile as something cruel.

I timidly ask him, “What condition?”

“I want you to save my physical body. It’s currently confined somewhere, you see? I will give you the sheet music if you rescue me.”

“I-I can’t do that! I’m locked in a dungeon, too. How do you expect me to—” I accidentally yell and quickly stop myself. Nothing good will come from the soldiers outside the cell hearing me.

“Help will arrive for you soon.”

“Help?”

You aren’t going to save me? I scream in my thoughts.

The man smirks meaningfully again and says, “My name is Ernest. I look forward to working with you. I will be waiting for your timely arrival...”

He departs as easily as he arrived, leaving only hollow words in his wake.

Chapter 2 The Silver Siren

"...HE disappeared," I mutter again, staring at the empty space where the ghost was just floating.

What I understood from my conversation with Ernest is this is a different world from Earth, and in order to return to my own world I need the *sheet music* capable of sending me home.

Ernest claims he has the sheet music I need, but he's currently imprisoned somewhere, and I won't be able to get my hands on the sheet music unless I rescue him.

"That's all I know?"

What kind of world is this? Who or what is a *Silver Siren*? And why was my hair glowing silver before reverting to brown?

Ernest vanished too fast. I regret not asking him about everything I wanted to know. But he's a reckless guy, asking someone like me, who doesn't have a clue about this world, to save him. Not to mention he asked for help without even telling me where he is. Is he that *desperate* for help?

Ernest said he looked forward to working with me before he disappeared. Does that mean he plans on showing up again? If he does appear, that would be the opportunity I need to ask him all the questions plaguing my mind.

Either way, someone who understands what's happening to me actually exists in this world. That's a reassuring fact for me in my current predicament. I can only believe in him and what he said about help coming for me. Not like I have

any other hope to hold onto.

It's depressing to wait alone in this damp and gloomy cell, so I imagine what kind of person is going to rescue me.

Will a man come? Or will they break the mold and be a woman? ...I hope they aren't scary. I wouldn't mind someone nice like Ernest, though.

"Silver Siren, can you hear me?" someone says out of nowhere.

I nearly scream.

The voice came from the small window near the ceiling. I stand and examine the opening. This cell is underground. The window likely connects aboveground; meaning someone is speaking to me from outside. But the window is too small to see out of.

I'm sure it's getting dark out. Now that I think about it, the air feels colder than when I was first shoved in here. The flame flickers on the candle attached to the wall; even if I squint I still can't make anything out.

"Oi, is anyone there?" a slightly agitated voice asks through the small window.

"Yes, I'm here!" I quickly cover my mouth thinking I might have responded too loudly.

"I'm sending my partner in with you. Aim for the door once it opens to make your escape."

Partner? How is he going to fit through the small window? I can tell from the way he talks that he's male, but he has the high-pitched voice of a boy in puberty.

I wonder if it's the way his voice echoes in the cell? Something small slowly falls from the window above as I debate the age of the person trying to rescue me. Actually, falls isn't quite the right word to describe it.

My face crinkles in surprise when something floats down in front of me. His supposed partner has a small white fur ball of a body with two black wings bigger than the rest of it, and tiny cute round eyes with a peculiar pig-snout nose.

"...A bat?" I mutter as the small creature alights on top of my open palm. It peers up at me and coos.

“Uh...” What exactly can this incredibly adorable bat-like creature do?

Just as I’m feeling unsure about all this, “Boo, I’m counting on you,” the person says from above.

The bat-like creature answers him with a noise that sounds like the word ‘boo’. The creature says nothing more once the person above stopped talking.

“Is your name Boo?”

“Boo.” Apparently, it understands what I’m saying. I have absolutely no idea what this Boo can do, but I’m happy someone is willing to talk to me in this jail cell.

“Nice to meet you, Boo.” I smile at it.

I stiffen at the metallic sound of the door unlocking. One of the soldiers who dragged me here stands in the doorway.

“We’re moving you to the tortur—” He freezes, eyes widening when he spots Boo. “A monster!”

“Huh? Where?” I’m the one surprised by the frightening word he used to describe this creature that seems nothing of the sort. Boo leaves my hand.

“GAAAH!” I return my gaze to the soldier screaming at Boo splayed across his face as he unsuccessfully grasps for his sword dangling at his waist.

The soldier falls backward, as Boo flies away from his head. A loud thud resounds when the soldier’s body hits the ground. I cautiously look down at the soldier with a distinct red mark in the shape of a pig’s nose stamped on his face. For a moment, I fear he is dead. His chest lifts and falls in regular breaths, so he must have only lost consciousness.

“You’re amazing,” I say stunned.

Boo lands on my shoulder and proudly snorts, “Boo!”

***

BOO was surprisingly helpful during my escape. Naturally, the soldiers on watch immediately noticed we escaped the dungeon cell. But all those soldiers are unconscious, with a red pig nose stamped on their bodies.

The soldiers kept calling Boo a *monster*. With how cute the creature is, I can't imagine it's something scary like a monster. *Creature*, on the other hand, is a suitable term. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't afraid as I watched it take out soldier after soldier.

The man who spoke to me from the window said this creature is his partner. What kind of person is he? I shake the image of an intimidating person out of my head as I make my way upstairs in search of an exit.

He's an acquaintance of the mysterious Ernest. He shouldn't be a scary person...I hope. I reach an exit faster than expected. I'm relieved this building's passageways weren't too complex.

I fall to my knees, with my hand still on the door the moment I open it. A cool breeze blows past me.

Over a dozen soldiers are waiting for me outside. There's no escape. My body trembles at the sight of countless gleaming swords pointed at me. Even Boo is intelligent enough to float above my head without making any sudden moves.

One of the soldiers steps forward and asks me sternly, "What are you trying to accomplish by escaping?" The soldiers behind him illuminate my face with their torches.

"How did you sneak that monster into castle grounds?"

I can't answer either question. I'm too scared to speak. The soldier sighs in exasperation as he watches me shake.

"She might have accomplices. Search for them." The soldiers behind him promptly scatter, when—

"***Wind, to me!***" loudly commands a sharp voice. A fierce tempest assaults us. I don't have the luxury of screaming. I can't keep my eyes open. Perhaps it's because I feared dying this whole time that I'm not surprised by this turn of events.

I can hear the trembling voices of soldiers amid the tempest.

"Sorcery!"

"Why is there a Sorcerer here!" one of the soldiers shouts hysterically.

Sorcery? I furrow my brow over the unfamiliar term, when someone tugs on my arm.

“We’re making a run for it.” I come to my senses when I hear a familiar voice and its owner pulls me forcefully to my feet. It’s the voice I heard in the dungeon. Between still being in the middle of a tempest and all the torches going out, it’s too dark to make out his appearance.

He pulls me by the arm before I can respond. My feet paralyzed from fear, somehow start running with him.

“Don’t panic! The girl is escaping!” says the agitated leader of the soldiers behind us.

Just as I wonder how long the wind will continue blowing around us, it abruptly stops. I slowly open my eyes to see Boo’s furry back first, and then my gaze trails up to the person pulling me. I know what felt abnormal now. I’m being led by a child—a mere boy.

His black hair tied in a ponytail sways in the wind like a tail. Boo, whom he claimed is his partner, hovers above him. Along with my surprise, an odd sense of relief spreads through me. I don’t fear him being unreliable because he’s a child; he’s already proven himself by saving me.

We’re somehow able to flee immediate danger, but that doesn’t mean we can let our guard down. Based on what I saw when I was dragged to the dungeon, we’re likely headed toward the back of the castle grounds. I frantically run as a sense of unease tickles at the edge of my mind.

“Th-Thank you!” I say as I run. But—

“Sing if you have the composure to thank me! Sing, Silver Siren!” he demands harshly in a high-pitched voice.

I’m irritated someone called me the *Silver Siren* again. “I’m not that Siren thing! People around me just keep saying that!”

He abruptly stops and softly clicks his tongue. I fall forward, barely catching my balance before slamming into his small back. I look past him at another set of troops running toward us.

“We found them!” a soldier exclaims from behind us.

A tall wall of stone blocks our left, the castle looms to our right, and soldiers close in from our rear and in front of us. We have nowhere left to run.

“Wh-What should we do?” I ask the reliable boy.

He glares up at me with blue eyes. He has a cloth wrapped around his forehead like a bandana, and his facial features make him appear around ten years old.

“You aren’t the Silver Siren?”

“You got the wrong person!”

“Damn it, that’s not what I heard!” the boy spat angrily and pulls out a dagger that does not suit him, as he steps in front of me. Boo is readying himself above the boy’s head to take on the approaching soldiers. But no matter how I look at it, they’re clearly at a disadvantage against soldiers wielding long swords.

“You can’t win! Can’t you make the wind come out again?” I’m certain the soldiers called it *Sorcery*. It’s probably similar to what we consider magic in Earth’s fantasy stories. With that power of his, I’m sure we can—

“I’m panicking because I can’t do it again!”

“You’re kidding me!” Helpless, the strength leaves my legs. Is this the end?

“It doesn’t matter what, just sing something!”

“Why would you want me to sing at time like this...?” I love to sing so much I’m always humming or tapping to some melody, but this isn’t the time for that. I can’t sing in this situation!

“Hurry up!”

The enemy is before us. We’re cornered with our backs against the wall. If only we could get over this wall! If only we could fly into the sky! Boo’s small wings enter my line of vision.

If only I had wings like him.

The soldiers encircle us. At the same time a quiet song escapes my lips—

‘I’m floating up into sky right now.

Higher, higher, and even higher.

Over this wall; higher than that tower; higher than the sky.

I flap these gigantic white wings.'

Since I was a child, I always loved to sing and compose songs. I sing impromptu, with the desire to *fly*. I imagine myself with the pure white wings of an angel. The soldiers stare at me with their mouths agape, overcome with shock. The boy and Boo look over their shoulder at me wide-eyed.

I continue singing without stopping. It felt incredible, like a rush of adrenaline, despite the predicament I'm in. My back feels hot; as if wings really did sprout there.

I want to fly. I squeeze my eyes shut and strongly wish for that to happen.

'I'm flying across the sky now.

Farther, farther, and even farther into the distance.

Over this mountain, farther than that sea, farther than any other.

I flap these great white wings.'

I'm consumed by an odd sensation, as if my body is disappearing. I anxiously open my eyes and discover the reason for my discomfort—I'm floating!

My body is leaving the ground as I float in the air. I nearly stop singing from the surprise, but frantically continue—I get the feeling I'll fall if I stop. Just then, I see something out of the corner of my eye that nearly makes my voice crack into a falsetto. My hair is glowing silver again.

"The Silver...Siren!" someone cries out.

The soldiers step back to flee from me as I gradually ascend. The boy kicks off the ground and clings to my waist—he's not heavy.



“Let’s escape like this!” the boy says.

Boo gazes at me with cute round eyes from where he’s riding on top of the boy’s head. He seems stunned by my ability to fly in the sky like him. The soldiers, whom dropped their swords, watch with their mouths agape as we ascend into the night sky.

I concentrate on singing, to keep from carelessly getting distracted. Thus, we make it over the wall, escaping the impending danger and headed toward freedom.

Chapter 3 Rag

TWINKLING stars fill the night sky. This world doesn't seem to have electricity yet. The castle used candles and torches, too. Now isn't the time to be moved by the beauty of the stars, though.

I'm flying freely in the sky for the first time. I slowly turn my neck to change direction, as if I'm swimming through water. A range of black mountains loom ahead of me, their peaks illuminated by the full moon.

So this world has a moon too, I casually think to myself.

A sea of trees with trunks extended into a dark oblivion spread out below us. I'm not afraid of heights per se, but looking down was enough to give me chills.

"We'll have the upper hand if we go into the mountains. Can you land over there for now?" The boy points to the foot of a mountain.

I continue to sing as I nod. I'm relieved my body is flying in the direction I want. I can't fly as fast as a bird, though. Running on the ground might be faster.

It started to get painful to continue singing about halfway to our destination. My mouth is dry and thirsts for water.

I wonder whether I can continue singing until we get there. Thinking about it was a mistake. My throat suddenly feels scratchy.

Shoot! I'm at my limit. I break into an intense coughing fit in the sky. Sure enough, once I stop singing, my wings disappear and we plummet to the ground.

In my panic I forget to sing, "AAAAAAAAAAH!" I shriek as I fall. Actually, my scream may have never cleared my throat.

We're falling roughly sixty-five feet to the fast approaching ground—I guess gravity works the same here as it does on Earth. There's no hope for survival.

I'm going to die. My consciousness gradually recedes from the overwhelming terror and air pressure from our intense free fall. I apologize to the boy still clinging to my waist before losing consciousness.

***

MY body sways at a steady rhythm. I slowly return from the depths of unconsciousness.

I'm alive? I hear birds chirping in the distance. I open heavy eyelids. When did dawn break? A white sky peeks through the canopy of tall, black conifer trees. However, I'm startled by what's right in front of me.

My eyes round at the sight of an unfamiliar young man's face.

Who is he?

The crunching noise of dirt mixed with dry leaves underfoot makes me painfully aware of the fact I'm being carried.

I should have plummeted from the sky with the boy and Boo. It's all good and well that I'm alive, but where exactly is this man carrying me off to?

The young man must have felt me stir, because he peers down at me.

"You're awake?" he says briefly, and stops walking. He roughly drops me on the ground. Barely keeping my balance, I put distance between us.

"Wh-Who are you?"

"Huh?" he frowns at the first thing I said. He looks about the same age as me, but his displeased expression makes him appear a little older. His long black hair is tied back in a simple ponytail, and there's a cloth wrapped around his forehead like a bandana.

I've seen his clothing somewhere before. The clothing is similar to what the boy who saved me was wearing.

He sighs loudly when I eye him dubiously. "Man...what a pain."

He averts his eyes and bluntly says, "I'm the brat from earlier."

“Huh?” I tilt my head to the side in confusion. I have no idea what he means by that.

He glares daggers at me as he shouts, “I’m tellin’ ya I’m the brat you met earlier! This is the real me! You got it?” He looks away.

“...N-NOOO WAY!” I raise my voice and point at him. Is he saying the boy and him are the same person?

I ask the man with the same blue eyes as the boy, “B-But...then where’s Boo? Where did he go!”

The boy said Boo is his partner. I look around, but don’t see him anywhere. If the boy and this man are the same person, then it’s weird for Boo to be missing.

“Boo is sleeping. He’s nocturnal, after all,” he says and roughly grabs his own ponytail and lifts it to show me. Boo is skillfully hanging upside down from the hair tie. His wings are folded on top of him like a tiny blanket. His eyes are closed and his pig nose twitches. He really is asleep.

“My name is Rag. What do I call you?”

“Kanon,” is all I can quietly say in response to his sudden question; I’m still at a loss for words.

“Okay then, Kanon, we don’t have enough time to stand here wasting it. Let’s get moving already; unless you want to find out exactly what those soldiers were planning on doin’ to ya.”

“Wh-Where are we going?” I ask as I frantically try to keep up with Rag.

“Over this mountain.”

“Oh yeah, how are we alive? We fell from such an insane height.”

“I had the wind save us.”

“Huh... You should have said you can do that from the start.”

“I can’t use any Sorcery in my brat form! We were in a serious pinch back there!” I flinch when he yells at me. He doesn’t have to yell so much.

I shut my mouth out of annoyance and look at my feet as we progress through the sea of trees. Little light reaches us, despite it already being dawn.

We're walking through a forest with no animal trails or artificial paths. Tree roots grow in every direction, threatening to trip me at every step. Rag casually strolls through the area like it's a walk in the park, and I frantically try to keep up with him.

If I'm stuck with this, I rather be with his boy form. I have the hardest time dealing with short-tempered guys like him. He did save me, though. To make matters worse we're alone together now that Boo is sleeping. I don't want things getting iffy between us.

"Hey, is mag—Sorcery the reason you turn into a child?" He immediately stops. I asked out of admiration for his skill, but maybe my question annoyed him.

I instinctively tense and ready myself to be yelled at again. Yet with his back to me, "...This is a curse," he says with disgust.

"A curse?"

"Yeah. I turn into a brat when I use Sorcery. A damn irritating curse!" Rag seethes, swiftly walking off again.

I've committed to heart not to bring up that topic. I check my hair—it's back to plain brown hair. Perhaps my hair only turns silver when I'm singing.

Curses and Sorcery, huh? This world is truly filled with mysterious things. And then there's Ernest; he appeared in front of me in a curious ghost-like form.

"Rag, what are you to Ernest?"

"Ernest? Who's that?" I'm confused when he questions me dubiously in response. Ernest knew Rag was going to rescue me. I assumed that meant they knew each other, but maybe I was wrong.

Huh. Why did Rag rescue me, then?

"Hey—"

"Don't talk anymore!" he harshly demands. I helplessly shut my mouth.

Rag spins around and warns me, "It's morning now. Those soldiers from before might be hot on our trail. Besides, it wouldn't be weird for monsters to appear at any time on a mountain trail like this one. Got it?"

His warning frightens me; the image of the soldiers who chased us all night still fresh in my mind.

After falling asleep I feel like I'm living the continuation of a terrible nightmare, but that's not it—this isn't a dream. I have no idea what the soldiers will do if they catch me again. They might attack me, or drag me back to the castle for an execution. And now we have to deal with *monsters* too! I don't even want to think what they might do to me!

Apparently, Boo is a monster as well, but I only relate the fearsome beasts from horror movies as monsters. Is that the type he's talking about?

The nightmare isn't over yet. I'm trembling.

"Man, if only a certain someone had tried a little harder we would've already been over the mountain..." Rag grumbles, walking even farther ahead of me. He looks back at me when he notices I'm not following him.

"Oi! I told you to hurry!" I couldn't move after he yelled at me. Just the opposite—I collapse on the spot. I can't put any strength into my legs.

"Uuugh....Waaaah!" I break down crying. Tears messily roll down my cheeks. All my fear and pent-up emotions burst through the dam and pour out.

"O-Oi, why're you crying?" Rag asks in a panic. I can tell he turned back and came to my side, but I won't look at him.

I haven't cried this hard in a long time. The last time was probably when my beloved grandmother died last year. I cried over my loss then. Now I'm crying from pent-up fear and confusion.

I never imagined I would keep encountering near-death experiences at the age of seventeen. My life has been mediocre until this point; so it feels as though I'm suddenly having all the excitement forced on me now to make up for that. Not to mention this nightmare isn't going to end any time soon.

I want to go home already. I want to be back in my world now!

"Are you hurt somewhere?" Rag continues to question in a panic.

I shake my head as I sob. Rag seems worried about me—a bit surprising considering he was just yelling at me. I feel bad about how confused he is; I'm a

little happy about it too.

No one is here to help me. I'm almost an adult now. If I don't suck it up, then I'll suffer in this new world on my own. I apologize to Rag.

"Thank you very much for saving me," I say with a tear-streaked smile, the best I could do given the circumstances. Rag looks startled at first, before heavily sighing.

Chapter 4 Reveur

RAG says there's a town on the other side of the mountain range called Cedez, where he can hire a mercenary.

According to him, "Your singing is too unreliable. Having another person around when things go wrong could save us."

He found my crying so unbearable he answered all my questions after I calmed down—although he still had a sour look. The castle I was imprisoned near yesterday is called Grave Castle, and the king of Renforcer Kingdom resides there. Apparently, people here call their world Reveur and this country Renforcer.

Rag set aside time to rest once the sun loomed high in the sky, and I was feeling sweaty under my school uniform. My legs, which feel like logs, give little resistance as I crumble into a sitting position on the ground. I nervously plop the unfamiliar fruit Rag gave me into my mouth.

"I'll say this because it seems like you don't know: don't go singing in front of people anymore." I tilt my head to the side in confusion as Rag continues, "I don't know how it is in this *Japan* place you're from, but singing is considered a sinister omen in Reveur."

"...What do you mean?" I ask after swallowing the fruit that tastes similar to a peanut. Singing is a bad omen? How could that be? I can't understand the logic behind that.

"I mean exactly what I said. Try singing in town like you did yesterday and you'll be considered ill in the head, or worse, you'll be chased out of town."

“Seriously?”

“Also, whatever you do, don’t mention that you’re the *Silver Siren*. Not unless you want to relive what happened yesterday,” Rag warns as he throws a fruit into the air and catches it in his mouth.

“What is this *Silver Siren,* anyway? Why does everyone call me that...?”

People have been referring to me as the *Silver Siren* since I arrived in Reveur. What I know at this point is the magic-like ability I used is a power of the *Silver Siren* and my hair turns silver when I sing. I can understand why people are startled when they see hair magically changing colors. What I don’t understand, and find odd, is why everyone is so terrified by it when there are Sorcerers like Rag who can control wind.

“The legends say the Silver Siren will come from another world to destroy Reveur. Singing became a sinister omen because the legend was once proven true.”

Destroy? I frantically close my mouth when I notice it’s hanging open. My mind can’t keep up now that he’s talking about a disaster on an entirely different scale from what I was imagining.

“Apparently, an entire country fell to ruin when a real *Silver Siren* appeared there. They say the prince was sacrificed as a result.”

“What! Are you telling me that someone like me has been here before?” The previous *Silver Siren* is of more interest to me than some fallen prince. I can’t think of this as just a plain old story now.

“Wh-What happened to that *Silver Siren*?” I ask, having a bad feeling about the answer.

“They died... They were captured and executed.”

I half-suspected that answer, but that doesn’t stop me from feeling as if the blood is draining from my body. I tremble thinking the same thing might have happened to me last night.

Did the other Silver Siren come from Earth as well? Why did they try to destroy a kingdom? Answerless questions run through my mind.

Rag is looking at me skeptically, “Are you really the *Silver Siren*?”

“That’s what I want to know!” I yell impulsively. Birds takeoff from the trees above us.

“Well, at the very least you can use the power of Song. So I have no doubt that you’re a Siren.”

“Siren?”

“A type of Fluxer who use songs as the foci for their powers.”

I’m skeptical about the using songs to make magic-like miracles occur part, but I can’t deny that singing last night allowed me to fly.

“Are you different, Rag? As a...Sorcerer?”

“In the past everyone who could influence the world with mysterious powers were called Fluxers. The difference now comes from Sorcerers having an affinity with nature and that they borrow the power of creation; while a Siren uses powers from within themselves to influence the world around them in the form of song. One requires nature, the other is internal.”

I kind of get it and don’t get it at the same time. Rag must have seen my confusion, because he stands up with an exasperated sigh.

“All right, we should get a move on. I want to arrive at Cedez before the sun sets.”

“Okay—oh yeah, why did you save me, Rag?” It’s a simple question.

I understand why everyone is terrified of the *Silver Siren*. So why is Rag okay with being near me? Why is he helping me?

“I need your song to break the curse on me,” he says in a serious tone as he walks.

Now I get it; and I’m a little happy to hear him say he needs me. I can repay him for saving me.

“I’ll sing! What song should I sing for you?” I ask Rag as he walks in front of me.

“If I knew that I would have had you sing it already.”

“G-Good point...”

“Plus, I haven’t met all the conditions yet.”

“Conditions?”

“...I’ll tell you more as it becomes relevant,” Rag says without looking back. I was right to think bringing up his curse leaves him in a foul mood.

Well, anyone would hate being cursed—but having seen how cute his other form is, I can’t think of it as that bad a curse. I almost want to meet his boy form again. Not like I’d ever say that to him, though.

I get the feeling I would regret having ever thought that.

***

“GRRRR....”

I think something just growled. Rag stops walking a short distance ahead.

“You just heard something too, didn’t you?”

“Shh!” Rag silences me and looks around the area with a grim expression.

I’m nervous; the birds stopped chirping.

What’s going on? Could it be the soldiers from yesterday? I restlessly look around the wooded area. Or I try to, since it’s so dark in this dense mountain forest that it’s hard to see, despite being daytime. A nasty cold sweat trails down my back.

“Tch, did we wander into their territory?” Rag quietly mutters to himself. He’s sweating.

Territory? Like an animal’s territory? I hope it’s not wolves. I don’t know if they have wolves in this world, but no matter what the beast is, we’re clearly in a bad situation nonetheless.

Rag pulling out his dagger is enough evidence this isn’t a good situation. I half-run to him.

“Grrrrrrrrrrrrrr....” I’m certain I heard a growl this time. It’s undeniably closer than the last time. Just as I gulp, the leaves rustle and a creature lunges out of the brush. I instinctively shrink back and shut my eyes.

“GYAN!” I hear an unfamiliar whimper. The first thing I see when I open my

eyes is a blood-soaked dagger and a creature cautiously glaring up at us as its front leg oozes blood. It looks similar to a wolf or dog, but it's different. I have never seen this beast before—it's an animal that definitely does not exist on Earth.

Jet-black fur covers the six-legged beast's body, and its tail coiled like a snake snaps at us. The creature's face is closer to a monkey's than a wolf's. The drool dripping from its slovenly opened maw makes me associate it with the term *monster*, even if I don't want to.

After escaping the soldiers we're faced with monsters! The monster is more grotesque than I could have ever imagined—I want to close my eyes to this situation.

I'm trembling behind Rag when something crunches behind me. I fearfully peer over my shoulder—I'm terrified by what's there.

"R-Rag," I grip his jacket.

"I know," he says on edge.

"We're in their territory." Grotesque monster after grotesque monster reveals itself from the forestry, as though his comment was their signal to show up.

I would have preferred wolves!

Three pairs of red eyes stalk us from the shadows. Several more openly show themselves, teeth bared.

"Kanon, keep your hand on me like that."

"Huh? Uh, sure!" I'm not sure what he plans on doing, but I tightly grip his jacket with both hands.

"Woah!" Rag suddenly crouches and I'm pulled by his movement into a crouching position as well. He touches one of the roots jutting out of the ground.

"I'm sorry, please lend me a bit of your strength," he says so gently I almost doubted the words came from him. It looks like he's talking to the roots—and I'm pretty sure that's what he's doing. Could this be Sorcery?

Meanwhile, the monsters must have taken our crouching to mean we

surrendered ourselves to our inevitable fate at their fangs, because they lunge at us from multiple angles!

"***Oh verdant land, grant me thy life, bring forth that which nourishes deep within. Water, to me!***" Rag shouts in a piercing voice, just as I squeeze my eyes shut.

I hear the rushing sound of water. Surprised, I open my eyes to high waves of water shooting up around us like a pillar; the waves of water jet over the highest trees and tower into the sky. I'm stunned as I look up at it.

Several monsters fall into the geysers before the pressure jettisons them into the sky. I look down to see some late-coming monsters cautiously draw back, but the water geysers bend in their direction. The pillars of water gradually expand in radius changing into a tornado that pulls in the remaining monsters.

The monsters cease to exist in an explosion of water. I gape at the sight; a mountain that looks like it was ravaged by twisters of water is all that lies before me. Water droplets fall off the leaves of the trees above, like they were sprinkled by a morning drizzle.

Rag slowly stands, but this time his movement barely lifted my hands still gripping his clothes.

"Tch, back to this form... Didn't expect it to kick in this fast," he says bitterly. Indeed, Rag transformed back into a boy after using Sorcery.

Rag touches the trunk of a nearby tree, "Thank you, you saved us."

I find it very endearing to witness him thanking a tree in his small body. He's clearly unhappy—he lets out a great big sigh after parting from the tree.

"I can't use Sorcery until I return to normal," he says, swiftly walking away.

I slide on the muddy ground as I try to catch up to him. I'm somehow able to catch my balance without falling over, but thanks to that the indoor school shoes I've been wearing this whole time are soaked. There's no grosser feeling than your soaked and muddy tennis shoes sloshing around your feet, but considering I just avoided becoming a six-legged monster's lunchtime snack, I could skip in these soggy shoes.

“How long until you revert back?”

“This time around might take a long while.”

“This time? It has to do with the scale of your spell then?”

“It seems to.”

It seems to? If he doesn’t know, then he might have only recently been cursed.

“But your Sorcery just now was amazing!”

“...You think so?”

What’s this? He doesn’t sound displeased by this topic, so I continue praising him to see his reaction.

“Yeah! It was super cool! Did you borrow the water from the trees?”

“Yeah, you figured that out fast.” Talking about Sorcery apparently puts him in a good mood. I can’t see his face, but the back of his ears redden.

He’s kind of cute. The corners of my lips curl in a smile. His child form is definitely easier to deal with.

“I’m envious. Does everyone in this world have that kind of power?”

“Not everyone has it.”

“Oh, really? You’re amazing then, Rag.”

“...Your *singing* is the rare ability here. I’m counting on you if we run into another monster.”

“What! Ah, um, sure.” I’m surprised he suddenly said he’s counting on me.

Makes sense though, because he can’t use Sorcery for a while. Thinking back to it, being able to fly through the sky last night seems like a fluke. I have powers that can only be activated by singing, so I need to think of songs to use. I try to come up with words and melodies that would be useful should we encounter another monster.

***

LUCKILY, after our initial monster encounter we were able to pass over the mountain without any more monsters or soldiers discovering us. Rag is back in

his normal body, as well. He had been in his boy form for about an hour when he suddenly shot up in height like a beanstalk. I must admit, I was taken aback by the sight—it's not every day you see a boy instantly become a man.

"Oh, I see light!" I shout with joy and sink to the ground. We finally spotted the light of a town down a little ways from the mountain path once the sun had completely set. The chill of night feels nice against my sweaty skin.

This might be the first time I've walked this far in my entire life; from the base of a mountain through uncut trails, and accidentally invading the territory of monsters, all the way to the town at the foot of the other side. Muscles all over my body scream in agony. My feet are likely covered in blisters, but I'm too afraid to check.

Contrary to my sad state, Rag isn't even winded and appears completely okay; he's most likely used to long journeys.

He looks over his shoulder at me. I thought he was going to yell again, instead he says, "Wait there for a little while."

"What?" I rise unsteadily on my feet as he turns his back to me.

"Why? I'll come—"

"You can't enter looking like that... I'll go buy you some clothes, so wait there for me."

I have to agree with him when I look down at my clothes. My school uniform is commonplace in Japan, but I bet it stands out in this world.

"Oh yeah, Rag!"

"What now! If I don't hurry the shops will close!"

"U-Um, please get me shoes..." I point to my tattered indoor shoes; Rag clicks his tongue once and leaves for real this time.

He will buy them for me, won't he?

I sit in the same spot. I guess that town would be Cedez. I'm relieved from the bottom of my heart that we won't have to spend the night outside—all thanks to pushing myself to keep up with Rag's pace!

“My muscles are going to be sore tomorrow, that’s for sure,” I mutter and rub my calves. Just then something fluffy and white flies out of the town. I wave my hand when I realize it’s Boo.

“Boo! You’re awake!”

“Boo!” Boo responds, as though saying good morning.

***

BEFORE long, Rag returns carrying two bundles. Upon spotting Rag, Boo flies off my shoulder and lands on his head. I guess that’s his spot, which is too cute.

“Here!” he shoves the bundles at me. His face is red.

“I don’t want to hear any complaints. I’ve never bought women’s clothes before,” Rag grumbles averting his eyes. I thank him and change in the shadow of a large tree.

The clothing’s design seems like a national clothing style. I’m relieved to wear the same style pants as Rag. My school uniform’s skirt was never meant to be worn on a journey that involves hiking through treacherous mountains. I might have been wearing knee-high socks, but the area where my skin was exposed is full of little cuts. Maybe he noticed that.

I resolutely take off my socks—lo-and-behold several areas on my feet are covered in popped blisters oozing blood. I wearily think it would have been better not to see them as I change into the shoes placed in the other bundle Rag gave me.

The shoe size is adjustable by a string, so I’m able to get them to fit perfectly. I finish changing and shove the clothes I had been wearing in the bags, before returning to Rag.

“Sorry for making you wait.”

“...Throw that away here. It’ll only get in the way,” he says pointing to the bundle of clothes.

Rag has a point—it’s not like I’ll have a reason to wear these clothes again in Reveur. Besides, I’m going to graduate soon, anyway. I probably won’t have a reason to wear the uniform in Japan anymore either. I’m hesitant about doing

this, but I decide to leave my clothes in the shadow of the tree I changed behind.

“Good, let’s go. Boo, get in here.”

“Boo!” Rag holds his coat pocket open and Boo snugly slips in. A smart choice, considering the people of this world consider him a monster.

Thus, we step foot into the Town of Cedez.

Chapter 5 The Town of Cedez

THE Town of Cedez is situated at the foot of a mountain, making it suitable for travelers like us to stop and rest. I heard from Rag that it was a small town, but it's significantly quieter compared to the castle town.

Cedez doesn't have much of an entrance per se—cottage-like houses peek out from the wall of trees and gradually increase in number as we walk farther inside the town's perimeter. The townscape reminds me more of what I imagine as a *village settlement* than a *town*.

The path gradually widens into more of a road and lit-up houses begin to closely line both sides. We finally see people walking around in small groups. It's not until we're further in that I've started to spot houses with signs in front of them. The signs must mean they're running some kind of shop. I get a general idea of what kind of shop they are from the pictures drawn on their signs.

A delicious smell tickles my nose near where I spot a sign with the picture of a frying pan and a mug of alcohol. My stomach growls feebly on the spot, letting me know I'm hungry.

"Want to get a bite to eat first?" Rag asks, stopping in front of the tavern; I'm embarrassed he might have heard.

Rag quickly heads for the tavern, and I follow him. The door opens with a clattering of wood that blends with the sound of the patrons enjoying themselves.

I'm startled when the eyes of ten people turn toward us. Luckily, everyone instantly returns to their own conversations when they confirm we're nothing

special. I quietly sigh under my breath. I might have developed a phobia of being stared at by strangers.

“Welcome,” a jovial call comes from an elderly man behind the counter. Rag brazenly sits on the chair in front of the counter, and I nervously sit beside him.

“Are you travelers? What will you have?”

“Anything you have that tastes good.”

“Coming right up.” The bartender turns away to cook without a visible reaction over Rag’s uncivil attitude.

Rag gulps down the whole glass of water the bartender places out for us first. I look around the tavern’s interior with my own glass in hand. The flickering flames of candles placed in various locations around the tavern create a splendid atmosphere with the play of shadows in the swaying light.

Something is amiss though, and it doesn’t take me long to realize what—there’s no music. This place would be perfect if quiet jazz music played in the background.

I bring the glass to my lips when, “BLEGH!” I spit out what I sipped.

“Gross! What’re you doing?”

“Th-This is alcohol...”

“Obviously. Don’t tell me you can’t stand alcohol at your age?”

“Y-You can’t drink until you turn twenty in my country!” I retort, more annoyed than I realized.

“Heh, then what do you want? Should I ask for some milk for the baby?”

“...Do you have juice or something of the sort?” I ask the bartender, ticked off that Rag made a complete fool of me with his comment.

The bartender chuckles, “I do,” and swiftly switches out the glass for me. I sip the red liquid and a sour tang numbs my tongue.

“It’s great!”

“I’m glad.”

I gulp down the whole drink to quench my parched throat.

***

AROUND the time I started eating the food similar to pilaf that the bartender served me, a startling comment stops my hand from bringing the food to my mouth.

“The Silver Siren has...” whispers a patron behind us.

“Isn’t that just hearsay?”

“Nah, it seems legit. I heard about it from an acquaintance who was in Grave yesterday.”

“But didn’t they catch it?”

“That’s the thing—they caught it once, but apparently it escaped.” Something suddenly bumps into my leg, and I look at Rag. Just like that, the spell keeping me fixated on my fellow patron’s conversation was broken. Cold sweat beads my forehead and back.

“Don’t let it get to you, stupid,” Rag whispers without looking at me.

He has a point—I need to act normal. I lift the food to my mouth again. The conversation continues behind me while I eat.

“Now that I think about it, the soldiers were actually patrolling the area for once. I guess that’s why.”

“The Silver Siren, huh? Seeing as it showed up in our country, does that spell the end for us too?”

“It wouldn’t go as far as laying its hands on a small town like this. If it was gonna target anywhere, Grave Castle would be the first place. Maybe it’s roaming the streets there looking for its next prey as we speak.”

“Scary stuff, man. It’s a woman, right? What kinda woman?”

“Nothin’ comes to mind aside from her having silver hair and wearing foreign clothes...”

I can’t even taste the food I found so delicious moments ago. The soldiers have already made it this far; they might still be here. The spoon trembles in my hand.

The clatter of a chair scraping back makes me jump—Rag is standing from his chair.

“Thanks for the food. What do I owe for the meal?”

Oh, it was just him. I’m relieved, but my heart won’t stop pounding.

“Hurry and eat your food. I have somewhere else I want to go tonight.”

“O-Okay!” I promptly devour the rest of my food.

“Thanks for your patronage!” the bartender’s voice follows us out the door as we leave the tavern.

***

“I was a kid at the time and you’ve changed clothes, too. Your hair won’t turn silver unless you use your power. They won’t discover us so long as you act oblivious,” Rag instructs as we walk along the road lit only by the light seeping out of nearby homes—there aren’t any streetlights here.

“Yeah...” I nod and restlessly scan the area for curious eyes.

I haven’t done anything wrong, yet I feel like I’m some sort of escaped criminal. I inhale the cool night air and slowly exhale. The next shop Rag stops at has a sword drawn on the sign. If this were a game, we’d be at the weapon shop.

I follow Rag into the shop; my face stiffens once I’m inside. As expected, various frightening weapons decorate the walls, but that’s not all—several men with scary faces sit on a bench inside. Every single one of them is muscle-bound, and there’s even a man with a shaved and scarred head. My legs almost give out beneath me when they shift their attention in a glare toward us.

Rag heads for the back counter without a change in his expression. I try to shrink as small as possible behind him.

“I want to hire a bodyguard to escort us to Rubato,” Rag says to the man sharpening a sword behind the counter.

Rag did say he wants to hire a mercenary. The forty-something year old owner stops sharpening the sword and slowly turns to look at us. His gruff physique is similar to the men behind us. His scowling face is scary. I gasp from the mental image of being surrounded by brawny wrestlers.

“What class do you want?” the owner brusquely asks in a deep voice. For a second I relate the word to the type of *class* you attend at school, but immediately rethink the meaning to be a type of ranking.

Rag examines the men behind us and asks, “Who’s the strongest here?”

“That’d be me by a far cry!” proclaims a man faster than the owner can respond; he vigorously stood up too. The man carries a gigantic sword on his back and has several scars carved into his burly body—a mercenary by all appearances.

“How dare you claim that! I’m the mightiest among us!”

“In your dreams! You only recently made 2nd rank!”

“Have you fools forgotten about me!”

Man after man stands in succession to glower at the other.

This is *scary*! I gulp at the explosive mood that suddenly erupted in the room.

“Don’t cause trouble. If you’re gonna go at it, take it outside. I’ll be making the decision here,” the owner quietly says in a low voice that travels through the room; the men reluctantly sit back down.

Apparently, the men here acknowledge the owner as their superior—if they didn’t, this shop likely couldn’t exist.

The owner snorts with satisfaction and turns back to Rag. “Unfortunately, I’ve only got men of the 2nd and 3rd rank. As you can see, they’re all the same. Are you departing right away?”

“No, we leave tomorrow morning.”

“Then you should drop by again tomorrow. If you’re lucky, our 1st might be back by then.”

“Okay.” Rag nods and turns on his heel to return to the entrance. I quickly follow him. The mercenaries’ eyes burn holes in my back.

***

I release all the air pent up inside me with one long sigh once we’re outside.

The extreme reek of sweaty male bodies lingers in my nose. I'm depressed by the mere idea of traveling with those people. To top it off, Rag wants to hire someone even stronger than the men we saw tonight. Although I can't deny that the stronger the bodyguard, the safer we'll be.

I let out another tiny sigh and ask Rag, "Hey, is Rubato far away?"

"About two days from here at my pace."

"That far? Don't you have car—carriages?"

"Don't be stupid. Nobles ride on those. You'd stand out like a sore thumb."

"I see..." I slump dejectedly. The popped blisters on my feet hurt by just thinking about walking more.

I ask another question to keep my mind off the pain. "What kind of place is Rubato?"

"A port city. It's just as prosperous as Grave. We're going to cross the ocean there."

"The ocean!" I exclaim loudly.

"What, is the ocean rare in your world or something?" Rag looks back at me dubiously.

"No, it's not, but—"

"Then don't shout. What a pain." Rag turns around.

This world has an ocean! Having been in the mountains all day I have a hard time imagining this world's ocean. Looks like I'll even get to experience traveling by ship in this foreign world.

Will I actually be able to return to Japan? I sigh deeply, insecure about what the future may hold.

***

"THANKS, Miss!" a boy says, waving his hand in wide strokes from the entranceway of a house in front of us. The boy is about the same height as Rag in his younger form. A woman who appears to be his mother is bowing beside him. A person walking toward us turns around and waves back to the boy.

The boy called the person *miss*, so she's probably a woman, but she's very tall. She's not much shorter than Rag who is quite tall, especially when he stands in front of me. The woman turns back in our direction and passes us.

I couldn't help turning around and following her with my eyes. She's wearing similar attire to the mercenaries in the weapon's shop. Her clothing is revealing compared to what the rest of the women wear. It's probably easier for her to move while fighting without excess clothing getting in the way.

She has light armor on top of what clothes she has on. Furthermore, she has a large sword on her back. It's too dark to properly see, but she seems like quite the looker.

"Hey, Rag!"

"Huh?" Rag turns to me as if the mere act is a nuisance.

"Do you think the woman just now is a mercenary?"

"...Probably," Rag says, checking her out.

"Hey, can't we ask her then?" I can tell I'm overly excited. I thought mercenaries were only sordid men like the ones in the weapon's shop. If women are also mercenaries, then I definitely want to ask a female mercenary to take on the job, but—

"Huh? ...Don't even joke about it. It's obvious a woman would be too weak." His curt rejection makes my shoulders droop.

"It'd be better to ask the scoundrels from earlier." Perhaps it's unfair to compare her to those men. I let out a sigh, giving in.

Rag bitterly continues, "I want to refrain from using my abilities as much as possible. If they aren't strong enough to protect both of us when we encounter monsters, there's no point in hiring 'em."

"I see. That makes sense."

My singing isn't reliable either. Wait a minute, if we hire a mercenary we need to keep it a secret from them that I'm the Silver Siren. I heave another sigh.

***

THE next shop sign we come across has something akin to a pillow drawn on it; I assume it's an inn.

"Welcome." We're welcomed by a smiling middle-aged woman behind the counter. She must be the proprietress. Her well-rounded figure covered by a white apron gives me the impression of a kindly mother, which somehow puts my mind at ease.

"One room please."

"Sure thing. You're travelers, right? Have a restful sleep," the woman says as she hands Rag a key.

"It's the first room you see when you go upstairs."

"Ah, okay!" The proprietress smiles at me when I respond in Rag's place—he's already making his way up the stairs beside the counter. I climb half the wooden stairs looking up at Rag's back until it finally dawns on me—we will be sharing the same room!

A strange sense of panic hits me—I've never shared a room, much less slept alone with a member of the opposite sex who isn't family. I'm not really in a position to ask for a separate room, though.

Seriously, what am I thinking about? He's saved me multiple times since yesterday—I owe him my life. I'm being unduly self-conscious thinking he would jump me just because he's a guy. Separate rooms will cost double the price. Plus, I should actually be grateful someone in this world cares about my safety.

I know! I just have to think of his child form as the real Rag! I delude myself into thinking that as I follow Rag into the room.

***

"BOO, you can come out now," Rag says behind me after I close the door.

I completely forgot Boo was with us; I'm incredibly embarrassed I thought we would be alone. Boo flies to me and alights on my head. I barely feel him, only a slight movement in my hair lets me know he's there.

"You did well. I bet you got sick of being in his pocket this whole time," I praise Boo with my eyes raised to greet him on my head; I'm happy he's taken a liking

to me.

Boo merely answers me with his usual coo, as if he's saying, "That's not true."

"What's wrong?" I ask Rag who's staring at me.

"Nothing...I've never seen Boo ride on someone else's head is all."

"Really?" Thrilled by his comment, I reach my hand up and gently pet Boo.

"What does Boo eat? Is he hungry?"

"He'll eat whatever he finds flying around, so he'll be fine on his own," Rag says as he falls back on the bed.

"Aah, I'm beat. I'm gonna sleep the rest of the day away."

Only now does it occur to me Rag hasn't slept a wink since last night. I open my mouth to thank him—

"Can you please refrain from sleeping just yet?" Rag bolts up at the sudden voice that doesn't belong here. I immediately turn my attention toward our intruder.

"Ernest!" The same blond man I met before is floating by the window.

"I'm glad to see you successfully escaped." Ernest smiles sweetly at me. My heart is fulfilled by his gentlemanly smile. However—

"You! What's there to be glad about!" Rag shouts fiercely. He's glaring at Ernest like he's going to lunge at his incorporeal body at any moment.

Boo seems stunned by his partner's behavior as well—he fell off my head and tumbled onto my shoulder.

What's going on here?

Chapter 6 Ernest

ERNEST'S smile doesn't fade when faced with a seething Rag. "You are as foul-mouthed as ever, I see."

"Shut your trap! Put me back to normal already!" Rag yells one-sidedly. All I can do is watch over them in suspense. The one thing I can tell from their exchange is that they do know each other.

"Look what you've done now; you've frightened her with all your anger. Women hate men who aren't nice to them."

"Don't patronize me! Do you know what I've been through since you—"

"I made you a promise, didn't I? I promised, to free you from the curse if you bring her to me," Ernest says as though he's pacifying a child.

"What?" I quietly ask. What is that supposed to mean?

"I don't remember makin' any promise! You just did as you pleased—"

"Did you want to stay in that place forever, then?"

Rag abruptly falls silent and glowers in frustration.

A smile crosses Ernest's lips at Rag's reaction. "You are free right now. Shouldn't you actually be grateful to me?"

"How is this freedom!"

"Well, whatever. Can't you keep quiet for a bit? I want to talk to her now. I don't have much time." Ernest's emerald-green eyes shift to me.

"Looks like you have had a very rough time since we last talked. Are your feet

okay?”

“Um?” I recall my blood oozing feet at his question.

“Oh, yes, I’m okay!”

Ernest smiles; his smile is so enchanting it warms my heart.

“I can’t do anything but watch over you, but...Kanon, I have faith you will make it to me—together with him,” he says, glancing at Rag.

“Excuse me! Why am I the *Silver Siren*? Why me?” I ask the question that has been on my mind this whole time. Is it just a coincidence I came to this world? Or—

Ernest closes his eyes, as if in prayer. “I have been calling for the *Silver Siren* for a long time—and then you appeared.” He opens his eyes and stares at me again.

His response isn’t the answer I’m looking for, but I’m moved enough by the emotion in his words not to pry further. Is it just my imagination that made me think for a second that I saw sorrow in his eyes?

“Okay, time is about up... Rag, don’t scare Kanon too much with your constantly angry face. It might get stuck that way.”

“Shut up!” Rag shouts, unable to endure keeping quiet any longer. “Hurry up and disappear already!”

Ernest’s expression doesn’t falter under Rag’s shouts—he vanishes with a smile.

“Damn it!” Rag angrily punches the wall.

He’s always grouchy, but this is my first time seeing him this angry. I’m nervous the proprietress downstairs might have heard the loud bang.

As I thought, Ernest and Rag know each other. I guess that means Rag just didn’t know Ernest’s name? I want to ask him a lot of different things, but right now is clearly not the time to talk. It’s too awkward to move or make a sound. I jump when I notice him standing in front of me.

“Oi...show me your feet,” Rag commands gruffly out of the blue.

“Why?” I’m hesitant.

“Show me your feet! You’re hurt, right? I’ll heal you, so sit down!” He orders me like I don’t have a choice in the matter.

“O-Okay!” I quickly sit on the bed and fumble over removing my new shoes. Rag scowls when he sees blood oozing from several sores on my feet.

“Tell me if you’re hurt! Geez...” Rag complains as he kneels on the ground and touches both of my feet.

Maybe he can heal using Sorcery. I stare at his hands full of curiosity.

“***Healing, to these wounds…***” Rag says in a whisper.

The popped blisters on my feet start to itch. Rag removes his hands a few seconds later to reveal regenerated skin.

“Wow! It healed!” I rub the sores that oozed blood until he touched them.

“I merely strengthened your body’s healing ability.” I look up with a sudden realization when I hear him sigh—mini-Rag is kneeling in front of me.

“Th-Thank you.”

“You’d better figure out how to do simple healing spells on your own,” Rag states and returns to the bed opposite the one I’m sitting on. I’m not sure whether I even have the ability to heal, but I nod anyway.

I work up the courage to ask him a question. “Hey, Rag?”

“What?”

“Um, I wanted to ask you about...Ernest....” My voice trails off. Rag is laying face up on his bed.

“That blond scumbag is called Ernest?” Rag grumbles spitefully, glaring at the ceiling. However, the high-pitched sound that accompanies his boyish voice dulls the intimidating edge; not like I would ever tell him.

“Could it be that your curse is—”

“Something that scumbag cast on me.”

I knew it! Their conversation gave me the general idea that was the case, but the truth is shocking. I never thought the kind and handsome Ernest would do something like curse Rag.

“He said he’ll remove the curse if I bring you to him, but I wonder about that...”

“Why did he do that to you, Rag? Where is Ernest?”

“Somewhere on a continent across the ocean from here.”

“Somewhere?”

“The trash won’t tell me! He always avoids it by sayin’ he doesn’t have time!” Rag fumes.

I’ve only met Ernest twice, but each time he disappears as abruptly as he appears. He said he’s confined somewhere, which might have something to do with it.

“He’s definitely enjoying himself. Always with a frivolous smile plastered on his face... He sickens me!” Rag complains.

Frivolous smile? I think it’s a lovely smile, though.

“So you’ve met that scum before too, huh?”

“Uh, yeah. Back when I was in the dungeon cell he said he’ll send me back to my world if I save him.”

“Haah. Best not expect much from him. I doubt that scumbag will let you go home easily,” he laughs mockingly. I feel like the ground is going to fall out from under my feet.

“...But he told me you were coming to save me, Rag,” I say quietly. I have a bad feeling, like the flutter of restless butterflies in my chest.

“I went there because that scumbag told me the *Silver Siren* is at Grave Castle. Thanks to a certain someone, I almost died before having this curse lifted.”

I unknowingly clench my fists at Rag who shut his eyes again.

“Better prepare yourself for the worse. We have no idea what that trash will do once we meet him.”

I explode at his comment this time. “You don’t have to put it that way!” I shout —Boo flies off my shoulder.

Rag’s blue eyes open wide. Not even I know why I shouted. I just want Rag to

stop saying bad things about Ernest and ruining my image of him. If I start to doubt him, I'll begin to doubt there's any hope of me getting home.

"I'll meet Ernest, get the sheet music, and return to my own world! So I have faith in him—I have no choice but to have faith in him!"

I didn't want him to shake the only solid ground I have under my feet. Ernest is the sole light of hope I have in this world. I didn't want Rag to extinguish the light. I immediately return to my senses at Rag's icy stare. I'm so ashamed I can feel the heat rushing to my cheeks.

"Do whatever you want. I'm happy as long as I'm freed from this curse," Rag says sourly and turns his back to me.

I'm unable to say anything else. Boo anxiously looks down at the two of us.

***

I lay on my bed after all conversation between us died at Rag's bitter remark. I regret what I said after the silence stretches between us. Rag despises his curse more than I'll ever know. It's only natural he would say bad things about Ernest when he's the very person who cursed him.

I work up my courage to mumble, "I'm sorry," to the tiny back facing me. He might already be asleep—he doesn't say anything in response. I apologize to him now because I know it'll be harder tomorrow when he's bigger. Even so, apologizing brings some reprieve and I instantly sink into a deep sleep.

***

"OI, wake up!" I'm pulled from my dreams by Rag's irate voice. I quickly sit up—a displeased-first-thing-in-the-morning adult Rag glares down at me from the foot of my bed.

"Good...morning," I awkwardly greet him in a hoarse and sleepy voice.

"I'll go downstairs first, so hurry and join me," Rag says and quickly leaves. I let out a tiny sigh as his footsteps fade with his descent downstairs. The chirping of birds and bright sunlight comes through the slightly opened window. Today marks my second morning in this world.

"Ow!" A small pain runs through my arm as I'm tying my hair up while sitting

on the bed. I roll up my sleeve to expose a shallow cut I must have gotten while in the forest yesterday.

"...This will heal right away! In an instant!"

Besides, I can't pay heed to every little cut anymore. Then, it hits me.

Maybe I can heal, too.

Rag did tell me to get to the point of healing my own injuries last night.

A song to heal injuries. I can't think of anything suitable aside from the nostalgic *Magic Song* grandma used to sing for me when I was little. I inhale and hold the injured area the same way Rag did for me last night.

'*Chichin puipui,*

pain, pain go away.'

The wounds don't have to heal—I'll be happy if the pain goes away. I finish singing the short ballad with that hope. I anxiously remove my hand.

"...No good, huh?"

The cut hasn't changed at all and still hurts to touch. Apparently, it's not as easy as I thought. My hair hasn't turned silver either. At any rate, I can't believe I sang that childish song seriously. I laugh dryly at myself for feeling ashamed of what I sang, and for being glad I was alone when I tried.

"Oh no, I better hurry if I don't want him getting mad at me again!"

I spot Boo in an unexpected spot as I hurry to get ready and leave the room. He's sleeping upside down behind the leaves of a potted plant placed in the room. I can't help smiling at the sight of him.

Boo's the type that soothes others. I quietly leave the room in an attempt not to wake him. I smell the tasty scent of freshly baked bread in the hallway. I descend the stairs as though being invited by the delicious scent and run into the proprietress.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well? I've prepared breakfast in the back room. Enjoy."

"Okay! Thank you."

The proprietress returns behind the counter with a smile. I enter the back room where three groups of guests are eating breakfast; they look like travelers. I spot Rag at the farthest table in the room and rush to the chair across from him. I watch Rag silently eat and I grab one of the delicious-looking baked rolls.

“I hope there’s a strong mercenary available today!” I try to say as cheerfully as possible.

Rag stares at his food and says, “Yeah. Worst-case scenario we’ll go without a mercenary.”

I’m relieved he responded to me normally, so I continue the conversation, “Really?”

“If we hire guys like the ones from yesterday they’ll actually get in our way, rather than be any help.”

“Hah, I see...” I reply halfheartedly as I gnaw at the bread.

The mercenaries from yesterday would be outraged if they overheard him; I search the room for any sign of them showing up out of nowhere. Rag is overconfident and doesn’t know to fear the unknown.

Not that I can deny how amazing his spells were yesterday. But I don’t know what counts as common sense in Reveur. Yesterday Rag said not everyone is capable of using Sorcery. Wouldn’t that make him a powerful person in Reveur? If he is, then I can sort of understand where his confidence and arrogant personality come from.

“Hurry up and eat!”

“O-Okay!” His anger impels me to continue eating.

Why do I feel like his arrogant personality has nothing to do with Sorcery?

***

“LET’S check whether there’s anyone worth hiring before we leave,” Rag says to me right before leaving the room.

“If we end up hiring a mercenary, don’t mention I’m a Sorcerer.”

“What? Why?”

“You stand out in a bad way by being a Sorcerer in this kingdom. I won’t use any spells unless the situation absolutely calls for it. Understand?”

I nod. I recall the castle soldiers who were utterly shocked by the presence of a Sorcerer. As expected, Reveur’s countries have different cultures. Cultural differences have been the catalyst for war on Earth as well.

My heart always aches when cultural differences are shown as the catalyst for tragedy on the news. I’m able to think this way because I was raised in the peaceful Japan of the modern age.

In a war torn land, everyone believes in their own convictions and desperately clutches to life. I wonder whether Reveur, which looks peaceful at a glance, deals with its countries going to war too.

Rag emphasizes, “Also, make absolutely sure you don’t sing.”

“I know! I won’t!” I respond, almost raising my hand. I feel like I’m being reprimanded by a strict teacher—even though we don’t appear too far apart age-wise. He always acts like he’s superior.

“By the way, how old are you, Rag?” I ask him as we go downstairs.

“I’m almost twenty.”

Which means he’s nineteen. Oh dear, he’s two years older than me.

“You?”

“Seventeen.”

“You act like it.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

I’m offended by him making a fool of me again, but I can’t hide my smile when I spot a black shadow swaying under the knot of his ponytail.

Chapter 7 Serene

THE town once shrouded in the shadows of night, is bathed in the morning light when we leave the inn. Cedez is built around a main road. The road itself isn't too wide, and I can tell it's a small compared to Grave's castle town. Almost every building is a one-story cottage; there are no two-story buildings aside from the inn we stayed at last night.

We pass old ladies idly gossiping with laundry under their arms; the scene reminds me of the time I went on a camping trip with my family where we ended up washing our clothes in the pond.

I'm sure my family and friends are concerned about my sudden disappearance. Two days have passed since I arrived in Reveur. My family must be really worried by now, considering I've never been away from home without informing someone where I was going.

My heart aches. I want to go home already—back to my own world. I have to find Ernest to do that!

I spot the weapon shop from yesterday. I gulp when I see the sign from last night up close. I hope there's someone strong, that's not one of those gruff overly physical musclemen!

I follow Rag as he places his hand on the door, while hoping for something contradictory—when he suddenly disappears. Before I can question what's happening, someone forcefully yanks on my arm. There's a loud bang as someone comes flying outside.

The person flies over the spot I was standing a second ago and lands hard on

their butt; he looks like one of the big burly men I saw last night. I shudder at the thought of nearly getting squished under his armored, muscular body.

Rag let go of my hand, so I quietly mutter, “Thank you.”

Rag doesn’t respond, he merely glares coldly down at the man who came flying out of the shop.

“Owwww! You she-devil! What te’ hell are you doin’!” the man shouts at the door and stands with apoplectic rage.

I’m surprised by who slowly saunters out of the shop—it’s the female mercenary from last night! There’s no mistaking that slender, tall, and well-proportioned body. Not to mention the large sword secured to her back.

I couldn’t really make out what she looked like in the darkness last night, but she’s even prettier than I initially thought. She has a great hourglass body! Her short hair is the bright red of embers.

She’s so cool looking! I’m fascinated by this beautiful woman who looks like she belongs in a Hollywood movie.

Slowly she opens her lips to address the glowering man, “I hate talentless, obstinate men. Get out of my sight this instant!” she says in an icy tone.

Her voice is intimidating enough I want to run away, though it’s not directed at me. The man recoils for a moment before realizing everyone’s attention is on him.

“What’re you lookin’ at!” the man spat, taking his anger out on the crowd watching him, before he turns back to the woman.

“Don’t get cocky, she-devil! Do you want that beautiful skin of yours messed up?” Of all things, the man removes the sword from his waist and points it at the woman!

I almost shout to stop them. The townspeople watching from a distance also raise their voices reproachfully over the commotion. However, the woman doesn’t even lift an eyebrow at having a sword pointed at her. Her sharp glare is more intimidating than the man’s sword.

“Quit while you still can. She’s not someone you can beat.” The weapon’s shop

owner we met last night laggardly appears behind the woman.

But the man, with his face drenched in a cold sweat, raves, “A-As if I could turn back now!”

He brandishes his sword at the woman; screams pierce the air. But the winner is decided in an instant—the point of her sword is close enough to remove his nose. The color drains from the man’s face—he can’t even tremble. I couldn’t tell when she unsheathed her sword from where I’m watching on the sidelines.

“I told you that you can’t win. This lady is an experienced 1st rank. A 3rd rank like you can’t even swing a sword properly yet, much less at her,” the shop owner says in exasperation. The man drops his weapon and meekly collapses to the ground in front of the owner.

In the end, the man couldn’t even touch her; much less put a single scratch on her skin. Clapping resounds from all directions.

“Nice work, Miss!”

“You’re so cool!”

The morning quiet of the town stirs with the commotion. The man shrinks and leaves the area in a hurry. My eyes meet the woman’s, who had already sheathed her blade, as I clap. I’m taken aback when the woman’s lips turn up in a slight smile before she turns on her heel. I watch her pass by the owner and slip back inside the weapon’s shop.

“Rag! We’re going to hire that lady!” I say, my delight from her smiling at me ringing in my voice.

“Huh? Sure...if there’s no one else. Man, what a waste of time,” Rag says, unamused as he pushes open the door to the shop for the second time. A bell rings overhead.

“Oh, you’re the ones from yesterday,” the shop owner immediately speaks to us when we enter.

Several men are sitting on the benches inside like yesterday. They’re all eyeing the redheaded woman walking in front of us; some with curiosity, others in fear.

“You’re in luck, she’s our 1st. Her ability is...well, you’ve already seen it for yourself.”

The woman notices he’s talking about her as she’s about to sit. She peers over her shoulder first at me, then at Rag.

“Do you have any other 1st?” Rag says looking past her at the shop owner.

I panic over his question—he actually asked such a thing right in front of the person!

The owner frowns with suspicion. “What, not satisfied with her? She’s skilled enough to have survived the height of the Great Sorcerers’ War.”

Rag seems to perk up the second war is mentioned.

The Great Sorcerers’ War? I’m puzzled by what that war entailed, as I never heard of it.

“I have the right to choose whom I work for,” the woman says disgruntled, as she sits on a chair.

Rag glares down at her. Everyone in the shop is on the edge of their seats over what is going to happen between them next.

Rag is such an idiot! Anyone would be angry over what he said! And I thought we finally found a good person too!

His temper is only going to cause trouble. I hopelessly watch over them in the heat of an argument.

The woman folds her arms and coldly continues, “You’re a man and you can’t even protect your girlfriend on your own? How pathetic.”

“Huh?”

“Uh?” Rag’s and my voice overlap.

“I told you I won’t protect anyone other than women and children, Master.”

“Y-You are mistaken! We’re not in any kind of relationship!” I try to explain to her. My heartbeat accelerates when she looks straight at me. Even I can tell my cheeks have turned red. But I can’t let things end like this!

I clench my fists and desperately bow my head to her. “Won’t you please escort us as far as Rubato!” My voice echoes through the silence encompassing the shop.

The eyes of everyone present bore into me, making me afraid to lift my head. Meanwhile, I hear the woman let out a little sigh.

“Fine. I’ll accept.”

“Really?” I ask excitedly.

“But I have no intention of protecting a grown man. I will only protect you. Do you accept those terms?” she asks. I timidly look up at Rag—his face stiffens the moment our eyes meet, before he sighs loudly like he’s given up.

“I’m the one paying you, but...whatever. I don’t feel like being protected by some woman, either.”

I’m relieved I somehow convinced Rag to agree.

“I look forward to traveling with you! Um, my name is Kanon.”

“I’m Serene. I will protect you with all my strength until we arrive at Rubato, Kanon.”

Thus, the three of us start our journey together by departing from Cedez.

***

HOW long have we walked since leaving the Town of Cedez? The sun beats down on our heads and the temperature grows hotter with each step. The tall trees give way to shrub-covered plains stretching endlessly in every direction on both sides of the dirt road.

At first, I wanted to run alongside this magnificent view that would be a rare sight in Japan—but that feeling didn’t last long. I quickly grew sick of the same never-ending scenery. I feel like we’re not covering any real distance, since nothing is changing around us. I almost fall into my usual habit of humming to myself in boredom, but I can’t now that Serene is traveling with us.

Apparently, this road continues until Rubato. People seldom take this route. A while ago we passed an old man who appeared to be a peddler and had a mercenary following him—we haven’t passed anyone else since.

The dirt road continues flat and even. Traveling this road is far easier on me physically than the path we took over the mountain yesterday. The lack of physical exhaustion and pain has freed my mind to mull over all the small details, making it mentally painful—there's no conversation going, either.

Rag has taken the lead, and Serene watches over me from behind. The way they're walking around me makes me feel like I'm on some kind of vital mission and they're my bodyguards. They haven't spoken a word since we left Cedez—it's likely their horrible first impression of each other has something to do with that.

Our footsteps and the occasional gust of wind blowing across the grass-covered plains are the only noises. I can't stand the silence; a few days ago I lived in a world where constant chatter and sound pollution were never ending. I have to start a conversation!

Determined, I turn around and speak to her, "Miss Serene!"

"Serene is fine."

"Oh? A-Are you sure? O-Okay then, Serene, how long have you been a mercenary for?"

"I officially registered when I was fourteen," she answers with a serious expression.

I'm happy she even replied, so I continue the conversation, "Fourteen! Wow! So since your freshman year of high school?"

"Freshman year? What's that?"

"Ah, uh, that's a word they use where I'm from...it means when you were pretty young—ahaha! So you've been strong since childhood, then?"

"No, I constantly failed back then. I nearly died more times than I can count."

"Wow, must have been rough... B-By the way, what was it, the Great Sorcerers' War? The shop owner said you survived during its peak, but was it that dreadful a war?"

Her expression changes for the first time—her eyes open wide and surprise colors her face. "You don't know about it?"

“Ah, uh, um, well...” I panic. It seems this war is common knowledge in Reveur. Rag just clicked his tongue.

“This girl is from the middle of nowhere. She knows nothing of the world. You should stay quiet if you don’t want to humiliate yourself further.”

His remark ticks me off, but it’s a good idea to keep from saying anything unnecessary.

“That war was...horrible,” Serene mutters. “You are better off not knowing. Even saying I survived is a matter of luck.”

I shouldn’t have asked about the war. The quiet sorrow in her voice assured me of that.

After that fiasco, we walked in silence as Rag requested. Our journey continued peacefully, until around the point I started wondering whether there was any need to hire a mercenary—then they appeared. Rag suddenly stops. I was gazing at the scenery in a bored daze and bumped into his back at full speed.

“Whoa, Rag?”

“Time to work, Miss Mercenary.”

“I know.” Serene walks in front of me protectively.

“Um?” I’m shocked they’re even speaking to each other, but more startling is *what* shows up in the surrounding grasslands.

A group of five men stand in the road as if to block us from going farther. Each man carries either a long sword or daggers; even I can tell from a single glance they’re trouble. They have a similar demeanor to the male mercenaries in the weapon’s shop, but this group is viler. I’m unnerved by the way they leer at Serene and me.

“One man and two women—not your lucky day. You can keep your measly lives if you leave everything of value,” the man with a lanky face says cockily. The man in his mid-thirties, standing at the front of the group, appears to be their leader.

They appear to be the so-called bandits I have read about in history; not that I’m particularly frightened by the thought. The peculiar monsters from yesterday

were far more frightening. Besides, I feel safe with Rag and Serene.

“No thanks.”

“What’s that, lady?” The smile fades from the man’s face at Serene’s comment. He examines her from head to toe and laughs mockingly at her.

“You’re a mercenary? Hah, you seem pretty confident in yourself. We’re not your run-0f-the-mill bandits, though. You see, we’re Sorcerers from Stretta of all places!” the man proudly declares and puffs up his chest, as if boasting something incredible.

Rag, who seemed bored until that comment, glares at the bandit. Serene’s expression turns even more serious as she deftly removes the long sword from her back. The lackeys brandish their weapons.

Weren’t Sorcerers supposed to be rare in this kingdom!

I shiver from the suddenly tense air—or maybe it was from the bloodlust.

“What’s this? Are you fools saying you still want to go at it!” The man raises both of his hands in the air.

Serene immediately moves to stop him, but his lackeys block her way. The high-pitched clang of sword clashing against sword fills the air.

Behind the combat, the leader takes the opportunity to shout into the sky, “***Lend me, the almighty one, your strength! …Wind, to me***!”

I stiffen and close my eyes in anticipation of the incoming attack. But five-seconds pass, and then another ten-seconds pass, with nothing happening.

I cautiously open my eyes and see everyone looking at Rag. Serene also raises an eyebrow at Rag, and stands defensively with her sword brandished. I peer at his face wondering what on Earth happened to him—there’s a single red slice across his cheek, like he had been cut by a piece of paper.

Hm? I thought something more dreadful would happen. I can’t help feeling that was unduly anticlimactic when the man starts laughing wildly like he’s accomplished some great feat.

“HAHAHAHA! So were you startled by how great and awesome my power is?” His lackeys follow suit and laugh with him.

“You should know your place now! Now then, leave everything of value and hurr—” A loud click of the tongue cuts the man off.

Rag slowly speaks as he wipes his cut cheek, “Don’t go mentioning Stretta...if this is all you can do!” The men are clearly afraid of his fury and vitriol.

“Serene, if you don’t want to get hurt stay behind me,” Rag says quickly. Serene glances at him curiously before returning to my side behind him.

“Wh-What? Do you want to be hurt even worse!” The man raises both hands in the air again with a bright-red face. Rag raises his right hand at the same time.

“Lend the almighty me your power once more!”

“I’m sorry, but please lend me a little of your strength...”

“*Wind, to me!”* Rag and the leader of the bandits’ request overlap.

In that instant I hear the roaring of wind and the men suddenly vanish from sight. I spot several specks that could be humans flying off into the distance over the grasslands. Rag’s wind blew all the men away. A boy stands alone before Serene and I.

Rag’s the one who told me to keep quiet that he’s a Sorcerer when we hired a mercenary—and yet not only did he use a spell in front of Serene, but he even let her witness him transforming into a boy.

The bandit must have really annoyed Rag when he called himself a Sorcerer. Rag must feel awkward; he won’t look back at us. I look over at the silent Serene to see as I feared, she’s staring at Rag’s small back befuddled.

“U-Um...Serene? You see, Rag is—”

“Kanon!” he shouts, stopping me. I shut my mouth.

“I’ll explain for myself...” Rag lets out a single sigh and slowly turns to face us. His cheeks are slightly flushed—perhaps from shame over his failure.

Rag opens his mouth and keeps his eyes averted, “As you can plain-well see for yourself, I’m a Sorcerer. But right now I’m stuck with this problematic body. Once this happens, I can’t use my Sorcery for a while. It’d be a big help if you

could continue protecting her, but...I understand if you choose to return."

Something, at the speed of wind, passes right by me. The moment I realize it was Serene—

"GYAAAAAAAAAAH!" Rag's scream echoes through the grassland.

My eyes bulge at the sight before me—Serene is squeezing Rag's little body as if he were the most precious thing in the world. To top it off, her face has a look of supreme bliss. I merely stand in befuddlement, watching the woman who I thought was so cool and strong until this point act like a completely different person.

"How cute! You are way too CUTE!"

"I-It hurts...L-Let goooooooo of meeeeeeeee!"



Rag's face is so red it's actually funny to look at. I'm certain the redness isn't just from how tight she's squeezing him. His face is buried between her two voluptuous breasts.

"Buha! ...Wh-What is wrong with you!" Rag shouts the moment he escapes from the clutches of her *breasts* and puts distance between them. His face still crimson with embarrassment.

"Aw..." Serene dejectedly drops the arms she was squeezing him with, depressed by his escape.

"Don't 'aw' me! Don't mess with me! Are you a *p-pervert*!"

"It's rude to call me a pervert..." Serene says, slowly rising to her feet. "What's wrong with pouring love out on something adorable?"

"Adorab—" Rag's face stiffens and he can't finish his sentence.

I secretly agree with her. I would never say it aloud, though. I rapidly feel the desire to laugh coming on and frantically try to keep my lips tightly squeezed together.

"You a-are f-fired! Fired, I say! Return to Cedez this instant!" Rag fumes jabbing his finger in the direction of Cedez.

"Don't wanna," Serene answers nonchalantly.

"Wha—"

"Kanon!" Serene spins toward me.

"Y-Yes?" I squeak out.

"You asked me to protect you until Rubato, right? Are you going to cross the ocean from there?"

"U-Um, that is the plan, but..." my voice comes out quietly.

"I see, that suits me well then. I was just thinking about leaving this country." The corners of Serene's lips curl in a smirk as she turns toward Rag. "I've decided! I won't let our journey together end at Rubato! I'll follow you two wherever you may go!" She says pleased by her decision, if the broad smile on

her face is anything to go by. Rag's little body trembles all over.

"Y-You've gotta be kidding me!" his boyish cry rides the wind and echoes across the swaying grass.

Chapter 8 Travel Companions

“RAG’S adorable form is...a curse?”

“Yes, that seems to be the case,” I whisper to Serene. She stares at the boy walking in front of us with a look of disbelief.

There’s easily thirty feet between Rag and Serene now. If Serene tries to close the distance by even a foot, Rag will shout, “Don’t get any closer, pervert!” and jump away.

Despite the tension, Serene constantly looks for a gap in his defense and inches closer. I merely smile as Rag fumes and yells warily every time she gets close.

Amid the peaceful scenery and the cooling of the coming dusk, I’m berated with questions by Serene who sticks to my side like a school girl with a new crush. Not that Rag would let her get close to him.

“Are you really, truly sure that precious baby boy is the cursed form? I think *grumpy* is the real curse here!”

“QUIET, PERVERTED WOMAN!” Rag shouts back.

“How long will we have the companionship of the adorable little Rag?” she asks, ignoring Rag’s comment.

“Um, I think he will probably turn back to normal pretty soon.”

“What! In such a short time? And then we get grumpy back? I must get one more hug in—”

“I told you not to get any closer to me, pervert!”

“Dang it...! But your angry face is so cute! ...I just can’t think of you as the same person as that surly man.”

“Ahaha,” I force a laugh in response.

Serene turns toward me like something just occurred to her. “Now that I think of it, what is your relationship with him, anyway? You said you aren’t romantically involved, but...”

“What? Um...” I’m at a loss on what to say.

How should I explain it? If I mess up, I might expose myself. I get the feeling that will be much worse than Rag revealing his secret.

“Oi! Mercenaries don’t have the right to pry into their employer’s personal lives!” Rag flips around and shouts back at us.

Unfortunately for Rag, yelling as a little boy has absolutely no impact, and doesn’t affect Serene in the least. If anything, her face brightens in happiness over him turning to look at her.

She raises her voice with even more curiosity, “What’s this? Is it the kind of relationship you don’t want to talk about? Don’t tell me one of you has unrequited feelings and is forcing the other—”

“We’re together because we’ve got a common goal! That’s all!” Rag yells red-faced, his anger finally reaching critical levels.

“A common goal?”

“I want to be freed from this damn annoying curse already! I’m searching for a certain person to do that. And she’s searching for the same guy, but for different reasons!” Rag declares loudly before he spins around and struts off.

I just realized my relationship with Rag is built on us working together for a common goal. There’s a sense of loneliness about the way that sounds, but it’s the inevitable truth. I have to meet with Ernest to get back to my own world. I need Rag’s help to find him, and Rag needs my *singing* ability to be freed from his curse.

I find it strange that there’s been no reaction from Serene yet, so I look up at

her face—and take a step back.

"...You're going to remove the curse?"

"Huh?" Rag turns around again after hearing her low guttural voice behind him—his body stiffens when he sees her.

Serene is standing there with her eyes glazed with anger and a bloodcurdling expression. I shudder from the aura she's exuding.

"Are you saying you are going to remove this wonderfully adorable curse!" she screams in overwhelming grief. Rag's face twitches and stiffens, as if his face could get any more rigid.

"I'll absolutely stop you from doing that! I'll devote my life to keeping the curse permanent, so I'll forever have that precious child by my side! If that's not possible, I'll have the curse reversed so you only turn into *grumpy* after using Sorcery!"

"A-Are you an idiot!" Rag shouts in more grief than Serene as she clenches her fists and gets fired up over protecting Rag's adorable boy form. I turn away, doing my best to ignore their shouts of who will succeed.

***

BEFORE long, the sun recedes over the horizon and we set up camp for the day. According to the others, some monsters are more active at night, so it's best not to move around once it's dark.

In exchange for settling down early, we're going to travel at first light. This is a lifestyle I would have never imagined living a few days ago, but I'm sure it's common in this world. I don't know how long I'll be in Reveur for, but I have to get used to this lifestyle if I hope to survive.

I'll have to get used to sleeping on the ground. I play with the dirt at my feet for no reason and sigh. Of course, this is my first time sleeping outdoors in this kind of situation. Luckily, this world is in a season similar to spring in Japan; at least the weather's like spring, making our journey far easier than it would be any other time of year. It's only slightly chillier than the afternoon after the sun sets.

My gaze drifts to a moon not unlike the one on Earth, and countless stars twinkling in the night sky. Thanks to that gentle celestial light, I'm able to make out the expressions on my companions' faces even in darkness.

Rag safely returned to his normal body and Serene is back to the cool beauty we first met. Rag sits opposite of me, his temples twitching every time Serene lets out a deep sorrow-filled sigh when she glances at him.

"Go back to Cedez already if you have any complaints. I fired you, so I'm not paying you for following us on your own. Man, I wish I could get a refund on what I paid you back in Cedez," Rag says to emphasize his opinion as he munches on dried meat. He's sitting on the ground with one knee up and one leg stretched out.

"There's no need for concern. I will give my all to protect Kanon from now on, as agreed. Besides, being able to see that boy again is more than enough payment..." Serene removes the sword from her back and sits behind me cross-legged and continues matter-of-factly, "Actually, I'll pay you if you let me see him again."

"In your dreams!"

I smile dryly at their conversation and chomp on the dried meat I got from Rag. I purposely didn't ask him what kind of meat. The meat exudes a strong flavor with each bite and honestly tastes great to me, especially after walking around all day on an empty stomach. I want to eat more, but I tell myself to be patient until Rubato.

"Hey, Rag, how much longer until we arrive at Rubato?"

"Hm, there are no landmarks around here. I'd say the day after tomorrow, depending on whether we run into any trouble."

"The day after tomorrow..." Meaning we'll be spending the night outdoors again tomorrow. A sigh escapes my lips again.

"I want to get there as soon as possible too. Let's walk faster tomorrow."

"Uuuuuuggggggghh..." I groan.

Today we didn't walk hard enough to burst the blisters on my feet again, but

my legs feel heavy enough I'm not even sure they're my legs anymore. I hope my fatigue will go away by tomorrow, but that's unlikely when I'm stuck sleeping on the hard ground without a bed.

Oh yeah, that reminds me, why isn't Boo up yet? He was flying around by this time last night. I glance at Rag's hair and spot Boo still sleeping with his wings folded. He might be cautious because he detects someone new is traveling with us.

Is it rare for monsters like Boo to get attached to people? Serene hasn't noticed him yet, but I wonder what will happen when she does. She won't suddenly cut him down, will she?

"Okay, I'm going away for a bit." I'm surprised when Rag suddenly stands.

"Why? Where are you going?"

"...To alleviate myself," Rag says curtly, disappearing into the grasslands.

"Where is that Sorcerer from?" Serene asks the second he's out of sight.

"Huh? Wh-What do you mean, where?" I panic. I can't mess this up while Rag is away.

"Nah, it's fine if you don't know... Sorry, don't worry about it." Serene says nothing more.

Boo was no longer hanging from Rag's hair when he came back. He must have let him go free. I bet there are tons of bugs for Boo to hunt in this grassland. I smile to myself when I imagine Boo happily chasing the insects fluttering through the air.

"Oi, I'll sleep first. You okay with that?" Rag asks.

"Yeah, I'll mercilessly beat you awake once I'm tired."

Oh yeah, I forgot it would be dangerous if we all sleep.

"Wake me up, too!" I suggest, feeling bad I'm the only one getting a full night's sleep, but—

"You just need to sleep. I can't rest peacefully if you're on guard duty."

"Ugh..."

“Kanon, this is my job. Sleep well,” Serene says kindly.

I thank them. I am truly grateful from the bottom of my heart that I’m traveling with them. It’s unimaginable for a modern Japanese teenager to fall asleep once the sun sets, but after walking nonstop for an entire day, I fall into a deep sleep once I pull my legs up and bury my face in them.

***

I naturally wake to sunlight and a refreshing wind caressing my cheek. I lift my head and rub my eyes. The peaceful landscape hasn’t changed one bit since I fell asleep.

Someone says, “Good morning,” from behind me.

I turn around when I sense Serene’s presence in the same spot as last night. She’s still sitting with her legs crossed.

“Good morning.” I’m relieved I’m not alone.

“Looks like you slept well,” Serene says.

“Oh, yes, I did. Thanks to you... Did you get any sleep, Serene?”

“Yeah, no problems there.”

“Rag is...still sleeping, I see,” I whisper when I notice he’s asleep. He’s surprisingly sleeping on his side with his chin resting on his hand; I stare at his resting face.

“We changed shifts once at dawn, after all. He will probably wake up soon.”

“I see...”

Boo is sleeping upside down from Rag’s ponytail knot again. He must have returned at dawn. This is the first time I have ever seriously examined Rag’s face. I get the feeling I’ve seen more of his back than his face since we met.

Heh. I carefully examine his features knowing this is the only chance I’ll ever get. First, I’m surprised by how long his eyelashes are with his eyes closed. His eyebrows are raised in a masculine way and the bridge of his nose is a fine length. It’s not an over-exaggeration or flattery to say he has a handsome face.

If only he wasn’t always so angry. He would probably yell at me, saying it’s

none of my business, if I told him to try not to be angry all the time. Plus, thanks to his brow not being furrowed into his usual scowl I can actually see some traces of his adorable boy form in his face. I'm certain Rag was a cute child.

Serene will go wild again if he grins innocently like a little boy. I laugh to myself as I imagine the scene. My heart skips a beat when his eyes suddenly open.

"G-Good morning."

"...You should have woke me if you were up," the first thing he says with half-opened eyes is a complaint. That ticks me off more than I thought. He sits up and stretches.

"You should smile a little," I mutter.

"Huh?"

"Nothing." I look away innocently.

I remember Ernest's smile as I gaze at the vast grasslands swaying in the breeze. Ernest's smile is enchanting. I try to imagine Rag smiling the same way, but instantly give up.

In one sense, it's incredible I'm unable to imagine what he would look like smiling. Now that I think about it, Ernest didn't show up at all yesterday; maybe because Serene is with us.

I let out a small sigh, feeling a little lonely. He said he's watching over us. His words motivate me to do my best again today.

***

TING! My eyes crack open to the sound of metal in the haze of dawn. I'm so tired and stiff, I just want to sleep. We hiked all day, and Rag rarely lets me sleep in. I drift back to sleep, thinking of home, and food.

"Kill it you fool!" are the next words I hear from Rag's angry voice, or at least I think I do, my mind drifts back into sleep again.

A weird chattering comes from all around me, before it gets any closer a squelch and the crack of bone against metal sends sparks over my head. Either that, or I'm dreaming.

“Shh! You’re going to wake up Kanon!”

Strange chattering and odd sounds echo across the field.

I sit up rubbing my sleepy eyes. “What’s going on?” I ask through parched lips, “Where’d all the ants come from?” What am I doing again? Oh! Right I was going on a picnic with Grandma!

Dog-sized twelve-legged ant monsters and their body parts litter the area surrounding our campsite. “Grandma is going to be so mad. She hates ants!”

“Kanon? Are you okay?” Serene asks, ripping her blade from a rather large golden ant.

“Is the picnic safe?”

“Tsk, she’s delusional! One of them must have bit her. I don’t have any anti-venom either!” Rag hisses cleaning his dagger in the long brush.

“Am not! I want *takoyaki*,” Serene steps next to me, a smile on her lips, “and I’m not sharing!”

“That’s okay, Kanon. Why don’t you go back to sleep, and in the morning this will all be a dream.”

“‘Kay. Make sure you tell grandma it’s not my fault the ants came!” I curl into a ball and quickly fall back asleep to the whispers of a kind Serene and a grumpy Rag.

***

“MORNING, everyone!” I yawn and stretch after a well-deserved rest.

“Good morning, Kanon,” Serene says opening her eyes, her back against a large boulder I don’t remember being in our campsite yesterday.

“Umm, did we move while I was asleep?”

“She really was asleep!” Rag snaps climbing to his feet.

Serene grumbles, “Of course she was, she thought you were her Grandma! Did you think she would treat you like that if she was awake?”

“Huh? Wait what happened last night?”

Serene smiles patting me on the head, “Nothing you need to worry about. We should get moving, we still have a ways to travel.”

Rag clicks his tongue and walks off; I stare after the two of them at a complete loss. “Wait, what happened? Who was Grandma? I didn’t talk in my sleep did I?” I call after them trying to catch up.

Verklärt Arc: An Enslaved People

Chapter 9 Port City Rubato

It took until the afternoon of our fourth day since we departed the Town of Cedez to spot the silhouette of a city.

“Is that a city? Are we finally there?” I mutter and take a moment to gaze at it. I recognize what looks like roofs at the edge of the grassland. Is that Rubato?

Considering we were attacked twice by bandits and more than ten times by different monsters, I’m ready for a city now. We encountered so many enemies that keeping track became a pain. Rag and Serene deftly fought off any with an intent to kill. Yesterday I almost puked when my first sight upon waking were the mangled corpses of monsters. Luckily, I hadn’t eaten yet.

I learned that for Rag and Serene, this was a normal part of traveling in Reveur. I’m not sure how to put it, but Serene’s fighting style is nimble and makes every movement count. Her swordplay is like an elegant ballet danced across the battlefield.

Rag’s fighting style is unrefined compared to Serene’s elegance. He swoops in for the killing blow, never giving the enemy time to attack. Rag hasn’t used any spells since our first run-in with bandits—instead, he fights with his dagger, fists, and legs. Serene’s anger grew day by day at the loss of mini-Rag, but I—and likely Rag—purposely pretended not to notice.

“Yeah, that’s Rubato,” Serene answers from behind me in a darker voice than how she sounded at the start of our journey.

I release a sigh of relief. We finally made it this far—I did pretty well surviving this journey, if I do say so myself. Obviously, this is the first time I’ve ever had to

live like a survivalist. My sore legs and blistered feet, which protested in agony at first, have finally gotten used to this lifestyle; at least they no longer bother me.

The pungent smell of salt mixes with the wind smelling of grass and wildflowers. A growing sense of exhilaration I haven't felt in a while returns with the fragrant breeze. I have always loved the sea, and after nothing but mountains and grasslands over the past few days, I long for the ocean. And yet—

"Phew, it's finally in sight. That took *longer* than I thought," Rag says at the vanguard of our party—my elated spirit pops at his accusatory words.

"Sorry for walking so slow."

"....."

He's not denying it!

I discreetly purse my lips and start walking until I hear Serene behind me.

"Is this your first time to Rubato, Kanon? ...Oh yeah, you said you're from a secluded village, right?"

"What? Ah, yeah, that's right."

"You should look around; you don't always get a chance to visit one of the bigger cities. They have a variety of clothes and other fashionable accessories, and being a port city there's also great food from all over the world."

"We don't have much time. We're heading straight to the port," Rag says monotone, cutting off Serene.

Serene's eyebrows raise in anger.

I shrug. How many times have they gone at it like this? I'm more than used to their quarreling now, but I really wish they would quit fighting when I'm in the middle. Putting aside the fact I don't want them to fight, they're both very tall—I can't help feeling depressed by my height when I'm stuck between them.

"A little detour won't hurt."

"It will hurt. If we don't secure a ship right away, we might not get one until tomorrow."

"If you're in that much of a hurry, you should just use sorcery to warp. That

should be a simple feat for someone at your level of power," Serene quips, more irate than usual.

"Don't even joke about it. I am never using another spell in your presence again!"

"Oh... What would you do if I attacked you?"

"I would handle you without Sorcery."

"H-Hold on, slow down, you two!" I frantically shout when they stop walking and glare daggers at each other.

I want to think they're just messing around, but the intensity behind their voices doesn't sound like they are joking. You could even say their tones are threatening.

"Let's hurry up and go! I-I'm hungry! Hey, Rag, don't we at least have time for lunch?" I rattle on quickly. They slowly turn their gaze on me.

"...As long as it's at a restaurant in the port."

"Rubato's fresh seafood, huh? The food here is superb; I haven't had it in a while."

I'm relieved when they both start walking again.

I'm finally going to get the chance to enjoy delicious food! I'm going to eat my fill!

The promise of a good meal after not eating for four days makes me feel like I'm on cloud nine. However, I would soon learn this is not a friendly journey where enjoying a tasty meal would come without hardship.

***

IN the distance, two people stand at the city's entrance. Our steady approach brings their attire into view. I stiffen.

"Kanon?" I'm unable to answer Serene. I frantically concentrate on keeping calm—I can't afford to have my legs tremble. I recognize their ostentatious armor. Standing in front of Rubato's gates are the same soldiers I hoped to never

encounter again. They must have noticed us too, because they are eying us cautiously as they stand guard at their station with an air of intimidation.

“What’s going on? It’s rare for Grave’s soldiers to be in this area... Kanon, there’s no reason for you to be afraid. They are likely doing a routine check for bandits and smugglers. We’ve run into a lot of bandits ourselves after all.”

Serene assumes I’m standing still out of fear of encountering soldiers for the first time. Her thoughts would be accurate if I were actually from some obscure village. Rag turns toward me and our eyes meet. His calm disposition is telling me not to panic. I give a slight nod and walk forward.

It will be okay. They might not be the same soldiers who arrested me, I repeat to myself as I put one foot in front of the other. Luckily, I don’t recognize these soldiers.

“Do you have anything to prove who you are?” one of the soldiers demands uncivilly.

Rag pulls a badge from his back pocket and shows the soldiers begrudgingly. The soldiers exchange shocked looks.

“The girl is with me. The other one is a mercenary I hired at Cedez. That’s good enough, right? I’m in a hurry,” Rag says, irritated.

The soldiers whisper something to each other. I hear the words “boy” and “the *silver*”—so they are searching for us. I clench my sweaty fists. The soldiers look at me. I feel like my heart is in a vise.

“Excuse me,” a soldier says as he approaches me and stares down at my head.

I avert my gaze and squeeze my eyes shut. I fear they can hear my thudding heartbeat, which sounds distant to me. This entire situation is too much for me.

However, to my surprise the soldier walks away with an easy, “You’re good to *enter*,” and opens the path for us. Almost contemptuously, he says, “Welcome to Rubato.”

I pass by the soldiers as calmly as I possibly can—my heart is still racing.

“So you are a Sorcerer from Stretta... No wonder,” Serene says in a low tone. Rag continues to face forward without answering.

Stretta? The bandits from a few days ago mentioned the same name. I really want to ask about it, but I'm certain Rag will get mad again, so I keep myself from bringing it up. What I do know is how amazing Rag is—considerably so, from the way those soldiers failed to hide their shock at his presence.

"Still though, what was with those guys? Why were they checking out Kanon's hair?" Serene asks, suspicious.

"Wh-Who knows," I respond vaguely.

"Oh, could that be it? You know, the rumor about the *Silver Siren* appearing."

My heart skips another beat. I didn't expect Serene to bring that up.

"So that's why there are soldiers, huh? I'm not sure whether it's true or just a rumor, but it's a nuisance either way," Serene says sighing. All I can do is force a smile.

***

THE first thing I notice passing through the colossal gate is all the people. I'm overwhelmed by the variety of people bustling about. After living the past few days traveling relatively empty roads, I'm shocked by the presence of a crowd. Street stalls line the main road from the gate into the city. Peddlers beckon citizens and travelers alike, attempting to entice customers with common and exotic goods.

Strange smells waft through the air, burying the scent of human habitation behind cooked food and valuable perfumes. Women clamor over their shopping endeavors, old men bicker in their chairs, and kids run through the crowds—easily avoiding traffic in a way only children can.

Grave had just as many people, but there was something elegant and calm about the castle town; perhaps due to housing nobles and royalty. Compared to Grave's solemn state, Rubato is lively with the hustle and bustle of people, as if it's in the height of a great festival. I easily forget my nervousness and stare in astonishment.

"It's a big city, right? People from neighboring countries make port in this city. It's also called the *City of Foreign Trade*," Serene explains.

“Heh, that’s a neat name!”

“We didn’t come to sightsee. Let’s get moving already,” Rag pushes me to keep moving. I direct my restless eyes to the road in front of me and notice I can finally see the ocean. It’s no different from the oceans on Earth.

Deep blue beautifully melds with the fluffy clouds overhead; together the sight dazzlingly contrasts the almost alabaster buildings in the city. *The port is likely that way.* My lips curl into a smile as we hastily pass the stall owners who cheerfully beckon us. Rubato seems more like a peddler’s city than a port city for foreign trade.

My stomach growls in response to the delicious smell of freshly baked fish at one of the street stalls we pass. I embarrassingly hold my stomach, but the sound is covered by the bustle of the city, saving me from the humiliation of the other two hearing.

I want to hurry up and eat something; seafood sounds good about now. Imagining tasty seafood makes my mouth water. However, as Rag said, we don’t have time to take it easy—soldiers are searching for us. Or likely, *“A girl with silver hair wearing clothes from a foreign country”* and *“a sorcerer boy.”* We might have been in trouble at the gate if Rag was in his boy form—and if I had been ordered to *sing* to prove my innocence.

I breathe deeply to calm myself, inhaling a whiff of salt-scented air. Just as I acknowledge the serious need to leave this country, the moment we can—a frightened scream draws a crowd at the other end of the street.

A crowd of curious bystanders is formed in the direction of the scream. I’m curious about what happened, but Rag continues without a single glance, so inevitably I try to pass the spot with him. The heartrending plea I hear as I walk by locks me in place.

“You are mistaken! I am not the Silver Siren!”

“Shut up! Quit your yapping and come with me!” the man scolds as a child sobs.

“What’s going on here?” Serene walks toward the commotion and I follow a step behind.

We push our way through the throng, my heart pounding with each step. I doubt what I see in the clearing. One large soldier holds a girl by her arm, forcefully dragging her across the ground. A boy around ten years old clings to the soldier's feet in a futile attempt to obstruct him.

The scene strikes a chord, reminding me this is not my world. What drew my attention most is the girl's appearance. She has dark-brown skin and white hair —which looks silver depending on how the light hits it. Her eyes are red like a rabbit's.

"Let go of my sister! She hasn't done anything wrong!" the boy desperately pleads with the soldier. His skin glistens with sweat as he fights for his sister's freedom with all his strength. Unlike his sister, he has black hair and eyes.

The boy and girl's clothes are clearly different from what people of this country wear. Their mostly black clothing is coated in white sand from being dragged across the dirt.

"The People of Darkness..." Serene mutters with a sour face beside me.

"People of...Darkness?"

"That girl has bad luck."

"Why?"

"The People of Darkness are people who live on a continent to the far south of here. I don't know why she came to Renforcer, but...she is going to be executed for it."

"Wha—" I'm taken aback by what Serene said. "Why! Because she's the...Silver Siren?"

"...The People of Darkness were on hostile terms with this kingdom in the past. A deep chasm of hatred still lingers between the two countries. Calling her the Silver Siren is nothing more than an excuse," Serene says far too dismissively. My heart constricts at the sight, how could they allow an innocent girl to be treated like this?

I slowly return my gaze to the girl. She must be around middle school age—her face still has childish features.

“I told you that you are mistaken! I am not the Silver Siren—”

“Then what is with this hair, huh!” The man forcefully pulls the girl up by her long hair. Her face contorts with pain as her body is lifted off the ground by her hair.

No one tries to stop the soldier’s horrible treatment of the girl. Not a single person reproaches him. Everyone watches at a distance with mortified expressions for what they know lies in store for her.

“Stop it! My sister isn’t the Silver Siren!”

“Shut your mouth, you Darkness brat!” The soldier cruelly kicks the boy clinging frantically to his legs.

My body moves of its own accord as Serene yells behind me. I stretch out my arms to catch the boy’s small body. The boy lands with a thud against my chest and I fall from the collision, hitting the ground. I gasp, losing my breath for a moment, but I somehow cushioned the boy’s fall. My vision is blurred from the dust kicked up by my fall. I blink away the fuzz as I sit up and gently lay the boy down who has gone limp, before long the boy takes a sharp breath and starts coughing.

“Cough...cough...blegh...!” He throws up as he coughs. He was kicked in the stomach.

How could he! I desperately hold back my tears and rub the boy’s hunched back.

The air gradually clears of dust and sound returns to my ears. The surrounding area is deathly silent and I can tell everyone’s attention is on me. I have to wonder where the festival like hustle and bustle went, because only the boy’s coughing echoes through the city. The silence doesn’t last long.

“What are you doing, girl? Are you going to defend the People of Darkness?” the soldier gruffly demands above me.

I don’t answer him. Anger, sadness, fear—too many emotions are swirling inside me; I can’t get any words out.

“Oh? Your skin’s color... You aren’t from our country, either. Are you a friend

of theirs?”

“...I’m not,” I say quietly as I care for the dry heaving boy throwing up nothing but what little fluid is left in his stomach.

“You are an accomplice if you take their side,” the soldier condemns. I fiercely look up at his eyes for the first time.

“What did these children do?” I choke out hoarsely.

“Are you unaware of what the People of Darkness once did here in the past?”

“I don’t judge the actions of a child for those of their ancestors! They’re so small, and yet...what did these children do!” I shout angrily. The inside of my throat burns with barely contained indignation. My head throbs, the heat rising.

The soldier’s cheeks redden, anger and embarrassment warring on his face. “Watch that attitude of yours!” He releases the girl’s hair and goes for the sword at his waist.

The girl collapses beside him, and I tightly shut my eyes as the sword glints in the light before it swings down at me. Metal clashes against metal and I timidly open my eyes—a redheaded swordswoman is standing defensively in front of me.

“Serene!”

Serene casually stops the soldier’s sword with her sword, the return blow knocking him off his feet. She doesn’t pursue the soldier; her cold eyes freeze him in place. The soldier remains dazed on the ground for a moment—and I hope it will end here—but he recovers and clamors to his feet as he glowers at his new enemy.

“...You mercenary scum! How dare you point your blade at a national soldier!”

“Hmph, this girl is my employer; you understand what that means, right? I can’t allow you to harm a single hair on her head.”

“Screw you!” the soldier yells and commences a merciless barrage of jabs.

“Laut! Laut, get a hold of yourself!” I look over my shoulder to see the girl had scrambled over to her brother. She’s holding the boy up in an attempt to help him recover.

Bright red marks from the soldier dragging her across the ground mar her bare feet. The boy she called Laut must be feeling a little better; he sobs piteously in her arms. The surrounding crowd of people's attention is on Serene and the soldier as their blades clash. They merely watch with curious eyes. Various feelings well-up inside me at their inaction.

These people are not from Earth, but... This is the common sense of this world.

This world looked peaceful at a glance; however, as I traveled I have realized my assumptions were wrong. Reveur has the same kind of sad history, discrimination, and wars as *Earth* does. This is human nature, and without laws to protect the innocent the strong are free to prey on the weak.

I hate this. I slowly stand inhaling. My mind is made up, my resolve firm.

'Hey, why are you fighting?

Someone is crying somewhere.

Hey, why are you fighting?

Someone is screaming somewhere.

Everyone has the same heart.

We all smile when we have fun.

We all cry when we are sad.

We make up when we fight.

And so let us all sing together.

If we do, look, we can smile together again.

We did that as children, didn't we?

Look, try to remember.

If we do, the world might change.'

My singing echoes through the area. My whole body feels like it's burning up. My hair sways in an unfelt breeze; it glows silver.

When did I compose this song? In class at school? When I was watching TV? I forget what exactly spurred me to do it. I put all my feelings into the song after learning about the sad history of my world. I longed for a peaceful world without strife; one free of discrimination in all its forms.

'Let us all sing together.

To the person crying somewhere

To the person screaming somewhere

Let this song reach them.

Even if the voice is quiet

Surely it will reach them as a grand star overhead.

If we do, the world might change a little.

See, this vast world is becoming one.'

The soldier drops his sword. His sword clattering against the ground brings all the people staring in a daze back to their senses, and they flee in different directions screaming. With her sword lowered, Serene gazes at me with wide eyes. I stop singing when I confirm the soldier had fallen to his knees.

I look over my shoulder at the hugging siblings who gaze at me with a mixture of awe and trepidation.

"Hurry and run," I say.

"You are—" the girl tries to speak.

The approaching clank of armored boots and swords being pulled from their

scabbards interrupts her. The other soldiers must have heard the commotion because they are running toward us. The girl supports her younger brother and immediately disappears into a narrow alleyway. Having seen them flee to safety, I release my tension without thought; my feet tremble and won't let me move. Just as I'm about to collapse on the spot—

"You idiot! What're you doing!" a familiar shout admonishes me from the side, and I'm lifted easily into the air.

"I beckon thee from the icy North, cold and swift! Wind, to me!"

The moment he says that a wind so intense it feels like it will break my eardrums assaults us. I see Rag's angry face up close until I'm no longer able to keep my eyes open. Our bodies raise high into the sky as if we're riding on the wind.

Chapter 10 The Cost of a Song

I squint against the hurricane level winds, before hearing a slight thud below my feet as the wind dies down. Relief overwhelms me at the sensation of my feet back on land, only to be cut short when the hand supporting me pulls away and drops me on my butt.

“Ooow...”

I rub my behind and check our surroundings with teary eyes. We’re in a narrow alleyway surrounded by white buildings. No one else is around and despite the fact it’s midday, the alley is dreadfully dark in the buildings’ shadow.

I warily peer at the person standing in front of me. As expected, a *boy* is glaring daggers at me with a fearsome scowl. He is clearly furious, but I still attempt to thank him, when—

“What were you thinking? Just how many people do you think saw your face because you chose to sing in the middle of a bazaar, of all places!” Rag’s high-pitched shout echoes off the buildings in the tight alley.

I cringe. I’m grateful he’s in his boy form. I probably wouldn’t be able to work up the nerve to argue with adult Rag when he yells at me like this.

“Because it was horrible... Don’t you think so too, Rag? How could they do that to such a small child—”

“It’s their own fault for coming to this country when they are weak! As if I’d concern myself over someone else’s lack of common sense!”

“They must’ve had their own circumstances for being here! ...Plus, I heard the

girl was going to be executed for being the Silver Siren...”

Even if it were just an excuse to execute her, I couldn’t ignore what was happening. I feel responsible somehow.

“Would you rather be executed in her place? What a saint you are!” Rag snorts mockingly.

Now I’m ticked. “That’s not it! I was really scared, too!”

“Then don’t butt into other people’s problems! I’ll be inconvenienced if you get yourself killed!” he reprimands. I look down and bite my lip.

What I really want to say is thank you, and yet, “...That’s...true. You want me to free you from your curse,” I mutter sarcastically.

“Yeah, that’s how it is. Since you know that, don’t go shoving your nose into worthless conflicts!”

He has saved me countless times—but only because he needs me as the *Silver Siren*. I bet he would have ignored the commotion earlier and walked right by if I wasn’t the *Silver Siren*. The reality of our relationship suddenly dawns—and it hurts.

Serene watched the poor treatment of those children just like the rest of the crowd until I intervened. I remember the shock on her face when she saw me. Now that this has happened, I doubt I will ever be able to thank her for all she has done for me.

Rag must have taken my silent stare at the ground as a sign of reflection for what I’ve done, because he heaves a loud sigh and doesn’t reprimand me further.

“What to do now? They’ll catch up to us in no time. If whoever is in charge has any sense at all, they’ll blockade the port too.”

I look up. “You mean we can’t get on a ship?”

“Leaving the country requires documentation through the proper channels. It’s likely they’ve tightened security with the harbor master. At any rate, we should look for somewhere to stay hidden until it’s dark,” Rag says with disgust as he clicks his tongue.

He’s right—this isn’t the time to get emotional. Everything will be over if I get caught here. Considering Rag isn’t able to use his Sorcery at the moment, I might have to sing again. I force the dark thoughts out of my head and try to stand up, an attempt at strengthening my resolve, but—

“This is w-weird?” I’m assaulted by an intense wave of dizziness and collapse on the ground. I feel like all the blood is leaving my head. How could I feel anemic at a time like this!

I know I haven’t eaten much the past few days. I only nibbled on something that tasted like hard bread this morning and haven’t had anything since. But now is not the time to be weakened by the lack of food. I have to push through the mind-numbing sensation threatening to shut down every part of my brain and body, with all my willpower. I shake my head and try once more to stand; I step forward, but my strength leaves me, and I collapse a second time.

“Why?” I stare in a daze at the legs I can’t use.

Rag heaves another heavy sigh holding his hand to his head. “Gimme a break. This is all because you sang when you don’t have enough stamina. I told you that Sirens put their strength into a song.”

“Yeah, but last time when I flew in the sky I—”

“You passed out while flying and we plummeted to our deaths.”

“Ah...b-but this never happened in my world...!” I try standing again, but it’s a futile attempt.

We don’t have time for this! I want to scream at my own helplessness.

“You probably won’t be able to move for a while; like I couldn’t in the past.”

“Really?”

“Sorcerers usually borrow the strength of things in creation, but that doesn’t go well for most people at first, so they end up exhausting their own strength,” Rag says, abruptly putting his ear to the cobblestone ground.

“Tch, there’s a group moving in formation; they’re already nearby.”

“No way!” I pale at the first signs of panic on Rag’s face.

“Man, I guess I’ve got no other choice... Get on my back.” Rag turns his small back toward me.

“But with your small body—”

“Don’t worry about that and get on already! The soldiers won’t ask questions this time if they find us after what you’ve done. They’ll kill us!”

The stricken look on Rag’s face and his terrifying comment hastens my resolve; I wrap my arms around his neck. However, he’s obviously unable to hold all of me up—my feet haven’t left the ground.

“Ugh...so heavy...”

“I-I told you it won’t work!”

“Shut up! Try putting as much strength into your legs as you can!” Rag orders shuffling forward.

“Damn it, why must I deal with this...” he grumbles and drags me with each step. I feel terribly apologetic when I see how red his face is.

“...I’m sorry I’m useless.”

“If you know that, at least keep from getting into trouble, would ya?”

“I’ll try to do better…next time.”

I don’t believe what I did was wrong, but it’s also a fact my actions got us into this mess. Rag has to clean up after my mistakes again. I finally thank him and concentrate all my willpower into moving my limp legs.

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CLATTERING steps approach us from both ends of the alley. I shrink into Rag’s back and slow my breathing. The metallic clang of the soldiers’ armored boots stops by our hiding spot behind a pile of crates at the mouth of the alley.

“Did you find them?”

“No, they aren’t here. I’m certain they landed in this area, though.”

Sounds like young men are talking.

“The Silver Siren, huh? She made Basso into a great ol’ fool. Catching her alive

is going to be impossible," the soldier says anxiously.

Basso must be the name of the haughty soldier from earlier. I recall the soldier who dropped his sword and hung his head in shame. I carefully cover my mouth behind Rag's tiny back. In this quiet alley, a deft ear could easily hear my breathing. The soldiers continue to complain while patrolling the area mere steps away, just on the other side of the wooden crates Rag and I are hiding behind.

"Still, why did it have to be here of all places? You've heard the rumors, right? It's so eerie in this area."

"Someone reported *it* appeared in this area just the other day, too."

"The ghost of the People of Darkness, huh? With how dreary this place is, it's no wonder rumors spring up every so often."

A ghost? I instinctively look over my shoulder. Just as the soldiers said, this area is unnaturally dark despite being midday; especially where we're hiding.

"Oh yeah, wasn't the girl Mr. Basso mistook for the Silver Siren actually one of the People of Darkness?"

"That's what I heard. Gotta wonder how their kids got into this country on their own..."

"What if that brat was actually the ghost?"

"S-Stop it... All right, let's search over there next."

Rag and I let out a sigh at almost the same time as their footsteps grow distant.

"You don't think a ghost will really appear, right?"

"...What are you more afraid of: a ghost from a rumor or soldiers who want your head?"

"Huh? Uh...both?"

"Good luck with that."

Rag slowly stands and pokes his head around the wooden crates to peer into the empty street. I try to stand, but my feet give out, and I put out my hands to

break my fall. On the plus side, I didn't experience the same horrendous dizziness I did last time. I'm relieved to learn I'm gradually recovering.

"Want to just wait here until the sun sets? They already checked this spot. I doubt they'll come again for a while," Rag says, sitting with his back against the wooden crates.

"Good idea. You'll probably revert to normal by then."

"Even in my normal body, the same problem is gonna keep repeating as long as we are in this country... Now that it's come to this, we've got no choice but to steal a ship."

I almost shout with surprise at his less than peaceful suggestion. I keep my voice down as I say, "Y-You're going to attempt something like that?"

"You wanna try offering up a different suggestion on how to get outta this country, then?"

I hold my tongue at his remark. Obviously, Reveur doesn't have airplanes or anything of the sort. A ship is the only means of crossing the ocean without magic. For us it's too difficult to stand right now, much less get into the port.

Once Rag can use his spells again it'll be possible to get pass the soldiers and steal a boat. But stealing a boat is clearly a crime, and it would involve harming innocent people.

Isn't there a better way? I frantically try to come up with something when a low growl comes from my stomach. I instantly put a hand to my stomach—but it's too late; Rag heard.

This is the worst day ever! How could my stomach growl at a dire time like this? I bury my bright-red face in my knees to hide my shame. Rag lets out a small sigh, which makes me even more depressed thinking he's exasperated with me again.

"Here, eat this...We have a long way to go."

He holds out something small and round and wrapped in paper. I thank him as I open it. Inside the paper is chocolate. I toss it in my mouth without a second's delay. The sweet taste causes my tongue to tingle as it melts in my mouth. How

long has it been since I last had something sweet? I put my hands on my cheeks as I happily chew.

"...Are you really the legendary Silver Siren?" Rag asks in exasperation.

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"THE soldiers who passed by earlier said they're supposed to capture me alive... Does that mean they won't kill me on the spot even if they find us?" I quietly ask Rag whose eyes are closed.

He's reverted to his adult body. The deeper than usual furrowed lines on his forehead are a sign he is awake. He's likely contemplating what to do next.

This area is so quiet: if you listen close enough you can hear the low roar of waves in the distance. Evening must be near because the small piece of sky above us has grown dark. As we predicted, the soldiers haven't patrolled this area again.

Rag slowly opens his eyelids revealing eyes the same color as the sky. "I wonder about that... The Silver Siren is pretty much a figure of legend. They might want to study you first."

"Study me?" I exclaim in fear. I quickly try to shake out the image of being strapped to an operating table with soldiers watching the doctors prepare me for vivisection.

"Either that or they want to use your power..."

"Use it?"

"At any rate, we can be sure they don't want you falling into the hands of another country."

"...Am I that big of a deal?"

"You definitely don't look it to me." His emphasis on *definitely* kind of annoys me.

"Well, duh. I was just a normal high school student where I come from..." I grumble at him. The expression in his eyes changes to pity as he scrutinizes me.

"Wh-What?"

“...Oh yeah, I didn’t mention it before but the legends claim the *Silver Siren* is a woman of unparalleled beauty.”

“A beautiful woman?”

“The legend says her bewitching looks and angelic voice will lead the world to ruin.” Rag looks away and heaves the biggest sigh yet.

“H-Hey! That’s incredibly rude! I know I can’t even be called a beautiful woman out of flattery, but still!” I argue indignantly with my cheeks puffed out.

Rag’s expression stiffens. I instantly shut up—footsteps are approaching us. I flip around when I realize the footsteps are coming from behind me. However, thick shadows obscure visibility for anything farther than a few feet away.

Could it be a ghost? I get spine tingling chills when I recall what the soldiers were talking about. The footsteps sound like someone slowly walking, and not running; they’re not the soldiers, then.

“Tch, locals?” Rag stands and glances down at me. “You should be fine on your own now, right?”

“Y-Yeah...probably,” I say and stand. I’m not dizzy. My feet don’t tremble beneath me. I’m relieved to discover I really have recovered. Relief briefly crosses Rag’s face when he witnesses my ability to stand.

“Okay, let’s go.”

I nod and follow Rag into the alleyway. It’s as deserted as ever. It’s not just the alleyway that’s empty, but our surroundings. Every single window in the nearby buildings is completely dark without a single sign of life. Compared to the lively main road this area almost seems abandoned.

“What are we going to do?”

“The sun is going to set soon. We should hide somewhere else until—”

“She’s here! It’s that girl!” someone’s loud shout cuts Rag off. Several men are pointing at me from the opposite end of the alleyway. They aren’t soldiers. However, each of them is armed with weapons ranging from gnarled daggers to wooden cudgels.

“Why are they after us? They aren’t soldiers!”

“Tch, the vigilante corps joined in! Kanon, we’re gonna run for it!”

I encourage my shaking feet into action and kick off the ground into a running gait. Vigilante corps? Is that like a group of concerned citizens? Does that mean the soldiers aren’t our only enemies?

Footsteps clatter against the ground behind us as the men follow in hot pursuit. It’s not as frightening as the metallic clang of the soldiers’ boots against the cobblestone, but the sheer number of men chasing us with weapons is terrifying enough.

As I run for my life, I remember how I was chased by soldiers in a similar way the first day I arrived in this world. Rag was in his boy form then, but not this time!

“Rag! Can you use Sorcery?”

“That’s our last resort! If I use a spell right now I won’t be able to use Sorcery when we run into the soldiers! We have to lose them somehow!” he replies, irritation and worry etched into his features.

Right—our biggest enemy is the soldiers. There might be another spot to hide in this complex and narrow alleyway. I restlessly take in our surroundings as I run—that was a big mistake. I should have just focused on following Rag. By the time I realize it, Rag is long gone.

“You gotta be kidding me!”

I instinctively stop running and look back; Rag is nowhere to be seen. When did we get separated? But it’s not like I have time to go back and search for him. I don’t see anyone yet, but I can clearly hear several sets of feet closing in on my location. I’m somehow able to slow my breathing and break off in a different direction.

What should I do? What should I do? What should I do!

I fall into a panic, suddenly finding myself all alone. Someone has always been nearby to save me since I arrived in this world. Now I’m completely on my own in the worst possible situation!

Rag! Serene! Ernest! I mentally cry out their names as I swerve between white

buildings covered in shadows. I only think about running blindly forward and away from the footsteps chasing me. But there's only so far I can go when I have no familiarity with the local terrain. I bang my hand against the towering wall in front of me.

"A dead end!" I turn my back to the wall intending to retrace my steps, when the worst possible sound reaches my ears: the metallic clang of boots! The soldiers!

I know, I can sing! I recall how I escaped Grave Castle. I was faced with a giant wall then too. My only option is to sing if I want to escape. I inhale, before immediately exhaling and gathering my senses.

What if I'm unable to move again after I finish singing? I'm alone right now. No one will save me this time if I can't move. But the footsteps are boxing me in. I shake my head and calm myself.

I have a chance to spot Rag from above if I fly. I resolve myself and open my mouth, when my heart lurches forward at a loud BANG.

"GAH!"

"Wh-Wha—GYAAH!"

"UWAAAAAH!"

Bloodcurdling screams come from right around the corner, followed by the clamor of metal crashing against the ground multiple times.

What's going on?

A sudden crash of metal, wood and stone, and then everything suddenly falls silent. I gulp. Considering the footsteps have stopped, my pursuers must have been taken out by someone. Could it be Rag? I turn the corner at a shaky gait.

"Ah!"

However, nothing is ever that convenient in real life. One man stands alone in the center of the road, the soldiers lying in a heap at his feet. The large man with dark-brown skin doesn't resemble Rag in the least. His jet-black eyes lock with mine.

Is he the People of Darkness' ghost?

I instantly come to that conclusion and fall weakly onto my butt. I'm overwhelmed by his sheer presence. He's muscle-bound and easily more than six feet tall. His massive hand is gripping a thick club. One hit from his club would render anyone in armor unconscious, and kill an unarmored person. On closer look, the fallen soldiers have dents in their armor. The man sluggishly approaches me.

This is it for me! I squeeze my eyes shut and prepare for the worst.

"You did it, Dad!"

Huh? My eyes snap open at the innocent soprano that doesn't belong here. On the other side of the large man stands the boy I saved only hours earlier. And behind him the girl with white hair grins.

Chapter 11 The Secret Room

I stare dumbfounded at the sudden change in my fortune, unable to grasp the situation, when the Dad speaks, “You have my thanks for saving my precious children.” His deep voice reverberates across the street; the unconscious soldiers lay unmoving at his feet.

He offers his large hand to me. I cautiously take his calloused hand and rise on my feet next to him. His skin is rugged and warm against my hand.

“Th-Thank you very much,” I straighten and thank him. He’s hard to read, but his expression seems to soften a little.

“You’re in luck, Miss! Dad’s incredibly strong, so it’ll all be okay now!” boasts the boy from behind his dad’s legs. I wonder whether his stomach is okay.

The girl with white hair lightly smacks him on the head from behind. “That is not the first thing you should say, Laut. You need to thank her first.”

“Oh yeah! Thanks for earlier, Miss!” he exclaims with a lively smile that melts my tense heart.

The girl looks straight at me—her eyes truly are red. “You have our utmost thanks. You helped us at great risk to yourself; we are complete strangers to you... And as a result of your assistance you got into this predicament when it would have been far easier to leave us to our fate.”

“Don’t worry about it! Thank you for saving me as well!” I say to them while waving both my hands to deny the trouble I’m in. They grin at me again.

They’re so cute! They might be called the *People of Darkness*, but they’re no

different from the people who live in this country. I'm incredibly happy to learn the *People of Darkness* are not vicious monsters like the soldiers here made them out to be.

The Dad turns on his heel, "More will come in pursuit if we stay here. We're heading back... Come," he addresses me with that last word.

I hesitate for a moment. Is it okay for me to follow them when I still don't know where Rag is? But I feel like I can trust them, so I decide to follow if for no other reason than immediate safety. More than anything, I don't want to be alone.

"Okay," I respond, and their Dad slowly walks off. I glance at the soldiers on the ground and am relieved by the systematic rise and fall of their chests as they breathe—a sign they were knocked out, not killed.

***** The Cost of a *Song* - Rag's Side Start*****

"YOU gotta be kidding me!"

I'm stunned when I look over my shoulder. The person who should've been following me this whole time—Kanon—is gone! It doesn't take long for the vigilante corps' footsteps to start echoing in the opposite direction—they're probably headed straight for her.

"Damn it all!" I spin around and sprint down the path I took to get away from the vigilante corps; I'm likely headed straight for them now.

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I must've reached my limit, because my heart is pounding loud enough to grate on my nerves.

I shouldn't have hesitated, and just used a spell back there. I click my tongue as regret nags at my thoughts. *It's not like me to have regrets!*

"Why can't that girl do somethin' as simple as follow me without causing problems!" I curse as I sprint at full speed in search of her.

But this annoyingly confusing maze of a city keeps leading me to dead ends. I'm enraged by the amount of time I'm wasting getting lost. Unlike Grave's soldiers, the eager and vile Vigilante members will kill Kanon…the *Silver Siren*, without hesitation.

“Oi’ you ther’!”

I click my tongue as a group of what could only be drunkards stumbles into the alley. I don’t have time to play with them.

“‘Ey you!” the leader in front bellows. His clothes are torn and dirtied. A cudgel dangles from his right hand, and his left clenches a flask he sips deeply from with the occasional hiccup.

“What do you want?” I snarl, tired of these distractions.

“Don’t,” he hiccups loudly taking another drink from his flask, the two goons behind him snickering. One of his goons carries a torch, hindering my night vision, “take that tone with us. We’re da Vigilante corps’ and authorititty ‘round ‘ere!”

“I don’t have time for you!” I turn to leave, only for a thick clammy hand to squeeze down on my arm. I should’ve dodged it, but I’m too preoccupied wondering whether Kanon is stuck in a similar position.

“Ya not goin’ nooo ‘here! Me and meh boys could use some fun!” the leader says leering at me.

My eye twitches; I’m tired of playing nice. In a single move I unsheathe my dagger and land the killing blow. Before the leader realizes he’s dead, I slit the throat of the man with the torch, snatching the torch before it hits the ground, and slam a knee into the final supposed vigilante corps’ member. He stumbles into a pile of barrels spilling cheap alcohol across the ground.

“I told you I don’t have time for this!” Two men are left dead, and the other groaning as I leave, but not before tossing the torch behind me. A single scream echoes as flames erupt from the alcohol drenched alleyway. I clean the blood off my dagger, and dash through another maze of alleyways.

For a second I consider borrowing the wind’s help to search from the air, but dismiss the idea because of that wretched curse. I enter another connecting alleyway, and tell myself to calm down before I place my ear to the ground. The sound of footsteps offers some relief I’m headed in the right direction. The number of frantic footsteps is proof she hasn’t been captured yet.

You’d better manage on your own until I get to you! I won’t forgive you if you

die on me without my permission!

I get up and break into a run, when something red flashes from a side alley and nearly collides with me.

“P-PERVERTED WOMAN!”

“Grumpy! Why aren’t you with Kanon!”

I instantly lose my cool when *it*—Serene—suddenly yells at me.

“As if I know! She disappeared on her own!” I spat at her, and dash off.

This isn’t the time for us to go at it. She must’ve thought the same thing, because she stops her nagging and follows me.

“Some guy named Ernest told me Kanon is over here.”

“What!”

I notice something unsettling just as I’m about to ask her for more details. The echo of many feet running in the distance stopped!

I didn’t make it in time? I run, a horrible sense of despair ripping at my chest. And then I come to another fork in the road, as if it’s there solely to mock my desperation.

“I’ll go this way. You go that way!” Serene dashes in the direction she pointed.

I race down the other alley. I sense people at the other end of a corner alley. I slow down. Whoever is there, they’re no soldier or vigilante pest. I put my back to the building wall and carefully check around the corner. My eyes bulge with shock at who’s there—Kanon—Kanon is there. And a large man looms right behind her.

A *man from the People of Darkness!*

My hand naturally goes for my dagger as I watch the two of them about to enter another alley.

***** The Cost of a *Song* - Rag’s Side End*****

THE three *People of Darkness* appear to know their way around this maze-like part of town; which is odd considering they aren’t from here. The children enter a narrow alley in front of me, while I harbor various doubts about my situation.

Just as I attempt to follow them in—

“You said you were traveling with someone else, right?” their Dad says behind me.

“Huh?” The instant I turn around he swings his club.

WHACK I’m startled by a dull bang. Something is stuck deep in the club. My eyes round at the sight of it—it’s a dagger I’m more than familiar with.

“Rag!” I shout.

Rag is standing right around the corner. However, his menacing expression warns now is not the time to be rejoicing over our reunion.

“Where do you plan on taking her!” Rag yells with a simmering scowl.

Rag has the wrong idea! I shudder when I look at the dagger lodged in the club—he was aiming for their Dad’s head.

“Rag, you’ve got it wrong!” I shout at Rag. His knitted eyebrows twitch into a deep scowl. “This man saved me!”

The children anxiously stick their heads out of the alley. Rag’s expression twists with further confusion at the sight of them. Their Dad pulls the dagger out of his club and throws it at Rag.

Rag deftly catches the dagger, and to my relief, sheathes it after a moment of hesitation.

“Did you find Kanon?”

I’m shocked by the person who shows up behind Rag.

“Serene!”

The area has grown thick with shadows as dusk sets in, but her red hair vividly reflects what little light there is like a flame in the night. Her expression softens at the sight of me. However, she immediately turns her gaze on the People of Darkness.

“You’re the ones from—”

“Oh! You’re the cool lady from earlier!” Laut says happily, pointing at Serene.

His sister whacks him on the head again saying, “You should not point at others.”

Beside me their Dad exhales a short breath. “I want to thank you for saving my children... Follow me,” he says to the other two before disappearing into the alley with his kids.

I turn toward Rag and Serene.

“Seriously, don’t suddenly disappear like that! Where were you looking as you ran!” Rag’s usual scolding rains down on me from above. Oddly enough, I don’t find his anger scary anymore.

“Isn’t it fine since she’s safe? If you’re that worried why don’t you hold her hand,” says Serene from beside him.

I thought I would never see her again. I’m happier than she will ever know that her attitude hasn’t changed toward me after learning I’m the *Silver Siren*.

“Wh-Who’d worry about her—hey! Y-You’re doing it again!”

More than anything else seeing them together again helped ease my tension. Tears roll down my cheeks before I know it.

“See! This is your fault for yelling at Kanon first without hearing her side! She must have been frightened on her own...” Serene gently pats my head as I frantically try to wipe my tears. Rag clicks his tongue awkwardly.

“That’s not it. I’m sorry. I suddenly felt relieved is all... But why are you together? How did you meet up?” I ask, with a tear-streaked face as I hold back a sniffle.

Rag’s face twitches before contorting with disgust. “...That scumbag.”

“Huh?”

“A man named Ernest appeared in front of me.”

“Ernest did?” My heart twists at his name.

Rag awkwardly passes me and steps into the narrow alley the family entered.

“You’re going to follow them?” Serene questions.

“I want to know how People of Darkness got into this country... They seem

well-informed about this area too," Rag explains.

I follow him into the alley and Serene is a step behind me. I'm comforted once more by this familiar arrangement that has become a part of our lives. The alley, or more accurately a very small opening between the buildings, is so narrow we have to walk single-file. The Dad actually has to angle his large body to get through.

"But I'm so glad. I thought I'd never see you again... Thank you very much for saving me from that soldier!" I thank Serene in an overly excited tone.

"Hmph, didn't I say I'd follow you guys wherever you go?"

According to Serene, she chased us right after we took off into the air. However, the city was a maze of cul-de-sacs and twisting alleys built to stop invasions by land or sea. Without prior knowledge of the different paths, Serene quickly lost track of us. Apparently, that's when Ernest, in his ghost-like body, appeared in front of her.

"He told me that Kanon is fleeing all by herself, and that he wanted me to save her. He told me where to go."

She followed his directions and bumped into Rag.

"Hah, if only I was a little faster I could have seen that adorable boy again. Curse it all."

I'm happy she is the same Serene I had come to know and love. At the same time, I'm reminded I've been lying to her this whole time.

"Serene…" I start embarrassed, "I'm sorry! I lied about many different things. You see, I—" I begin apologizing.

"You don't have to apologize. Well, I was shocked. I never imagined you were the *Silver Siren*, Kanon."

"...You aren't afraid of me, Serene?" I ask nervously.

The people in this city fled the moment they realized who I was. The soldiers trembled in fear of my song. Everyone fears the *Silver Siren*, and yet—

"Afraid? I never once thought you were scary, Kanon. I wasn't particularly frightened when I heard you sing either... Legends are just that, a legend. I only

believe in what I have experienced for myself.”

Warmth I have rarely experienced since coming to Reveur, bubbles up in my chest at her words. However—

“Besides, I know someone far more terrifying than the Silver Siren...” she continues in a low tone. Her gaze locks on Rag’s back.

“Rag?” I ask in a whisper.

Serene laughs a little and shakes her head. “Nah, it’s nothing... Oh yeah, that man called Ernest—is he the one you’re looking for?”

Her suspicious gaze toward Rag makes me curious, but I can tell she won’t say anymore on the topic, so I answer her question instead of prying.

“Yeah. I have to see him to go back home to my own world.”

“And that would mean he’s the one who will free Rag from that wonderful curse?”

“Don’t you dare call it wonderful!” Rag shouts frustrated, but with a hint of discomfort, “You disgust me, perverted woman!” Rag finishes without looking back. He clearly overheard our discussion.

A dry smile almost creeps onto my lips, when—

“But I feel like I‘ve seen him somewhere before...” Serene adds on as an afterthought.

“You have?”

“What!” Rag sharply spins back to face us. “Where did you see him!”

“Ah, well...I can’t remember.”

Our shoulders slump dejectedly.

“I’ve been to a lot of different countries. I don’t remember every little detail.”

“But Ernest is confined somewhere! That doesn’t leave many places for you to have seen him!” I’m excited over the prospect of discovering Ernest’s location.

I wait in anticipation of Serene’s answer, but—

“Confined? Sorry, I really don’t remember.”

“Tch! Tell me the moment you remember,” Rag demands marching down the alley once more.

This is a big step forward in our search, though. Nothing would be better than Serene remembering, but at least we can start by searching the countries she has visited in the past. I take a deep breath to calm my excitement.

“Oh, looks like we’ve arrived,” Rag says from the lead. A thoroughly rusted door lays open at the front.

The dad stoops down and goes inside. This isn’t their home, right? Is it okay for us to go inside without asking? We exchange looks and head for the entrance.

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INSIDE the white house is devoid of well—anything. There’s not a single piece of furniture, which confirms my suspicion that no one lives here. Of course, there are no lights, leaving the room in a deep gloom the moment the door shuts behind us. A tiny window provides an iota of light, because it’s almost darker outside.

“This way,” their Dad beckons us from deeper inside the house.

His deep voice echoes through the empty building, as if he’s in the bottom of a well. I carefully follow Rag’s back; ensuring my gaze doesn’t drift from him this time.

A ratty worn-out rug lays covered in dust in the back room. Laut, who entered the room before us, is rolling up a corner of the rug. Curious what he’s doing, I strain my eyes to see past Rag to where there is a small indentation in the floor under the rug.

The Dad bends down, places his hand in the indentation, and pulls the floor up revealing a trap door! My heart races as stone scrapes across stone, revealing a square hole in the floor and a ladder down.

“There’s a basement?” Serene asks surprised.

“That’s right. But you have to keep it a secret!” Laut smiles proudly and dangles his feet into the hole.

“Come now, hurry inside.”

Spurred along by his sister, Laut turns around and descends into the hole. He descends into the darkness with a dull metallic thudding. His sister follows a step behind him.

“I’ll go last so I can hide this place. Go on ahead of me,” the dad turns and encourages us to move forward.

“Why did you tell us about this place?” Rag asks displeased.

A reasonable question. We may have saved his children, but that doesn’t mean he should expose such an important secret to people he just met.

“I’ll tell you below,” is all he says and nothing more.

Rag lets out a small sigh and approaches the hole. He peers inside before turning back to us saying, “Serene, take care of her.”

“Will do.”

Rag is still cautious of the Dad. I approach the hole and look down. Darkness clings to the area below, and I gulp as Rag is swallowed by it during his descent into the basement. Suddenly, a dull light flickers below. The kids must have lit a lantern.

I’m relieved at the first sign of artificial light since entering this building. I watch Rag reach the bottom of the ladder. He briefly surveys the area before looking up at us.

“It’s safe, come down. Don’t fall.”

“I-I won’t.”

I carefully place my feet on each step on my way down. The ladder is mostly rusted metal. It was likely placed here long ago. I pray the ladder won’t break with me on it the whole way until the final nerve-racking step to the ground.

The room down here is about the same size as the one above. However, unlike the floor and walls above, the clay they’re made of is exposed. While the area above had no furniture, there are several pieces down here. A bookshelf reaches all the way to the ceiling and there’s also a table with a few chairs. Every single item is covered in a thick layer of dust. A lit candle is on the table, casting the children’s shadows across the walls.

The basement has the same salty stench as the port. Serene descends the ladder and leans against the wall beside it. The flame of the candle on the table flickers as the dull sound of a stone door shutting reverberates. Rag watches the Dad descend the ladder; the metal bars creak with each footfall.

“Hey, you’re a Sorcerer, right, Mister? I saw you flying earlier!” Laut smiles innocently up at Rag.

Rag’s face stiffens with surprise as he mutters, “Y-Yeah,” and gives a small nod.

I barely keep myself from laughing at Rag’s reaction, even though this isn’t the time to be laughing. Rag must struggle with how to deal with kids.

Laut grins and continues, “My Sis is a Fluxer too! She doesn’t fly like you though, Mister.”

Rag scrutinizes the older sister on the other side of the table. She quickly averts her eyes.

Hm? I’m curious why she reacted like that. Rag raises a suspicious eyebrow. On closer look, she has a very pretty face. The dim light of the candle plays across her mocha colored skin, adding to her beauty. It’s easy to assume she will be a beautiful woman in the future.

She seems more like the Silver Siren of legend than I do. Rag said the *Silver Siren* was reputed to be of unparalleled beauty, and I certainly don’t fit that description.

Laut is staring up at Rag’s face when he doesn’t respond to him bragging about his sister.

“Heh! Really? That’s cool!” I quickly answer in Rag’s place. Laut grins proudly again.

He must love his older sister. A smile naturally creeps onto my face. Now that I think about it, why isn’t Serene showing any interest in this boy whom is of similar age to mini-Rag? Suddenly curious, I peek at Serene behind me.

“Hm? What is it?”

“N-Nothing! Nothing at all!”

Rag questions the Dad once he’s down the ladder. “So what do you want from

us? You don’t just want to thank us, I’m sure.”

I’m on edge when he talks as rudely to strangers older than him as he does to me. However, the Dad silently turns his jet-black eyes on his daughter. The daughter takes that as a signal and turns her red eyes on us.

“I will tell you everything.”

I’m sort of surprised—the serious expression on her face does not resemble the innocent *little girl* from moments ago. I gulp in anticipation; something is definitely going on here.

“I apologize for my late introduction. My name is Leise. My young brother is Laut and my father is Wild.”

“O-Oh, I’m Kanon,” I stammer.

“Miss Kanon... You are the *Silver Siren*.” I fidget when her eyes narrow holding me in place, as if she would not let me deny it. Leise, continues in a serious tone, “I—we—came to Renforcer to meet you.”

Chapter 12 A Girl's Request

"UH...huh? You wanted to meet me?" I say, startled by her confession.

Leise nods.

"All the way from Verklärt?" Rag asks, suspicious and ever the skeptic.

"Verkl...?"

"It's the name of their country."

"Seriously? I mean you guys have been telling me their country is in the far south... Does that mean news of my existence has spread that far already?"

I thought the only people searching for me were from this country. If news of my existence has already spread to the other countries, that means I won't ever be safe in obscurity, even if we cross the ocean.

Still, it seems too soon for word of the *Silver Siren* to spread this fast in a civilization without cell phones and the Internet. Information in Medieval Earth would take months to spread on the same continent, and much longer for anything but rumors to travel to different continents.

Leise shakes her head. "No, we are the only ones from Verk that know the *Silver Siren* is here."

I'm relieved to hear that, but it also creates more questions.

"Then how did you know about me, Leise...?"

"I heard a voice."

"A voice?"

Rag cuts me off, "You're an Augur?"

Leise shivers at his cold assertion.

"An Augur...?"

"I've heard of 'em before. All Augurs have white hair and red eyes... They have

a unique power among Fluxers," Rag explains matter-of-factly.

I haven't a clue what he is talking about again. "How do they differ from Sorcerers?"

"Sorcerers borrow power from the world with their requests and Sorcery, but can't converse with the powers they call on. Augur's supposedly hear the whispers of the same power and converse with it and monsters, yet have an entirely different price to pay," Rag says, turning to Leise to confirm what he said. She merely nods without looking him in the eyes.

"If I'm not mistaken, a part of that price is their shorter than average lifespans," Rag finishes emotionlessly.

Short lifespans? Aside from her hair and eye color, she seems like a normal girl who dotes on her little brother. I can't visibly see any signs of her life span being reduced.

She smiles innocently, like one would expect of a child her age; my face stiffens at the sight. "You may call it a short lifespan, but Augurs generally live until thirty. My mother was an Augur as well, and she lived until thirty-four."

What can I say to that? There's a slight pause before Leise looks at Rag for the first time; the smile vanishes from her face. "You are a Sorcerer...aren't you?"

"Yeah, and one from Stretta at that," Rag says cynically, the corner of his lips curling up. His smirk gives the impression he's trying to challenge her, all the while mocking his own statement.

Rag?

"Is that...so?" Leise looks down, hiding the pain that flashed across her face.

How many times has the name Stretta come up now?

"Hey Rag, what is Stretta? A country's name?" I ask straight-out.

The answer comes from behind me. "Stretta is the greatest training facility for Sorcerers," Serene answers simply. Her sharp gaze is aimed at Rag's back.

A training facility for Sorcerers? Like an academy?

"It's likely that even among the strongest Sorcerers, this guy is—"

“Enough talk about me! So? What does an Augur like you want with the *Silver Siren*?” Annoyed, Rag forces the conversation back on topic.

Leise slowly lifts her head and directs a serious look at me. “I want you to...save Verklärt, my country.”

I’m shocked and confused by her request. It takes a few seconds for me to realize her request isn’t directed to the Sorcerer Rag or at the Mercenary Serene, but at me.

“What? Y-You want m-me?” I say, pointing to myself.

Leise nods. “Yes. The task requires the *Silver Siren*—you.”

I panic. Save a country? Me? No matter how I look at it, I’m in no possible way suited to do that. I am not a hero, a soldier, or even a politician in a position of influential power to save an entire country.

“B-But I’m a useless person who will only cause you problems. Plus, it’s still up for debate whether I’m really the *Silver Siren*.”

“Don’t admit that aloud,” Rag promptly admonishes me with a sigh.

Leise shakes her head again. “No, you are without a doubt the *Silver Siren* of legend,” she says full of confidence, which makes me feel kinda bashful.

“Why’re you blushing?” Rag glares down at me through narrowed eyes.

“Huh? I-I’m not...” I frantically touch my cheeks.

Rag heaves another exasperated groan before turning toward Leise. “Listen here, I think you should already know this, but the Silver Siren is supposed to destroy the world, not save it,” Rag says annoyed, as if everyone should know this.

“I thought the same thing until I actually saw Miss Kanon in person. Having met you I finally understood what the *voice* was trying to say.”

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LEISE begins her tale of why she came to a hostile continent in search of the *Silver Siren*. “As you are well-aware, after the Great War my country became a vassal nation of Renforcer. My country’s people have been forced to live

miserably ever since. Amid unspeakable horrors, I have done my best to care for and protect everyone as Augur. For generations, Augurs have served as advisors and a guide to my people.

“Though I say that, all an Augur can really do is convey what they learn from the voices of the world. Such as providing the citizens advance knowledge of ‘a coming storm’ or other natural disasters. I have found my lack of ability to aid my people vexing; all I can do is warn them and nothing more.

“At least that was true until I recently heard a different *voice*. The *voice* told me the *Silver Siren* appeared in Renforcer. Unable to sit by and do nothing, I immediately departed my country to begin my search.” Leise pauses leaving silence as the group absorbs her revelation.

“...At first my plan was to eliminate the *Silver Siren* who is renowned as one who brings destruction upon this world.”

“What!” I’m frightened by Leise’s casual assertion and plan to kill the *Silver Siren*. Serene’s disposition shifts, she visibly places a hand on her sword. The motion is purposeful, a declaration she will act aggressively at the first sign of a threat. A tiny grin tugs at her lips as she meets Wild’s gaze, who in turn is fingering his cudgel.

Leise rushes to assure us, “But it’s different now! Once I met Miss Kanon I knew what the *voice* wanted to tell me,” Leise says loudly. “You can change the people’s hardened hearts! I realized that when I witnessed your song’s effect on the Grave soldier. Please! Please save the people of Verklärt! I am certain our sad fate will change directions if you sing to the people throughout the villages of Verk.”

I briefly stare in silent awe as her fervent request reverberates through the basement. Before long, I feel myself getting psyched. I have no idea whether I truly have the power Leise claims I do. But there is one thing I can say with confidence: *I love to sing*. Songs bring joy and sorrow, they give people courage in moments of despair, and at times, they even bring a yearning for a better tomorrow, a sense of hope.

Reveur considers *song*, song that is capable of changing people in so many different ways, to be ominous. If song is what’s truly needed in this world; if, as

Leise says, my song can save the people of Verklärt, then—

“I—”

“Now that’s a sick joke,” Rag spits out bitterly, cutting me off. Everyone turns their attention to Rag. “Save the People of Darkness? There’s no way this girl can accomplish such a grand feat. She hasn’t even learned how to sing without it ending badly.”

“Ugh.”

He hits me where it hurts, deflating my exulted feelings and the bit of ego I had. It’s irritating, but Rag is right. Even if I want to sing, it only results in me losing any ability to move, causing problems for those around me instead. As expected, it’s likely too heavy a burden for me to bear at this point.

“But the voice—”

“Besides, just how much time do you think it takes to get to Verklärt?”

He brings up a good question. Leise said she lives in a country to the far south. How far from Rubato is her country? And how fast can the ships of Reveur travel? I can’t even begin to fathom the numbers.

“Like something over a week?” I answer.

“Are you stupid? It’d take at least a month.”

“A month!” I say hysterically.

She stated her objective in coming was to eliminate me, but she must have had quite the resolve to do it considering the great distance she traveled to get here.

“If you make yourself useful and use a spell to send wind at the sail we would get there much faster,” Serene suggests.

“Good idea! We could do—”

“In. Your. Dreams. I told you I will never use another spell in front of you.”

“But—”

“You need not worry about the distance or the time it takes,” Leise says smiling over some hidden truth.

“Yup! I mean we got here in three days, after all,” Laut boasts.

“Three days?” Rag, Serene, and I exclaim in unison.

They covered a distance that takes at least a month in three days in a world without airplanes? Rag was curious about how Leise and her family got into this country. Perhaps they have a secret mode of travel, after all. Leise told us earlier she can’t fly like Rag. What could it be then?

Rag furrows his brow and asks Laut, “It’s not a ship?”

“Nope! It’s much faster than a ship and super cool!”

“Cool?”

“It’s not what I would call a pleasant ride, though,” Wild says in a deep baritone from behind Laut. He grimaces as if he’s recalling a horrible experience.

“Hm?”

“I love it, but dad has a rough time,” Laut says consoling his father with soft pats on his leg, a tiny smile pulling at his lips.

I have no idea what they are referring to. Exactly what kind of transportation did they use to get here?

“How do you feel about this, Miss Kanon? Are you willing to travel to our country with us and sing for our people?” Leise directs her red-eyes at me hopefully.

Her eyes waver in the candlelight like someone who has been cornered. Rag notices me glancing up at him from the side and lets out a groan as if he’s saying, “Do what you want”. He’s probably curious about their mode of transportation and hopeful he can use it to escape Rubato.

I swallow hard before opening my mouth, “I have no confidence that I can fulfill your expectations, Leise, but... I am willing to try.”

Leise’s face brightens—her smile is befitting of her age.

“Thank you very much!”

“We did it, Sis!” Laut cheers.

Their happiness brings a smile to my lips. The greatest sigh on Reveur is heaved

beside me—I expected as much from Rag.

“Serene, have you been to Verklärt before?” Rag asks.

“Huh? Yeah, I have, but...” Serene replies in surprise over Rag’s abrupt probing.

“Which would mean there’s a chance that scumbag is there,” Rag quietly mutters.

Oh yeah, earlier we concluded Ernest might be in one of the countries Serene has visited. That would mean Rag is in favor of going too! I keep my relief over the fact to myself. I kinda thought he would tell me to go to Verklärt without him.

“Thank you, Rag,” I say happily. Rag looks at me wide-eyed, like he doesn’t understand why I would thank him.

“Oh yeah, Leise, do you know a person called Ernest?” I ask.

Leise tilts her head to the side thoughtfully. “Ernest, was it?”

“Yes. He’s a handsome man with blond hair and a mark on his head...”

Leise shakes her head apologetically. I groan; of course, he won’t be that easy to find.

Rag clicks his tongue in his usual displeased way. “I have no intention of staying long. I want you to give up the instant you learn the hard way that Leise and the others expect too much from you.”

“Okay!”

“Don’t worry. I am sure Miss Kanon will change the hearts of everyone in Verklärt with her singing,” Leise interrupts. I grin shyly at her confidence in me.

“C’mon, was that song of hers that great? I don’t get what all the fuss is over,” Rag complains flabbergasted.

“What lies are you spouting? Even you were completely enthralled by her music earlier,” Serene quips from behind us.

“Wha—” Rag’s face turns crimson, and not because of the candlelight.

I couldn’t care less what Rag thinks of my singing; his reaction is what stuns me

—he’s never reacted like that before.

Rag spins around, red-faced, and yells behind us, “Wh-What the heck are you saying! Don’t make up stuff!”

“I didn’t make it up. Her song had that much power. You shouldn’t have been able to move at the time either, like I couldn’t... Otherwise, you would have intervened sooner,” Serene counters.

Rag’s entire body is trembling. Now that she’s mentioned it, Rag could have stopped me at any time during the few minutes I was singing. And yet, he only ran to me after I finished. The soldiers and townspeople should have reacted as well.

Rag seems at a loss for words. He won’t look at me. Instead, he turns vehemently toward Leise and her family.

“So? How are we gonna get to Verklärt! Hurry up and get on with it if we’re gonna do this!”

I burst out laughing at Rag’s complete change of opinion on the topic—he switched from being against the idea to urging us to go forward with it.

Chapter 13 Flight

DRIPPING and the low rumble of the sea mingle with the sound of our sloshing footsteps. The six of us proceed single-file through the damp cave tunnel reeking of salt water and moss. Laut eagerly leads our procession; his lantern's light is all we have to guide us along the dark path.

The cave's tunnel is barely wide enough for two small people to squeeze through side by side, and the ceiling is low enough to touch if I stretch. The tallest person in our group, Wild, has to stoop down to get through. The ground and walls are slimy enough to make slipping a possibility. I inhale the salty scent of mildew.

"Oi, watch where you're walking. You'll fall again if you don't," Rag admonishes me. To tell the truth, I would have fallen once already if Serene hadn't been there to support me.

Falling would have left me soaked and muddy, which would've been a pathetic sight in front of all these people who make walking in here look easy.

"It's amazing they dug out such a long tunnel in this rock," Serene says from behind me.

I agree with her. I've voiced my admiration for their accomplishments several times already. I mean who would have guessed their hidden basement would have a trap door that was actually the entrance to a cave?

Apparently, the *People of Darkness* hollowed out the cave during the Great Sorcerers' War. According to Leise and her family, the cave leads to an undiscovered part of the port. Laut smiled proudly as he told us we would figure

out the rest once we saw it for ourselves.

I have no idea how long it took to excavate a cave this size, but the people of Renforcer have yet to discover the entrance. Leise and her family secretly arrived in Rubato by using this cave. In essence, they have their own hidden transportation and private port hidden from the eyes of Rubato's citizens.

"We've been going on like this for a long time already. We still aren't there?" Rag impatiently asks.

I'm almost at my limit too. We've been walking through this claustrophobic and oppressive cave for more than an hour. What part of Rubato are we under? Are we still in Rubato?

"We're almost there. Just a little farther and we'll be at the exit. Do your best until we get there!" Laut innocently encourages us. Even Rag could only respond by quietly clicking his tongue.

I'm not sure how long we trudged through the tunnel before Laut's cheerful voice rang out, "It's the exit!"

Seconds after, the whole cave falls into darkness.

"H-Hey!" I shout, surprised.

"Hey, Laut! Give us the lantern before going down on your own!" Leise yells ahead of us.

"Aah, sorry! I forgot!"

I can see again as the lantern is handed back from Laut, to Leise, and finally Wild.

"Be careful. We're not too high up, but there isn't a ladder here," Wild cautions with a glance over his shoulder.

Leise disappears with a loud thud as she lands. Wild disappears next, shrouding the cave in darkness again before the lantern returns. Wild descended a ridge that puts his head several feet below us. The tunnel doesn't lead outside, but to a spacious cave where Leise and Laut's cheerful voices echo.

"Thanks for waiting! Were you lonely without us?"

“I’m sorry we are late.”

Laut and Leise are talking to someone. I wonder who they are talking to as I watch Rag disappear over the ledge.

“C’mon, hurry up. I’ll help you down.”

“O-Okay.”

I take his outstretched hand and jump down. My feet hit a rocky surface, rather than dirt. I remove my hand from Rag’s, and walk two steps forward before raising my voice in awe. Compared to the clearly artificially excavated tunnel, this cave seems natural. The tall ceiling is dome-shaped and the cave is about the size of a high school classroom.

The nighttime sea peeps through the cracks in the crag. The moonlight plays across the cresting waves. The water’s surface sparkles majestically in the distance. The magical scene captivates me, at least until Serene drops behind me. Wild directs the lantern toward us.

“Hyaaaaaaaa!” I can’t help screaming.

I screamed at what’s coiled and sprawled in front of Leise and Laut—it’s a gigantic white *snake*. And of course, it’s not just any plain old snake. Sure its enormous size is shocking, but it’s the gigantic white wings sprouting from its back that gets me. The wings aren’t like a bird’s, but closer to what would be attached to the back of a *dragon* in a video game.

I hear a sword being unsheathed behind me; it’s likely Serene took the sword off her back. Rag’s hand is on the dagger at his waist, ready to draw at a moment’s notice.

No matter how I look at the snake creature before us, by this world’s standards, it would be classified as a *monster*. I’ve seen various types of monsters since arriving in Reveur, but I have never encountered one as ginormous as what’s coiled in front of me.

The white snake slowly lifts its head and locks us in its gaze. Lifting its head was enough to make it taller than Leise and Laut. For a second, I fear it might swallow them whole. I circle behind Rag trembling. And yet, Leise and Laut don’t seem frightened in the least, despite being in range of its massive jaw. Just the

opposite of being afraid, Leise strokes the white snake's neck like one would a pet—a really exotic man-eating pet.

"Do not be afraid. She does not attack people," Leise grins.

Sh-She? I guess that means it's a female. Knowing that doesn't motivate me to get any closer, though. Being female doesn't make her any less likely to eat us.

"Yeah! Don't be so scared! Bianca is very gentle," Laut adds cheerfully.

"Bianca?" I retort hoarsely, trying to associate the name with the creature. Is Bianca the snake's name or its last victim?

"Yup, this is Bianca! Isn't she amazing?" Laut boasts.

I can't nod along with him this time around. This monster may have a name like Boo, but they're completely different in every aspect. Boo's cute exterior made me doubt he was a monster.

In contrast, Bianca is a monster no matter how you look at her. Leise and her family are on friendly terms with this giant snake. Oh yeah, I thought I heard them talking to someone earlier; don't tell me it was—

"Don't tell me that monster is our ride," Rag says in a low voice, like he's trying to contain his fury.

I was just thinking the same thing. Laut proudly boasted about how amazing their ride is. A dark aura surrounded Wild as he muttered about how it wouldn't be a pleasant ride. And then to top it all off, the monster has large white wings reminiscent of a dragon's.

Please don't tell me it really is our—

"It is! We got on Bianca and flew all the way here!" Laut exclaims, puffing out his chest with a grin; all the while I can only think of what will happen if I faint.

"Don't screw with me! You think I'm gonna ride a monster I've never seen before for three days!" Rag immediately objects.

His rude attitude usually puts me on edge, but this time I'm in complete agreement with him. Bianca's red eyes haven't released their grip on us. I feel as if she's judging the viability of her next meal; an overly unpleasant feeling if I do say so myself. My inflated motivation to help Leise and her people withers away

at the prospect of riding a giant garden snake with wings. I feel like I just ran into a very scaly wall.

“Why not? You’re friends with a monster too, Mister.”

Rag promptly puts his hand under his ponytail. There’s no doubt Laut was referring to Boo. When did they find out about him? I’m surprised they noticed, and I’m concerned about Serene’s reaction. We haven’t told her about Boo yet.

“What do you call him? He’s got a name, right?” Laut approaches us with a twinkle in his eyes. “Hey, when will he wake up?”

“H-He’s...” Rag sends several sidelong glances back toward Serene.

“What? Did you honestly think I wouldn’t notice?” Serene asks in exasperation.

Rag’s expression contorts with mixed feelings over her unexpected confession. I must have a similar expression on my face. Serene watches in amusement over our reactions.

“Did you think I was going to cut it down? Not all monsters pose a threat to humans. Everyone knows that... Well, there aren’t too many people who get attached enough to name the critters.”

“Geh...” Rag’s face stiffens.

Did Rag keep Boo a secret from Serene because he didn’t want her to discover he’s friends with a monster?

“Hey, Mister! What’s his name?” Laut ignores our conversation and pulls on Rag’s coat.

“Th-This guy’s name is...Boo. Boo, you can wake up now,” Rag says, the last half of his statement tinged with the sound of surrender.

Boo promptly reacts to Rag’s voice. He confirms the situation before he slowly unfurls his wings and flutters out from Rag’s hair.

“Boo?” Boo slowly flies around Rag, his coo asking, “Is it really okay to come out?”

“Wow, he’s cute! So he’s called Boo! Boo, come here!” Laut stretches out his

arms to catch Boo. Boo glances at the boy, before raising his nose in disgust, and lands on Rag's head—completely ignoring Laut.

"Laut, he is scared. Try again after he gets used to you," Leise chides.

"All right." Laut enviously looks at Boo on top of Rag's head before he returns to Leise and Bianca.

"Could it be...you can understand what this little guy says?" Rag hesitantly asks Leise. Surprise and hope color his voice; anyone would be overjoyed if they could understand what their favorite pet was saying. I secretly smile beside Rag.

"Yes, I can hear the voices of most monsters. That is a part of an Augur's power, after all. He seems to truly love you," Leise continues while glancing sadly at Boo, "Sorcerers are naturally loved by things in creation... You Sorcerers take advantage of that power—I'm sorry. We should not be talking about this here. Please forgive me." Leise closes her eyes apologetically.

I'm stunned. She almost sounds as though she despises Rag, or perhaps Sorcerers in general. I got that feeling when they met for the first time too. Leise purposely tried to avoid making eye contact with Rag. They're both Fluxers, but perhaps *Sorcerers* and *Augurs* are on bad terms.

Leise's criticism doesn't get any reaction out of Rag. I thought he, of all people, would have a snappy retort. I can't read any emotion from his expression.

"So, what do you want to do, Kanon?" Serene asks me, cutting off my analysis of Rag and Leise.

Right, I need to decide whether I'm going to ride Bianca. I'm extremely curious about why there's so much tension between Rag and Leise, but this clearly isn't the time to pry.

"Um, well...Bianca is it? I won't fall off her?" I'm sure that sounds like a ridiculous question to them.

"Do not worry. You will not fall off her as long as you hold tightly to her scales," Leise giggles.

"To her s-scales?"

"Besides, even if you happen to fall off, Bianca will lovingly catch you with the

utmost care.”

I force a laugh in response to Leise’s scarily innocent smile. An image of being caught in Bianca’s mouth and being swallowed flashes through my mind.

“Are you okay with heights, Miss?” Laut says pushing his way between us.

“What? Yeah, I guess...”

“You won’t have a problem, then! The wind feels awesome!”

I bet it would be impossible for someone with a fear of heights. Laut asks Rag and Serene the same question.

“I’m fine with them,” Serene replies, unconcerned.

Even Rag, who was against riding Bianca, nods in resignation. Maybe it’s hard for him to complain after revealing Boo.

“Glad to hear it! Dad’s the only one who has a problem with heights then,” Laut says nonchalantly.

“What?” I say a little too loudly, so I cover my mouth. I glance behind me at Wild covering his mouth like he’s already sick to his stomach. I guess you can’t judge a book by its cover, or a person by their exterior.

“Dad, are you okay?” Leise asks concerned.

“.....” Wild silently removes his hand from his mouth.

This might be rude, but seeing him in such a weakened state gives me the courage to face my fears.

I’m sorry you have to face this fate Wild, but thank you for giving me courage! I silently thank him.

“Bianca, I-I look forward to riding with you!” I force my best, and likely stiff, smile at Bianca, all in the hopes this crazy venture of mine doesn’t end with me being eaten. She sticks out her long, thin and red snake-tongue in response.

“High tide is coming soon. Please hurry,” Leise urges us on, so we can no longer hesitate. All of us clamor onto Bianca.

Apparently, the entrance to this cave is hidden by the pull of the high and low tides; thanks to this natural phenomenon neither the people of Rubato nor

anyone else, have discovered this secret passage.

“Are you prepared? Please hold on tightly to her scales,” Leise says over her shoulder.

I tightly grip Bianca’s cold and smooth scales as I listen to the pounding beat of my racing heart. Rag sits in front of me with Boo snugly tucked in his pocket to keep him from blowing away. Serene is behind me and Wild is sitting behind all of us. He already has his eyes squeezed shut.

Laut quietly told me earlier the reason Wild wasn’t with him and Leise when I first met them in town is because he passed out in the basement the moment they arrived. Worried, Laut went alone into the city to buy medicine for him. But Leise had chased after him and they were quickly caught by the soldier, Basso.

I have to wonder how horrible a ride it’s going to be when it left Wild in such a sorry state. But I can’t turn back now—I don’t want to. Instead, I try to fire myself up.

“All right, Bianca, takeoff!” Laut points at the night sky peeking through the opening in the crag from the front of Bianca.

“Please take us home, Bianca,” Leise says rubbing Bianca’s scales in an odd pattern.

A subtle shiver moves below us as tendons, and powerful muscles, shift. Bianca flaps her gigantic white wings in response to their request.

One flap of Bianca’s wings sends her heavy body carrying all six of us easily into the air. The second flap made the strong wind feel like it was going to send me flying backward. The sudden change in pressure painfully pops my ears. I’m greeted by a starry sky and a glittering ocean illuminated by the full moon once I finally open my eyes.



“Wooooow!” The majestic beauty spread out before me brings words of awe to my lips.

Even the intense gust of wind threatening to blow me off earlier, almost gingerly strokes my body now, as if I’m one with the sky.

“See? Doesn’t it feel awesome!” Laut crows back.

“Yeah, this feels great!”

“Don’t get so worked up, you’ll fall off!” I barely notice Rag’s exasperated voice as I stare at the awe-inspiring view.

Rubato’s port is directly below us—many large ships are anchored in the port and in the bay. Smaller skiffs travel back and forth, and a few tiny fishing boats bob with the waves in the distance.

We were supposed to board one of those ships. I never fathomed I would be soaring through the sky on the back of a dragon-like monster. Bianca steadily ascends over the fluffy clouds toward the moon. Around the time my skin is chilled by the air, Bianca flaps her large wings in order to straighten our ascent.

“You can let go now. We are going to continue on a straight path from here,” Leise says.

I took a nervous peek below us; tightening my grip on Bianca’s scales when I get the feeling the darkness below might swallow me whole. My previous awe fading in the face of reality.

“Don’t tell me you have no intentions of landing until we arrive at Verklärt,” Rag says to Leise in front of him.

“Our journey will have several breaks along the way. We will not go into any towns, but if there is somewhere you want to drop by on the way...”

“I have to say I’m starved by this point. I don’t care where, but drop us somewhere near a town for now.”

“The Town of Calme would be a good stop, then. Their taverns have exquisite food.” Serene explains where the town is located to Leise. I swallow hard,

remembering my hunger, when—

“Boo?” Rag whispers.

“What’s up? Is something wrong with Boo?”

“...He’s shaking. Oi, Boo, what’s wrong? Are you cold?”

“Boooooooooooo,” he weakly whimpers back.

Leise finishes talking to Serene and glances back at Rag’s pocket with concern.

“He is terribly afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes. He has never flown this high before... Bianca, can you please fly a little lower?”

Bianca begins a gentle descent.

“Boo, are you okay?” Rag asks with quiet worry.

I’m surprised Boo, who has wings like Bianca, is the one who’s afraid of heights. I’m worried about Boo, but—I peek behind Serene. Wild has his eyes squeezed shut and a deep furrow in his brow. His large hands grip at Bianca’s scales for dear life.

“How long until we get to Calme?”

“I believe we will most likely get there by dawn,” Leise answers my question.

Dawn is not a helpful marker for me when I have no idea what time it is.

I hope we get there soon and safely, I pray, as the white moon looms overhead.

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“WELCOME!” someone hollers when we enter the tavern.

We’ve arrived significantly earlier than lunchtime, so there aren’t any other customers. I’m surprised by how modest the tavern is.

Serene swears this tavern in the Town of Calme serves the most exquisite food. Her praise the whole ride to town made me imagine the tavern would be huge and full of customers, but the inside is slightly bigger than the dining room we

ate at in the Town of Cedez. The only people staffing the tavern are an old man who appears to be the owner, and a girl around my age who greeted us with a smile.

Calme isn't too big a town either—or maybe I just think that way because I saw it from Bianca's back. We decided as a group only Rag, Serene and I would go in to town, as the rest would draw too much attention.

Wild decided he would hunt for their dinner in the forest Bianca landed in, while Leise and Laut set up camp. They really are self-sufficient; I'm envious of their survival skills. Maybe I can learn a thing or two from them before we part ways.

"It's been a while, Master."

"Ooh, Serene! Long time no see. How many years has it been?" happily asks the forty-something owner with a long handlebar mustache, as he wipes his hands on his dirty smock.

"I counted and it seems like it has been about three and a half years since I last stopped by. I never once forgot the taste of the food here, though."

"You know how to make this old cook happy… Oh, I see you aren't alone today. Who are the two with you?"

"My current employers. Actually, everyone is starved. So keep bringing out plates of food."

"Gotcha. Gimme a sec'." The master smiles and enters the kitchen.

Before long, the sound of something simmering and a delicious scent that stimulates my hunger wafts through the tavern. I can finally dine on good food!

We sit at a table for four and eagerly wait for the food. The girl from earlier carries drinks to our table. She serves Serene and Rag alcoholic beverages, and hands me a glass of juice. I made sure to order juice right away this time. I'm certain I'll be sick if I drink alcohol on an empty stomach. Serene and Rag drain their cups easily, as if quenching their thirst with water.

"You guys have a strong alcohol tolerance, huh?"

"What? You don't drink yet, Kanon?" Serene asks from the seat opposite of

me.

“Y-Yeah. There’s a law in my country stating you can’t drink until you’re twenty.”

“What a weird law. Alcohol is no different from water. How else can you be sure water is safe to drink? Wouldn’t want the runs after a simple drink, after all.”

“She spat it out the instant she took a sip of the same drink before,” Rag brings up what happened in Cedez from beside me.

“That’s not my fault! I thought it was water!” I say annoyed.

“Want to try a sip? You might be surprised by how much you like it,” Serene asks like she’s enjoying this. I wave her off.

“No thanks! I-I tried this juice before too, and it tastes great,” I say gulping down the red citrus drink.

The waitress brought the food we were starting to get impatient for. Among the food we were served were dishes including whole roasts of creatures I’ve never seen before. One of the roasts looked like a hybrid of boar and crocodile. I hesitated to touch those dishes at first, but gave in to the mouthwatering smells, and discovered everything was delicious. We consumed every last morsel of food in almost complete silence. I can understand why Serene praised the food so much.

“Phew, that was delicious. I’m full!”

I’m suddenly tired now that I’m full, though. We can’t sleep on top of Bianca. I stayed awake all night, keeping myself stiffly alert on Bianca’s back. One brave soul slept during our ride—Laut. Leise constantly warned him of the danger, but he eventually leaned into Bianca and slept for several hours. I anxiously watched his small body loll back and forth. I’m impressed by his courage.

“Master, I see your skills haven’t rusted. It was a marvelous meal!”

“Thanks. I’m honored to hear that from someone who has traveled the world like you, Serene. So, where are you headed next?”

“Hm, plan to cross the open ocean again,” Serene says vaguely. Their

conversation goes on for a while.

“Oi.”

“Hm?” I open my eyes at the sound of Rag’s frustrated voice and am surprised by how close his blue eyes are.

“Whoa! S-Sorry!” I frantically straighten. I must have fallen asleep on his shoulder without realizing it. I’m so embarrassed!

“I’m really sorry! H-How long did I sleep for?”

“A mere half a minute. Don’t worry about it,” Serene answers looking at Rag, not me. “You shoulda let her borrow your shoulder longer.”

“Shut up. I don’t want her drool on my clothes.”

I wipe my mouth, but luckily there’s no drool. I sigh in relief.

“Good grief, you’re a man without a sliver of delicacy. Sorry about that, Kanon. I got caught up in a conversation about the past. Let’s take a nap at a nearby inn,” Serene says, exasperated with Rag.

I’m really happy at the prospect of getting some sleep. My exhaustion is at a dangerous level.

“See ya, Master. I’m not sure how many years it’ll be before I can drop by again, but if I’m in the area I’ll come by.”

The tavern’s master sees us off with a smile. The inn is several buildings away from the tavern. I follow Serene inside like I’m being sucked in by the allure of sleep.

“Welcome.”

“Sorry for dropping by at this time. We’d like to get some sleep. Do you have any vacant rooms?”

“Yes. We have two rooms available.”

“Good. We’ll take both, then.”

Serene quickly takes care of the payment and we head to the designated rooms. This is my second time staying in an inn in this world. I’ll finally get to sleep in a bed again!

“Hey, Kanon! You’ll be in this room.”

“Huh?”

I was following Rag into his room when Serene stops in front of a door farther down the hall.

“Don’t ‘huh’ me. Why do you think I got two rooms? Come on, you’ll stay with me.”

Rag slams the door in front of my face. I thought we would share because we did in Cedez. I immediately head to Serene’s room, embarrassed.

“I’m hoping I’m wrong on this one, but don’t tell me you shared the same room until now?” Serene asks when I enter the room.

“J-Just once! In the Town of Cedez! I don’t know anything about this world, so being with Rag was the safest choice.”

Serene frowns and asks me something so outrageous my sleepiness is blown away. “…He didn’t do anything to you, right?”

“H-He did not!” I quickly deny. “Oh yeah, he was small at the time too!”

Serene’s expression twists. “What! You mean you slept with the precious child?”

“Huh! No, not really together—”

“What an enviable situation! Aaaaah! I want to sleep with that boy, too! I’d be happy just to watch him sleep! …SO, you mean it when you said nothing happened then, right? *Right*?”

I was stuck proving my innocence to a question I’m certain held a different meaning than it did when she thought I slept with adult Rag.

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AFTER successfully talking Serene down, we went to sleep. Leise and the others are waiting for us, so we can’t stay long. My exhaustion instantly hits. I fall into a deep sleep imagining what Leise’s country, Verk, will be like.

Chapter 14 Verklärt

ON the night of the fourth day since departing Rubato we arrive in the skies above Verklärt. The others told me Verklärt is an extremely hot country, and they weren't wrong. Our flight south brought humidity and warmer weather.

Stopping at the Town of Calme and other towns along the way delayed our journey to Verklärt more than we initially planned. Obviously it would be too dangerous to sleep on Bianca, so we would stop at random inns for lunch and a nap when they had a vacant room. Bianca always landed in places away from civilization, where she could hide from villagers and travelers.

Every time we landed, Wild collapsed to the ground looking deathly pale and laid limp with an occasional twitch. Witnessing him in that state made me sympathize with Laut's dangerous attempt to go into Rubato to get medicine for him. Contrary to Wild's sorry state, Boo's fear of heights was cured by the time we departed Calme. He rode the rest of the way on top of Rag's head, thoroughly enjoying the wind.

"Dad's the only one who's afraid again," Laut quietly whispered to me after Boo got over his fears.



Bianca is gradually alighting toward the dense forest expanse below. Past the forest there's a clearing with a spattering of lights. Perhaps that's one of the villages Leise's people live in. I'm starting to get nervous. I hadn't thought deeply about it until now, but Leise wants me to visit multiple villages. I kinda wonder if this is what it would be like to be an idol on tour… Well, except I get to travel by flying snake instead of a private car.

"You can see our house over there." Leise doesn't point toward the clearing with lights, but the forest. A cone-shaped, tall tent-like building is barely visible from the sky in the direction she pointed. Bianca skillfully weaves her way through the trees and quietly lands in what looks like a clearing in the forest's center. It's hard to tell though, what with the limited light provided by the moon.

The chirp and buzz of bugs resonates annoyingly through the dense forest. Towering trees obstruct the moonlight, making the surrounding area eerily dark. Laut is the first to disembark, followed by Serene and Rag. Serene helps me slide down the scales to solid ground. We each stretch, working out kinks in our muscles after such a long flight. My legs have scales imprinted on them. I wonder how long it will take for the snake sores to heal.

A loud thud draws my attention. Wild fell, or more like slid, from Bianca onto the ground. He groggily clambers to his feet and shambles toward what looks like a path cut through the forest.

We follow Leise and Laut toward the tent we spotted from above. The humidity and stuffy heat quickly cause sweat to bead under my clothing. I'm envious of Serene's airy attire. Before long, Rag takes off his long coat and wraps it around his waist.

Wild walks slowly behind us. I can't make out his pale expression in this darkness, but I get the feeling he'll go to sleep the moment he sets foot in his home. Bianca slithers across the ground beside us. I may have just ridden her for four days, but watching her slither like a gigantic snake creeps me out.

Leise suddenly stops in front of us, which is odd because we can't see the tent we saw from the air yet. I notice a den nearby. The den has a table for giving offerings of some sort; the solemn atmosphere there reminds me of a shrine.

“Thank you so much, Bianca. Please rest well,” Leise says as she rubs Bianca’s neck.

“Thanks!” Laut cheerfully thanks Bianca. Bianca sticks out her pronged tongue in response before slithering into the cave.

I guess I can safely assume that’s her den.

“Thanks,” I say too late—she already vanished into the heavy shadows.

“Hey, Leise, is Bianca some kinda incredible monster or something?” I ask what even I consider a ridiculous question.

“Yes. Bianca is a sacred beast to the People of Verk. Augurs have been worshipping her for generations. It is another one of our duties to tend to her needs,” Leise answers.

Bianca must have been alive for a long time if the Augurs have been worshiping her for generations. And now I’m suddenly worried I straddled this sacred beast for four days; not to mention comparing her to a giant garden snake with wings.

“Normally it would be forbidden to take Bianca out of the country as I did, but...she acquiesced to my request,” Leise says happily. Her happiness naturally brings a smile to my face.

“We’re almost to our house!” Laut exclaims in high-spirits, when—

I’m suddenly shoved from behind. The abruptness causes me to lose my balance and fall pathetically to the ground; something slices through the air at the same time.

“Wh-What was that?”

“Don’t get up!” Rag yells when I try to sit up with my hand pressed against my bruised nose.

He’s probably the one who pushed me. He swiftly draws his dagger; Serene’s blade intercepts several more glinting objects, that now look like arrows. Rag tenses ready to move. I’m taken aback when I glance where the sound went—my guess was right, an arrow is sticking out of the tree next to where I was standing seconds ago!

“Show yourself!” Leise’s icy demand rings through the night. Her expression

is grave as she glares in the direction of the archer—there's no sign of her youthful smile, causing her to appear older than her age. "If you do not show yourself, I will be forced to summon Bianca. She does not take kindly to invaders."

Laut stares at his older sister in surprise. I glance toward the pitch-black forest, while keeping close to the ground. A shadow moves on the other side of the brush.

"Breit!" Leise raises her voice in surprise. Her reaction makes me peer up at my assailer.

The one she called Breit is a lanky boy around her age. He has the same dark-brown skin and black hair as Laut and Wild. His long hair is braided behind his head. He awkwardly stares back at Leise with a tight-grip on his bow.

"Lady Leise, where on Reveur did you go! Who are these people!" he demands boldly, pointing at us.

She looks him straight in the eyes—no longer a shred of surprise in her.

"They saved my life."

"Saved your life? How did that happen! Do you know how worried I was when you left without a word!"

"I apologize for making you worry. However, where do you get off suddenly attacking us?" Leise questions angrily; the boy flinches.

Rag sighs and sheathes his dagger—a good enough sign we're safe now. I slowly get to my feet. He probably won't attack us again. Serene hasn't sheathed her long sword yet, but she calmly watches the conversation between Leise and the boy.

"I thought they kidnapped you...Lady Leise," the boy fumbles with his words, clearly flustered.

Leise lets out a small sigh and turns to us. "You have my utmost apology, Miss Kanon. Are you hurt?"

I glance down at the arrows lying broken at Serene's feet. Rubbing the dirt from my nose, I glance back at Leise. "No, I'm fine.... Um, who is he?"

“This is my childhood friend, Breit.”

“Your childhood friend...?”

He calls her ‘Lady’ and seems pretty stiff around her, like a servant. Leise told us she’s respected and cared for by the People of Verk because of her role as Augur. Is that why a childhood friend would treat her this way?

“I am not finished talking yet, Lady Leise. Where did you go? And what is with that attire—”

“Breit, my guests are exhausted from our long journey. Where is your hospitality? I will fill you in on the rest tomorrow.”

“Huh! Y-You do not mean to say that they will be staying at your home, do you?” Breit’s voice cracks. Disbelief colors his face.

“Come again tomorrow, Breit,” Wild adds, a hint of frustration in his words, as if to say Breit doesn’t have any other choice. He looked like he’d collapse at any second earlier, but the oppressive aura exuding from him now overwrites his prior weakness. As one would expect, Breit shuts his mouth, bows, and turns to leave.

“Breit!”

“Yes?” Breit spins around at Leise’s call.

“Please keep it a secret from everyone that we were away—”

“Rest assured; I have yet to divulge your absence to anyone.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Breit fades into the shadows of the forest. A sigh of relief unknowingly escapes my lips. I feel kind of bad for him, though; he appeared desperate and flustered. Although, I’m certainly not happy he decided to use me for target practice.

“Leise, is it okay to just send him off like that? He seemed really worried about you.”

“It is. He is usually a gentle soul, though prone to worrying. I never thought he would attack someone like he did... I truly am sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry about it. Looks like you left without telling anyone.”

“Yes, because I knew if I mentioned it, everyone would be against the idea...”

“Dad and I were shocked, too! Sis suddenly announced she’s gonna go to Renforcer,” Laut informs me as he nimbly walks backward down the trail we were following with his hands behind his head.

Laut said he was shocked, but his expression gives the impression they were happy she shared her plans with them.

“I see,” I smile in return.

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WE finally arrive at the front of the tent I saw from the air. The tent is tall enough I have to bend my neck back to see the top. It’s quite impressive up-close. The long and narrow shape alludes to it not having much square footage. I’m getting worried over whether there’s enough room for us.

“I am sorry, but only women are allowed in this tent,” Leise says. Rag raises his eyebrow skeptically at her comment.

“You and Boo will be bunking with Dad and me, Mister Rag! Look, you see that one over there? That’s our house!”

I strain my eyes in the direction of another house-like hut Laut pointed to. The hut’s appearance is more like a round building, than a tent.

“Oh? Does that mean you live in different houses?”

“Yes. For many centuries an Augur has lived here, with their male family members living in the hut over there.”

It’s kind of lonely to think of family members living separately, even if they are close by. Perhaps, this too, is because Leise is special. Even her childhood friend called her Lady Leise.

I’m here because she asked me to save the people of this country. The gravity of Leise’s request suddenly dawns on me, bringing a whole slew of worries I had all but forgotten when Breit attacked.

“Leise, what should I do tomorrow?” I ask, unknowingly clenching my fist over my heart.

She's not going to request I sing on stage or something ridiculous like that, right?

Leise smiles gently, as if she has guessed my fears. "I think tomorrow I would like to start by explaining the situation to Breit. I will also divulge that you are the Silver Siren..."

Leise explains how Breit is the intermediary who conveys messages between her and the people of this country. He's also in charge of protecting her, like a bodyguard.

"Afterwards, I think it might be best to gradually introduce you to the villagers and have you sing to small groups of people, Miss Kanon."

I'm relieved it won't be all at once, but I still feel the heavy weight of expectation on my shoulders. I have to do my best though! And in order to do my best, there's something I have to do first.

"Okay, Sis, we'll see you again tomorrow. Goodnight! Let's go, Dad!" Laut pulls Wild by the hand toward the hut.

"Dad, Laut! Really, thank you for everything!" Leise thanks her family.

Laut grins. Wild's expression softens. I quickly call out to Rag before he walks away.

"Wait, Rag!"

He looks over his shoulder with his usual agitated expression. I dash to him and lower my voice so only he can hear me.

"Um, I need a favor. Can you meet me back here after the others go to sleep?"

"...Fine."

"Thanks! See ya later, Boo!"

"Boo!"

Rag furrows his brow suspiciously and nods. Satisfied by his reaction, I return to where Serene and Leise are waiting for me.

I was contemplating things while we rode Bianca. I prepare myself to put what I was brooding over into action, and wait until I can meet with Rag later.

Chapter 15 Spring of Purification

THE inside of the tent is broken into multiple rooms by thick curtains. Obviously, there's no air-conditioning. Inside the tent is just as unbearably hot and stuffy as outside.

"Leise, um...what do you usually do when you want to wash up?" I ask, unable to endure the stickiness any longer. I doubt they have bathrooms, but I would be happy with cold water or even a river at this point.

"I agree with Kanon. I would like to wash off the sweat as well," Serene says as she wipes her drenched bangs from her sweaty forehead.

"Oh, I apologize for not realizing sooner. I always cleanse my body in a spring not far from here. I will show you there now."

Yay! I cheer internally.

***

"WOW, it's so pretty! This is incredible!"

Leise led us to a spring hidden inconspicuously within the forest. The water's surface sparkles under the starry sky and reflects the moonlight. A gentle breeze blows ripples across the water. It's not a hot spring, but with how hot the air is I don't have to worry about catching a cold from bathing in cool water outdoors.

"Do you have any problems with monsters?" Serene asks, cautiously checking the perimeter. I don't want to get attacked by monsters while bathing.

"You do not have to worry. The entire area is under Bianca's protection. Other monsters do not dare trespass."

In other words, we are in Bianca's territory. I imagine Bianca creating a roped-off area by wrapping her long body in a circle around the pool.

"Let's all enjoy the water together then!" I exclaim, suddenly excited. Serene and Leise smile back at me.

We quickly strip off our sweaty clothes, and enter the spring one-by-one, starting with Leise and ending with me.

"Wow, that's cold!" I shout when my feet make contact with the icy water.

With how hot the air is, I thought the water temperature would be warmer too, but boy was I mistaken. The water is deep enough to reach my stomach when I stand. I muster my courage to sink my whole body into the chilly water, but once I do the cool bite feels wonderful against my sweaty skin. I take a deep breath and gaze at the night sky covered in an infinite number of foreign twinkling stars. I glance at Serene and Leise—they're enjoying the water with their eyes closed.

My eyes naturally take in the shape of their bodies. I already knew that Serene is a voluptuous beauty. Leise is slender, and no matter how I look at it, she's much bigger than me—when it comes to breast size. Is everyone in Reveur blessed with a nice physique, or just the people I meet? I pinch the unnecessary flab on my stomach. I've most likely lost weight since coming to Reveur.

I'll have a slim and fit body by the time I go home! One I can brag about! That is, if I ever get home.

Before I realized it, over half a month has passed since I've arrived in Reveur. No doubt my parents, friends, teachers, and relatives are worried. Imagining their reactions over my disappearance causes my vision to blur against my will. I quickly dunk my head under water.

"Is something wrong?" Serene asks when I emerge from the water. Both her and Leise gaze at me curiously.

"Nope, I'm fine! It felt so good I couldn't help myself!" I say, forcing a smile.

Leise giggles. "You truly are different from the *Silver Siren* I had imagined, Miss Kanon."

“Ahaha. Rag often says the same thing. He even asked, ‘Are you really the *Silver Siren*?’” I say mimicking Rag’s voice.

Leise shakes her head. “I am glad you are the *Silver Siren* from the bottom of my heart, Miss Kanon. I am counting on you from tomorrow on.”

I’m surprised by her confession. “Ah, but, I’m sorry if I end up being no use whatsoever. I plan to give my all, but still…”

Leise grins at me again—her smile is always adorable. I’m sure if I were a boy I’d fall for her smile; which reminds me of the boy from earlier.

“Hey, Leise, about the boy named Breit...”

“Yes?”

“You said he’s your childhood friend, right? Meaning the two of you have known each other for a long time, right?”

“Yes, you are correct...” Leise responds, bewildered.

I continue with a wide grin, “Do the two of you have feelings for each other?”

Leise frantically shakes her head. “W-We do not! As if we would! Breit doesn’t see me in that way and I have never considered it before!”

“Heh? Really now?” I say teasingly.

From what I saw, Breit at least seems to have feelings for Leise. I only saw him once, but the way he fussed over her looked like it came from a feeling more than you would have for a childhood friend or out of devotion to her as Augur.

“Really! Besides...I already have a fiancé,” Leise says shyly, looking down. My thought process skids to a halt for a moment.

“Y-You doooooooo?” I shout.

“Oh?” Serene interjects amused—she had stayed quiet until that moment.

“I am now thirteen years of age.”

“You’re engaged at thirteen?”

“Yes. I must have a child as soon as possible, so...”

“Ah...”

My enthusiasm is cooled by Leise's bashful smile. I forgot Leise will die young. I almost apologize, before stopping myself. It seems wrong for me to apologize for this.

"A fiancé, huh? Is he a good man?"

"Yes. He is a man of few words, but he is kind."

"I see."

Silence hangs in the air. The buzzing bugs that hadn't bothered me suddenly annoy me. She's thirteen years old; only four years younger than me. In Japan, she would still be in her first year of middle school. What was I thinking about at her age? I'm sure I hung out with my friends, studied, and worried and rejoiced over nonessential stuff. How large of a burden is Leise shouldering with that tiny body of hers?

In the end, I'm the one who couldn't stand the silence any longer. "Oh yeah, what's Rag going to do about bathing? Does the other house have a place to bathe?" I nonchalantly try to change the topic.

Leise abruptly stands in a panic. "G-Good point. Why don't we get out soon? Rag might come here to bathe as well."

"Wh-Whaaat!" I shout again.

I don't want Rag to walk-in on us! The heat has made Rag uncomfortable since we stepped foot in Verk. There's an extremely high chance he'll come to the spring after hearing about it, like we did. I hastily get out of the water and change into the clothing from this country that Leise lent me. Serene and Leise get out of the water after I do. We quickly wash the clothes we were wearing in the water and return to our tent.

***

THANKS to the cold bath and airy clothing, the journey back is far more pleasant than when we first went to the spring. However, on the way back I start sweating for another reason altogether—I spot Rag walking our way.

"A-Are you guys headed to the spring too, Rag?"

"Boo!" Boo happily responds from the top of Rag's head.

“...This is the right path?” Rag deflects, averting his eyes.

“Yeah. Just keep going straight. The water feels incredible!” I answer smiling in an attempt to hide how nervous I am to have run into him.

“What an unlucky man you are,” Serene snorts from behind me.

“Huh?”

“You would’ve seen something much better if you had only shown up a little sooner.”

“Serene!”

Rag furrows his brow, as if he didn’t understand her meaning. He caught on quick though—if the abrupt ruddy coloring of his cheeks means anything.

“It’s up to me when I come! As if I care!” he yells and slips by us. “PERVERTED WOMAN!”

“If you want to join us, come in your boy form next time.”

I can’t tell if she’s joking or being serious. Rag ignores Serene’s comment and quickly disappears in the direction of the spring. Leise seemed confused throughout the conversation. I unknowingly let out a sigh of relief. I finally felt clean and refreshed, and now I’m sweaty again.

***

WE return to the tent and find our places for the night in the bedroom area partitioned by a curtain from the rest of the tent. I’m fatigued from the long journey, but I can’t sleep yet.

I quietly get up after confirming Serene and Leise are sound asleep beside me. I leave the tent and glance around the surrounding area. I immediately spot Rag sitting cross-legged with his back against a nearby tree.

Rag notices me too, and stands as if the sheer act of being here is troublesome. Like me, he’s wearing clothes borrowed from Wild which are slightly too big for him. He always wears relatively thick clothing, so it’s odd to see him dressed lightly.

I run to him. I never noticed how well-built his chest and arms are until now,

because he's always covered by heavy clothing. I guess he wouldn't be able to fight well with a dagger if he lacked upper-body strength. I recall his battles with the bandits and monsters as I observe the significant amount of displeasure etched on his face; apparently he can look more disgruntled than he usually does.

"Did the boys fall asleep early?"

"Yeah. That old man collapsed in a heap the moment he entered the house and the little brat was already asleep by the time I came back."

I panic—that would mean I made him wait a long time.

"S-Sorry! The other two wouldn't fall asleep!"

"So? What do you want?" Rag interjects, cutting my excuse short.

I really didn't want him to be impatient with me right now. His ire will cripple what little resolve I built in preparation of this request.

I can't let that happen, so I muster my courage, "I want you to be my teacher!"

"...Huh?" Rag scowls wholeheartedly at my earnest request.

He's probably wondering where this is coming from.

"W-Well, as you know, I can't move if I sing, right? So I was hoping you could teach me whatever tricks you know to avoid that!"

I was brooding over this the entire time we traveled on Bianca. No matter how powerful my songs are, if I can't move after one song, I'll be useless to Leise. I want to help Leise, which will be difficult to do as things stand. The more I learn about her, the stronger my drive to help becomes.

"You told me before that you used to have the same problem too, so I thought you might know a good way to overcome my weaknesses..."

"....."

Is he going to turn me down saying it's too much of a pain, as I expect him to? My heartbeat accelerates in anticipation of his response. Rag is looking down at me through narrowed eyes, but he lets out a small sigh soon after.

"You have a point. I'll be troubled if you can't learn how use your songs

properly.”

“Really? Thanks!” I say, relieved.

“...But why do we have to keep it a secret from the others?”

“Oh, well...because I’m embarrassed when others watch me practice.”

He heaves a loud sigh this time.

“We should change locations then. You’ll get found out in no time if you sing here.”

“Ah, that’s a good point. Where should we go? Oh, how about the spring?”

Thus, the two of us head for the spring we bathed in earlier. Now that I think about it, it’s been a while since I was last alone with Rag. Hm? Actually, Boo has always been with us from the start, so I guess this is the first time I’m truly alone with him. Rag told me Boo is off hunting in the woods—likely searching for something scrumptious and exotic to dine on. We are in a foreign land, after all.

I’m a little nervous—I was the one who asked him to be my teacher, but I highly doubt he will teach me nicely.

If he gets too scary, I’ll make him teach me in his boy form. I chase after Rag’s back, grinning over how Serene would react if she had a one-on-one lesson with mini-Rag.

Chapter 16 The Power of a Song

I feel as if I'm in an entirely different location now that the moonlight and starlight shine freely on the undisturbed spring's tranquil waters. I sigh over the mystical beauty before me and only get my act together when Rag spins around to face me.

"Okay, I'm gonna start by teaching you the basic practices of Sorcery."

"Please do, teacher!" I straighten-up and raise my hand in the air.

"Nah, don't call me teacher..." Rag says weakly. I quickly apologize.

Rag clears his throat and continues the lesson, "The basic requirement for Sorcery is the ability to borrow power from creation and redirect said power with our will. In order to accomplish this, you need whatever it is you want to borrow power from to have an affinity with you.

For example, if you want to borrow from the wind you need the wind to like you. If you want a tree to help...nature needs to like you," Rag says as he gently touches a tree beside him.

Now that I think about it, Rag always takes on a gentle disposition when using Sorcery, like he's a completely different person.

"Having an affinity differs greatly depending on how much talent the Sorcerer is born with..."

"So does that mean a lot of different things have taken a liking to you ever since you were born, Rag? I knew it! You really are amazing!"

"I-I guess." Rag swiftly turns away embarrassed.

Oh? His reaction reminds me of how pleased he was the last time I complimented his Sorcery. He seems genuinely happy when others acknowledge his accomplishments. Most people are happy when they are complimented for what they are skilled at. But his reaction seems out of place—it's kinda cute. Not like that's ever something I'd say aloud, especially not when he is around. I keep my laughter to myself. And then I remember something else.

"Oh yeah, Leise mentioned the same thing…how Sorcerers are loved by creation."

"Yeah...she did." His face suddenly tenses. Rag's reaction pushes me to finally ask about his weird behavior on this topic. I get the feeling he will answer me this time.

"Hey, does Leise hate...Sorcerers?"

A single leaf drops from an overhanging tree and lands on the water's surface. Ripples shatter the moon's watery reflection.

The corner of Rag's lips curl back in a smirk. "...I bet she does. Well, it's rarer for someone to actually like a Sorcerer, anyway."

"What? Seriously?" Disbelief fills my cry.

"I think she especially has an intense dislike of me. Augurs are practically the complete opposite of what a Sorcerer is."

"Complete opposite? Your abilities aren't similar?"

Rag continues without a single glance in my direction, "In the annals of our past, Fluxers—the original term for those who borrow power from the external world and from within—were the same. Fluxers were a special existence beloved by creation and able to use its power at will. Instead of other pursuits, our powers were used...to wage wars."

My heart tightens; each beat is like the gong of a cymbal.

"The name *Sorcerer* was coined after the war and used to refer to Fluxers who use their abilities like a demon—harming others for their own benefit."

"I really like you...Sorcerers!" I accidentally let those words slip because Rag looked terribly pained as he laughed self-derisively. His blue eyes round with

shock at my sudden outburst.

“I-I don’t think anyone can help going to war! And I don’t think anyone is ever in the right or wrong when it comes to war! ...My Grandma always said everyone is a victim when there’s war.”

That was my Grandma’s favorite saying. My Grandma lost her family and husband, my Grandpa, during a war. But she never blamed anyone for it.

“You see, Kanon, war turns everyone into a victim and ends with no one truly feeling happy,” she repeated these words with sadness each time war came up in the news or on TV.

I don’t know the war-torn world she lived in. I understand even less about the wars in Reveur that Rag is talking about. Nor do I know what the Sorcerers did. Maybe it’s wrong for me to say this when I don’t have all the facts, but—

“That’s why! I really like you and Leise, Rag!” I said everything so fast it takes a moment to catch my breath. Meanwhile, Rag looks at me with his mouth agape before his face gradually reddens.

His ears turn bright red as he hides his face under his arms and yells, “Y-You shouldn’t say those words so casually! You’re makin’ me the embarrassed one here!”

Embarrassed? It’s my turn to let my mouth hang open. I was serious. I don’t think I said anything embarrassing.

Rag coughs to the side before glaring down at me red-faced, “And that’s the end of that topic. I’ll teach you how I use Sorcery!”

“O-Okay!”

I’m being weird, because I’m incredibly relieved he is yelling and glaring at me as he usually does.

***

“FEEL the power of creation. Believe in it and be grateful to it... I chanted this to myself all the time in the past when I struggled to use my powers, just as you are now.”

Feel the power, believe in it, and be grateful to it. I repeat those words to

myself.

“Well, they say *Sirens* put their own power into song, so things might work a bit differently for you.”

“Hm, then would that mean in my case I need to feel my own strength, believe in it, and be grateful for it?”

I still don’t get it. I feel like it would be easier to feel the power in nature than it would be to call on what is in myself.

“I don’t have a clue about song, so I can’t help you there... I mean, what is song even like in your world? What do you use it for?”

I’m bewildered by his abrupt question. How do I explain song?

“Do you get taught how to use it by someone else?”

“Um, yeah, you can take singing lessons too, but... How do I put it? In my world, song flows from all different places.” I feel like I’ve become the teacher now, so I choose my words carefully as I explain, “Everyone is in some way influenced by songs and can become motivated, impassioned, or even distraught when they listen to a song... I guess songs can cheer people up when they listen in times of depression. Or it can overcome them with sorrow depending on the emotion behind the song. Oh, and we don’t say we *USE* songs in my world. Singing in my world doesn’t cause curious magic-like things to occur like it does in Reveur.”

“Magic? What is magic?”

“Ah, um, like your Sorcery? The ability to influence the world…”

I wonder whether my explanation helped him understand. I look up at Rag who’s clearly confused.

“Hmm, I don’t really get all the small details that go into it, but fundamentally it influences the world, right?” Rag summarizes in his own words.

“Yeah?”

“Doesn’t that make it the same as Sorcery, then?” Rag concludes.

“Oh?”

I guess that makes sense. Singing on Earth doesn't let you fly, heal injuries, or cause miracles before your eyes as it does on Reveur, but music influences people and even the world around us by changing people. Thinking about it this way helps me realize the amazing power a Song can hold. It's almost a form of magic!

"...Yeah, you're right! Songs are incredible! Wow, I feel moved now!" I say getting all worked up. Rag looks at me baffled. "Thanks, Rag! I love singing even more now!"

"Huh? I-I see..."

"Yup. I think I can do it now! Hey, can I try singing right now?" I say motivated.

Rag's face stiffens for a second. "...Don't use anything that will influence me."

"Oh, good point."

I jump right into the first song that comes to mind, and start gasping for air five seconds later as my lungs feel like they're on fire. "KAAH!" I wheeze, blinking as what feels like steam escapes my lips.

"What did you do?" Rag questions, leaning against a nearby tree.

"Umm, I decided to sing a song that's always stuck in my head."

"And?"

The song was a jingle from a commercial about hot and spicy gum that hasn't stopped playing in the back of my mind ever since they repeated it for the thousandth time! "It dealt with fire?"

"Why are you asking me?" Rag scolds. I flinch, "Were you trying to set your lungs on fire?"

"No?" Rag sighs long and hard at my reply, but I can't help it.

"What should I do, then?"

"Focus on mixing the origin with the purpose. A Fluxer must always keep their goal in mind."

"Huh?" Rag's comment gives me an idea, "Okay, how about this?"

I focus on a cleaning tune called "Mr. Sponge", with the purpose of being

clean, because I'm disgusted by the new layer of sweat sticking my clothes to my skin.

'Oh, Mr. Sponge, Mr. Sponge~ Please save us from unholy bacteri—'

Black flashes before my eyes; I barely have time to put my hands out before hitting the ground.

***

SEVERAL hours pass before I recover from my first blackout. Rag teaches me more about Fluxers and the powers they use. I pass out three more times in the process of using what he taught me, but I think I'm finally starting to get the hang of it.

"Okay, I got it now!"

"Really?" Rag says, obviously not putting any faith in my proclamation. I can't blame him; I've failed every time I tried so far.

"Yes, really… Could you stand a little closer?" I look away, heat rushes to my cheeks. "I don't want to fall face first again this time."

Rag clicks his tongue, but moves closer, ready to catch me if I should blackout again—or maybe he just wants a front row seat to my face-plant. I contemplate what song to go with next, when the perfect one hits me. I face the spring and deeply inhale:

'Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,

Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home;

A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there,

Which seek thro' the world, is ne'er met elsewhere.

Home! Home!

Sweet, sweet home!

There's no place like home

There's no place like home!'

The British song, "Home! Sweet Home!" is famous in Japan as well. The lyrics

weave a yearning for one's home. Grandma loved this song. To me, this song is filled with memories of my grandmother. Our time together at home, of ice-skating, and the fun we had every year.

Around me the water begins to shine. I'm not sure why, but I step away from Rag. Rather than step into water, my foot touches a solid mirror-like surface that ripples with every step.

Closing my eyes, I continue to sing and dance across the water's surface. On and on I sing, dancing with the tune as memories of my Grandma and home fill my mind. With a final flourish I spin returning back to the shore, to stand next to Rag as I prepare to end my song. I grin.

I still don't fully comprehend the meaning behind Rag's saying, "*Feel the power, believe in it, and be grateful to it.*" Talking with Rag reminded me of my Grandma—she was a kind and strong woman who loved music. She was always with me, since both of my parents worked full-time. She doted on me and taught me all about music.

My silver hair reflected in the water dims to a blur. I can no longer thank her for all she has done for me, but I sing with the desire to convey these feelings of gratitude to my beloved Grandma.

***

"PHEW..." I exhale as I finish singing. A pleasant sense of lethargy enshrouds my body. I'm a bit dizzy, but not to the extent of being unable to stand. I wipe away the tears I don't remember shedding, and look at Rag.

"Look, I can stand! I guess I did it!"

"Huh? ...Yeah, looks like it." Rag opens his eyes like he was shocked awake. I'm irritated by his reaction.

"Were you sleeping through it?"

"More like he was listening attentively," a gentle voice suddenly interjects behind me. I spin around startled. Floating above the spring with a serene smile on his face is—

"Ernest!"

“...Scumbag!”

My happy shout and Rag’s groan of disgust overlap. Ernest smiles as always.

“That was a lovely song, Kanon.”

Hearing his voice for the first time in a while puts me back on the verge of tears. His smile and voice oddly give me a sense of assurance and safety. I barely know him, so why does his presence warm my soul and soothe my heart? The feeling he gives me is similar to the feeling I have when I sing.

He continues with his unfaltering smile, “As expected of the *Silver Siren*... If possible, I would love to listen to you sing forever.”

If my singing accomplished anything with the power of the *Silver Siren*, it would be the affect it had on me. I might be homesick because I was singing lyrics that yearn for home. And that’s probably why I cried while singing and feel like crying again now.

“Th-Thank you very much.” I deeply bow my head to hide my face contorting with my effort to hold back tears. If I cry now, I won’t be able to stop. I squeeze my eyes shut and bite my lower lip.

“Hey, Rag, did you not think so as well?”

“Shut up! Before you change the topic with your pointless banter, why don’t you hurry up and tell us where the heck you are! Per your orders we left Renforcer!”

Rag’s frustration is as intense as it was the last time we saw Ernest. His shout is like a cold slap across my cheek, halting my tears from falling. Yet, Ernest seems unshaken by Rag’s outburst. His shoulders are trembling slightly with hidden mirth.

“You did. I was surprised. I never expected you to travel to Verklärt... Unfortunately, I am not in that country.”

“Then where the heck are you!” Rag yells, ticked off. I gulp and wait for Ernest’s answer.

“What would you do if I answered you now?” Ernest questions with an unruffled grin.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’ll immediately drag her with me to where you are.”

“I thought so...” He chuckles before continuing, “I won’t tell you then.”

“Why not!”

“It wouldn’t be interesting if you found the answers too soon, now would it?”

“You scumbag!” Rag’s fists tremble as he holds himself back from lunging at Ernest.

I’m taken by surprise as well. It appears he isn’t just a nice person. I also notice he isn’t reflected in the surface of the water below him like the silver moon above.

“I have already given you several hints. That redheaded companion of yours seems to know of me as well.”

Ernest turns toward me. His eyes are gentle, making me incapable of getting angry at him like Rag does. I want to hurry to where he is and find my way home. I should want to go home more than anything else, and yet—

“I’m sorry, Kanon. You see, I...want you to see more of this world.”

“What?”

He wants me to see more of this world?

“I truly want to return you to your world soon. I also want to escape my imprisonment...but after listening to your song, I want to hear you sing even more. I want to see how you influence this world and what you will change.”

Heat rises to my cheeks as his gaze matches mine. Leise said the same thing to me, but this is different. I’m not sure how Ernest’s words are different, but they have an effect on me. I almost feel as if I have the power to change the world. At any rate, my whole body thrums with heat. However, I tremble when I hear a click beside me.

“Each and every single one of you people! With your selfish demands and the meaningless expectations you have when it comes to this girl! How idiotic! If a little girly singing about sad and happy things could change the world, then this world would have changed long ago!” he yells, disgusted.

Rag? I thought I had gotten used to him yelling and being angry, but I'm scared of him for the first time in a while.

"Rag, you are scaring Kanon," Ernest sighs.

"Ah!"

Rag's eyes meet mine. He swiftly turns away and clicks his tongue irritably.

"And it looks like my time is up again. I look forward to our next encounter... Do your best, Kanon."

"I-I will!" I'm somehow able to choke out a response.

Ernest smiles at me and vanishes without a trace—leaving me alone with Rag again. To make matters worse, things are awkward between us now.

"Th-Thanks for teaching me how to call on my power Rag. Why don't we go back now?" I say as brightly as possible. He turns his back to me and walks off. He won't even look at me.

I clamp my hands together and speak to his back, "I don't presume there's anything I can do either, but... I want to do whatever I can in this country for Leise's sake... I might only cause problems for you as a result, though."

He stops walking. "Give up the moment you realize it's impossible to accomplish the selfish desires others shove on you. All right?"

"Yeah, I will!" I respond loudly.

Rag still won't look at me, but I feel a little better walking behind him now. I return to the tent and Rag goes to the hut. I should be exhausted, I'm crawling into bed at the crack of dawn after singing and fainting all night, but I have a hard time falling asleep.

Chapter 17 Hesitation

“**KANON**, wake up already.” My heavy eyes open at Serene’s urging.

“S-Sorry! Good morning!”

Crawling into bed at the crack of dawn caused me to oversleep. I quickly sit up. Moist clothing sticks to my sweaty skin. I was only capable of sleeping in this heat thanks to the tent’s careful construction allowing for a cool breeze to blow through specialized gaps in the upper parts and the ground, creating air circulation. Sunlight mercilessly shines through those gaps once dawn breaks.

“Where is Leise?”

“She’s—”

“Good morning, Kanon. Did you sleep well?” Leise says, holding up a corner of the curtain and peering into the room. A delicious aroma wafts into the room through the lifted curtain, stirring my stomach awake.

Leise’s attire draws my attention more than the mouth-watering scent does. She’s clad in eye-catching clothing entirely different from what she had been wearing. Maybe she’s wearing the traditional clothing of this country.

Despite this dreadful heat, her clothing covers her arms and legs, barely revealing any flesh; a dramatic change from her earlier attire. Her clothing uses black as its base and emphasizes her youthful beauty in a simple manner. Her attire truly suits my image of what an Augur would wear as traditional clothing.

“Kanon?”

“G-Good morning! I slept well!”

“Breakfast is ready, so if you are ready, please follow me.”

“Oh! Thanks!”

Leise grins and returns to the room on the other side of the curtain.

I comb through my bed hair with my hands and tie it back, when—

“Kanon, did you have fun last night?”

“Fun?”

There’s a mischievous look in Serene’s eyes as she grins down at me.

“You were having a tryst with that man, no?”

My brain stops working for a moment over the unfamiliar word. It doesn’t take long to click in my mind that she’s referring to something like a date.

“Y-You got the wrong—”

“I kept wondering whether I should look for you because you didn’t come back for a long time, but I thought it would be rude of me to get in your way,” Serene jests, enjoying my reaction. “But Kanon, I don’t think he’s right for you.”

“That’s not it! Really not it! Totally not it! You’ve got the completely wrong idea! It’s not what you’re thinking... You see, I asked him to teach me how he uses Sorcery, so I can apply his method to my Siren ability in Singing!”

“...Aw shucks, I’m wrong?” Serene says, suddenly losing interest. Serene surprisingly has a thing for talking about romantic relationships; either that or she enjoys tormenting others.

I bring my hands to my slightly warmed cheeks. I’m reminded of how Serene reacted when Leise’s fiancé came up last night.

“Serene, don’t you love mini-Rag?” I asked, a mischievous grin creeping onto my lips.

“Yeah, I love him,” Serene declares with a dead-serious expression ruining my fun.

“You have absolutely no interest in adult-Rag? What if he has a girlfriend...” Rag is traveling with us right now, but there’s a chance he has someone waiting for him back home.

“I have absolutely no interest in him whatsoever. Wait, actually, I *hate* that man,” she declares without hesitation. To Serene mini-Rag and adult-Rag are separate people.

“I-I see... What about Laut then? He’s about the same size as mini-Rag. Don’t you want to squeeze him to death, too?”

“Yeah, I think he’s a cutie. But in no way can he measure-up to that boy. His not so cute attitude is what makes him the cutest little boy in Reveur! Now that his adorable little face is on my mind, I want to squeeze him to death and watch as he struggles to escape! ...Aaah, when can I see him again?” Serene asks with a massive sigh. Her shoulders droop dejectedly.

Mini-Rag must fit her tastes perfectly. I almost burst-out laughing when I recall how much Rag despised being squeezed by Serene.

“I hope you can see him again soon.”

“Me too. Maybe I should just try to kill that man. Even he’d use Sorcery if his life was at stake.”

“Uh, I don’t think that’s such a good idea! Please don’t try...” A bead of cold sweat rolls down my back. I’m not sure how serious she is about doing that.

We leave the bedroom while in hot-discussion over whether her attempt on his life would be effective in drawing out mini-Rag.

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FOOD, precious and free food, lines the center of a knitted straw-cloth. We follow Leise’s instructions to sit around the assortment of foods. Thin and crispy crepe-like pancakes, minced fish, and fresh vegetables fill the various wooden bowls laid in front of us. I mimic Leise’s way of eating by placing vegetables and minced fish into the steaming thin-pancake before I fold the sides and dip it into a pungent sauce.

“It’s delicious!” I exclaim, relishing the rush of flavors.

“Mn, this is good.”

“I am glad it suits your tastes.”

“Do you always cook for yourself like this, Leise?”

“Yes,” Leise nods.

I take in the food for a second-time and let out a sigh of admiration. I barely cooked in middle school—not like I cook much now, either. I’m kinda embarrassed when I compare my meager skills with Leise’s amazing cooking skills.

“What about Wild and Laut? What do they do for food?” I ask.

“They will probably be here soon—”

“Morning, Sis! I’m starved!” Laut’s boisterous voice cuts through the tent. Leise hides her face behind her hands in embarrassment over her brother’s shouting.

She collects some extra food and leaves the tent to meet with Laut outside. Curious about the siblings’ quiet discussion, I finish the food I’m holding before peeking around the flap that serves as the tent door.

“Good morning, Laut.”

“Mornin’, Miss Kanon!” he promptly says with a wide-grin.

“You should say ‘Good morning’. Boys,” Leise admonishes her little brother.

“How is Wild feeling?” I ask, enjoying their banter. Rag said Wild clonked out the second he entered their hut last night. I wonder whether he’s doing okay.

“He is still asleep. I will check-in on him later,” Leise explains in Laut’s place.

“I see...that’s worrisome. Oh, what about Rag? Is he up already?”

“Yup! He’s up! He kept chasing me away with a ‘shoo-shoo’.” Laut grins while making shooing motions with his hands.

I instantly imagine Rag’s disgruntled face as he tries to shoo Laut away like he’s a pesky animal.

“...Are you not afraid of Rag, Laut?” I ask curious.

“What? I’m not afraid in the least. Why would I be?” Laut asks bewildered by my question. I’m not sure how to answer him.

***

WE say our goodbyes to Laut, who rushes away with breakfast for the boys. We go back into the tent to finish our meal.

“Suddenly having to take care of so many people must be tough. If I’m not mistaken the nearby town has an inn and a tavern,” Serene says to Leise when we come inside.

Serene’s right. We can’t mooch off Leise’s hospitality forever. Leise’s expression abruptly darkens.

“...No, there are no longer any inns or taverns here. Please do not mind me and remain here while we are near this village. I do not have much food, but Breit will bring more at set times, so there is no need for you to concern yourselves,” Leise says, obviously straining to keep a smile on her face.

Serene and I exchange looks.

“...Is this country in such a bad state now?” I ask.

Leise’s smile fades. She quietly explained the state of her country to us. The situation is far worse than I could have ever imagined. Leise told me before that Verklärt became a tributary state to Renforcer after the Great War, but what startles me is the way the people here have been treated since the war ended.

The strong and young were sold into slavery, leaving only the injured, children, and elderly. The remaining people spend their time toiling in the fields harvesting crops that only grow in Verklärt in a desperate attempt to meet increasingly difficult quotas set by Renforcer.

The Renforcer overseers vary from uninterested in helping to overtly aggressive, going so far as to beat the very workers trying to fulfill the quota. Sometimes they even sneak some of the harvest for themselves, and blame the lack of supply on the helpless villagers who can’t even plead their innocence.

“Our family has been carefully hidden by the people, so we have avoided being discovered thus far. Food is secretly brought to us... The people are struggling just to provide for themselves while meeting their own family quotas, and yet they provide for us too...” Leise gnaws at her bottom lip. I have no words of comfort. This is what it means to be a tributary state with an unjust ruler, and to lose a war where the loser is unjustly ravaged by the victor.

“To think they have gone that far...” Serene says frowning. “How many men have they dispatched from Renforcer to maintain their rule here?”

“Four to six people per village,” Leise responds.

“Th-Then couldn’t we just chase them out?” I suggest hopefully.

Getting rid of a few men should be a walk in the park with Rag and Serene. However, Leise and Serene seem troubled by my naiveté.

“If we do that the people of this country will meet a far worse fate... Our actions could lead to everyone, including those taken as slaves, being massacred,” Serene says darkly. “Worse, it could reignite a war that would leave Verklärt in a far worse position than the one it’s in now.”

My chest tightens; I really don’t understand the ways of this world.

“Anyone capable of fighting has either been sold into slavery or killed. Just chasing the current soldiers’ away wouldn’t be enough... We can’t stay here protecting them forever either,” Serene continues.

“I-I’m sorry, I—” I apologize to Leise, realizing how foolish my words were.

She shakes her head and smiles. “Don’t be. You are a foreigner, and a guest in my country. How can we expect you to understand our ways? Besides, the few soldiers are only the ones stationed in villages. There is a garrison in what used to be the capital of Verk, with over 200 soldiers. They are sent out whenever there is trouble to deal with. I am the one who should apologize for begging you to help our country when it is in such a sorry state.”

What can I possibly do to help Verklärt and its people? I feel like a fool for rejoicing over my simple accomplishment last night. What exactly will singing without fainting do for these people? What benefit is a Song to people who have lived horrors beyond my imagination?

“I’m going to get some air!”

“Kanon?” Serene eyes me with concern.

“I might have to sing a lot today, so I need to prepare myself. I was thinking of practicing a bit first!” I force my best smile, so as not to let them catch on to my

inner despair, and quickly take my leave. I couldn't look at Leise.

***

I relish the sunlight spilling through the gaps of the densely packed forest. I close my eyes and listen to the serenity of the surrounding trees. I can hear the high-pitched shriek of a bird and a soft breeze rustling the leaves and branches. I deeply inhale the smell and purity of nature before slowly exhaling.

Of course, leaving to practice was just an excuse. I couldn't stay with Leise any longer. I wanted to think on my own somewhere, so I could wallow in my worry without burdening others.

I lost all confidence when I heard about the state of this country—no, I became afraid of the expectations placed on me. What Rag said to me last night, echoes darkly in the back of my mind:

"Each and every single one of you people! With your selfish demands and the meaningless expectations you place on this girl! How idiotic! If a little girly singing about sad and happy things could change the world, then this world would have changed long ago!"

He said those things because he understands the state of this country—of this world. Now I get why Rag was so angry. After all, I was born in a peaceful country in another world. I know nothing about Reveur—how could I? How sickeningly conceited I was to believe I could save a world I know nothing about. And in the end, I fled alone from the tent when faced with the gravity of the situation.

"I'm the worst..."

The leaves suddenly crunch in front of me. The boy with braided hair, Breit, is standing some distance ahead. He notices me right away.

He's gripping his bow and has a quiver on his back—which frightens me for a moment until I notice he's calm compared to when he shot at me last night. Breit likely came for an explanation from Leise. He walks up to me and deeply bows. Long-braided hair spills over his head.

"I am terribly sorry about what I did to you yesterday. I did something unforgivable before I learned you saved Lady Leise. Words alone will never be enough to convey my apology..."

“I-It’s okay! Anyone would be worried if someone important to them suddenly disappeared!” I rush to say, waving my hands in front of me in denial. To be honest, talking to him in my current mental state is agonizing.

Breit slowly lifts his head. “Indeed, Lady Leise is a necessary existence this country cannot be without... I truly feared for her safety.”

He’s a peculiar boy. Perhaps because I saw what a mess he was last night and how it contrasts with his present demeanor. His speech and manner are considerably politer, and I can tell he’s a nice guy, even if he doesn’t smile.

“I apologize for the late introduction. I am Lady Leise’s guardian, Breit.”

“Oh, my name is Kanon. Pleasure to meet you,” I quickly introduce myself and lower my head. I lift my face to be greeted by a newfound seriousness etched into his facial features.

“Please forgive my rudeness in asking this, but why are you and your companions in this country? Also, what exactly made you Lady Leise’s savior?”

I’m not sure how to explain—even if his questions are the logical thing to ask. It’s not like I can tell him I came to save this country by singing.

“Ask your master for the answers to your questions.”

Rag approaches us with his typical disgruntled look. I force an awkward smile, dreading seeing him again after the way things ended last night.

“Rag! G-Good morning.”

Rag’s attention is on Breit, not me. “We came this far as a favor.”

“A favor to Lady Leise?” Breit raises a suspicious eyebrow at Rag. Their height difference leaves Breit with the predicament of tilting his head to look up at Rag. Rag’s constant irritation and snappy attitude toward everyone worries me.

“That’s right! I think it’d be easier for you to understand the situation if Leise explains instead of me!” I’m not sure whether I followed-up Rag’s statement well enough, but at least I can find relief in the fact they stopped glowering at each other.

“I see. All right, I will do as you request.” Breit bows and heads for the tent.

“...I’m surprised you can have a casual conversation with the person who tried to kill you last night,” Rag comments in utter exasperation. I look up at his worried expression and giggle before rushing to answer when it shifts to an angered glare.

“H-He didn’t know who we were last night,” I try to defend Breit.

Rag sighs and glances at Breit’s back as he walks away. A black shadow sways in Rag’s hair.

“Oh, Boo’s back.”

“Yeah.”

“...Th-Thanks for yesterday.”

“.....”

He doesn’t respond. Maybe he’s still angry about last night. I look down and clench my fists.

“Lady Leise, good morning. It is I, Breit,” Breit announces several steps away from the entrance to the tent.

I whisper to Rag, “I’m sorry for saying something selfish like it’s a simple thing when I don’t have the slightest grasp of the turmoil in this country or this world.”

He sighs glancing up at the swaying trees; his face is bathed in the morning light. “So?”

“...Huh?” I’m taken aback—before I know it, Rag’s blue eyes pierce me as if he saw through everything.

“What’re ya gonna do about it? Gonna give up at the start and flee this country?”

My heart thuds at his suggestion. My body goes rigid as though a dagger pierced me.

“I’m all for that option. We’ve confirmed that scumbag isn’t here. I’ve got no more business in this country.” His icy gaze is focused on Breit and Leise by the tent. “Whatever happens to the *People of Darkness* has nothin’ to do with me...

It’s their own fault for being too weak to do anythin’ on their own.”

“You shouldn’t say that!”

I nearly scold him further until I realize—I have no right to argue with him. Not while I’m doing nothing—not while I’m incapable of doing anything and am raging over the hand dealt to less fortunate people.

Leise sticks her head out of the tent. She says something to Breit and smiles when she sees me. I bite my lower lip when she directs an angelic smile at me.

“I can’t give up yet.”

“.....” Rag directs a solemn gaze toward me in response.

“I haven’t done anything yet... I decided to do whatever I can.” I clench my fists once more, “I don’t want to give up without trying.”

Giving up is simple and easy. But I don’t want to give up without fighting first. Leise believes in me and I need to find my place as I travel through this world.

“Miss Kanon! I want to explain the situation to Breit. Can you come here?” Leise calls for me.

“Sure! I’ll be right there!” I respond without hesitation. My chat with Rag calmed my nerves and gave me the courage to take my first step forward.

I glance at Rag’s silent profile and quietly wonder whether he purposely reprimanded me for my sake. Wouldn’t that mean all his cruel statements were for me? I suppose he is just brutally honest no matter the situation. Is he a coldhearted man or a kind one? How could I know for sure when I’ve only known him for a short time? Either way, I feel refreshed and ready to face the oncoming storm.

Chapter 18 Sorcerers and Augurs

“THIS girl is the *Silver Siren*?” Breit asks in disbelief. “*Silver Siren*, as in the legendary being capable of destroying civilizations with a few words?”

Various emotions color his face in a matter of seconds. An expression of sheer dread for the *One who will Lead the World to Ruin* is clearly visible, but he also seems more bewildered over *me* being the entity he fears. Rag’s statement about how the legends say the *Silver Siren* is a woman of unparalleled beauty echoes in my mind.

I’m uncomfortable under his scrutinizing stare, but I force an awkward smile at him. It goes without saying Breit deeply furrows his brow at my poor attempt to ease his worries.

We’re currently in front of Leise’s tent. Serene is standing beside me. The usual aura of displeasure surrounds Rag from where he leans against a nearby tree, arms folded. Boo is sound asleep under his ponytail.

A whole day of rest helped Wild mostly recover from his motion sickness. He didn’t sway while walking with Laut from the hut to join our group earlier. Leise told me he used to be a warrior. He gave off the daunting air of a warrior when he was surrounded by knocked out soldiers the first time we met. Motion sickness weakened my initial impression, but since getting better he’s regained the intimidating aura of a warrior.

“That’s right, Breit! Miss Kanon’s hair turns silver when she sings!” Laut’s cheeriness shatters the tension.

“What! Ah, well, h-he’s right. I don’t really get why, but it does

happen...ahahaha.”

“Lady Leise, if that is the truth, then why did you bring her to our country!” Breit sharply turns his stony gaze from my fake smile to Leise.

“In order to have Miss Kanon sing for us.”

“Sing? Hold on a moment! They say the Silver Siren’s Song leads to destruction!”

“There is no need to worry. The legend is false. I confirmed Kanon’s Song is capable of saving people,” Leise says with conviction. Breit is at a loss over her ardent defense. Her faith in me makes me self-conscious.

“What about the other two?”

“I’m Serene, a mercenary. I’m traveling with Kanon as her bodyguard,” Serene briefly introduces herself.

Breit, still confused, bows to her before his eyes dart to Rag. “And who is—”

“This is the Sorcerer Rag,” Leise answers quietly, yet clearly.

“Sor—” Breit’s eyes round in shock.

His reaction to Rag being a Sorcerer is more overblown than when he heard I was the legendary *Silver Siren*. An unsettling feeling presses against my chest.

“Wh-Why is a Sorcerer here! Lady Leise, are you in your right mind?” Breit’s voice cracks. “Maybe you should rest for a while…”

I remember what Rag told me about the relationship between Augurs and Sorcerers last night. His eyes are closed, and he acts like he can’t hear them talk about him.

“How could Lady Leise, an Augur, allow a S-S-Sorcerer in her presence! How could this happen—”

“Breit. I believe I told you these people saved my life. Watch your manners.”

“B-But!” Breit won’t back down, despite being admonished by his master.

“Hey, Breit! Mister Rag is super cool! He can soar through the sky with his Sorcery!” Laut’s cheery voice intervenes again. Breit stares down at the grinning boy.

“The Sorcerers are no longer our enemy,” interjects Wild, who stayed silent until now. Breit finally stops, realizing he is outnumbered.

Their conversation forces me to realize for the first time that Sorcerers were once Verk’s enemy.

“Breit, I need to ask a favor,” Leise says, breaking the silence and changing the topic.

“Ah, a-anything!”

“I want you to gather as many children from the surrounding villages as you can and bring them here.”

“Children?” I repeat what she said surprised.

“Yes. I was thinking I would like you to sing in front of the children first, Miss Kanon.”

I’m honestly relieved—I can sing in front of tiny children without being overwhelmed. Actually, I think it will be fun to sing to children!

“But won’t the watchdogs from Renforcer notice if children suddenly disappear from the villages?” Serene questions.

“Oh, that’s true. If gathering the children caused this place...and Leise to be found by the soldiers, things could turn bad real fast!”

“We probably do not have to worry about that,” Breit answers our fears in a low tone. “They only show up to patrol the area when they feel like it...” His words carry a barely contained fury.

Having been lovingly raised in a peaceful developed country, I have no idea what it’s like to be under another country’s rule, but I can tell he hates—or more like despises—the situation and the ones who caused it.

Breit clearly considers Sorcerers on the same level as the people who subjugated his country. Perhaps he equally despises Rag for being a Sorcerer. And that hatred probably isn’t confined to Breit alone—Leise probably does as well. She wouldn’t even look Rag in the eyes at first, and rarely does now either.

I wonder how Rag feels about being in this country. He wanted to leave Verk as soon as possible—and that might not just be because he found out Ernest isn’t

here. He's still leaning against a tree with his eyes closed and his head tilted toward the sun. The sunlight spilling through the tree canopy dances across his face adding to his already handsome features.

"But Lady Leise, what should I say to the children's parents?"

"Tell them I have need of the children. Please tell them I will call for the rest in due time."

"I understand. I will do as you say."

I'm a bit surprised—this conversation has proved how important Leise is to Verk, and the authority she holds among her people.

"Breit," Leise calls out to Breit who had turned to leave.

"Yes?" He looks over his shoulder, confusion painting his face.

Leise's eyes soften as she gently smiles at him. "I will have you listen to Kanon's song as well. I am sure once you hear a Song you will understand why I brought her here."

"A-As you command! Th-Then if you will pardon me!" Breit deeply bows his head to hide flushed cheeks and departs for the forest depths.

I can't stop my lips from curling into a silly grin after witnessing Breit's flustered reaction. Just as I predicted—he does have feelings for her. I'm pretty sure if I were a guy I would fall for her too, after seeing such an adorable smile.

Judging from Leise's reaction to my questioning last night, Breit's feelings for her are unrequited. She hasn't noticed how he feels for her in the least. Breit is likely aware of that. And from his position as bodyguard, he should be aware of her fiancé.

Their entire situation is kinda heart-wrenching. I wish I could help. Sadly, I'm an outsider and my wish to intervene makes me a meddler. I'll still secretly root for Breit over some fiancé I haven't met, though.

Good luck, Breit!

"Oi, girl of a hundred different faces, you can sing on the spot, right?" Rag questions, dragging me from my wandering thoughts.

“Huh?” I’m startled Rag is right next to me—I never realized he moved. “A hundred different faces? Was I making that many weird expressions?”

“It was fun to watch,” Serene answers. I bring my hands to my face in a panic. The heat rises to my cheeks.

Laut must be mimicking me, because he’s rubbing his cheeks and making funny faces at Wild. Wild watches him expressionlessly. Leise giggles as she watches our little exchange. I am so embarrassed.

“So, can you sing? ...Don’t pass out,” Rag whispers the last part, so only I can hear him. He’s being considerate after all the training we went through yesterday. I’m fully aware it took me all night to finally grasp what he was trying to teach me.

“Y-Yeah, I’m okay! ...Probably,” I whisper the last word to Rag.

I’ve already decided what song to sing for the children. They most likely have never heard someone sing before. The perfect song for them has been playing in my head ever since Leise said my audience will be children.

“I hope they enjoy it,” I say nonchalantly.

“Enjoy? You can enjoy a song?” Serene asks doubtfully.

Leise is staring at me with curious yet hopeful eyes. It’s not just the children who don’t know how enjoyable music is, but Serene, Leise, and everyone else in Verk.

“Yup! Singing is a ton of fun!” I say with growing confidence. I want to teach them all about what a blessing singing is.

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WE don’t have anything to do until the children gather, so Serene and I help Leise with housework to burn time. Leise tried to turn us down, but I can’t stand staying in someone’s care without helping them out.

Laut and Wild returned to their hut for the time being. I’m currently hanging the sheets from last night in a clearing where the hot sun can dry them, with Serene. The sheer act of hanging sheets to dry causes an onslaught of sweat to drip down my back and forehead.

Naturally, Rag isn't taking part in our cleaning—he's comfortably napping in the shade of a nearby tree. I'm irked when I see him out of the corner of my eye, but I have no right to say anything when I made him help me until dawn.

Leise prepares lunch for us after we finish cleaning. Laut suggested we eat together outside. I bring the home-cooked food to my mouth and feel like all our hard work in the morning paid off for the melt-in-your-mouth taste of Leise's food.

After reveling in the taste of a few bites of food, I ask everyone the question that has plagued me since I learned about the legend of the *Silver Siren*.

"None of you have ever heard a song before? Not even once?"

"Never. I heard song for the first time when you sang in Rubato," Leise answers.

"Same goes for me," Laut admits with a mouth full of food.

"But doesn't this world have people called *Sirens*? Right, Rag?"

"Huh?" Rag stops reaching for the food he was aiming for and looks at me. "Yeah, they exist, but there are barely any of them left."

"...What does that mean?"

"Did you think *Sirens*, who can use Song, would be living normal carefree lives in a regular town where people who sing are ostracized or killed now?"

"Oh..."

That makes sense—how could people known for singing live normal lives in a world where others view their ability as ominous? I witnessed the people of Reveur's frightened and mob-like reaction firsthand the instant I arrived. Anyone considered ominous would have a hard time living normally.

"You said, 'now', right? Does that mean Sirens used to sing freely and live in the open in the past?"

"Apparently they did. I don't know the details."

"But I've heard the Sirens now live in an uncharted region, hidden from others," Serene says flatly.

“Seriously?” I exclaim. “Where is that?”

“How would I know? It’s uncharted for a reason. Plus, far as I know, it’s just a rumor. I forget where I even heard about it.”

I lean back and slump my shoulders. I would love to meet them if I can. What are they like? What kind of songs do they sing? What do they think of this world that bans singing? So many of my questions will only be answered if I meet a Siren.

“Why is singing so feared?”

“I told you why before. It’s because of the legends stating the *Silver Siren* will destroy the world,” Rag answers plainly.

“But the Sirens used to sing in the past, right? How long ago was that?”

“As if I’d know!” Rag shouts irritably and averts his eyes as he shoves food into his mouth. I doubt I’ll get any more information out of him.

“Have you never heard singing before either, Wild?” I try asking Wild, the oldest person present.

“Yeah, never have,” Wild responds in his deep baritone. I let out a small sigh.

“But,” Leise interjects, “Oddly enough, I immediately recognized what you were doing at the time as singing.”

“Now that you mention it, I did too,” Serene adds and looks at me thoughtfully.

A disgruntled Rag gives them the reason, “Isn’t that because her hair turned silver? It must have clicked in everyone’s head that she’s the *Silver Siren*... You’d figure out what she’s doing the second you put two and two together.”

“Oh, good point. I didn’t think about that... Why does my hair turn silver, anyway?” I mutter as I play with my plain-old brown hair.

Obviously, no one present had an answer for me. Only one person I know might have the answers—I wonder just how much Ernest knows. He knew about me, that I sang, and not only that I came from another world, but how I can return.

“Do you guys know about sheet music?”

“*Sheet... muu-sick*?”

They look puzzled. Song is the fundamental basis for music. Perhaps it’s only natural for them not to know what sheet music is when they have never heard a song, much less sung one before.

And yet, Ernest told me, “I have the sheet music that can send you home.”

He knew what sheet music was and claims to have the exact one I need. He clearly knows more than he lets on. When will he show himself again? I have a ton of questions for him, yet whenever he shows up I can never actually hold a conversation with him. If anything, the mystery only deepens as I think on his words...

Chapter 19 The First Song

“LADY Leise, I apologize for returning later than originally planned. I have brought the children as you requested,” Breit says.

I had nothing left to do after I helped Leise clean up once we finished lunch, so I dozed off in the shade of a nearby tree. Breit’s voice woke me up around the time the sun was almost over the horizon. Rag and Serene, who were both resting against the same tree, were already on their feet watching things from a comfortable distance. Laut and Wild are nowhere in sight as they had returned to their hut earlier today.

“Good work,” Leise says, exiting her tent. I sprint over to join her and Breit.

“They are the children from the villages of Freude and Belebend.”

I gasp at the crowd of children standing uncomfortably behind Breit. The small group is made up of about twenty kids. They have the same dark-brown skin, black hair and eyes as Laut. However, unlike Laut, each child is dreadfully emaciated. They look like children from impoverished countries shown on TV across Earth.

The children range in age from toddlers whose age you could count on one hand to around Laut’s age; at least in appearance. They may very well be older than they appear, but stunted in growth because of the obvious lack of food. The children nervously stare at Leise. Breit quietly instructs them to greet us, but no one attempts to speak up.

The Augur, Leise, gently smiles at the gathered children. “I apologize for suddenly calling you to me like this. I am certain you must be surprised. I had you

all gather here today because I want to introduce you to someone special."

Leise's comment seems to ease whatever fears the children had, because they relax. Perhaps they have never been called here alone. They may have thought they were in some sort of trouble. I can't help the smile tugging at my lips; their reaction reminds me of a child called to the principal's office without knowing why.

Leise glances at me. The children follow her lead and turn from her to me. I do my best to hold back a nervous giggle as the heat rises to my cheeks, and butterflies do a backflip in my stomach. As a result, I'm stuck flashing them an awkward smile.

Not a single child responds, barely acknowledging my existence. They're wary of me—a single glance at my appearance screams I'm a foreigner. Their reaction is understandable when I consider the subjugation of their country by foreigners who force them to live in such horrid conditions.

"This is Miss Kanon. She came to Verk as a favor to me. She is an incredibly kind and lovely young lady."

Her introduction is embarrassing. I rush to speak to the children in my cheeriest voice, "It's a pleasure to meet you all! I'm Kanon. I hope we can get along!"

Leise's vote of confidence must have had some affect, because a few children bow in response. My heart warms from their small gesture.

"I would like for you to listen quietly as Miss Kanon sings for us today."

The children exchange confused looks. Chances are they have no idea what Leise means by *sing*.

"Don't worry. I have already listened to her myself. Songs are a unique and enjoyable experience for those who have never heard them before. That is why I would like all of you to hear for yourselves," Leise explains with a smile. "Please take it from here, Miss Kanon."

I move to the front to take center stage in the gathering of children, when I catch Rag's receding form as he vanishes at the edge of the forest.

“Rag?” I call, “Where are you going?”

“...The spring from yesterday.”

“What? Why? What about the song?”

“I don’t need to hear it,” Rag disappears into the forest without looking back.

Did he work up that much of a sweat? His absence leaves me feeling insecure, but it’s not like I can stop because he left. I prepare for the task ahead and return my attention to the children.

“I look forward to hearing your song,” Serene encourages.

Bolstered by her encouragement, I take the last few steps required to put me in the center—my gait may have looked robotic as my feet and arms went out at the same time. As expected, the little eyes watching me are full of unease.

I put on my best smile and address the kids, “Um, well, why don’t we sit down first?”

The children slowly sit on the dirt. “I believe this will be your first time hearing someone sing, but you see, singing isn’t very fun on your own. So I would love it if everyone joins me in singing today!”

Everyone looks shocked—I expected that reaction. A couple of the kids have their mouths hanging open, as if they can’t comprehend what it would mean to sing alone, much less together. Breit shoots a panicked glance behind me. I peer over my shoulder at Leise who stares back at me with a hesitant expression.

“It’s fine, right? Leise?”

“Y-Yes,” she consents.

I’m relieved by her nod of approval.

“Leise, if you like, you can sing with us too!”

Shock registers on her face. I turn back to the group and notice two more people standing behind the sitting kids—Laut and Wild. Laut is waving in wide arcs at me.

I smile at him and continue, “You see, a song is created on the basic sounds of ‘Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-La-Ti’.”

I show them the rising intonation of the music scale with my fingers—their eyes follow my fingers with every movement. My hair doesn't change color or glow. I guess it won't change unless I'm singing a proper *Song*. I repeat the tune of Do-Re-Mi several times before some children join in by moving their lips silently in sync with my voice.

The timing seems right, so I boldly suggest, "Okay, it's your turn now, kids! Can you copy what I just did?"

Naturally, no one jumped at the idea. They look at each other shyly, when—

"Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-La-Ti-Do!" a cheerful voice sings behind the children. Everyone turns back to see Laut singing!

"That's it! You're great at this, Laut!" I praise Laut as I clap for him. He blushes, smiling bashfully.

"Do-Re-Mi..."

"Do-Re-Mi!"

Two additional voices resound from the group of children at the same time—they belong to a boy and girl around the same age as Laut. The two of them look at each other in surprise and smile sheepishly.

They smiled! I'm so happy they smiled, I start the song over. Laut and the boy and girl join me this time. Another voice chimes in from behind me—Leise is smiling shyly with flushed cheeks. Her smile is the spitting image of Laut's. By the third round of singing, the rest of the children joined our small chorus.

This is so much fun! It's been a long time since I last had this much fun. I stop singing for a moment and take one deep breath. The children watch me with curiosity. I break into a real song this time.

'Do-Do-Do. What sound is Do? A door being knocked on is Do-Do-Do

Re-Re-Re. What sound is Re? Ray is Re-Re-Re

Mi-Mi-Mi. What sound is Mi? A Mi-Ki puppy is Mi-Mi-Mi

Fa-Fa-Fa. What sound is Fa? Fatty cotton-candy is Fa-Fa-Fa

Sol-Sol-Sol. What sound is Sol? To sew is Sol-Sol-Sol

La-La-La. What sound is La? Laughing is La-La-La

Ti-Ti-Ti. What sound is Ti? Tea is Ti-Ti-Ti

Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-La-Ti is a fun, fun song!'

This is a nostalgic song I made up with my Grandma as a child. Not a single child drew back in fear of my hair glowing silver. The wind around us begins to swirl, a comforting breeze that sweeps the cloying heat away. Serene and Wild glance around warily, but settle down once they associate the change in the air with me.

Plants begin to grow, first tiny green stems, and then wild flowers slowly sprout around the group. Everyone looks around in awe, before returning their starry-eyed gaze to me. One child swings to the beat of the song. A girl quietly moves her mouth in unison with me. And a boy listens to my song with a glimmer in his eyes.

As soon as I stop singing, one of the girls hops to her feet and loudly asks, "Hey, can you sing it again? I want to sing, too!"

The boy beside her stands, "Me too!"

"Sing it one more time!"

"Hey, hey! What's cotton candy?"

The children's voices overflow with the joy of singing for the first time.

Laut hops excitedly beside his dad shouting, "Again! Again!"

"Miss Kanon, please sing for us again," Leise softly requests. She stares in awe at the newly grown plants, and pushes her hair behind her ears as the comfortable breeze still swirls around us.

Serene nods a slight distance away from the group, her eyes closed in silent remembrance.

"Sure! Okay then, why don't we all sing together this time!" They respond with excited grins. "Oh, right, you wanted to know what cotton candy is. It's a sweet and fluffy dessert," I explain thinking they probably don't have cotton candy in Reveur.

Their smiles instantly wither. I'm confused by the sudden change in their demeanor when Leise quietly explains the reason, as though it's hard for her to tell me.

"Miss Kanon, these children have seldom had the chance to taste sweets."

My lack of consideration is like cold water poured down my back, putting out the flame of self-satisfaction over making the children happy for a minute. How could I explain delectable sweets to children who barely get enough food for their survival?

The children are patiently waiting for me to continue. The guilt causes me to draw a blank, until—

"Wh-Why don't we all think of a word to use for Fa together?" Breit suggests. "How about Falche?"

"Falche?" I repeat the unfamiliar word.

"Falche is the name of a village to the far north," Breit answers, flustered by all the attention his statement had drawn.

"I think Falche is a wonderful idea! Oh, but is it problematic if we change the song?" Leise looks at me anxiously.

I shake my head. "Nope, I think that's a great idea! Let's tie Fa's verse with Falche!"

Smiles return to all the small faces. Breit's expression softens with relief that I had no problem with his suggestion. I need to thank him for his help later.

We discuss what verses we can change to fit their world and compose a new song everyone present can enjoy. We switch the verse with Re to this world's name, Reveur. A unanimous vote had La's verse changed to Lady Leise. When she heard everyone wanted her name in the song, Leise blushed but seemed happy. Thus, we sing the new song we created together.

'Do-Do-Do. What sound is Do? A door being knocked on is Do-Do-Do

Re-Re-Re. What sound is Re? Reveur's Ray flower is Re-Re-Re

Mi-Mi-Mi. What sound is Mi? A Mi-Ki puppy is Mi-Mi-Mi

Fa-Fa-Fa. What sound is Fa? Falche's residents are Fa-Fa-Fa

Sol-Sol-Sol. What sound is Sol? To sew is Sol-Sol-Sol

La-La-La. What sound is La? Lady Leise's laughter is La-La-La

Ti-Ti-Ti. What sound is Ti? Tea is Ti-Ti-Ti

Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-La-Ti is a fun, fun song!'

The sound of jubilant children singing echoes through the skies of Verklärt. Their voices are in perfect unison. To say I am surprised this is their first time singing is an understatement. My Silver hair sways in the air; the trees sparkle with fresh dew, as a soft breeze and a warm aura of contentment settles on everyone. Whether this is my influence or just the power of Song itself, I am not sure.

We sing the song together so many times I lose count. We lose ourselves in song until the sky is dyed with the shadows of evening.

"We should call it a day," Wild says in the evening.

If not for his comment, we might have sung until the following morning. I will never forget the joy on their faces after they finished singing.

Compared to the drawn looks of melancholy when we first met, the jubilation on their faces makes me feel like a different group of children were swapped in midway through. I'm surprised, the kids actually look a little healthier, and their once emancipated faces appear a little fuller. Everyone who sang seems healthier. Is this the power of Song?

"See ya next time, Miss!"

"Let's sing together again sometime!"

"It's a promise!"

The children thank me as they follow Breit home. I wave until they are out of sight. I groan once their elongated shadows could no longer be seen. I collapse to my butt a second later.

"Kanon!"

"Miss Kanon!"

Serene and Leise run over to me worried.

“I-I’m okay. Just tired is all.” I run my fingers through my silver hair, watching as it slowly reverts to its normal color. It lasted much longer this time.

I may have learned how to control my ability a little bit last night, but I definitely sang too much today. At least practicing with Rag helped me keep from face planting in front of a bunch of children. Collapsing this time was more out of relief things ended well, rather than utter exhaustion.

Serene helps me up.

“Thank you very much, Miss Kanon. Things went just as I predicted they would. No, actually, it was a far greater result than I ever expected. Truly the Silver Siren’s power is incomprehensible. You have my utmost thanks!” Leise says, her eyes misting at the edge as she gazes toward where the children departed.

Chapter 20 The Great Sorcerers' War

LEISE set about preparing dinner after the children left. I decided to take Serene's advice and rest in the bedroom. I vividly recall the image of children joyfully singing when I close my eyes. Leise's childlike smile was worth the embarrassment and fear I faced singing to children for the first time. Words aren't enough to express my joy; I am truly thankful to Rag and his encouragement.

I hope this experience will show the People of Darkness the positive side of singing, and that it's not just an ominous noise as their legends state. I hope Song begins to spread through this world, where music and singing is forbidden. I smile when I imagine a future where the concept of *singing* is no longer spoken about in hushed whispers. Although my singing has only brought fear so far—I can only hope my efforts in Verk will leave a different impression.

My good mood sours when I think of Rag—he never did come back from the spring. He couldn't have been bathing the whole time I sang. I roll over on the bed and open my eyes as I remember Rag walking off earlier.

Maybe he didn't want to hear me sing?

He seemed like he didn't want to be present while I sang last night either. Could the prejudice and revulsion toward Song be bad enough on Reveur people actively avoid it? The children gave singing a chance, but only after being pressed by Leise, who has authority over them as Augur.

Wild and Serene listened to everyone else sing yet never joined in our small chorus. Perhaps the older you are, the harder it is to accept what years of life have told you is evil. People have difficulty changing beliefs they've had since childhood. Never knowing the joy of music is a sad inevitably that comes with being a citizen of this world.

I bet Wild would sing in a lovely baritone. I doze off imagining how each of my friends in this world would sound if they sang.

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“KANON.”

I drowsily open my eyes.

“Hmm? ...Did I fall asleep?” My body is heavy and listless from my nap.

“Are you okay? Song is like Sorcery in the way it drains your strength, right?” Serene asks, concerned.

“Ah, yes, it is.”

I only spoke with Rag about how much singing drains me, but Serene noticed its effect on me as well.

“But I’m okay now,” I say, rubbing my eyes.

“I see.” Serene smiles with relief. “Then let’s have dinner before the food gets cold.”

“Okay! Oh yeah, where’s Rag? Have you seen him, Serene?”

“Ah, if you mean that grumpy man, he stayed cooped up in the other hut this whole time. Laut said he found him sleeping like a log.”

I expected as much. I heave a tiny sigh and stand.

“...I suppose he couldn’t endure being there,” she mutters to herself.

“Why’s that?” I ask, confirming I’m capable of standing without feeling dizzy.

“Rag probably couldn’t stand looking at those kids... Well, that is if he still has the feelings of a normal human being.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Those kids are like that because their parents lost the war.”

My heart tightens at Serene’s explanation.

The children’s terribly emaciated bodies were clad in tattered clothing. During the war the Sorcerers, including Rag, and the people of Verk were enemies. The outcome of the Great Sorcerers’ War led to the current state of Reveur, and the predicament these children are in today.

I work up the courage to ask something that has been bothering me since I

learned about the war, “Hey, Serene? Did the Sorcerers really do something worse than the other side did? It was a war, after all…”

Serene examines me carefully. “...You came from another world, huh? Kanon.”

“Uhh? Y-Yeah, I did. Are you surprised?” I wasn’t expecting Serene to bring that up.

“Nah, the Silver Siren legend states they come from another world. I just put two and two together with your lack of knowledge of something everyone in Reveur knows,” Serene casually explains before seriously asking, “Are there wars in your world?”

“Um?” I’m not sure how to answer her when she turns the question on me.

I nod as I find the words to answer her question. “There are wars in my world. The country I live in is currently at peace, but several decades before I was born it was involved in what we call a World War...twice. Various countries across the world went to war killing millions.”

“I see... Five years ago, a long and drawn-out war plaguing Reveur finally came to an end. They call it the Great Sorcerers’ War now.”

The Great Sorcerers’ War—Rag and Serene talked about that war once before.

“The war everyone believed would continue forever ended the instant the Sorcerers got involved. A great many lives fell at their feet, when they entered the war... Their power was that overwhelming—to the point it ended a never-ending war. The sacrifice was the cost of many innocent lives.” Serene stares into the distance as she recalls an unseen past. She told me before she was lucky to have survived the war.

I swallow uncomfortably; unlike my world and country, war is fresh in the minds of everyone in Reveur.

“Was Rag also involved in that war?”

“I have little doubt he was, considering he’s from Stretta. He was likely a rarity among the Sorcerers there as well.”

Reveur’s Great Sorcerers’ War ended five years ago. That puts Rag, currently nineteen, at fourteen years old when he stood on that war-torn battlefield.

“What kind of place is Stretta? You guys told me before it was for training Sorcerers, right?”

“Stretta created demons,” someone interjects into our conversation.

Surprised, I look over my shoulder. “Leise!”

“The Sorcerers trained by Stretta used what was once a holy power...to massacre people.” The intense anger and grave sorrow shadowing Leise’s features all but erase any signs of the childish smile she had earlier.

Massacre—what a dreadful word—and to think Rag was one of those people.

“Instead of other pursuits, our powers were used...to wage wars.”

I can’t get the image of Rag’s harrowed expression as he admitted that, out of my head. My Grandma’s words I was able to easily convey to him then are stuck in my throat.

Serene continues talking amid the strained air between the three of us. “No one ever even considered Fluxers getting involved in the war. One day, the name Stretta spread across the world like a raging inferno, despite being nameless until then. Their name was spread as the First Sorcerer Training Facility.

Stretta took on a neutral position in world politics after the war, but it wouldn’t be exaggerating to say the world runs the way it is now at their allowance... Everybody fears a repeat of what happened on that day.”

“On that day?” I ask hiding a slight tremble.

“...A single city was obliterated by a handful of Sorcerers. And in an instant at that.”

A single city was taken out instantaneously? I’m reminded of the gigantic mushroom cloud no one from Japan would be unfamiliar with. Earth’s greatest and most fearsome weapon that turned a single city into hell on Earth in an instant—the power of nuclear fire contained in a bomb.

The same level of death and destruction was possible in Reveur at the hand of Sorcerers? Devastation of the same level was caused by a handful of humans without technology? What kind of nightmarish world have I come to?

I’ve witnessed Rag’s incredible Sorcery several times, but for some reason I just

can’t connect his power level to the same magnitude of a nuclear bomb. I wonder whether Rag has killed people with his Sorcery. Sweat trickles down my clenched fists.

“I find them more frightening than the legendary *Silver Siren*,” Serene says in a low voice.

What horrors did she witness during the war? I can’t even begin to imagine. A gloomy silence hangs in the air of our small room. Leise’s slightly cheerier voice breaks the silence.

“I apologize for suddenly interrupting your conversation. As my Father said this afternoon, the Sorcerers are no longer our enemy. Dinner is ready, so please join me in the other room.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks!”

Leise smiles and drops the curtain.

“Hey, Serene? You hate Rag, don’t you?”

“...Yeah.”

“Is that because Rag is a Sorcerer?” I cautiously ask her.

Serene peers down at me, then smiles. “Nah, that’s just because every little thing he says and does gets on my nerves. That precious child, on the other hand, is cute no matter what he says or does.”

Her remark draws a smile from me.

“Are you scared of him now?” Serene asks in a soft tone.

I shake my head. “No... Or more like I was scared of him from the start, and now I’ve finally gotten used to his attitude.” My smile widens as I remember my travels with Rag and Boo.

Stretta and the Great Sorcerers’ War have piqued my interest. I’m scared to learn more, but those things are a big part of this world I may be stuck in for a long time. However, considering the harrowed edge in Serene’s voice when she talks about it, Leise’s enraged expression, and Rag’s silence last night—I have decided it’s best to keep my curiosity on the topic to myself…for now. I’ll always remember those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. I’ll try to learn

more about this world too; Ernest seemed to want me to.

Serene gently pats me on the head. “Why don’t we go enjoy dinner?”

“Okay!” We leave the bedroom for where Leise already laid out dinner for us.

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LEISE smiles from the start of dinner until the end. The food she made was heavenly. I gulfed it down after burning most of my energy singing earlier.

“I’m going to see Rag for a bit,” I tell Serene as I stand—I timed saying it for when Leise stepped away for a moment. I have a hard time mentioning Rag around her. “I want to thank him for yesterday.”

“I see. Are you okay on your own?”

“Yup! I’ll be fine!” I smile and wave as I leave the tent.

A comfortable, if not cool, breeze caresses my cheeks. Just like last night, the bugs make their presence known by buzzing in a loud, obnoxious chorus. An animal cry unlike anything I’ve heard on Earth is mixed into the chorus. I shiver a little as I walk, and try not to imagine what that cry belongs to or how close it is. I follow the speck of light visible on the other end of the clearing set in the middle of the gloomy forest. When out of nowhere—

“Lady Kanon.”

My heart lurches in my chest when someone abruptly calls out to me. A boy with braided hair steps out of the shadows.

“Y-You startled me, Breit!”

“Oh, I apologize for surprising you.”

I let out a sigh of relief and shake my head. “Nah, it’s okay. Are you just coming back now? Good work! Are you headed to report to Leise?”

“Yes, and I also wanted to thank you, Lady Kanon.”

“Um, I’m a bit embarrassed to hear you call me Lady—Wait, what did you just say? You want to thank me? For what?”

Breit straightens and bows down before me. “Thanks to you, Lady Kanon, I was able to see the long lost smiles of our people’s children. Thank you very much.”

I never thought Breit would thank me. I quickly wave off his gesture. “Y-You don’t have to! I only sang! Actually, if anything...I wanted to thank you, Breit!”

“You do?” Breit lifts his head and looks at me blankly as if he can’t fathom why I would.

“You know, when you brought up Falche? I drew a blank at the time, so if not for your quick thinking things might not have gone as smoothly as they did. Thank you for that!” I thank him and bow the same way he did.

He’s flustered by my reaction. “I did not do anything amazing! Please lift your head! I merely said what I thought of at the time. I did not do anything that deserves your thanks—”

“No, it really is thanks to you, Breit! I enjoyed singing with everyone! That’s why I want to thank everyone for taking part. I want to thank Leise too.”

Breit’s expression changes at Leise’s name. He squints at the tent as if he were staring into the sun itself.

“It has been a long time since I last saw Lady Leise smile freely without burden.” His gentle tone brings my mischievous side out.

“Leise’s smile is super cute, after all.”

“It is... Wait! U-Um, well...” Breit croaks when he notices me staring at him. It’s too dark to see, but my gut tells me he’s blushing. I grin.

“Leise’s really important to you, isn’t she? Breit.” I almost said, ‘you must really love her’, but decided it was best not to.

Breit nods, a look of relief coloring what I can see of his face in the dark. “She is.”

A realization hits me from his earlier comment. “You said Leise hasn’t smiled in a while, but Leise is always smiling?”

Breit’s expression clouds. “Lady Leise rarely reveals her true smile—not since Lady Ferne passed away.”

“Lady Ferne?”

“Lady Leise’s mother.”

My heart aches. Like Leise, her mother was an Augur and died young because of her ability.

“Lady Leise always smiled, a true smile, when Lady Ferne was still alive. And she also often...cried.”

“She cried?”

“Yes.” Breit nods.

Leise has the air of a mature young lady, so I can’t imagine her as a crybaby.

“It was just around the time the Great War had ended... I occasionally witnessed her crying as she asked Lady Ferne: ‘Why are the Augurs so powerless? Why are we the only ones with so much food?’” He sounds sad and proud of the young Leise. He likely prides himself in being the bodyguard of Leise who cried for others.

“However, Lady Ferne passed away not long afterwards. As a result, Lady Leise stopped crying and lost her innocent smile... Ever since, Lady Leise has fulfilled her role as Augur with a magnificence we can all be proud of. She is a pillar of support for our people… No, our nation!”

Leise must have been heartbroken when she lost her mother, the only other Augur like her. No doubt she has since put her role as Augur above all else.

“Leise is a strong young lady.”

“Yes, incredibly strong...but it is painful seeing her that way.”

I think I understand what Breit means. Her expression is solemn as she fulfills her role as Augur. The adorable, innocent smile she showed today is a remnant from her lost childhood. I look back at the tent. Leise is supporting all the people of her country at the young age of thirteen. That feat alone is incredible.

“You know, Leise told me she’s vexed by the fact she can only be protected and can’t do anything herself.”

Loneliness seeps into Breit’s features. “She spoke to me about that as well—quite often as of late...which is why I feared the worst and took drastic measures when she disappeared.”

He straightens and looks straight at me. “I think Lady Leise found the answer

she was searching for when she met you, Lady Kanon."

"She did?"

"I was overjoyed Lady Leise smiled at me when she said she wanted me to listen to you sing. I never thought I would be able to see her smile like that again... I am grateful to you beyond what words can convey." Breit bows deeply.

"I think Leise was able to leave this country to find her answers because she has faith in you, Breit," I tell him as I remember Leise's smile this afternoon.

Breit jolts his head up.

"The faith you two have in each other is just what I'd expect of childhood friends!"

His face turns a deep crimson I can see in the dark. "N-Nonsense! I do not deserve such a title! I mean, I certainly have had the honor of her playing with me quite often since we were young, but..." Breit stutters, completely flustered.

I chuckle. "Good luck, Breit!"

"What? Good luck for what?"

I wave to Breit, who stands stricken as he tries to figure out what I mean, and walk deeper into the forest.

I envy the trust they have in each other.

A sigh unknowingly slips out as I progress through the forest's edge. The closest people to me in Reveur are Rag and Serene. I trust the two of them, but I'm pretty sure that's a one-sided feeling. It'll take time for us to develop trusting relationships.

I have no idea when I will disappear from this world. Naturally, it's hard to trust or put time into a relationship with someone who could disappear for good at any time. So I'm a bit envious of Leise and Breit who have a firm relationship of trust. Besides, having a childhood friend is something I've always envied.

"Boo!" I barely hear Boo's coo mixed among the bugs' buzzing. The sound came from deeper in the forest.

"Boo!" I exclaim happily. I open my arms for Boo to fly into my chest. "I forgot

you’re usually up by this time. Are you alone? Did you eat already?”

“Boo! Boo! Boo!”

I have absolutely no idea what he’s saying, but I’m happy he’s trying to answer my questions.

“Boo, do you trust me?”

“Boo?”

Boo scrunches his nose and looks curiously up at me from my hand. The leaf-covered ground crunches with a footstep in the same direction Boo flew from. Rag slowly steps into view. He must be coming from the spring, because his sloppily tied hair drips water as it sways behind him.

Everything Serene told me about the Great War runs through my mind for a brief moment. But, as I thought, I don’t fear him. I know nothing about what he did or who he was in the past. I know the current him—the young man who is short-tempered, has a foul mouth, talks arrogantly to everyone, is obstinate, and is always there to save me.

He lifts an eyebrow, as if to ask why I’m here.

“Perfect timing! I was on my way to see you.”

“Why?” Rag says, curt as ever.

I continue undaunted, “I came to thank you.”

“Huh?”

“Thanks to you I was able to sing for everyone without passing out! I also made Leise happy... So I wanted to say thank you!”

I bow my head like I did to Breit earlier—I’m genuinely grateful to him. I’m also grateful he came with me to this country despite the painful memories and frustration it must cause him. Maybe that’s why the next words he said made me doubt my ears.

“Then you have had your fill of this place.”

“What?”

He continues with a sigh, “We’re leaving this country first thing tomorrow.”

I stare after Rag—he might be ready to leave tomorrow, but I certainly am not!

Chapter 21 Secret Friends

“DO you understand? You’d better tell that Augur we’re leaving, too,” Rag demands before sauntering away.

I frantically try to stop him. “W-Wait a minute!”

Rag turns around with an air of annoyance, as if he knows I’m going to argue with him, and he doesn’t want to deal with it. “What?”

“What do you mean we’re leaving? We just got here last night! And Leise wants me to sing for the other villages, too!”

“You made the kids happy, didn’t ya? Isn’t that enough? No one will complain if you leave now.”

“B-But I haven’t—”

I haven’t accomplished my objective for coming to this country yet. I haven’t fulfilled Leise’s wish yet—her heartrending wish for me to save everyone in Verklärt through the joy of song.

“Do you honestly believe you can save this country?”

“What?” I shudder from the way his eyes burrow into me. Sweat, caused by something other than the heat, beads on my forehead.

“You sang in front of little brats today. So? What next? Gonna sing in front of the adults? And what good did singing do for them?”

“Y-Yeah...Leise said she wanted me to sing for multiple villages to have a greater effect on her people. And my singing made the children happy,” I avert

my gaze.

Rag heaves his usual sigh. “Stop while you’re ahead. It’s obviously an impossible goal.”

His quick dismissal ticks me off.

“How can you say that? Children and adults are the same. You don’t know this because you didn’t watch today, but the children who came all enjoyed themselves!” I yell back.

The bugs stop their loud chorus for a moment after my scream, before quickly resuming their obnoxious song. Boo peers up at me then at Rag with concern.

“Adults are different from kids. The length of the lives they’ve lived and the cruel realities they’ve experienced are different,” Rag answers monotone. “And merely bringing joy to people won’t save them.”

I’m not sure how to respond to his matter-of-fact statement, because I was pondering the same thing earlier. Acknowledging his comment is the same as denying Leise’s wish. And Rag didn’t see how much healthier the children looked after they sang with me. I’m not sure whether he’d believe me even if I told him about it, though.

“Just imagine it. If you screw up you’ll have a repeat of your mistake in Rubato. Or even worse, you’ll be dragged away and tossed in some dungeon awaiting a public execution like what happened in Grave.”

I shiver as I recall being chased through the streets of Rubato alone. “B-But as long as Leise says I’m trustworthy, I’m sure everyone else will give me a chance!”

Leise is an influential and important person in Verk. People should believe what she says. When she informs everyone how wonderful singing is, I’m sure—

Rag shrugs, his lips curling into a mocking smirk. “I wonder about that. The Augur is still a little girl. It’s doubtful how much trust people put in a little brat who hasn’t done anythin’ for them yet.”

“You shouldn’t say it like that! Leise is giving her all at such a young age for the people of this country!”

Boo soars off my hand to flee me. I didn’t realize I was squeezing him. I can’t

help feeling frustrated when Rag mocks everything Leise has worked for.

“No matter how hard they try, there’s only so much a kid can do. The same goes for you too. You need to hurry up and throw away your empty and childish beliefs and focus on saving yourself, not the world.”

“You keep saying brat this and kid that, but there are things only children can do! Didn’t you put your life on the line in the Great War when you were Leise’s age? How are you any different!”

I regret what I said the moment the words left my mouth. Rag’s disposition changed from the silence of a simmering volcano, to rage, and then to the utter silence of a glinting blade-like glare stabbing through me before he averts his gaze.

“...At any rate, I’m leaving this place tomorrow. As if I could stand lingering in this hellish heat any longer,” Rag spat, walking off for real this time.

Boo looks from me to Rag’s back, and hesitates a moment before flying after Rag. I’m left alone with a terrible sense of guilt. Why did I say that to him? I can’t get Rag’s piercing glare out of my mind. For a moment, he looked like a terribly hurt child. I remember how he self-derisively confided in me about his past last night.

How could I be so insensitive to use what he said against him when he finally opened up to me? I decided to wait on bringing up the Great Sorcerers’ War—that resolve didn’t last long.

Regret and anger at my own stupidity push me to the verge of tears. I can’t run after him to apologize after my remarks. Words can cut deeper than any knife.

Besides, what should I do now? How do I tell Leise and the others? Rag declared he’s leaving tomorrow morning. He’s likely fed up with me and what I’m doing. In order to free him from the curse he needs me to sing as the Silver Siren—that’s what he said at least.

But I get the feeling someone of his skill could find another method that doesn’t involve me. I know who Serene would join without asking—she won’t leave Rag as long as there’s a chance to see mini-Rag again. If I tell them I want to stay here tomorrow, I’ll end up alone in this country.

Even if I succeed in fulfilling Leise's wish, I won't be able to find Ernest on my own afterward. I want to apologize—but I can't take that step forward. I want to go back to the tent—but I don't know how to explain, so I can't turn back. I can't move from this spot.

"What should I do?" I stand under the veil of darkness having lost my direction, when the orchestra of bugs cease. The ground crunches under someone's feet. It's not the crunch of heavy footsteps like Rag, but someone of a lighter step.

"Laut?" I guess.

"Hey, Miss Kanon, is it true you're gonna leave?"

I'm at a loss for words when his sudden question jabs at just the thing I was hesitating over. Laut is acting different than usual, so I crouch, putting myself at eye level with him.

"Yeah, Rag's planning on it. I don't want to leave yet—not until I fulfill Leise's request. I made a promise with her, after all," I say forcing a smile.

Laut looks down. His hands are shaking. He's oddly fidgety and restless.

"You're a good boy, Laut. I know you want to grant your big sister's wish too." I draw the conclusion his flustered behavior is from me breaking my promise with his sister, but—

"Hey, Miss Kanon... Can I ask you a favor?" Laut looks up at me with a surprisingly mature expression.

"What is it?"

"I want you to save my friend," he whispers, so as not to let anyone aside from me hear. A stark seriousness colors his feature compared to his usual cheery disposition.

"What friend?"

"Come with me!"

"Huh—Ah!" He grabs my hand and drags me into the black forest.

***

“L-LAUT! Wait! W-Woah...!” It takes all my concentration not to trip over every root and plant my feet get tangled in as I’m dragged through the forest by Laut. Our sole lighting, the moonlight, is hidden behind the tall arbor of trees making it nearly impossible for me to see where we’re going.

Laut doesn’t hesitate as he rushes through the forest—like he can see exactly where he’s going. His eyes work much better in the dark than mine—a benefit of being raised in a forest, and not a city like me.

I try to catch my breath so I can call out to him again. “Laut! Hey, Laut! Where are we going?”

“To where my friend is!”

“A-And where is this friend of yours?”

“In the Village of Belebend!”

“That’s one of the villages the children who visited us today are from, right?”

“Yup, that’s right!”

“Then is that friend of yours one of the kids who came today?”

“Nope! He wasn’t there. That’s why he has to hear you sing before you leave!”

Well, at least I finally know why he’s pulling me through the forest.

I’m happy he feels this way, but I don’t think it’s wise for us to leave without telling anyone we’re going to a village. The others said there are soldiers from Renforcer on patrol. Plus, what will the villagers think when they see me—someone who is clearly an outsider? Rag’s comment repeats in my head—

“Just imagine it. If you screw up you’ll have a repeat of your mistake in Rubato.”

I honestly don’t think it’s such a good idea for the two of us to go alone. “Hey, Laut, we should go back! We need to tell Leise about our plans first and—”

“We can’t! This is a secret I kept from Sis!” Laut sounds apprehensive.

“A secret?”

“.....” Laut finally stops running. We stand between a clump of large roots holding up massive trees. A brook burbles in the distance. He slowly lets go of my

hand.

“What do you mean it’s a secret from her?” I press him for answers.

Leise and Laut are siblings who get along very well. It’s kinda hard for me to believe they keep important things from each other.

Laut hangs his head and reluctantly answers, “...The truth is, I’m not supposed to go to the villages. It’ll be bad if Sis gets discovered. But I secretly sneak into the closest village from time to time.”

“In order to see your friend?”

“Yup. I mean he’s the first friend I’ve ever made... But Klar—that’s his name—has been out of it lately. So I thought he’d cheer up for sure if he sang with you, Miss Kanon. So please come with me!” Laut pleads, looking straight into my eyes. His eyes may be a different color from his sister’s, but they share the same determination and hope.

“Okay, I’ll go.” His determination won me over.

“Really?” He asks in disbelief.

“But can we see your friend right away? You know that if I’m too late in going back to the tent everyone will get worried, and Leise might find out what we did.”

“Yeah, you don’t have to worry about that! Klar’s house is right on the outskirts of this forest!”

“I see. But how long will it take to get there from here?”

“It’s just a little farther! Follow me!” Laut runs off.

I frantically call him to a halt. “Wait a minute, Laut! Um, can I have you lead me there by the hand again? I can’t see too well in the dark.” I hold my hand out to him with a bitter smile. Laut laughs and grabs my hand.

Serene might worry if I take a long time to come back. I only told her I was going to talk with Rag for a bit. Since it’s Serene, she might come to the conclusion something is going on between Rag and me again. Either way, it’s only a matter of time before someone realizes we’re not together. But I’m not willing to shake off Laut’s hand now.

Rag is serious about leaving Verk tomorrow. I want to do what I can for the people of the country Leise so dearly loves before I leave.

***

THIRTY minutes pass in a twist of hopping over roots, dodging branches, and my tumbling behind Laut on our way to Belebend. Eventually, I spot the specks of light scattered in the distance. Laut wanted to progress through the forest at a faster speed, but any faster and I'm liable to break a limb, if I don't break my neck first.

"C'mon, Miss Kanon! We're almost there! Keep it up a little longer!"

I let out a pathetic moan as he increases our speed again, causing branches to smack me in the face for what feels like the hundredth time.

Laut suddenly slows when we near a light—this won't end well if we get spotted. We have to proceed carefully from here. I catch my breath and prepare for what's to come.

"That's Klar's house over there." Laut points to a hut-shaped shadow similar to his own home.

This hut is significantly smaller and dilapidated compared to Laut's—or at least its shadow is. I would have never thought someone lived there if not for the sliver of light spilling outside.

"I'll check it out first. Wait here until I come back!"

"Ah, okay...make it quick!" I whisper, feeling nervous.

Laut waves back before running off.

I sit there alone and wait for him to return.

I take the time to rest. The last time I ran this long was for a marathon in Physical Education class. I wipe the never-ending flow of sweat from my forehead and reminisce about PE class in middle school. I was never much of an athlete in the first place, but I've been made painfully aware of my lack of stamina since coming to Reveur. On the upside, I'm starting to put on muscle—not that I'm overjoyed over that fact.

I stare in the direction Laut vanished after I catch my breath. I don't see him.

Maybe he went inside the hut. I wonder what kind of person his friend Klar is. From the way Laut spoke about Klar, I assume his friend is a child.

I'm concerned about why he didn't partake in today's singing lesson. Seeing as they meet in secret, Klar's family likely doesn't know they are friends either. Is it possible for us to meet with Klar at this time of night without the rest of his family finding out? Pondering it alone only creates more questions without answers.

Maybe this was a bad idea after all. Thinking about things calmly without Laut tugging on me, brings the realization Wild would be the first to notice Laut's absence. He might have already noticed he's gone. There's no caring parent who wouldn't panic over their child missing at this time of night. It won't take long for the others to realize my absence as well.

Meeting Klar, singing for him, and then heading back to the tent will all take longer than thirty minutes—it took more than thirty minutes getting here. How will I explain to the others? I stand and start to pace.

"When is Laut coming back?"

"Miss Kanon!"

"Eek!" I leap backward when Laut suddenly comes out of the shadows behind me.

"H-How did it—"

"It's bad! Come with me, Miss Kanon!" Laut shouts, cutting off my question. I'm startled by the urgency in his voice.

Did something happen? Laut yanks on my hand as he runs without hesitation to the hut.

He lifts the tattered cloth used in place of a door and I follow him inside. The ground inside is bare earth, with no flooring. Pots and plates are strewn across the ground. One small boy lies on the ground in a corner at the back of the hut.

I cover my mouth when his body is illuminated by the unreliable flickering candle beside him. His cheeks are hollowed from a lack of nutrition and his arms and legs are almost as thin as twigs. My only relief comes from the slight

movement of his chest as he breathes. This boy is clearly starving to death. Is this sickly child really Laut’s friend, Klar?

Chapter 22 Deadly Encounter

“KLAR! Hey, Klar! Wake up!” Laut calls Klar repeatedly from where he’s kneeling beside him. Klar shows no sign of opening his eyes.

“He won’t open his eyes no matter how much I call him. What should I do? Is Klar going to die, Miss Kanon?” Laut looks at me on the verge of tears—I haven’t moved an inch since I entered the hut behind him.

I have to be the adult here and handle this calmly. I crouch beside Laut. “When was the last time you talked to him?”

“Um, uh, the last time we met was...a little while before we took off on Bianca for Rubato...so about a week ago? He wasn’t feeling good then, either. But he didn’t ignore me like this.”

“I see... And where are Klar’s father and mother?”

“He said his Ma died during the war, and his Pa was dragged off somewhere by soldiers...”

Leise told me Verklärt’s people were sold into slavery by Renforcer after the war. Has Klar been living alone since the war ended five years ago? My fists clench—how could they leave a child completely alone?

“...Do you know whether anyone has been looking after Klar? Perhaps a relative or a friend of the family?”

“I don’t know. Klar was alone every time I dropped by.”

“I see... What about someone who cares for the ill? Is there a medicine man in this village?”

“I—” An unnatural noise outside cuts Laut off.

We freeze in place. I signal Laut with my eyes to keep quiet. Footsteps slowly approach the hut from outside. I don’t know why it never hit me until now, but the candle placed beside Klar is fresh and barely melted. I doubt Klar could have lit a candle in his current state—meaning someone is caring for him.

What should we do? There’s nowhere for us to hide and we can’t run away at this point. I rack my panicked brain for some way out of this mess.

Laut grips my arm tightly—his fear is conveyed through his clammy hands. A hand grabs the cloth covering the entrance to the hut. I protectively step in front of Laut; I need to keep him hidden.

I’ll protect Laut and Klar with the power of the Silver Siren if things get bad!

“Eh?” a perplexed voice echoes through the empty hut. I utter the same dumbfounded sound when I see who it is.

“Br...eit?”

“Lady Kanon? Why are you—” Indeed, the person who entered the hut is the same boy with braided hair I parted with not long ago. A vessel filled with water hangs from his hand as he looks at me bewildered.

“Breit!”

“M-Master Laut!” Panic instantly clouds Breit’s face when Laut bursts out from behind me. “Wh-Why are you in a place like this, Master Laut!”

“What’s wrong with Klar? You can heal him, right? Right!”

“W-Wait just a moment! What is the meaning of this? Why are you here? How do you know Klar?”

“He’s my friend! Hey, Breit, you can save him, can’t you?”

“Your friend?”

Their conversation isn’t going anywhere like this. Laut’s desperate plea only serves to confuse Breit as Laut clings to his clothes.

“Laut said he visits Klar when he can.” I’m reluctant to reveal their secret, but it’s too late for that now. “Laut was worried when Klar wasn’t with the rest of

the children you gathered today, so he asked me to come here...”

Breit listens attentively to my explanation, a mixture of emotions coloring his face.

“Is that so?” is all Breit says.

“Hey, Breit, what’s wrong with Klar? He’s not gonna die, right?” Laut asks, slightly calmer than before.

Breit doesn’t respond; the flicker of the candle shadows the pain he must be going through to find the best way to answer him.

“Breit?”

“...He no longer has the will to live.”

“What?”

Breit glances at Klar as he continues with a hint of sorrow in his tone, “He has not eaten once over the past five days. He barely drinks. At this rate it is difficult to say whether he will last another day...”

Laut weakly releases Breit’s clothes and lets his hands fall limp at his side. His stare is devoid of his usual joy. “That can’t be true...I mean when I saw him a week ago he was still okay.”

“He received a message about ten days ago saying his father had died.”

Laut’s expression stiffens.

“He’s lost the will to live ever since he found out his entire family is dead. Just staying alive is a constant battle for him now.”

Laut clenches his tiny fists until his knuckles are white. I was aghast when I saw Klar, but Laut is likely overwhelmed by a far greater pain seeing his friend wasting away.

“...Please return to Lady Leise, Master Laut. I will take care of Klar for you.”

“I can’t take it,” Laut says quietly.

“Eh?” Breit and my voice overlap.

“I can’t take this anymore!” Laut yells, anger, and sorrow contort his boyish

face. He dashes pass Breit and outside before we think to stop him.

“Laut!”

“Master Laut!”

We chase Laut outside the hut. I’m somehow able to make out his back as he runs through the dark—he’s not heading for the forest.

“He can’t be—” Panic fills Breit’s voice as he runs after him. I follow directly behind Breit.

“Master Laut, you mustn’t! Please come back here!” Breit yells.

Laut shows no sign of slowing.

“Where is he heading?” I question Breit whose panic at the direction Laut is running grows by the second.

“Likely to where the soldiers from Renforcer are staying!”

“D-Does Laut even know where that is?”

Laut has been living in hiding with Leise since the war ended. How could he know where the soldiers are stationed?

“I assume he asked Klar. They are stationed where the children often used to play.”

“I can’t take this anymore,” Laut muttered, mortified. He was probably referring to Verk’s current condition. But going there will only result in him getting hurt. Unlike the other children, Laut is healthy and is wearing nice clothing. There’s no way the soldiers won’t find his appearance suspicious!

***

Wooden huts, similar in design to Klar’s, line both sides of the path—it appears we’ve run into the center of the village.

Th-The two of them are way too fast!

I’m gasping for air and unsteady on my feet after trying to keep up with their speed without stopping. A gap gradually opens between Breit and me. On the bright side, it looks like he’s closing in on Laut.

“Uwa!” I stumble over a rock; the momentum is enough to send me flying to the ground before I’m able to put my hands out to break my fall or protect my face. Dirt and rocks scrape my arms and cheeks. “Ooooow!”

Tears fill my eyes, but I’m somehow able to stand, despite the haze of pain. The lighter clothing I had changed into to withstand the humid weather leaves my legs and arms bare—the lack of cloth is great for the temperature, but not so good for protection.

The fall leaves me covered in scratches. My face stings the worst of all. Now’s not the time to concern myself with little cuts, though. I lift my face from the dirt to see it’s already too late—Breit and Laut have vanished into the night and out of my limited view.

Ugh, why does this always happen to me? My shoulders slump.

Suddenly, it hits me that I’m alone in the middle of an unfamiliar village. I dust the dirt off my clothes and debate whether it’s a bad idea to blindly chase them. The last I saw, Breit had pretty much closed the distance with Laut. I’m sure Breit will catch Laut and persuade him to come back.

But waiting for them alone isn’t smart. I’m inviting trouble just by standing in the center of a village where my appearance screams outsider. Light is seeping out of all the huts surrounding me.

The smartest thing to do is return to Klar’s hut. Luckily, I remember the huts I passed on the way here, so I can find my way back. I turn—

“Ooh, what’s this? Why’s there a young girly here?”

My heart lurches in my chest when a burly man—not quite the size of Wild—appears from the shadows and speaks in a slur. At first I thought he was a villager, but I was wrong. The worst-case scenario has occurred.

“I t‘ink we d’ank too much…” A second man hiccups, “No way a fine girly ‘ike t’is would be in a cesspool ‘ike Verrkkk.”

My entire body tenses. A ratty, buck-toothed short man steps out from behind the first. I could tell they weren’t from this country the moment their faces were lit by the candlelight leaking from a nearby house. They most likely thought the same thing the instant they spotted me. They both scrutinize my body from head

to toe.

“Whaddya know, I guess we are seein’ things already. I didn’t drink that much though...hiccup!” A bottle of alcohol dangles from a strap around his hand. The big guy stumbles as he walks; a strong scent of alcohol permeates the air.

I might be able to run from drunks! I immediately sprint toward the forest. A dark forest should be full of places to hide! Plus, he thinks I’m just a drunken delusion.

“OH! The ‘ittle fairy girly is runnin’ away… Bah, I’m going back for more alcohol!” the buck-toothed man says behind me.

I force my exhausted legs to run with everything they have. These men are undoubtedly soldiers stationed here from Renforcer. I have no idea why they’re wandering around drunk at this hour, but the one thing I do know is I can’t let anyone catch me!

It’s obvious I’ll be interrogated about why I’m in this country and how I got here. Worse, they may have already heard news about the *Silver Siren*. I push back my fears of what could happen, and concentrate on running. However, the footsteps closing in on me from behind are much faster than I expected.

Renforcer is keeping Verk subjugated with a small number of troops—the people they have dispatched here must be at least average military caliber to keep the peace. *I’m screwed!* Just as that thought runs through my mind, he grabs my wrist and yanks me back.

“Gaaah!” I scream and lose my balance. The man pushes himself on me, pinning me to the root-covered forest floor.

“Hehehe, I don’t care whether you’re a delusion or a ghost at this point!”

I shiver under his lustful gaze and the scent of alcohol wafting off his breath. I try to escape, but he twists my arms above my head and pins them there. His fingers dig deep into my flesh. I yelp from the pain. The man uses his free hand to undo my clothes. He pants, eager.

I know what he’s about to do, but I’m too afraid to scream for help. Not as if anyone will hear me anyway. I made it really far from the village—meaning no one is around to save me. Even though I have power in this world, my mind is

completely blank of anything I could sing! His loathsome touch locks down my mind.

Tears spill from my eyes in despair and self-hatred. I squeeze them shut and pray—

*****Deadly Encounter - Rag's Side Start*****

I'M ticked off. Ticked off at her, at that scumbag, at those kids, and that woman. And most of all, I absolutely despise this heat!

I return to the *People of Darkness* boy's hut, and immediately plop down on the bed prepared for me—a blanket laid out on the hard, bare ground. I want to fall asleep quickly, before I think about unnecessary stuff. But it's only at times like this I can't seem to fall asleep. The annoyingly loud bugs outside, and the sultry heat intensify my ire.

Damn it all! I curse over and over again, rolling over. Boo, who's flying in circles over my head, suddenly lands beside my pillow—a blanket rolled into a ball—and peers at my face with worry. His gesture helps calm my rage. I rub his nose with my finger. He snorts happily in response.

"Do you know where Laut is?" the Dad asks out of the blue.

Eyes the color of darkness are staring down at me.

"Huh? I wouldn't know."

"I see…" the old man says, leaving the room.

Now that I think about it, the kid—whose name I don't remember—isn't around. Not like that matters to me. I mean, once morning comes, it's farewell to this accursed country of heat.

I pet Boo's nose one more time and finally almost fall asleep, when stomping stirs me awake.

"Oi, Grumpy, wake up!"

The rage that finally settled, boils back up at the angry shout. I don't have to open my eyes to know who'd speak that way to me. Well, not like many women would visit me here, anyway. I open my mouth to tell her to go away, but she cuts me off.

“Kanon and Laut are missing.”

“What!” I leap out of bed and make eye contact with Serene. I’ve never seen her look this edgy before.

“What do you mean?”

“That’s what I want to know. Kanon said she was going to talk you. Did you meet up?”

“I did, but…”

I’ve got a real bad feeling about this. Our conversation earlier, and her thoughtless actions until now, race through my mind. Serene lifts an eyebrow at me—what I’m thinking must’ve shown on my face.

“You know something, don’t you!”

I stand without answering her, and go outside, shoving her outta the way in the process. Cloying heat, no different from the temperature inside the hut, clings to my skin. I dash toward the tent, ignoring the yells behind me. Boo lands on my head as I run.

“Do you know where that brat would go?”

“You won’t answer me, but want me to answer you? …There’s little doubt they went into the forest, but the others don’t know where they’re headed. Most likely to some village.”

I knew it. Anger, regret, and guilt overflow inside me as I curse.

I immediately spot the Augur and the kids’ old man. They’re arguing about something, but turn their attention our way when they notice us.

“Miss Serene.”

“This guy didn’t know anything either. He has a hunch, though.”

“A hunch…”

Red eyes stare up at me, before immediately glancing away. I guess she doesn’t plan on asking about it. She turns her attention back to Serene.

“I was just speaking with Father about it. I believe they went to a village, after all. But we do not know what for, or which village…” She glances at me with

those red eyes—no, she's looking above my head.

"Do you know where?"

Boo flies from my head to answer her. He sniffs the air.

"Do you know where they went?"

"Boo! Boo! Boo!"

It's almost like they're chatting—no, they probably are talking. I remember how skilled Boo is finding things with his nose, and cut off whatever they're wasting time conversing about.

"Boo, lead me to Kanon."

"Boo!" Boo happily answers me and flies toward the forest. I sprint into the forest after him, his white body acts as my beacon of light in the night. I get the feeling Serene is yelling behind me, but that's her problem.

***

HOW far have I run now? I spot the sparse light of a village in the distance. I wipe the sweat dripping down my chin, and run faster. A woman screams. It was a quiet scream I barely made out through the irritating chorus of bugs, but I know that voice. Just as Boo disappears, I exit the main part of the forest and immediately spot some strange guy, and *her pinned beneath him.*

I snapped.

***** Deadly Encounter - Rag's Side End*****

"GAH!" the man yelps in pain, tumbling off me into the dirt.

I cautiously open my eyes. A white fur ball is latched onto the man's forehead.

"Boo?"

Boo flies away as the large body propels backward from the impact. The man soars through the air before crashing on his back—he convulses, face up. I remember the same thing happening to the soldiers Boo attacked at Grave Castle. A tall shadow looms over the twitching soldier.

"How dare this sleazebag!" angrily shouts a familiar voice as the shadow brutally kicks the soldier.

“Guaaah!”

“...Ra...g?” I quietly call out to the shadow.

I fix my disheveled clothing with quivering fingers and stand on wobbling legs. Perhaps my voice was too quiet, because Rag is mercilessly kicking the man without answering me. The groans coming from the soldier sound more guttural with each kick. I panic thinking he’s going to kick the man to death. I drag my still trembling legs to Rag and grab the hem of his shirt.

“Rag!”

His back shudders. A second passes before he stops kicking the man.

Spittle spills from the man’s mouth and his eyes roll into his head, but he’s still alive—not dead. I sigh in relief that I’m not responsible for his death, and fall on my butt releasing my hand from Rag’s clothes. My legs are at their limit. I’m relieved Rag and Boo came to my rescue again. Rag clicks his tongue and turns toward me. I prepare myself for him to reprimand me for my foolish actions—

“You’re not hurt, right?”

“Uh?” It takes me a moment to process his kindness and worry. He must have run to my rescue, because he’s panting and is drenched in sweat. His usual hard glare is replaced by the gentleness he only shows while using Sorcery. He wipes the sweat off his forehead and offers me his hand.

“Can you stand?”

His outstretched hand loosened the dam holding back my tears. “Uuu...aaah!” I cry from the bone-chilling fear and from disgust at almost being violated by a man in the middle of a dark forest after running for my life.

“Ah! Not again!”

“I was so scared!” I roughly rub my eyes to stop the onslaught of tears. Rag, without fail, will panic when I cry. So I try my best not to cry in front of him. But his kindness shattered my resolve.

“Boo?” Boo worriedly peers at my pathetic tear-stained face as I sob.

Rag heaves a sigh at my breakdown. “Man, if you’re gonna end up cryin’ you shouldn’t have taken off on your own! I keep telling you to stop getting yourself

in these situations!”

He ended up yelling at me after all.

“That’s because you—plus, Laut...and then Breit... The two of them are really fast!”

“Huh?”

I realize I’m speaking incoherently, but I have no idea where to start. There’s so much I need to say. I know this isn’t the time to cry. I suck it up, wipe away my tears, and look up at Rag.

“I’m sorry. I’ll be okay! Um, where’s Serene? Oh yeah, were Leise and Wild worried too?” I sniffle.

“I don’t know about the other two, but Serene should be headed here... We had better hurry back. Things are gonna get nasty when this guy wakes up. C’mon, get on your feet.”

Rag glances at the collapsed soldier before carefully helping me stand with one hand holding mine, and his other arm around my back to make sure I don’t fall. The warmth of his arm on my back soothes the chill of fear. His touch is almost enough to overwrite the lingering dirty feeling of that man’s hands on me. Rag helps me to my unsteady feet and doesn’t let go of me right away as I assumed. I stare down at the man from the safety of Rag’s arms.

“This guy isn’t from this country, is he?”

“Yeah, from the looks of him he’s gotta be from Renforcer.” Rag says, staring at the man with revulsion.

I thought he was from Renforcer—he’s likely the person Laut went to meet.

“I wonder whether we did the wrong thing...”

“Huh?”

“I mean he saw my face? And he got beat up... Isn’t he going to take out his wrath on the people of Verk?” I realize the gravity of the issue as I say it.

“Worst-case scenario, they will slaughter everyone.”

I recall what Serene said about us taking action—my body trembles for

another reason now. What he tried to do to me was bad enough—knowing that might lead to him killing other people is more than I can bear.

"...So what, then? Would you have rather I let him rape you?"

"N-No! I didn't mean it like that—Ah, that's right! Thank you for saving me!" I hug Rag as I thank him. His frown deepens, but he doesn't shove me away.

"You really are—"

"What?"

He sighs again. I have no idea why.

"What're you gonna do about being so different from the legends?"

"Huh?" I don't get what he means.

His large hand touches my cheek. His finger gently trails my chin.

"W-Wh-What is it?" I rush out flabbergasted.

"I'll heal you," he grumbles. Which reminds me, my face got scratched up when I tripped earlier—and he can instantly heal such injuries. I'm embarrassed I tensed expectantly when he touched me.

"Hold on, Rag! You don't have to heal me!" I say, a sudden realization dawning on me.

"Why not?" His brow knits together with chagrin at my refusal.

I grab his arm and say, "There's someone else I want you to heal instead! Come with me!"

"Wh-What're you talking about?"

"Just come with me!"

Rag's Sorcery might be able to help Klar! That hope alone is enough to help me push through the emotional turmoil of almost being raped.

Chapter 23 A Chorus in the Night

I run with what energy I have left, pulling Rag by the hand behind me. Contrary to my desire of getting to Klar's hut fast, I barely move at a turtle's pace. Relating the state of my legs to the weight of a rooted stump has been a common occurrence for me since coming to Reveur, but a tree would likely move faster. My lack of strength is disconcerting; all my effort to improve my stamina feels wasted.

I nearly stumble when Rag suddenly stops behind me. I let go of his hand and turn to face him.

"Haah...haah...Rag?" I wheeze his name.

"Do you really think what you're doin' right now counts as running?" he questions in exasperation.

Annoyed, I try to scold him by saying 'I'm trying my best', but Rag swiftly walks around me and crouches, presenting me his back before I can catch my breath enough to say anything.

"What?"

"Crops will grow before you get anywhere, this is faster... Hurry and get on," he remarks curtly.

"...Are you offering to carry me?"

"Don't ask foolish questions! Get on! Aren't you in a rush?"

"I-I am!" I wrap my arms around Rag's neck after a moment of hesitation.

Rag has a broad back. This is my first time receiving a piggyback ride from a man who's not a relative or my dad. I know this isn't the time for wayward thoughts, but my heart accelerates for a reason unrelated to exercise. I hastily adjust my expression to hide my flushing cheeks. Boo stares knowingly at me from Rag's head; he almost looks smug, as if he understood my blush.



This is the second time Rag has carried me on his back. The first time he did it in his mini-Rag form. Despite all the yelling and condescending words, he really is a kind and reliable man. I'm happy what I thought about him all along was true. I just know a silly smile is pulling at the corners of my lips—so much for controlling my emotions. Boo's twitching nose only proves I failed to hide it.

Rag puts his hands under my legs and heads off.

"So, is this the right direction?"

"Yup! Keep going straight this way and you'll find it!"

Rag increases his pace before breaking into a run. He's even faster on his feet than I thought. So fast in fact, it's hard to believe he's carrying me. It's not long before Klar's hut comes into view.

"That's the hut there!" I point to the house and Rag gives a small nod before slowing.

I saw Rag use his Sorcery to heal when I first arrived in Reveur. He instantly healed my injured feet. Surely we can save Klar with Rag's Sorcery!

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"I'M putting you down."

"Thanks!"

Rag lowers me in front of Klar's hut. I hurry inside the moment my feet touch ground. The candle is nearly melted now. The unreliable flicker of a flame reveals Klar quietly lying in the same spot. The faint movement of his chest reassures me he's still alive. Rag followed me into the hut.

"This boy—his name is Klar—hasn't eaten for days it seems. Can you help him with your Sorcery?" I gaze pleadingly at Rag until I notice something is off about him.

At first I thought he was staring at Klar, but his eyes are unfocused, and his hands are trembling.

"Rag?"

“!!” He leaps back when I say his name. He looks at me with trepidation. His complexion is bad—and I don’t think it’s from carrying me all the way here.

“Are you okay? You seem kinda—”

“Y-Yeah…” He rushes, “...I’m fine.”

“But—” He doesn’t seem fine. Boo peers worriedly at his face from above. Rag shakes his head and repeats his previous statement.

“...So, you’re askin’ me to save this brat?”

“Huh? Ah, that’s right!”

I’m worried about Rag too, but we should focus on Klar first. His breathing is shallow enough I fear he might stop breathing at any time. Rag slowly approaches the boy and kneels beside his pillow.

He examines his body from top to bottom before answering, “It’s impossible.”

“What?” I gasp at Rag’s certain declaration.

“The healing done with Sorcery only speeds up and strengthens the body’s natural healing process. The kid doesn’t have any physical wounds to heal. Either he has chosen to die, or doesn’t have the will to survive in this harsh world.”

Breit never said he was injured—just that he lost the will to live. Rag’s Sorcery only affects the body, so it can’t cure Klar’s suicidal mental state.

“Klar’s dad recently passed away...I heard he’s been out of it ever since he found out,” I answer softly in confirmation of Rag’s prior statement.

Bowing his head slightly, Rag moves away. “In which case, even I can’t do anything for him. Basically, his survival comes down to his will to live.”

“I know, but...at this rate he will...”

I gaze at the unconscious Klar with the hopelessness of an onlooker unable to change an afflicted patient. Someone suddenly smacks me on the head. Startled, I’m met with the most exasperated expression I’ve seen yet.

“Isn’t this where you take over? Miss *Silver Siren*.”

“Huh?”

“Aren’t you the one who said music cheers people up or whatever? You’re the Silver Siren, aren’t you? A legendary being of unfathomable power? Are you gonna let a little boy’s mental state be the limit of your ability? His mind is what needs healing, not his body.”

“Oh yeah!” I exclaim loudly. “I’m not sure what the Silver Siren can do, but I have to try. I can’t always let others solve my problems for me.”

Laut brought me here for this purpose from the start. I remember the beaming smiles and grins on all the children’s faces as they returned home after singing. Not only were they in high spirits, but they appeared healthier too.

I still don’t understand the mysterious powers of the *Silver Siren*. These powers have caused a lot of difficulties for me since coming to Reveur, but it may hold an unlimited number of possibilities.

The thought suddenly puts the legendary *Silver Siren* in a new light for me. Could this be why people speak of the rarely seen *Silver Sirens* with such fear? I don’t know whether I’ll reach Klar’s closed-off heart, but I want to sing for him! I want to share the joy of living with someone who has given up on this world.

What song should I sing? What song would delight a child when they heard it? Something that will reignite their will to live...

My thought process is halted when Rag says, “Hang on a minute. Someone’s coming.”

I turn to the door in a panic. Footsteps approach the hut. Who could it be? Rag steps in front of me. His hand resting on his dagger, so he can draw it at a moment’s notice. Boo leaps from Rag’s head and cautiously stares at the door. I was terrified earlier, when it was just me and Laut, but I feel completely safe with Boo and Rag here.

“Is Kanon here?” someone whispers outside.

“I do not know, but I cannot think of any other place she would be...”

Rag relaxes after hearing the voices. I quickly go to the entrance of the hut.

“Serene! Breit!” The two startle when I stick my head out. They immediately smile with relief.

“Laut!”

Laut stands beside Breit with his shoulders slumped dejectedly. Breit likely persuaded him to come back after his mad dash to find the soliders. They smell of pungent sweat.

“I am terribly sorry! I was so focused on chasing Master Laut that—Oh! Sir Rag was with you.” Breit’s expression hardened the moment he spotted Rag after coming inside.

Rag doesn’t respond—he just looks down at Breit. These two don’t trust each other—or more like Breit doesn’t trust Rag. I can tell just by looking at his reaction; there’s no way Rag hasn’t noticed. I purposely step between them and bend down in front of Laut.

“Thank goodness you are okay. I was worried after you ran off.”

Laut glances at my face and mutters a soft, “I’m sorry.”

I slowly shake my head and try to be considerate of how depressed he is. “Don’t be. I understand how you feel, Laut. Everyone does...I’m really glad you’re safe!”

“You’re one to talk,” Rag grumbled from behind me.

“Kanon, your face is injured,” Serene says, angered.

“Oh yeah, I fell earlier. But it’s no big deal!”

“But it will be if it leaves a scar. We have to hurry and tend to it...Aaah, your adorable face is a mess.” She rubs at the dirt on my cheeks.

“Th-Thanks! I’ll take care of it when we get back to Leise’s—Ah! Were Leise and Wild worried?”

“Huh? Yeah...”

According to Serene, Wild was the first to notice Laut and I were missing. Leise panicked the moment she found out and immediately tried to set off in search of us. An understandable reaction—someone who cares as much about their family as she does wouldn’t be able to sit around and do nothing if their little brother disappeared.

Serene and Wild were somehow able to talk some sense into her. Only Serene came looking for us, because Wild needed to stay back with Leise.

From Laut's depressed state, I take it Serene told him already. Imagining Leise losing it because of us makes me regret not considering my actions and how they might affect the people around me. This isn't my world, and I don't understand the practices or logic here, but I should strive to always think before I act—which is easier said than done.

"How did you know I was here?"

"Thanks to Boo's nose. That young lady asked him if he knew."

"Boo!" Boo twirls in the air proudly, like he knew he was complimented. Boo is too smart for his own good. Serene narrows her eyes at Rag.

"Well, thanks to a certain grumpy man dashing off at full speed when he heard where you were, I lost my guide and ended up wandering blindly through the forest, which is why I arrived late."

"He did?"

"Shut up! Oi, Kanon! Weren't you gonna sing!" Rag yells. "You know the whole heal the sickly child who has given up on living plan?"

"Right! I was about to sing. I need to do my best; especially if there's a slight chance my actions will give Klar hope."

Serene's expression stiffens and a serious air surrounds her when I glance at Klar. I tell the others about my plan to heal him through song.

Laut jolts his head up expectantly. "I want to sing with you!"

"I guess that could work. Yeah, with you I'm certain we can make Klar fight to survive," I say to Laut who regained his usual smile.

"Sing with us too, Breit!"

"What! M-Me too? Um..." Breit glances at me troubled.

I answer him with a grin. "Sure, sing with us, Breit! You remember the song from this afternoon, right? Do it for Klar!"

"...V-Very well. I will give it my all!" Breit says clenching his fists.

Asking Rag and Serene is an excessively big hurdle I doubt I can get over, so I don't say anything. They don't try to stop us, either. Their steadfast attention is heartening enough for me.

Laut, Breit, and I sing the song we composed with the children this afternoon. I get the feeling my hair is glowing a brighter silver than usual. The single candle's flame grows stronger, becoming an impossible bonfire from a tiny wick. Serene and Rag are startled by the change.

Klar, please feel better. See, your friend Laut and Breit are singing for you. You have to get better! So you can sing with us!

I sing, while pleading with him in my heart. Klar's eyebrow twitches. Everyone must have spotted the small movement, because Breit, and especially Laut, sing louder. Klar still won't wake up after our first round of singing together. The flame returns to a pitiful flicker—even I'm surprised by the random influence my powers have on the world.

"Klar almost opened his eyes, right? You saw it, right!" Laut bounces excitedly.

"Yes, I certainly did! Let's try it again!" Breit adds, his tone holding the same excitement.

We start singing again. I concentrate on singing and ignore everything else around me. I don't notice the sharp look on Rag and Serene's faces as they detect something, or that Laut and Breit stopped singing for some reason. Using the lessons I learned from Rag about Sorcery, I focus my Silver Siren powers—seeking to save a single lost child.

Klar, please open your eyes. There are people who will be sad to lose you. Please don't give up. Live and—

"Sing with everyone!" Laut says.

I finally realize it's not just Laut, Breit, and me singing. The children from earlier this afternoon are singing for Klar from the entrance of the hut.

The children respond to my shocked expression with beaming smiles. Everyone must have come when they heard us singing! A lump from the joy and embarrassment forms in my throat and causes my voice to quiver.

The shadows of night are stripped away as nearby candles become beacons of impossible flame reaching into the air. The cracked ground begins to sprout tiny flowers, and the children start to glow. A soft silver aura, not dissimilar from my own hair, surrounds them. Our hopes turn to singing for Klar's hardened heart and lost will to live.

May our wish reach him!

Once the song ends, I take a deep breath and pray for Klar, watching as the silver aura around him and the other children fades away.

A loud bang comes from behind us. Startled, I turn to see a young woman on the ground as if her legs gave out; terror clouds her visage. Could she see the eerie aura surrounding us and my silver hair as I sang?

"Th-The *S-Silver Siren*!" the woman chokes in a trembling voice as she stares at me like a deer caught in the headlights. Like the children, she is covered in tattered cloth and is dreadfully thin.

Now that I see a comparison, I notice how much thinner the woman is compared to the children. She seems to notice too. Her panicked gaze shifts from the children to me, locking onto my hair. It's not just her either—several women in similar attire stand behind her. They stare at me with horror.

This is bad! I raise my hand in a poor attempt to hide my silver hair. It's too late, though. They had enough time to witness me using my power. Unlike the children, the adults have yet to learn why I'm here. Breit must have realized too—his face pales pitifully.

This was bound to happen—the children's presence means my singing was loud enough to echo outside and attract attention. I may have been in a daze while singing, but how could I be so stupid not to realize this would be the outcome!

"Mama?" a confused girl speaks to the collapsed woman. The woman recovers on the spot and quickly grabs the girl's arm; she tries to drag her child away as if to flee from a monster attack.

"What in blue blazes are you doing, child! We must flee!" the woman shouts hysterically.

The girl tilts her head and asks her mother in an adorable voice, “Why? We were only singing a song? Singing for Klar to feel better.” The girl sounds incredibly happy, as if she did a good thing, not something her mother should scold her for.

The mother is stricken with fear. “You willingly took part? How could you do such a—”

“I will explain! Th-This is Lady Kanon, and Lady Leise brought her here to—” Breit tries to explain, but Laut cuts him off.

“Klar!” Laut shouts behind us.

Everyone’s attention locks on Laut then at the boy lying beside him.

Klar’s staring at the ceiling in a daze, but his eyes are open, and glow silver, just like my hair! A horrified gasp erupts from the crowd of onlookers.

“Klar! Do you know who I am? It’s Laut!” Laut frantically calls out to Klar, ignoring the unnatural silver glow coming from his normally black eyes.

Klar’s eyes drift from the ceiling to him, the silver fading from them.

“La...ut?” he squeezes out between dry cracked lips.

Laut leans forward. “Yup! It’s Laut! Thank goodness! Really, I’m so glad!” he bawls.

The children cheer behind us.

“...Ma...is—” Klar says as he gazes emptily at the ceiling again. He speaks so quietly I have to strain my ears to hear him. “...I heard Mama and Papa’s voice...I heard everyone’s voice...so I thought I had to wake up...”

A single tear trails his cheek. Laut sniffles and angrily says, “Yeah, that’s right! We were all calling for you!”

My vision blurs with tears. He woke up for us. Our feelings reached him. Laut and the rest of the children are overjoyed. But I don’t have time to be moved by this scene!

“Hurry, let’s flee while we still have a chance!”

“Run before the Silver Siren’s aura consumes us as well!”

“Get the children out of her reach!”

“Come this way!”

The women are trying to gather the children and run away from the hut with them. Some of the women frantically dash into the room, pick up their child, and flee without a word. The children are trying to figure out why their mothers are in such a panic.

I’m unable to say anything. I feel like I’m watching something that has nothing to do with me as the frightened mothers desperately struggle to rescue their children from *me*. Breit tries to reason with them, but not a single person will listen.

Not a single child is left by the time my hair returns to brown. The hut previously filled with the cheerful chorus of children, is suddenly quiet. Laut’s occasional sniffles of joy at his friend’s recovery are the only sound.

“Kanon...” Serene walks over, “Are you okay?”

Boo lands on my shoulder and peers at my face worriedly.

“Yup, I’m okay! But what I did turned in to a big mess.” Leise said she wanted to gradually tell the villagers about me. No doubt to avoid the confusion that just happened. Yet, my headlong rush before thinking blew it.

Breit returns from trying to convince the women outside. “They left... I am terribly sorry! I told the children to keep it a secret from their parents, but...”

“It’s okay. It was inevitable in this situation. They seemed to enjoy themselves. I was happy we had the opportunity to sing together.” I’m speaking honestly, but my smile feels forced. “...I ended up frightening the villagers as a result.”

Serene pats me on the head, “But it’s thanks to you the boy regained consciousness.”

“Yeah...”

“I should’ve taken action the moment I noticed, but I couldn’t do anything.”

“You make people incapable of moving or doing anything when they hear you sing,” Rag speaks for the first time. “It’s probably the power of your Song... To them, losing the ability to move was frightening enough evidence that you’re

someone scary. Oh and let's not forget the creepy silver glow. They may have thought you infected their children, forcing them to sing with you."

Serene told me before about her inability to move while I sang. The silver glow aspect is new, though.

"The power of Song, huh? Song is a pretty incredibly power," Serene mutters with a thoughtful expression.

"But I was able to move. As were the children who sang with Lady Kanon. So I wonder whether that is really all there is—ah!" Breit runs to Klar as if he just remembered him. "Are you all right? How do you feel? Can you drink some water?"

"Oh yeah, you must be thirsty. Drink some water. You haven't had anything to eat in a while, right?" Laut says, bringing a jug of water beside the pillow to Klar's lips.

I find satisfaction as I watch a small amount of water spills into Klar's cracked lips. I can't say he's fully recovered, but with a drive to live and the assistance of the Silver Siren's mysterious powers, he will most likely recover.

"All right, what do we do now? They might come at us with weapons, you know?" Rag says as if he knows what's coming next is going to be a pain.

"I-I do not think that will—"

"You can't say for sure," Rag interrupts Breit, who falls silent.

I recall how it wasn't only soldiers, but a vigilante group who tried to kill me in Rubato; a cruel reminder of how fear can turn even townspeople into killers. I swallow the bile in my throat.

"We better get outta this country before things get real messy," Rag makes his position clear.

"But..."

I clench my fists. I don't want to abandon the villagers; especially not when they're all under the false-assumption Songs are sinister. I finally got their children to learn how fun it is to sing, and I still need to sing for other villages.

"Aaah!" I suddenly shout. Everyone stares at me taken aback. I completely

forgot about the most important thing!

“What’s wrong?” Serene asks frowning.

“T-To tell you the truth, earlier...”

I tell the others about the men from Renforcer, and the one we left passed out in the forest. Breit is the first to react.

“Th-This is not good! I know at least one of those men and his name is Calda. He is always causing problems, not to mention he is an unrepentant hopeless piece of scum. Calda will undoubtedly search for Lady Kanon the moment he regains consciousness... Actually, he might already be up and searching for you! Please hurry back to Lady Lesie!”

“That’s a good idea. Let’s go, Kanon,” Serene says. I nod

Breit turns a serious expression on Laut. “Master Laut, please return to Lady Leise now. I will tend to Klar, so please leave him in my care and go back.”

“Okay, I understand... Klar, let’s play again sometime, okay? Get well soon!”

Klar smiles for the first time, giving a slight nod of his head. Laut seems to take that as proof he’ll be okay, because he gets up.

“What about you, Breit? Will you be okay staying behind?”

Breit smiles gallantly to reassure me. “Please do not worry about me. I will be all right. Besides, I plan to go around the village to persuade everyone tonight. For Lady Leise’s sake... Now then, please go. I will return to the forest to report in the morning.”

He’s acting so mature; I can’t believe he’s the same boy who turned red and stuttered about his feelings for Leise.

Thus, we departed Klar’s hut and headed back into the forest.

Chapter 24 Rampant Emotions

LAUT sets a fast pace through the pathless dark forest. My eyes must have finally adjusted to the night, because I follow him without someone guiding me by the hand. I have a sense of safety with Rag and Serene behind me. Plus, Boo's white body glows amid the shadowed trees, acting as a kind of beacon for me to follow.

My thoughts return to Breit who stayed behind to persuade the villagers about me. I'm worried over so many things at once, my mind is a whirlpool of rushing concerns and emotions. If only I could run as fast as my mind thinks.

"Ah, that's right! I forgot something important!" Laut glances over his shoulder at me as he runs. "Thanks, Miss Kanon!"

"For what?" It's difficult to talk and run at the same time.

"I'm glad I asked you to help Klar!" he replies with a broad smile. "I'm so happy you were here! Thank you!" He thanks me again as he happily navigates the tree-covered path.

His encouraging words have given me extra strength, or at least motivation. My apprehension hasn't gone away, but his gratitude is enough to spur my weary limbs forward. His innocent smile brought my smile back.

"But Laut, we really made Leise and your Dad worry. So we need to apologize properly for what we did."

"Yeah… I bet they're super angry with me. Sis is seriously scary when she's mad," Laut mutters and slumps his shoulders.

I giggle. “Don’t worry, Leise is nice. She’ll understand if you properly explain your reasons.”

At least I hope she will. Leise cares deeply for the people of Verklärt. I may have disappointed her with my actions tonight. I’m honestly afraid to tell Leise about what happened, because she’s the only person who has held such high hopes for me. But I believe it’ll be okay, because Leise is an understanding person.

I continue running through the forest with no end in sight and ponder what to do from here.

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“LAUT!” a high-pitched and anxious voice slices through the chorus of yammering bugs the instant we exit the forest into the clearing with the tent and hut.

“Sis…” Laut awkwardly stops running when he spots his sister dashing straight for him.

Laut glances anxiously over at me. I signal that it’s okay with a smile. He takes a deep breath and turns resolutely toward his sister.

“I’m sorry! I—”

Leise hugs him before he can say anything further. She tightly squeezes the bewildered Laut and cries.

“I’m so glad…you’re safe… So, so glad,” Leise fumbles over her words. Her behavior must have reassured him.

His expression crumbles and he breaks down sobbing in her arms. He may seem tough, but he’s only ten years old. No doubt what occurred over the past several hours was a shock to him. Plus, he had nervously prepared himself for her anger and received her warm welcome home instead.

Wild stands beside his children looking at them fondly as he strokes Laut’s head. I get teary-eyed watching the three of them, but stop myself from crying when Leise looks up at me with eyes reddened by tears.

“Miss Kanon, everyone, you have our utmost thanks.”

“Don’t thank me. I need to apologize to you. It’s obvious you guys would worry if Laut was gone too long, but I allowed this to happen without thinking about —”

“That’s not true!” Laut interrupts me. He roughly rubs the tears from his eyes and firmly looks at his sister. “Miss Kanon did nothing wrong. It’s all my fault… I’m sorry. I’ve been breaking my promise with you and Dad for a long time. I’ve lied to you…for a very long time.”

Leise isn’t shocked by her younger brother’s confession—she patiently waits for his explanation.

“You see, I have a friend in Belebend. His name is Klar. I went there alone to hang out with him. I knew it was dangerous, but I…” Laut falls silent and hangs his head, ashamed of his actions. He must have thought she would be angry for sure this time.

“I already knew.”

“You did?” Laut jolts his head up to look at her, clearly shocked by the confession.

“I noticed you often went to the village. Both Father and I knew, and we didn’t stop you—because you looked so happy on the days you visited the village. We were worried, but seeing as our bodyguard Breit didn’t even notice, I had faith you weren’t doing anything dangerous and decided to keep quiet on the matter.”

Laut listens to his sister with his mouth hanging open.

“You’re a boy, Laut. I’m sure you would rather make lots of friends and explore new places, over being stuck in this confined space… If not for this age we live in, you could have… That is why Father and I did not stop you.”

Laut glances hesitantly from his sister to his father, before sniffling and quietly apologizing again. Leise squeezes her little brother again.

“If not for this age we live in, you could have…”

Leise said those words with a gentle expression, tinged with a sadness I’ll never know. *‘Explore new places,’* perhaps she longs to do that too. Laut isn’t the only

one stuck here, and Leise's fate as Augur is far more confining than this forest.

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LEISE healed my cuts after everything settled down. She heals the same way Rag does. Sorcerers and Augurs—they may have different names and callings, but they can both use abilities that allow them create what we would call miracles on Earth. They still won't look each other in the eyes, though.

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"I see…you had something terrible done to you… Breit has told me about Calda and his men. I doubt this is the first time he has attempted something so despicable. I often worry about the women and children in the villages because of the presence of men like him. I am sorry you got caught up in this, Miss Kanon…" Leise says in a heartrending tone after learning what happened in the village, as if it happened to her. "Miss Kanon, you have my sincerest apologies. I think it might be best if you leave this country immediately."

"What about all of your plans to have me sing to the people of Verk? Didn't you ask me here to save them?"

The childishness in her features is gone; in her expression is an Augur who holds authority over a broken people. "You have done more than enough for us. The children who heard your song are clearly healthier, and have been influenced in ways I could have never foreseen. I am grateful to you from the bottom of my heart. However, you will most likely face great danger if you stay in this country any longer on my behalf."

"I don't think so!" I try not to give in to her discouragement. I explain my opinion with an equally determined air. "I have absolutely no intentions of leaving, Leise. I mean, the villagers mistook singing as something evil because of me, and that man—Calda—might do something horrible to the villagers because of me. How can I leave Verk in a worse state than when I arrived?"

"But…" Her resolute expression as an Augur cracks.

One more push and I'll have her convinced. "Hey, why don't you let me stay here until we can confirm the villagers will be okay? Wouldn't it be best to have more fighters on your side in case something happens?" I suggest.

“Besides, I don’t want to give up on your plan to introduce the People of Darkness to Song, yet,” I say, happy Rag has remained quiet so far. I know he wants to leave in the morning.

Leise’s face contorts for a moment, as if she’s about to cry. She deeply bows her head, shielding her face as tears fall silently to the ground.

“Truly, truly, thank you, Miss Kanon…” her fragile voice no longer held overwhelming authority—it was the voice of a distraught girl with the weight of a nation on her shoulders.

I’m relieved she isn’t going to force me to leave. I lock eyes with Rag and Serene. Serene instantly gives a nod of approval. Rag has the deepest furrow in his brow yet, but averts his eyes, “Hmph”. I decide to interpret that as him telling me to do what I want.

***

CLEARING the misunderstanding with the villagers is a secondary concern—we prioritize what to do about the soldier Calda first. Leise and Breit are convinced Calda will search for me the moment he recovers. Rag violently kicked the man, but that was after Boo’s attack knocked him out. Calda only saw me. Leise anxiously told me he will seek revenge.

She said he’s the worst kind of man. He despises being stationed in Verk and takes his anger out on the villagers. Leise’s voice trembled as she told me he was likely wandering the village to blow off steam. Calda is the type she can easily imagine taking his anger out on the villagers when he can’t find me.

I’m filled with disgust when I remember his hand digging into my wrist and his weight on top of me. I shudder at the phantom touches across my flesh. I really need to visit the spring again to wash Calda’s filth off. I bury my disgust, and mourn for the people unable to escape Calda.

“Is Breit going to be okay? What if he gets spotted? Will he get sold off to another country like the other young men?”

With all the healthy young men and women of Verk sold as slaves, Breit is likely an irresistible target. Breit may be lanky, but he’s healthier than the other villagers—won’t he be in trouble if he gets caught?

“He’ll be okay. Breit’s our medicine man after all,” Laut answers, grinning.

“Huh?” I embarrassingly squeak.

Leise giggles over my reaction.

“Breit is the only person in the region with any knowledge of medicine, so they allowed him to stay. I am sure Renforcer will be troubled if fewer crops were harvested due to the people remaining in Verk falling deathly ill. After the war, Renforcer took far too many people, and our quotas for the individual villages were impossible to maintain with how few were left in Verk.

When they became stricter, illness killed the old, young, and few remaining healthy. The rulers of Renforcer finally ordered our quotas reduced and allowed any healer to be officially exempt from slavery.”

“…Breit is…a medicine man?” I absently repeat those words. Was Verk really in a worse state only a few years ago? I didn’t think it could get any worse than it already is. Breit was tending to Klar. But there’s such a huge gap between my image of medicine men and Breit; it’s hard to believe.

Leise’s expression suddenly clouds. “There was actually one other person with the knowledge to heal, but…his proficiency in not only medicine, but the ways of war, caused them to drag him off somewhere.”

“Don’t worry. Folgen will return,” Wild speaks up for the first time. He places his big hand on her shoulder.

Leise smiles at Wild’s gentle tone. I’m curious who they’re talking about, but their expressions make it difficult to ask.

“Who is Folgen?” My curiosity gets the better of me.

“Folgen is Breit’s older brother and the guy Sis will marry,” Laut answers beside me.

It takes a good long moment for my brain to put the pieces together. “Seriously?”

Hang on a minute! I knew Leise had a fiancé, but no one told me he’s Breit’s older brother!

I think I just learned about an incredibly complicated family situation—and to

make matters worse, they basically said he's missing. I can get why Leise's worried. But doesn't that put Breit in a seriously painful position of bodyguard and younger brother of the fiancé to the girl he loves! Thinking about this kind of thing in a time like this goes to show just how meddlesome a person I am.

Leise must have assumed my shock to be from something else, because she continues her explanation. "Breit's family has been proficient in the healing arts for generations. And they have also protected the line of Augurs for generations. However, his parents were pulled into the war and never returned. With Folgen no longer around, Breit has been protecting me on his own… He highly respects Folgen and is probably in the most pain over his loss."

"I…see." I feel for Folgen, a man I've never met. A deep sorrow and rage wells-up inside me at the nature of war—war separates families and ends in tragedy for all. "I hope Folgen and the others return home soon."

"Me too," Leise smiles at me, despite my empty words.

"So, what're you gonna do?" Rag's irate voice cuts the tension. "Are you gonna return to the village right now? Or are ya gonna wait until dawn breaks? I'd like to get some shut-eye first."

Once again, Rag's impolite attitude irks me, but Leise quickly apologizes like she's at fault.

"My apologies, I took the conversation off topic. I completely forgot everyone is exhausted… I plan on waiting until Breit returns. I would like to discuss our plan of action again with everyone, including Breit, once I have heard the current situation in the village. Please rest while you can."

I'm assaulted by a wave of drowsiness at the word 'rest'. Laut is nodding off while standing. He's probably exhausted as well. I feel bad Breit is left to do all the work when he's exhausted, but we take Leise's advice and nap.

I lie down in the tent's bedroom and fall into a deep slumber seconds after saying goodnight to Serene.

***

A piercing scream startles me awake around dawn. I bolt out of bed and immediately find Serene.

“That was—”

“Leise’s voice!”

Leise isn’t in the tent with us. We dash outside. The tent surroundings are still dark from the trees, but the sky has a faint whiteness to it.

“Over there,” Serene points to several shadowy figures near the entrance of the forest. We swiftly run in that direction.

My heart pounds uncomfortably—I have a very bad feeling about this.

“Breit! Breit!” Leise screams.

I stop behind her and gasp. Leise is on her knees screaming hysterically at the sight of Breit lying limp on the ground in front of her. His body is terribly mangled to the point it’s hard to look without bile forming at the bottom of my throat.

“Breit! Open your eyes, Breit!”

She carefully caresses his bruised and bloodied cheeks in her hands. She calls his name repeatedly, but his eyelids don’t even twitch. The bruises don’t stop at his face—bruises and welts cover him from head to toe as if he were mercilessly beaten. Fresh blood oozes from broken flesh, while dried blood coats his superficial wounds.

The scene is too much for me—I can’t even scream; I stand there paralyzed. Serene slips by me and kneels beside Breit.

“He’s in a bad state…but he’s only unconscious. He likely used up what energy he had left to make it here,” Serene explains. She must have grown accustomed to seeing people like this during her years as a mercenary. Her diagnosis that he’s not dead offers me a slight relief in what was quickly becoming a waking nightmare.

“…The forest’s usual commotion sounded uneasy.” Serene’s comment must have helped calm Leise as well, because she stopped screaming and slowly pulled her quivering hands from Breit and clasped them to her chest. “I went outside to check and I found Breit here—” She clasps her mouth and hangs her head, unable to continue.

The childhood friend she was anxiously waiting for returned in this bloodied-

state—it would be odd if she didn't react. I crouch behind her and place my hands on her shaking shoulders.

"He walked this far on his own. Breit is strong; he'll be okay, Leise."

Breit's face twitched at Leise's name.

"Lady…Lei…se…"

"Breit!"

His swollen eyes crack open.

"Lady…Leise…Calda—Cough! Cough!" Breit painfully doubles over coughing, and throws up a shocking amount of blood.

"Breit!" Leise screams.

"Breit!" My voice overlaps with Leise.

"This isn't good! He's bleeding internally!"

Serene's shout drags my mind back to Earth—if we were on Earth, in Japan, we could immediately call for an ambulance and have him treated at a hospital. But Reveur doesn't have an ambulance—or a hospital.

Worse, Breit is the only person around with any medical knowledge. Even if there was someone else, I doubt this country has the technology or materials required to handle internal injuries. My mind draws a complete blank over what we can do, when Leise places her hand on Breit's body.

"I will heal you right now!"

I'm surprised she offered to heal him—from what Rag said, their healing ability only strengthens the body's internal healing; is it possible to repair damaged organs with it? Maybe it's different for Leise?

Serene and I watch over Leise in silence as she places her hand on top of Breit's stomach and closes her eyes to concentrate. Breit weakly grabs her slender arm. Leise opens her eyes, surprised he stopped her.

"You mustn't…Lady Leise! D-Do not…use your power…for someone like…" Breit says through ragged breaths.

"What are you saying!" Leise yells at him.

“But…your lifespan…will—” Breit chokes out.

“What about your lifespan?” I ask, unable to stop myself.

“Don’t tell me your lifespan shortens when you use your power as an Augur?” Serene asks what I feared might be the case.

“…Yes, it does.”

“No way!” I’m appalled. My mind rushes to my own power. I failed to heal my cuts before, but that was back when I had no real experience. Maybe I could make a difference now—

“My mother used her power a lot during the war. That is the duty of the Augur. So I will—”

“You mustn’t! You mustn’t…for the sake of someone…insignificant as I—COUGH! COUGH! Please…listen to me…Calda has—” Breit coughs violently as he desperately tries to tell Leise something.

Leise gently removes his hand from her right hand and places her hands back on him. “Breit, don’t speak anymore, I will—”

“Don’t be foolish!” A hand snatches Leise’s out of the air, Rag’s iron gaze causes Leise to flinch away before he comes to kneel by Breit. He places his hands on Breit’s stomach, and closes his eyes in deep concentration.

“Hear my call, healing, that which brings life, come to this person in his time of need. Healing, to these wounds!”

“Rag!” I exclaim.

The crease in his brow deepens as if he is searching for something—he didn’t do that when he healed my feet. Leise stares at him dumbfounded.

“Ugh…it’s hot…” Breit moans.

Rag’s healing ability accelerates the body’s ability to heal itself. Breit’s body is rapidly trying to heal his wounds. A minute passes with Breit moaning before Rag exhales and removes his hands.

“His body should handle the rest on its own now. Take care of the other injuries yourself.”

“Th-Thank—” Breit touches his stomach and hesitantly attempts to thank Rag, but the moment he looks up his jaw drops.

Not that I blame him—he’s witnessing an adult man gradually shrink into a little boy. Leise’s red eyes round with surprise as she stares at the boy, now shorter than her.

“Um? Who are you?”

I look over my shoulder at Laut and Wild. They’re staring at mini-Rag’s small back. Unable to withstand their startled gazes, Rag swiftly tries to leave with his eyes downcast. But there is no way *she* would ever let him go—

“M-MY PRECIOUS BAAAAAAAAAABY!”

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAH! I FORGOT ABOUT YOOOOOOOOOOU!”

Serene dashes at lightning speed and lunges for Rag’s tiny retreating back, plowing him into the ground with her on top. Rag struggles and squirms to escape her embrace, screaming indignantly between her breasts.

Between relief over Breit being healed and seeing Rag and Serene act freely for the first time in a while, I burst out laughing. The others are still in shock, so I quickly explain.

“W-Well, you see, Rag shrinks when he…uh, uses Sorcery. And Serene is, uh, well, passionate about his boyish body. So yeah, this is the result. Ha…hahaha,” I laugh dryly.

“Looks like they’re having fun,” Laut mutters with what almost sounds like envy as he watches them.

“Aaaaaaaaawwwww! You are just TOO CUTE~~!”

“LET ME GO! LET GO, YOU PERVERTED WOMAN!”

Rag’s screams didn’t stop until he gave in to his fate.

Chapter 25 Rain Plantation

THE temperature gradually grew warmer with the arrival of daybreak. Breit's survival was only possible thanks to Rag, but his injuries are still severe. We lay Breit in the shade. Once settled, Breit gives his grave report, remaining on his back the entire time.

"Calda may have found out about Lady Leise."

Tension fills the air; we patiently wait for his next words fearing what is to come. Breit's face contorts as he begins his tale.

****Breit's Point of View Start****

AFTER parting with Lady Kanon and the others, I made my rounds through the village attempting to explain what happened, but no one would listen. Not a single villager, people I once considered friends, stepped out of the safety of their homes to listen…

Lady Kanon is truly incredible, her power to rejuvenate and bestow hope on those who have long since forgotten hope, is beyond words. I can understand the fear everyone is experiencing, especially since they witnessed us wrapped in the mysterious silver glow as we sang with Lady Kanon. But I am saddened they would not even give me a chance to explain. Perhaps they believe I was infected by the Silver Siren.

Seeing as my endeavor was a lost cause, I inevitably returned to Klar's hut. Calda stood in the shadows of the hut waiting for me… He looked from me to Klar with a touch of surprise; even I was shocked by Klar's healthier complexion.

“Ooh? You finally woke up? Good, then you can get to work first thing tomorrow,” he sneered.

“He cannot! Tomorrow is too soon! He just woke up! He needs at least three days of rest,” I plead, carefully hiding my distaste with the ease of long practice.

“Hah! Even without being sick, the villagers are slow at work. At this rate, I’ll be the one getting scolded by my higher ups. He’s gotta eat if he’s awake, right? If he’s gonna eat, he’s gotta work for it. If he’s not gonna work, he can’t eat. It’s as simple as that.”

“Tch…”

“More importantly, have you guys spotted a weird woman? A young woman who ain’t from this country?”

Calda really did search for Lady Kanon the moment he recovered. *Here it comes*, I thought making sure my expression was under control. Calda was watching for any reaction.

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Hmm. You see, I’m not sure why, but the villagers are afraid of something. And when I looked into it, this brat’s name came up, so I dropped by his place here… I’ll ask you one more time. Did you see a woman?”

“I have not seen any foreign women.”

“…Nothin’ good will come of you hiding her. The kid finally woke up, too. Poor thing,” Calda smirked and walked over to where Klar was lying.

Calda paused, as if waiting for me to leap to Klar’s defense before he threw the first punch. I know he has despised me since the first day we met. Renforcer officially recognizes me as the medicine man for the region. Without explicit permission from his superiors, or a valid reason, Calda cannot publicly beat me.

In private, however, Calda held absolute authority. I was prepared for the first punch. Defending myself would accomplish nothing other than further inviting his wrath. I fell with the punch, and Calda beat me mercilessly. At first I strove to protect my body, but as he kept beating me, I started to lose consciousness—

“Please stop! Breit is Lady Leise’s—” Klar rushed out Lady Leise’s name. Even in

his weakened state, the boy strove to rescue me.

“K-Klar…”

“Huh? *Lady* Leise? Who’s that? Never heard of her.”

“Aaah…” It dawned on Klar what he had done by mentioning her name.

“Calda! Klar just regained consciousness…his mind is still recovering from his illness. Take out your anger…on me!” I hissed.

“Hah! What a gentle little medicine boy you are. In that case, I’ll take you up on your offer!”

To be honest, I thought death was the only fate awaiting me. I am not sure whether he got sick of beating me or what, but Calda eventually stopped. It took everything I had to keep my eyes open.

“What a bore!” Calda grumbled spitting on me before leaving.

Klar cried—his inability to move, the fate of his family, and witnessing my pathetic state left the child with only his tears.

“I’m sorry, Master Breit! I—”

“Don’t be…but at this rate… Klar, are you all right on your own? I…must…tell Lady Leise…of what transpired here.”

“Yes. I’ll be okay. But you—”

“Haha, I am a man of medicine, you know? I will be fine. Think…of yourself first…and get better. For Lady Leise…and Master Laut. Understood?”

“Yes!”

After leaving Klar’s house, I limped for the forest, my body aching, mind hazy. A single thought pushed me forward—*I must warn Lady Leise*!

****Breit’s Point of View End****

“I highly doubt Calda will be satisfied with just beating me. At best, he will threaten the villagers until they expose your hiding place here. At worst, he will begin beating the villagers using the possibility of a hidden group as an excuse to his superiors. Someone will eventually break. So please, Lady Leise, I beg of you. Flee somewhere before that happens!” Breit pleads.

He dragged his severely injured body here for the sole purpose of telling her to flee—he is her bodyguard, after all. However—

“I will not flee,” Leise declares, looking straight into Breit’s eyes.

“Lady Leise!”

“I will not be the only one to flee while the villagers suffer for my mistakes… I will go to the village and negotiate with Calda. To keep him from ever being violent toward the villagers again.”

Even Laut and Wild are shocked by her decision.

“Wh-What are you—He is not someone you can negotiate with!”

“The villagers will be reassured if I tell them directly about Miss Kanon as well.”

“You might…have a point there, but—N-No! I won’t allow it! You should not risk your life meeting that man, Lady Leise!”

“I am a citizen of Verklärt as well!” Leise yells. Breit flinches. “My only worth is in a power no one else has… For just that reason, I am granted this secure place to live in peace, while everyone else suffers on the outside. I do not want to die without accomplishing anything at all!”

Breit’s downcast eyes are a sign Leise’s sorrowful words are resonating with him. The reason she traveled a great distance despite the danger to find me, and her desperation to do something now, is because she deeply loves her people. She wants to do something to help them. She doesn’t want to just be protected. Leise’s strong determination is the very reason I’m in Verklärt!

“I’ll go see Calda,” I abruptly break the silence.

“Huh?” Everyone gapes at me.

“Calda is searching for me, right? He’ll be satisfied if he finds me. Or more like, it was my fault for running into him in the first place, so I should take responsibility for my actions.”

Just thinking about facing Calda is enough to make my legs tremble, but my resolve is greater than my fear.

“Even in my world there are countries with similar relationships to Renforcer

and Verklärt. While blatant slavery in most countries has publicly disappeared, it still exists in the shadows.

The strongest nations of my world sought to create human rights, a belief that everyone is equal—or at least they strive for such a goal. Perhaps we can convince Calda if we talk to him. And if not, maybe the *Silver Siren* will convince him…"

What the people of Verklärt are facing isn't anything new on Earth—sadly it seems wherever humans are, so too inequality exists. Even Japan waged wars and abused the nations it subjugated, only to later taste what it felt like to be occupied after losing a war itself. I didn't passionately study world history in school, but I learned war should be avoided whenever possible.

"How I wish Reveur could end up like the world you are from, but that is not our reality, Miss Kanon!"

"It's a bad idea for you to meet Calda, Leise! Especially when you consider the future of your people! Instead, you should focus on reassuring the villagers, over causing problems with Calda! Besides, I still want to travel with you and share the gift of Song with everyone in Verk!"

"Miss Kanon…"

I continue forcing a smile, "If talking fails, I'll bring the might of the *Silver Siren* forth! Just as I did with the soldier in Rubato. Singing stripped him of his will to fight, right? I can sing the same song again."

"Are you an idiot!" Rag fumes in his tiny body pushing Serene away—she was still trying to bury him in her breasts. Mini-Rag's anger has no impact compared to his adult wrath. Even so, he continues yelling with a cute bright-red face. "Do you think that fluke of a Song will work every time, when you don't even get how it works yourself? You look at the world with a naiveté that is laughable!"

"I'll go with you," Serene interjects, briefly looking up from where mini-Rag struggles in her arms; her grip doesn't loosen in the slightest.

"What!"

"Serene!" I light up at her offer.

Her gaze instantly falls on the boy struggling in her arms. “You may complain about it, but you plan on going with her too, don’t you?”

“Huh! Who’d go with her!”

“You’d panic if you got left behind. My, what a cutie you are. Didn’t I tell you before? I’ll follow you *wherever* you go *forever*!”

“I DON’T GET YOU!” Rag’s high-pitched scream echoes through the forest, making several birds soar into the sky.

I don’t really get it, but I can safely assume Rag is coming too. I have nothing to be afraid of as long as they are with me. I thank them—though I’m not sure whether they heard me.

“Thank you very much, everyone,” Leise bows before us.

“I want to go too,” Laut says.

Laut probably has a lot on his mind—Klar who regained consciousness for the first time in a while is probably at the top of his list of concerns.

“You stay here with Breit,” Wild cuts him off in his low baritone. “I’ll go.”

“Master Wild? I-I am all right! As Lady Leise’s bodyguard I cannot stay here if she goes—” Breit’s face contorts with pain as he frantically tries to sit up.

His internal injuries may have healed, but his entire body is covered in bruises and sores from being beaten. Breit’s attempt to sit up stops at Leise’s wrath.

“I do not need such a reckless bodyguard. If you endanger yourself any further, I will dismiss you, Breit.”

“Y-You mustn’t!” Breit interjects, his expression similar to a puppy scolded by his master.

Leise continues with a sad smile, “I never needed a bodyguard. Most of all don’t you ever forget you are my very precious friend… Please don’t make me worry anymore.”

“Lady Leise…”

Is it just my imagination, or is Breit blushing?

Breit didn’t fully accept being left behind with Laut, but he didn’t try to fight it

either. Laut asked his dad one more time, before reluctantly giving in.

Thus, we headed to the village for the second time. Leise and Wild are going to discuss matters with the villagers, while Rag, Serene, Boo, and I deal with Calda.

***

SUNLIGHT shines through several gaps in the trees' canopy, bathing the ground below in its warmth—a dramatic change from the eerie forest we had entered a few hours earlier. Birdsong fills the air, with the cacophony of bugs' oddly distant.

Within minutes of entering the humid forest, my clothes are layered with sweat. The weather seems nice, yet the nasty moisture in the air ruins what peace I might have before confronting my potential rapist.

Before we entered the forest, Leise told us a storm is coming this afternoon. The lack of clouds in the otherwise clear sky causes me to doubt her prediction, but considering her powers as Augur allow her to talk to nature, storm prediction seems plausible.

According to Leise, Verk used to have a lot of rainfall—basically, it's a land of heat and cloying humidity. I recall what I learned about tropical rain forests in school. A storm will create the ideal situation for meeting Calda—I doubt a man like him would venture outside in a tropical storm. The height of the storm is the safest time for Leise to visit the village.

Just in case Calda has a habit of walking in the rain, Leise changed out of her usual flashy attire into the worn and ragged clothing I saw on most of the village woman. It's not like they have contacts or wigs for her to truly disguise herself with, so she dons a dirty robe that covers her from head to toe.

Serene, Rag, and I plan on heading straight for Calda after we part with Leise and Wild at the forest's edge. As Serene guessed, Rag came with us and complained the whole way. I can easily imagine the expression plastered on his face as he grudgingly brings up the rear.

Rag's irritation over the entire ordeal seems to grow with each step. I pretend not to hear the constant clicking of his tongue as I walk behind Leise and Wild. Boo is sound asleep in his usual spot under Rag's hair.

“Oh yeah, Leise?”

“Yes?”

“Um, well, earlier you said your lifespan shortens if you use your powers as Augur, right? Yesterday, you—” My words trail off when she peers over her shoulder at me.

She healed my wounds when I returned from the village last night—and that’s been on my mind this whole time. Did I cause her lifespan to shorten over such simple injuries?

She must have guessed what was on my mind, because she smiles at me. “You do not have to worry about yesterday. I always use simple spells like that on Laut. That boy often gets cuts and bruises when he plays.”

“Really?”

“Yes. An Augur’s lifespan only shortens when healing the critical wounds of someone on the verge of death, like Breit was… Which is why I should be able to live far longer than my Mother did, as we are no longer in a state of war.”

“I see… I’m really grateful to you for healing me, though!” I thank her, relieved my wounds didn’t shorten her life. She smiles back at me.

“If I’m not mistaken, you said Renforcer stations several soldiers per a village. How many others are with Calda?” Serene asks.

“Anywhere from two to six are generally stationed with him at Belebend. Sometimes they are away on patrol, or fending off monsters. I heard from Breit that another man occasionally comes from a nearby village as well. Apparently this other man is the highest rank among those stationed here, and even he has trouble with Calda,” Leise answers.

“We might have to deal with a group, then,” Serene summarizes.

“You should go with that thought,” Wild says. “The time to harvest *Teteo* is near. The ferry should arrive soon, so the soldiers should be around to load it.”

“*Teteo*?”

I’ve never heard of *Teteo* before, but it has to be some sorta crop if they harvest it.

Leise looks back and explains, “*Teteo* is a rare fruit grown only in Verk. You can’t eat it raw, but it’s excellent cooked, and as a dessert.”

“Heh!” I can’t help imagining all sorts of cookies and cakes baked with this unfamiliar fruit. I have to keep from drooling—this clearly isn’t the time to be fantasizing about dessert. I couldn’t help myself; I’ve barely had anything sweet since coming to Reveur—aside from Rag’s chocolate, that is.

“I always used to eat the desserts, but our entire harvest is handed over to Renforcer now, so I have not eaten anything made of *Teteo* for a long time… If possible, I would love to eat it with Laut again,” Leise says wistfully.

“…I-I’m sure you will both eat it again!” I encourage her.

“Indeed, we surely—” Leise stops in front of me before finishing her statement.

“Leise?”

“Voices…I hear many screams!”

“S-Screams? How? I-I don’t hear anything?”

I listen closely to our surroundings, but all I hear are birds and insects. I occasionally hear the screech of a bird-like creature sounding similar to a scream, but that has been going on the whole time since we entered the forest.

We are still a significant distance from the village. We shouldn’t be able to hear the villagers. But Leise is clenching her hands over her ears as if she hears the screaming inside her head.

“Leise?” Wild eyes his daughter concerned.

“Oh no! The village!” She dashes off right before Wild can place his hand on her shoulder.

“Leise!”

We frantically chase after her as she races through the forest with an energy beyond anything she’s shown before.

***

A soft drizzle starts around the time we exit the forest. Steadily it shifts from a

mild annoyance to an outright torrential downpour drenching us to the bone. Our destination appears to be a plantation for the fruit used in the desserts Leise mentioned.

Short trees spaced equally apart inside a massive fenced enclosure comes into view. Round fruits are scattered across the ground. Sturdy fences surround everything, from the fruit to the blackened trees. Smoke wafts in the air, and fires still crackle in areas covered from the rain. It's obvious even to me that a fire burned through the area consuming the plantation not too long ago.

Leise falls to the ground in a daze over the burned plantation. Fortunately, I don't see any bodies. The hood of Leise's robe slips off, exposing her white hair. Were the screams she heard from the burning plants?

"Are you…Lady Leise?" A man asks from behind us. Startled, I turn around to see several villagers covered in soot. The oldest man among them takes a step forward. "Why are Lady Leise and Master Wild in a place like this? Who are these people with you?" The man asks, clearly weary of us.

Leise finally stands, facing the villagers with an air of authority. "I will explain my guests' identities later. More importantly, what happened here? Explain!" Her tone holds a dark rage that disturbs me.

"We haven't a clue what happened. We were working in the fields as we usually do, when flames suddenly erupted. The fire spread out of control, and resulted in this…" The old man explained helplessly, hanging his head the entire time.

"Is anyone injured? Did anyone fail to escape? …Are you all okay?"

"You needn't worry. We noticed the fire long before it reached us; everyone had plenty of time to escape… However, I get chills when I think about what may have happened had there been no rain."

Huts built near the plantation would have easily caught fire had the flames extended further.

"U-Um…" an emaciated man painfully speaks up behind the old man. "Calda never checks on the plantation, yet he did today."

Leise's eyes widen.

“I do not have any proof, but…”

“But Calda should be in just as much trouble if there’s no Teteo harvested! Why would he—” another man interjects mortified.

“Where’s the creep now?” Rag demands.

“Rag?”

“Where is he?” Rag repeats his question, ignoring me.

The man he’s questioning trembles for a moment, “U-Um, I believe he’s already at his post…”

“Where’s that?”

“If you leave the plantation and continue straight, you’ll come to a jetty. He lives in the big white house. You won’t miss it,” Wild answers in place of the frightened man.

Rag immediately trots off in the direction Wild pointed. I quickly chase him and Serene follows me.

“Rag! Wait! What’s wrong with you?” I ask him, worriedly looking over my shoulder at Leise.

Rag’s clearly enraged. I was furious the moment Calda’s name was mentioned too. But until now, Rag only listlessly followed us, as if he didn’t even want to do that. Was Calda’s responsibility for the fire what spurred him into action?

“Don’t follow me!” Rag yells, without turning back. “I’ll face him on my own.”

“Wh-Why? There’s no point if I don’t go!” I yell loud enough to cut through the whistling rain.

Ticked off, he stops in his tracks and spins around, the full force of his glare locked on me. I glare back at him. I haven’t been traveling with him all this time just for show. I’ve gotten stronger too, and I’ve learned how to deal with him… although I haven’t completely gotten over my fear of his adult-form.

“I’ll protect Kanon. Don’t worry.”

“Serene!”

Rag loudly clicks his tongue returning to his headlong march for Calda’s

residence. “Do what you want!”

“Yeah, I will!” I say with determination.

“Miss Kanon!” Leise’s voice barely reaches me through the roar of rain.

“Leise! We’ll be fine, so go ahead and reassure the villagers!” I shout as loud as possible.

“Please be careful!”

I wave, before dashing to keep up with Rag. We’re finally going to face Calda again. I prepare for the worst and sprint through the mud.

Chapter 26 Demon Child

OUR trek takes us through the village into another dense forest. Unlike the prior wooded areas, this one has a path carved for humans. We follow the path until the sea's horizon is visible. White sand gradually overtakes the reddish-brown clay path.

The rain beats down on our soaked clothes. I cover my face using my hands to keep the rain from my eyes as I chase after Rag. My shoes are covered in mud, causing my feet to squelch with every step.

I have many questions for Rag, but his receding back stays just out of reach. What exactly is he planning? It's unforgivable if Calda set the plantation on fire, but we have no proof. I doubt he'll confess because we barge into his office. And even if he does acknowledge his role in the fire, we're foreigners who hold no status here—what can we do about it? We can't rule out the chance he'll detain us and try to frame us for the crime, either.

But Rag is smart; he should know all these things. He's not the type to give in to emotion and act without thinking ahead. I'm sure he has a plan. Serene believes he has a plan too; she wouldn't follow him in silence otherwise.

We race down the edge of the beach. The waves roil with an ominous color under the heavy rainclouds, and a magnificent white building stands in the distance. Its color and construction is opulent compared to the village huts.

"Guess that's it?"

"Likely," Serene answers from behind me.

Rag didn't say a word, but speeds up. The incessant downpour and the roar of waves crashing against the rocks ring noisily in my ears. The area must be beautiful when the weather is good. I glance toward the beach where a long jetty stretches into the open ocean. Not a single boat is tied to the jetty, but Wild said Renforcer's ferry will arrive soon. The storm might delay them, though.

The white house borders another forest. A sliver of light seeps from its windows, alerting us someone is inside. We approach the building, using the trees for cover.

"How do you want to go about this?" I quietly ask Rag. The house is similar to a bungalow and acts as a silent bastion in the storm.

Rag seems to have noticed something, because he approaches the window instead of the front door. He puts his back against the wall and carefully peers inside. Serene and I crouch and sneak over to him. Someone is talking inside.

"I hear people!" Rag glares at me to shut up. I listen closely to Calda arguing with someone.

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"WHAT are you going to do about this! I'm the one at risk here! The Viceroy will not tolerate another decrease in our quota!"

"Calm down. I'm tellin' you it won't be a problem." This unmotivated voice is, without a doubt, Calda's.

I shake away the image of his attempted rape, and concentrate on their words over the roar of waves and rain.

"How is there not a problem! Why'd you go and set a fire!" the other man demands enraged.

Serene and I exchange looks.

"These pathetic villagers don't deserve the land they stand on. They're definitely plotin' something. So I made it known just what'll happen to 'em if they defy me… Besides, the woman I saw was—"

"Woman, woman, woman! I care little for your drunken fantasies!"

"I told you she ain't no fantasy! I showed you the kick marks on my stomach!

We'll be in the clear when that woman shows up. I know the type, all high and mighty. There's no way she'll remain hidden after what happened. We'll capture her and say she's the one who set the fire," Calda laughs maliciously.

I clench my fists until they turn white at the fresh memory of the charred plantation. The other man obviously doesn't believe his explanation.

"And what do you plan on doing when she doesn't show up! This village was already marked as a problem with its continual failures to meet the quota! Your little plan has put my own career at stake… Aaah, the Viceroy is going to blame me again. If you're wrong, I will ensure your transfer won't be in some tropical rainforest, but in an arctic environment where if the cold doesn't freeze you to death, the monsters will devour you!"

"I told you not to worry. I was never suited to this kinda work, anyway. Ugh, I wanna say farewell to this crappy country and go home already!"

***

WHAT *a self-serving man*. I shake from the rage boiling inside me. Rag suddenly moves. I try to keep up with him as he goes around the house to the front door covered by an overhang blocking the rain. Rag sweeps away his wet bangs.

"I should go first—" I try to say, but he kicks down the wooden door before I can finish.

The door slams on the wooden floor inside. I'm frozen by how sudden everything is happening. Calda and the other man run over.

"What do you villagers think you're doin'!" Calda yells, seething with anger. He takes in our apparent health, foreign features, and clothing. A lecherous smirk contorts his features the instant he spots me. "Oh, did the smoke scare you out of hiding already, little mouse—"

Calda chokes as Rag smashes into him. They crash into the wall, which easily breaks, sending them both into the mud away from the house. Rain instantly soaks the muddy Calda.

I rush to follow him, Serene a step behind. Calda kicks impotently against Rag's iron grip on his throat; the pouring rain sticks his hair to his face. I take a step

back at the darkness in Rag's eyes. His eyes soften at the sight of me, before he throws Calda harshly into the ground. Sand and mud spray everywhere as he tumbles.

A gasping chuckle comes from Calda as he recovers from the fall, his eyes locked on Rag, but he addresses his frightened companion instead. "S-See, what d-did I tell you? These types are all morons. Now we have our excuse for the Viceroy."

I shiver with disgust. I don't want to remember what he did to me, but I can't get the image of this man forcing himself on me out of my mind, or the fear from my body. I nearly lose myself in a tumult of emotions until Serene gently rests her hand on my shoulder. Her presence helps ground me in reality. I didn't come here to relive my fear. I turn my fear into a glare at the mud covered Calda.

Rag stomps, and I swear I can almost feel the ground tremble with barely contained rage. Rag's complete lack of hesitation or fear causes the other man to shout at us.

"Wh-What's wrong with you people!" He turns to Calda "This is the woman from your drunken escapade?"

The other man seems considerably weaker compared to Calda in appearance and demeanor. But from the conversation we overheard, he has the higher rank. Calda is almost dismissive of his rank, paying only the barest respect necessary.

"Ha! Ha! See, what'd I tell ya? Yup, this is her! I'd know those looks anywhere," Calda says, pointing at me as he stands smudging the mud on his face and wiping the blood from his lips.

"Who woulda thought there were three of 'em. See? They're clearly foreigners! How'd you guys get here? I would've heard about foreigners coming to Verk. Why're you at this village? Y'know what? I don't care; I'll enjoy interrogating each of you." Calda's lecherous grin sends a shiver down my spine as he eyes Serene and I, "Some more than others."

I find it strange he would address us as foreigners. At the very least, we should pass for citizens of Renforcer. We didn't file any paperwork when we traveled from Renforcer to Verk. Maybe you need permission to travel in Reveur? Did we break the law by traveling here? Not that it matters; I'm not a citizen of this

world, and their laws might put me to death for being the *Silver Siren*.

Unnerved, I stare at Rag's back. He doesn't seem bothered at all. He suddenly grabs the dagger at his waist and in a single motion flings the blade at Calda. For a second, I thought he was going to cut him down—but I find myself relieved and a little disappointed at being wrong.

"My name is Rag Evans. I came to investigate this country," Rag says in monotone, yet with authority.

Shock crushes the twisted rage plastered on Calda's bleeding face. Blood dribbles down his cheek where Rag's dagger cut, barely missing him and embedding deep in the sand.

"A Sorcerer from Stretta!" croaks the other man wiping the rain from his face. He quickly scampered away the moment he saw Rag's dagger.

Calda's attitude instantly changes. His previous confidence mixed with a sickening air of authority vanishes as an insincere smile grudgingly forces its way into place.

"M-My, what a preposterous mistake I have made. I never thought a great Sorcerer from Stretta would bless us with their presence in this remote land…"

I didn't get how Calda knew he was from Stretta until Rag retrieved his dagger and returned the blade to its holster, as if it were no longer necessary. The dagger is inlayed with a sort of crest, similar to the badge Rag used as identification in Rubato. I remember how the soldiers in Rubato were shocked when they saw his badge. I didn't have a clue what it meant then, but I understand now.

The Sorcerer Training Facility Stretta rules over Reveur with the overwhelming power unique to Sorcerers. Whatever that crest is, it must be how they identify someone is from Stretta.

"But why on Reveur would you investigate…? I did not hear anything about an investigation…" Calda asks cautious, but demanding an answer.

"You peons likely haven't heard yet, but the *Silver Siren* appeared in Renforcer," Rag confesses the most preposterous thing in an emotionless tone.

I barely stop myself from gasping. Should he really tell them about that? But this is Rag, I'm certain he has a plan. I try to keep the shock from showing as I glare at Calda.

Calda's brow furrows as if he's racking his brain for what Rag means. "The *Silver Siren*? As in the old children's legend…isn't the *Silver Siren* a fairytale?" he repeats.

"Perhaps in the past it was a tale for children, but no longer. We recently received word the *Silver Siren* was traveling with the *People of Darkness*. So Stretta dispatched me to investigate," Rag easily lies, without a hint of hesitation.

What he's talking about is enough to make me panic internally, but he's dreadfully calm. The smile vanishes from Calda's face. I probably shouldn't be the one to say this when I'm the legend they're discussing, but what Rag said isn't easy to believe.

Calda is somehow able to force another insincere smile—albeit, his face is twitching. "In that case, you should have told us first. If you had, this would—"

"We planned on investigating covertly. We wanted to return to Stretta without causing a scene to avoid a commotion and risk delaying any exports. With circumstances as they are, it's best all remain on schedule… Well, the investigation ended without finding any problems, but we can't go back when we planned now."

Rag's matter-of-fact tone changes, "A fire suddenly broke out in one of the village's plantations. Luckily, the storm kept the village from burning to the ground, but the plantation's crops were left utterly destroyed. The fire will affect the exports and I will not be held responsible for delays!"

"I-Indeed! We were just discussing how terrible the fire is. And how it will delay exports just as the Viceroy is due to arrive!" Calda feigns innocence. Sweat trickles down his forehead.

"As you well know Stretta invests a great deal in the plantations. I have already revealed my presence, and this failure will affect how my superiors view me when I report in. I cannot leave until we are sure no one was responsible for purposely setting the plantation on fire," Rag continues.

"……" Calda's insincere smile cracks and falls away.

I didn't know Stretta had a connection to the plantations. Is this another of Rag's lies?

"You're in charge of the village plantation that caught fire, correct? Do you have any idea who might have dared raise a hand against Stretta?"

"N-No, I do not know anything at all."

"…I see. Were you aware certain Fluxers are blessed with an ability to hear the voices of nature? For example, they can hear the screams of plants being burned in a fire," Rag says icily.

The Augur, Leise, is the only person with the power he described. I know that, but the fury hidden in his voice makes it sound like he heard the earth-shattering screams.

Rag suddenly turns to me, grabs my arm, and forcefully pulls me into a warm embrace with his right arm. "You said something about her being the suspicious woman you saw?"

Calda's face stiffens seeing Rag beside me.

"She's an associate of mine. I brought her with me from Stretta to assist in the investigation. She possesses the necessary special power for our mission. Can you guess what one of her abilities is?"

Wait, what? I panic internally over the unexpected turn of events. Rag's bluff was overwhelmingly effective on Calda too—his face turns a funny shade of blue. I hide my surprise and go along with Rag's bluff.

"And it appears the plants in the plantation used their last breath of life to tell her someone set fire to them," Rag turns to me and quietly asks, "Isn't that right?" I nod visibly and continue glaring at Calda.

With all my anger I thrust my finger at Calda and say, "You are the one who set fire to the plantation!"

"Gah!" The man who fled behind Calda after Rag threw his dagger groans when Calda took a step back, bumping into him.

The supposed officer stumbles to the muddy ground—deathly pale. He doesn't

try to stand; he only stares up at us like a fish out of water. Rag isn't done with his interrogation yet.

"Additionally, we haven't forgotten what you sought to do last night. Assaulting a legal representative of Stretta is a crime punishable by death!"

Terror flashes across Calda's face. His eyes search for an escape route—to our right is the ocean, behind him is dirt and sand, and an endless forest spans every other direction. Rag's lips curl with a vicious smirk.

"You've got some guts to lay your hands on someone from Stretta."

Those words must have been the final blow to Calda. He falls to his knees. He hangs his head and his arms fall limp beside him—he's so small when he's hunched over like this.

Is it finally over? Or so I thought.

"Everything all right, Boss?"

Three men dressed in the same uniforms as Calda come out of the hole in the wall. Swords clink at their sides. Two more men follow them out and circle around us to join up at Calda's side.

Calda straightens, the rain keeps the blood seeping from his nose and his hair plastered against his head. A cruel smirk creeps onto his lips.

"What's the big deal about Stretta…?" Calda spits off to the side. He glares up at me with such rage, I step back. "What's the big deal about Sorcerers!" he yells pulling a dagger from his clothes.

Rag shoves me behind him and instantly draws the dagger at his waist.

"Rag!" I shout when Serene catches me. She's forced to turn as the two men behind us draw their blades. I'm not the only person panicking over the sudden change from tense conversation to open conflict.

"Wh-What are you—that man is from—" The supposed higher ranked officer tries to stop Calda and the others, but—

"SHUT UP! If we kill all three of them the truth DIES WITH THEEEEEM! All of you," Calda shouts at the others, "will suffer with me! I know all of your secrets. If I go down, so will all of you!"

With those words, and a silent nod from the others, they attack. Calda swings his dagger. Rag doesn't have the time to use a spell with him so close.

"Serene!"

Serene's sword intercepts the blade of one of her attackers. Her hand snaps out grabbing the pommel of the other sword and smashes it against the man's face. He falls unconscious to the ground, blood pouring from an obviously broken nose.

The other three men charge at us. Rag swipes his dagger at Calda forcing him back while two others join the foray attacking Serene who sends her final combatant tumbling into the mud.

Dagger hits dagger as Rag fights against a surprisingly skilled Calda while managing the other man who sweeps in with a long sword. Rag steps forward slamming a palm below the man's chin knocking him unconscious, as he turns to block a strike from Calda. Red trails Rag's clothes as Calda lands a thin cut.

Serene deftly fights the two men joining the battle. Water sprays with each sweep of the blade as Serene moves with an experience only a veteran has.

I stand dumbfounded at the battle around me. I panic when the man Serene sent into the dirt climbs to his feet and approaches me with blood dribbling from his smirking lips.

"Hello, little fairy!" he says suggestively. An image flashes of a man smelling of alcohol, stumbling along with Calda. He was the one with Calda that night. "Good, I like it when my prey knows who I am."

Dread unlike any I have ever felt before fills me as I tremble—Rag and Serene are occupied, no one is here to save me. I have no idea what to do. This man is just like Calda, he's going to try and *rape* me too. He closes the distance with each squelching step.

Fear crawls down my spine; I take a step back, the rain pelting my face. "H-Help," I whisper, a plead to anyone who might hear.

"No one is gonna save you little fairy."

"N-No," all I can think of is Song. In this world Song is my only defense.

“All I can do is sing…” I whisper, gathering my faint courage with closed eyes.

‘Don’t let them come, stand firm in the fading light.

Let not the night consume this dwindling light!

I will not surrender; I will not flee in the face of injustice!

Let the storm’s final light rage on!’

The world shakes with a reverberating thunder, and silence reigns. Rag stares as my silver hair dances in the storm’s wind. My mind sinks, as if my very head has become a great chasm.

This has never happened before. I panic searching for my body, reaching outward. Something massive, greater than anything I have ever felt before welcomes me in, merging with my very being. I don’t understand what is happening.

I try to open my eyes, only to realize the world is before me. I am the mist itself. I have become the hurricane surrounding Verk. My fear becomes the wind, my rage an all-encompassing maelstrom of whipping rain. I am the *STORM*! I feel my throat strain to keep up with the faster beat, the emotional music becoming the fuel of the storm itself.

My very essence is a part of the storm—I am no longer Kanon. A small part of me panics at the loss of my…mortality. Yes, I am beyond mortal understanding. I have become a part of the world, a part of nature, the very power Rag sweetly whispers to.

The man approaching me is a mere speck; nothing matters as my consciousness reaches to the very edge of the massive storm spread across Verk and out into the ocean.

I see monsters in the distance; they are but a presence within my embrace. In the distance there’s an object of wood. Crewed by odd beings, they fight the storm trying to survive as they approach the land a part of me stands upon.

My mind is a mess of foreign thoughts—I care nothing about returning home, to friends, or school; my Grandmother a distant memory. I am a force of nature, uncaring of the world around me. With each passing second, I feel myself

consumed, or rather absorbed by the storm.

Lightning strikes the ground, cracking the earth in giant fissures that send micro-earthquakes through the area. Thunder shakes the world. My wind creates waves miles high, and shatters them just as easily.

I can sense the fear of the people around me, and the fool who dares ignore the storm—the speck approaching a part of me—collapses, steam hissing from his body as lightning falls around him.

“Kanon.” Whatever held Rag from using his true power previously, evaporated, a look of trepidation marring his usually calm features. A part of me mourns the loss of his stalwart visage. “***Oh Earth, Mother of all. Hear my call and consume he who impedes my way! Earth to ME!”***

A web of tiny strands rips from the ground to enwrap an utterly scared Calda. Around and round they went, until Calda is entombed in a stalagmite of wet packed-sand.

I barely notice as my mind is swallowed by the storm, a raging tsunami that is but an extension of my will reaches up into the clouds. Lightning sparks across the sky, swells rise and fall.

“What’s wrong with her!” I barely hear the words and absently watch Serene calmly walk over to me, her two combatants lay bleeding. Their life’s blood drains in the pouring rain; amazingly they are still alive. Serene tries to place her hand on my shoulder, and barely leaps back in time as blinding light strikes the ground inches from where she stood. “Kanon! Snap out of it!”

“She can’t hear you!” I barely notice the fleshy creatures that dare approach a part of my body. One of them approaches, and I make my displeasure known.

“Look out!” The feminine one yells, but the foolish male only raises a hand up. I seethe as he dares defy me, lightning bolt after lightning bolt strikes him. Steam sizzles up from his hand, but I can’t seem to stop him. The earth itself is protecting the creature. My rage invigorates the rain, and the wind howls.

I continue to sing, my throat is parched and a metallic flavor fills my mouth. I am the storm, and yet a part of me feels weak. And then his hand touches my shoulder. It feels as if my mind has just awakened from a deep sleep as it rushes

back from the unknown abyss it was in. Pain unlike anything I have ever felt before ignites every nerve in my body. I scream; no, a scream does not justify the sound emanating from my throat. A shriek of unending agony beyond human comprehension engulfs me.

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BlOOD seeps between my lips, and I don't understand why. I remember nothing; my last thought is of the man who was with Calda walking toward me, and a sense of panic. I feel as if I have just woken from a nightmare I cannot remember. My legs give out as I fall forward.

I gasp, swinging numb arms forward, only for a warm body to stop me. Heart racing, I'm soothed by the warmth of the body pressing against my own in the pouring rain. I look up meeting Rag's concerned eyes.

"What happened?" I ask through cracked lips. I don't know what just happened, but I have an overwhelming urge to cry. Tears begin to stream down my face, even as the rain maintains its constant deluge soaking me from head to toe. "Was I asleep?"

"Everything is going to be all right now." Rag says softly, squeezing me with such force I am actually shocked. Rag, the same man who is always irritated with me, and the world, is embracing me. Something big must have happened, but I just don't care.



Part of me wants to ask, but I feel it would ruin Rag's mood, and so for the first time since coming to this world, I feel completely safe. I know I'm blushing, but I just can't let go. Boo lands on my shoulder and cuddles my cheek. His soaked body still feels warm against my chilled cheek.

"You just went a little too far, but you are back now, and nothing else matters." Rag says running his fingers though my silver hair as it slowly reverts.

Honestly, I can't remember a thing after deciding to sing, just the odd tingling of being in a deep sleep and having woken from a horrible nightmare. I feel there is something missing, but it's not important; I just want to hold onto Rag.

"I just need to take care of the trash." Rag whispers, his form slowly shifting into a boy. I sniffle, holding back a giggle as Rag goes from being taller than me to a little boy. He gently hands me off to Serene who holds me close. Mini-Rag walks back to Calda.

I want nothing more than to leave this place and rest. I turn to Serene, but she's standing protectively in front of me. She watches with stony eyes, and endures her usual obsession at the sight of Mini-Rag.

I cautiously turn my attention to see Calda encased in stone. His expression wrought with fear and shock as if he knew who stood before him.

"You asked previously what the big deal is about Stretta?" Rag hisses, "They make monsters… Demon children like me!" Rag's blade flashes, catching the light in the rain.

Is he dead?

The dagger in Rag's left hand isn't covered in blood, though. I've seen Rag fight more times than I can count, but I'm still impressed by how swift he is.

Rag is preposterously strong, not only does he have physical fighting skill, but Sorcery too. He tosses his dagger into his right hand and sheathes it. He coldly stares at the unconscious Calda encased in the earth, the roaring waves and pouring rain return with a fury.

The other man, who had watched everything from the sidelines since the

beginning, sits in the mud in a stunned daze. He screams pathetically when he notices Rag's attention.

"Are you the one in charge here?" Rag asks.

"Ye—N-No, the Viceroy should arrive on the next…ferry."

"When will the ferry arrive?"

"It's l-likely very close…probably by tomorrow morning at the earliest because of the storm…"

"Then tell him everything this sleazebag did: setting the plantation on fire, raping women, his unwarranted aggression toward the villagers, and most importantly his unthinkable remarks about Stretta. Don't leave out a single detail, except for our presence. Understood?"

"Y-Yes, Sir!"

"Make sure you tie him up when you chisel him out, and toss him somewhere he can't escape."

"Yes, Sir!"

The man nodded to everything Rag said, like a tiny child listening to their father —which is an odd sight, since Rag is currently a child.

"Tell them to carefully pick the people they dispatch from now on, to keep this from ever happening again. Stretta will not tolerate export delays because you fail to treat the locals who know the trees with the dignity they deserve," Rag adds, gesturing to the unconscious bodies surrounding us.

I come to my senses when Rag turns his back on the man and approaches me. His expression lacks all emotion, but I have to admit I am proud he sought to ensure people like Calda will never be stationed in Verk again.

"We're leaving," Mini-Rag tries to say as he passes. Serene scoops him up in one fell swoop, suffocating him between her breasts so he can't scream.

I hesitantly nod and follow them, a tiny smile pulling at the edge of my lips. I look back at the house one last time; the other man is staring at Rag's tiny back in fear. His blank stare doesn't even register Serene's actions. It's still raining, but not nearly as hard. The sky is clearing over the ocean. I'm sure the rain will

stop soon.

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WE walk along the water's edge, waves lap at our mud-encrusted shoes. Serene finally let Rag go. He's childishly stomping through the water ahead, and throwing wary glances at Serene. As if the Perverted Woman will strike at any moment.

"Hey, are you sure it's okay for us not to keep an eye on Calda until the ferry comes?" I ask, kicking at the sand.

"It'll be fine," Serene says behind me. "Calda didn't seem to realize it, but the other man clearly did."

"Realize what?"

Serene's eyes narrowed on Rag's tiny back, not me. "Rag Evans," Rag stops when he hears his name, "I didn't think it was possible, but are you really *the* Rag Evans?"

"…What about it?" Rag snaps without looking back.

What's with the tense air between them? I've seen them argue more than get along, but this is the first time I've sensed an aura of killing intent. I had never felt it before. It's as if a life-or-death battle could erupt at any moment.

Rag Evans—I just learned Rag's full name. Does his name mean something to the people of Reveur?

"Why is the *Demon Child* that Stretta gave birth to in a place like this?" Serene asks.

Demon Child? For some reason, those words echo loudly in my mind. My heart thuds uncomfortably in my chest. There's a brief pause before Rag's answers her.

"I told you already: to be freed of this damn annoying curse."

"I highly doubt Stretta would easily let you roam free. Is that really the only reason?"

"Stretta isn't foolish enough to keep a Sorcerer who can't use his ability to its

full potential… What other reason is necessary?" Rag says self-derisively.

Serene falls silent. She watches him walk away until she notices me staring; she smiles. "Sorry about that. Let's go."

"Serene, what's all this about a Demon Child?"

I had to ask. Serene watches Rag's back recede into the forest.

"…I told you yesterday about how several Sorcerers from Stretta obliterated a single city, right?"

"Yeah."

"A young boy was among them—actually, you might even say that boy obliterated the city on his own. He had power beyond our understanding. I don't think Stretta even realized how powerful the child was. After what he did to the city, he became known as the *Demon Child*. The boy's real name was Rag Evans… the very man we travel with."

Rag destroyed an entire city? In an instant? Back home only a bomb of considerable power could accomplish that. Even then, I'm not sure it could erase an entire city.

I unknowingly grasp at my chest; my heart pounds in my ears.

"Stretta must favor him above anyone else. You can even say it's all thanks to him that their name was spread around the world. They were able to show that even a young boy in their care possesses the power to obliterate a city."

"Stretta created demons."

Leise's words repeat in my head.

"…Do you think Leise realized who he is?"

"She likely did. The thought crossed my mind when I heard his name too, but I didn't think Stretta would ever let him out of their sight."

"I…see."

Rag is a demon's child?

If what Serene says is true, Rag had the blood of thousands staining his hands when he was only a child. A frightening image, heightened by footage from

horror movies, forms in my mind—the image of the adorable boy he turns into standing in front of a field of endless corpses. The boy's face mimics Rag's expression as he glared at Calda earlier.

"Come on, we should go. I'm curious about how things went at the village."

"U-Um, Serene?" I call out to Serene, stopping her from following Rag. She looks at me. "You know, I think Rag probably…really regrets what he did."

Serene blinks at me, like what I said doesn't make any sense to her.

"I-I haven't known Rag for too long; he's always angry, and occasionally seriously scary, but…but I don't think he's coldhearted enough to be called a demon… That's why…you see…"

I have no idea what I'm trying to say. I just don't like hearing him called a *Demon Child*. I know nothing about the many people who have died because of him. I don't know the sadness of those who lost their loved ones. What I do know is the Rag of right now. Is it wrong for me to want to defend the man as I know him?

Serene may have lost those near and dear to her during the war as well. I'm suddenly too nervous to continue what I was saying. A hand softly rests on top of my soaked hair. She strokes my hair.

"Serene…you aren't angry?"

"What reason do I have to be angry? I was just wondering how that man would react if he heard what you said."

"P-Please no! Anything but that! He would definitely scold me again!" I say completely flustered.

Serene removes her hand and laughs aloud—I rarely hear her laugh so freely. "Hahaha! It's a joke. I won't tell him."

Well, that's a relief.

She smirks, "It does make excellent blackmail, though."

"Ah!"

Serene suddenly stops laughing, serious once more. "I don't know what he

thinks about what he did, but it's a fact many people fear and loathe him from the deepest and darkest parts of their being. You should keep that in mind as long as you continue to travel with him."

"…Yeah." I nod.

Serene's expression softens. "All right, enough of this. Let's get moving. You're going to tell Leise and the others what happened, right?"

"G-Good point. Let's hurry!"

Rag has long since left the beach. We sprint through the drizzle to catch up.

Rag is the only one who knows whether he regrets what he did in the past. Why did I believe he regrets it? Maybe I want him to regret it. Rag would definitely never admit regretting something, though. But perhaps that's why—a part of me wants to know what the small boy felt as he stood at the height of their world's bloodiest war.

Chapter 27 Verklärt's Song of Change

"RAG!" I catch my breath, finally matching his much shorter steps, "Thanks!"

"…Why do I have to hear your thanks?" His childlike tone does little to affect me. Mini-Rag is so much easier to handle.

His attitude annoys me, but I continue with a smile, "Because you solved all the problems! So thank you!"

Whatever he did in the past, his position as a Sorcerer from Stretta is what saved the day for us. I tried to do something as the *Silver Siren*, even though I had no guarantee it would help.

I shiver when I recall Calda's rage, and the other man as he fell steaming on the ground. What would I have done if I were alone? Could my abilities have won the day? Would I have ended up locked away in a cell at Calda's mercy, held responsible as a foreigner for burning down the plantation? Or would I have lost myself in my abilities and caused more havoc to Verk than even Renforcer has?

"I just couldn't stand the guy, or his minions."

I didn't expect him to say you're welcome, but I wish he'd at least look at me when he speaks.

"Oh, but was it okay for them to see the Silver Siren? I mean what I did back there must have made them fear me as the monster from the legends. You lied about there being an investigation, too."

"Sooner or later, they will investigate this country," Serene answers behind me.

"Why?"

"Remember what you did in Rubato? As that uncouth man said earlier, everyone present saw you saving Leise and her brother. It's normal they'd assume the *Silver Siren* and the *People of Darkness* are related somehow. You showing up here only confirms it. There are legends of the Silver Siren traveling

the land stirring up conflict wherever they go. You are merely fulfilling the legends as we know them."

"Ah, that makes sense… Will the *People of Darkness* be held responsible?" I reply as Serene hums with barely contained energy, hands darting for a paranoid Rag.

"No, there aren't enough left in Verk to punish without drastically reducing the exports. No one will risk that happening. At most they will be given a warning," Rag said, hopping out of Serene's reach as she made to snatch him up. "Go away," Serene chases after him, "PERVERTED WOMAN!"

I've been thinking only about myself, I never stopped to consider the aftermath of my actions in Rubato. I never plan ahead. No doubt, the city was in an uproar after we took off on Bianca. I still have a hard time believing I'm the center of all the commotion—even after using Song in surreal ways. To think there are actually legends, fairytales, of the *Silver Siren's* activities. How many Silver Sirens have there been before me? Did they lose themselves in their powers as well?

"But, the real problem is gonna be the fact a Stretta Sorcerer saved the *Silver Siren*," Serene says as she coldly stares at Rag's back several steps away from her.

Rag showed his Stretta identification to the soldiers when he entered Rubato—and our little commotion started not long after we went into the city. The soldiers must have put the pieces together that we caused the problems.

"G-Good point. I'm sorry, Rag! Will you be okay?"

Saving Leise and Laut was the right thing to do, but my foolishness may have caused more problems for Rag than I ever imagined. I'm worried about him.

"Just when I think you're thanking me, you apologize? You're a real troublesome one, aren't ya?" Rag complains, completely exasperated. He hops away from Serene who dashes at him with grabby hands.

"Ugh…" I apologize again. "I really am sorry… Um, will your position be affected when you return to Stretta?"

"Who knows? I don't concern myself with stuff like position or rank anymore,

but I do plan to go back and report. I'm sure the guys from Renforcer sent an emissary to Stretta by now," Rag says annoyed, although I can't tell if he's more annoyed with the emissary or Serene.

The gravity of the situation is summed up in a single word—*emissary*.

"You mean you're planning on going to Stretta after leaving Verk?"

"Yeah."

My heart races at the knowledge we're heading to Stretta after we're done in Verk. From everything I've heard I can only imagine Stretta as a facility for demons and inhuman trials.

"But who knows how many months it'll take to travel from here to Stretta," Serene interjects, clearly finding the idea distasteful.

"Wow, it's that far away?"

"Stretta is much farther north than Renforcer. I've never been there, but…"

"The far north… Sounds cold."

"Yeah, I've heard it's a frigidly cold region."

"Frigidly cold?" My face stiffens. What's the cold like in a country without electricity?

"A far more comfortable climate than this stuffy country," Rag says displeased with the heat.

Rag has been complaining about the heat since the moment he set foot in Verk. If he were raised in a freezing climate his whole life, it makes sense he would have a low tolerance to heat.

"If only they'd lend us Bianca again."

"Oh, good idea! I'll ask Leise!"

Bianca isn't the most comfortable transportation, but I'm willing to take the pain of her scales chafing against my legs for a few days over months of travel. She's faster and easier to deal with than commandeering a ship. Rag isn't complaining about it, so I'll take it he's not against the idea.

"But Leise probably can't leave the country anymore. I wonder whether Bianca

will listen to us without her," I say trying to figure a way around the problem.

"That's true… If Bianca won't work out, we could make the guys from Renforcer let us catch a ride on the ferry arriving tomorrow," Serene suggests.

"Nah, I rather not…" I say with a strained smile.

I'm not sure whether she's joking or not, but I'll be sick if I'm stuck on the same ship as Calda for weeks.

"Don't even joke about it. As if I'd ride the same boat with that sleazebag," Rag snarls. Apparently, we're of the same opinion for once.

"So cute…" Serene whispers, closing in on Rag during our conversation. Rag realizes just how close a second too late. Serene lifts him off the ground and clutches him to her chest like a stuffed animal.

"Perverted WOMAN!" his struggles are futile.

"Oh yeah, where did your sudden motivation to face Calda come from?" I ignore their usual banter, and ask the question that's been on my mind since the plantation.

Rag was against confronting Calda the entire walk through the forest. But the instant he saw the plantation he almost left us behind in an angry flurry to face Calda himself. Was the fire so unforgiveable to him?

"It's gonna be a real pain if they don't harvest enough Teteo," Rag says with a sigh.

"What?" I didn't expect that response at all.

"There's someone who's obsessed with food made by that fruit, and they'll make a scene if they go without it. That sleazebag did somethin' real unnecessary."

Is he talking about the sweets made from *Teteo* Leise told us about? *Teteo* really is a major export from Verk if it's that valuable in Stretta. From the way Rag's talking about the person, they must be close.

Is it someone in Stretta? I get the feeling it's a girl. Maybe Rag actually does have a girlfriend back home. Even if that's true, Rag's rage seemed to stem from something more than an angered friend. Although it's hard to tell when Serene is

happily squeezing the life out of him.

I shake my head—he won't tell me the real answer even if I ask.

"But I'm glad you came with us. Thank you so much for everything," I say smiling at Rag's struggling and Serene's expression of supreme bliss.

***

"YOU can see the village now," Serene says distraught; our walk back was much slower. Getting lost in the forest added hours to our trip back, giving enough time for Rag to revert to his adult-form, ruining Serene's fun.

I look past Rag to the village and the blackened plantation. We may have gotten rid of the problem with Calda, but the plantation can't be talked back into being healthy—it will take time for the trees to heal and be replanted. How much time will it take before the trees can produce the delicious *Teteo* fruit again? My anger grows toward the self-serving Calda who set the plantation on fire.

"I'm headin' back to the hut first," Rag says as we near the village perimeter.

"Why?" I ask in surprise.

Rag suddenly changes direction to the forest bordering the opposite side of the village.

"Why don't you come with us to see Leise and the—"

"Too much of a pain," he flat-out declines.

I blink several times in shock. Rag doesn't wait for me—he makes a beeline for the forest.

"B-But do you know how to get back? Won't you get lost again?"

"Don't put me on the same level as you… If something happens, I'll wake this guy up," Rag points to Boo under his hair, and hurries toward the forest.

I watch him leave in a daze.

"Leave him be. We can laugh at him to our heart's content if he gets back later than us."

"Y-Yeah… You just miss Mini-Rag." I say realizing Serene's lack of interest. She nods.

Rag's input would help when we explain things to Leise, but I guess that's asking too much from him. Serene and I set foot into Belebend. The smell of smoke lingers around the plantation as we pass—I try to endure the mix of emotions caused by the charred state. I spot Leise in the village square after leaving the plantation. I stop walking when I notice the group of people gathered around her.

"What's wrong? Aren't you going to tell her what happened?" Serene asks.

My legs won't move. From the sheer number of people gathered, it's likely all of Belebend's villagers are present. About fifty people surround her. The numbers are mostly made up of women and the elderly. I'm surprised by the very few young people I do see—the rest were sold into slavery. No doubt the mothers who fled Klar's hut last night are among the group.

Is it okay for me to wander into their group without introduction when I was the cause of all the commotion? I'm not sure I can take more people screaming at the sight of me. Was Leise able to persuade them?

"Ah!" someone suddenly shouts.

"Miss Kanon and Miss Serene are back!" a girl exclaims, pointing at us.

Everyone's attention instantly turns to us.

"You're right! It's Miss Kanon!"

"Welcome back!"

We're greeted by the children who sang with me yesterday. Some of the children I particularly remember are waving at us. Not a single person screams or flees at the sight of me. Serene plops her hand on my shoulder.

"Come on, let's go," she grins.

"Miss Kanon!" Leise shouts and dashes over.

"I am glad you are safe! I was so worried when the storm worsened!" she welcomes, relief etched into her features. Leise's expression instantly clouds the moment she notices Rag's absence. "Where is Rag…?"

"Oh, Rag is fine! Um, well…he's tired, so he went on ahead."

“I see.” Relief colors her face again, but her smile looks like it will be crushed under the weight of her own apprehension.

“You don’t have to worry about Calda anymore! Rag settled everything with him and his superior!” I say with a wide-smile.

“…How?” Leise asks, clearly having not expected things to go well.

I tell her everything: about how Calda really was the one who set the fire and how tomorrow morning he will be on the ferry back to his own home, and the next person dispatched in his place should be a better person. At least if Rag’s threats held any weight. I leave out my use of Song, afraid of further worrying her.

Her red eyes open wide in sheer amazement and disbelief. The greatest shock of all for her was how Rag intervened personally to such an extent.

“Rag did…?”

“Yup. Regardless of what he says, he took care of everything.”

Leise stares at the forest Rag vanished into. Is it just my imagination, or does she seem happy? Perhaps Rag didn’t want to come to the village because he’s shy—another thing I’d never dare ask him.

I look at the forest thinking how great it would be if Leise came to like Rag because of what he did for Verk.

I only now realize the rain stopped.

***

“OH yeah, Leise, did you tell the villagers about me…?”

“I did! Things are slowly coming together. I have already dispatched runners to some of the other villages in preparation for your visit. They are still a bit reluctant, but they understand you are not the monster they thought you were.”

I’m relieved, until I realize what she just said.

“Wait, other villages?”

“Of course, you didn’t think I had you come all the way here just to sing for a single tiny village at the edge of Verk’s territory, did you?”

“Ah…” I did think about what it would be like to be an idol on tour here, but that seemed too surreal. It makes sense she wants me to reach as many people as possible to soften their hardened hearts, though.

“Don’t worry; I’ll be with you the whole time.”

“Thanks! You really are amazing, Leise. The villagers truly trust you.”

“No, I am not. This was not due to my power alone,” Leise shakes her head and smiles as she glances at the villagers in the village square.

“It’s not?”

“The children joined me in persuading the adults. They tried their best to explain Songs are not the same as the dreadful horror stories of legend make them out to be.”

“The children did…?” A small light of hope flickers in my heart.

“Yes, the children have been waiting for you all day. They want to sing with you again, Miss Kanon.”

I’m so happy I’m speechless. The children wave their hands in wide-arcs when they notice my gaze.

“Now then, please come with me, Miss Kanon.”

***

LEISE’S authoritative voice echoed through the village square. The villagers chattered noisily among themselves when they heard about Calda. Some looked as if they couldn’t believe it, but the more they listened to Leise the more they accepted it as truth.

“You no longer have to live in fear of that man.”

The villagers broke into an uproar. Some of the villagers broke down crying, some cheered, and others hugged friends and children. My heart aches when I think of all the horrible things Calda must have put them through.

Leise and Wild, who is standing beside her, fondly watch the villagers as if their reactions are a remarkable sight. Leise never once mentioned Rag—likely to keep from starting another commotion.

“But Lady Leise, what are we to do about the plantation? Nothing will grow there now. We barely have any food left to eat,” an old man says, bringing the anxiety of reality crashing down on the villagers.

“We cannot turn back time to stop what has already occurred. Let’s start over from scratch. I will be visiting the other villages soon, and I will ask if they are willing to share their seeds. We will all have to endure some hardship for a while, but I promise I will do everything in my power to help. Let us work together as we get through this,” Leise answers brightly.

The villagers cheer.

“Lady Leise is right! Calda is gone! Let’s show Renforcer we can work together and bring about better results without a guy like him haunting our every step!”

“Yeah! There’s nothing agonizing about hard labor without that man breathing down our necks!”

Leise watches the villagers rejoice—a sense of satisfaction and pride emanating from her.

It’s not like Verklärt and Renforcer are on better terms now. The people sold into slavery won’t come back. But Leise and the people of this village regained some hope for the future, and that is an accomplishment in and of itself.

“Miss Kanon, this way.”

“Hm?”

“Please allow me to introduce you to everyone. Miss Serene as well,” Leise urges us forward.

I look up at Serene.

“I’ll refrain. It doesn’t suit me.”

“What? Then I don’t—” I feel everyone’s eyes on me as I was about to say it doesn’t suit me either.

“Sing for us again, Miss Kanon.”

I turn toward the familiar voice.

“Klar!”

Klar is standing in the square with the support of his friends. His complexion is a thousand times better than the last time I saw him—evidence he is getting better.

“I want to sing too!”

“Yeah! Me too! Come join us, Miss Kanon!”

“Let’s sing together!”

Heat rushes to my cheeks when the little children call out my name. Serene lightly pushes me from behind. I timidly walk beside Leise who directs me to the stump in the center of the square.

“I believe you all have realized this already, but this is Miss Kanon. This boy, Klar, regained consciousness thanks to her singing. She is also the one who went to confront Calda despite the danger. I am deeply indebted to her.”

I’m too embarrassed to look up. I’m certain my face is as red as a tomato.

“I brought Miss Kanon to our country to have everyone hear her sing… Miss Kanon, please sing once more for us. Sing the song you sang with the children.”

The children all shout, “Sing! Sing!”

I draw a blank because I wasn’t mentally prepared for this, but their innocent smiles eventually bring my courage forward.

“All right, then let’s all sing together like we did yesterday!” I say, nervously overlooking the group of villagers and their children from on top of the stump.

The children cheer and sing along with me. The adults were shocked when my hair changed color, but not a single person fled. Obviously, none of the adults joined me in singing, but I was overjoyed at the tiny smiles and slow movements to the rhythm I saw—no sign of fear ever crossed anyone’s face.

I will soon travel this country before leaving to continue my journey, but I have a strong feeling Song will continue to echo through all of Verklärt even after I’m gone.

Chapter 28 An Idol's Journey

"DIFFICULT! You thrive on making my life difficult!" Rag hissed as I revealed my plans to travel with Leise across Verk over the next week. Behind me Bianca stretches, the massive sacred snake of Verklärt listens to Leise as she whispers her instructions.

"I'm sorry! Leise doesn't think it will take more than a week to visit the major villages. We'll come right back after we finish!"

"I'm not wasting any more time traveling to places I know we won't find that scumbag!"

"Miss Kanon has given me permission to start teaching her how to work with Bianca. There is a chance she could learn to fly Bianca without my help…" Leise says nervously. I can't help feeling Rag is being manipulated, and it has nothing to do with the tiny smirk hidden behind her silver hair. I fight to keep back a giggle.

"…Can this girl really learn?"

"I have confidence in Miss Kanon!"

"I don't! It's not worth the delay! I'm not gallivanting across Verklärt on some hopeless mission!" Rag shouts with a tone of finality.

"Which is why you aren't coming," Serene's no-nonsense voice came from the forest's edge. Wild and Laut are a step behind her carrying supplies for our excursion.

"Huh?"

"Don't be foolish, I am more than enough to protect these two. Besides it's time for us girls to go on a vacation! I'm tired of constantly being in close proximity with a grumpy man. Just go do what you usually do, loafing around in the shade doing nothing. Well, unless you want to join us as that precious child. I'd always welcome him."

“FINE!” Rag yells and trudges off into the forest, obviously agitated. “Do what you want, but don’t expect me to save you!”

“So grumpy,” Serene says, eliciting a few giggles from Laut as they work together to load supplies onto Bianca.

“Rag will be okay, right? I feel bad making him wait, when he wanted to get to Stretta right away.”

“Grumpy will be fine, it’s only a week. If we get to use Bianca to travel to Stretta, flying will easily shave off months in travel time. It’s well worth the wait.” Serene’s words help to ease my worry. I don’t want Rag angry at me, but this is why I came to Verklärt. I want to help the people here as much as possible, even if that means putting off returning to Earth.

I watch from the sidelines as Wild and Leise work in unison to tie supplies to a neat harness on Bianca’s back. We are in the clearing we landed in when we first arrived in Verk.

“All set,” Wild says, taking a step back with Laut at his side.

“Thank you, Papa.” Leise smiles climbing onto Bianca’s back. Serene easily climbs on behind her. “Miss Kanon, come sit at the front, and I will get started with your lessons on how to takeoff.”

I hurry over, excited at the prospect of learning how to fly a mythical beast, when I still don’t even know how to drive a car. I search for a way to get on her back without help.

“Here, see these scales?” Leise says sliding down and showing how she easily climbs Bianca’s smooth scales.

“Like this?” my hand slips and I fall on my butt. “Oomph!” My face turns scarlet at the laughter I hear from Laut. Serene’s grin doesn’t help either.

“Laut!”

“Sorry, Sis and Miss Kanon.”

“No, it’s my fault.” I dust the dirt off and try again. This time, I make it in one go. I position myself in front of Leise who leans around my arm.

“Very good, now you rub Bianca’s scales like this, she really enjoys the

attention.” The low rumble from Bianca scares me at first, but after a while I associate it with the purr of a cat—well, a giant scaly cat that can fly and eat people whole.

“I will see you both in a week.” Leise says to Wild and Laut.

“Be careful. Watch over them,” Wild says meeting Serene’s gaze, I see her nod out of the corner of my eye.

“Okay, Bianca, let’s go.”

I hold back a scream as we ascend into the air at incredible speeds.

***

“LADY Leise! What an honor! We weren’t expecting you,” says an old decrepit man, leaning heavily on his cane. He’s obviously excited to see Leise. “Is everything all right?”

“Of course, is it possible to talk privately with my honored guests?”

“Yes, yes, right this way,” the old man wheezes and leads us through the crowd of villagers. Occasional glances of concern are directed toward Serene and I, but they instantly welcome Leise.

After some lessons in sending commands through touch to Bianca in the air, we made for the Village of Joz—the first stop in our journey. After landing Bianca in a nearby forest, Leise led us right into the middle of the village, where she asked one of the children to summon the village elder who was working in the fields with his people.

“It has been such a long time since we have had honored guests.”

Leise smiles, “Do not worry, Miss Kanon and Miss Serene are completely trust worthy. They are fully aware I am the Augur of Verklärt.”

The elder flinches before smiling once more. “True honored guests then. Please forgive me for my lack of sincerity in welcoming you to Joz.”

“Not worries,” Serene adds in from the back, “Just out of curiosity, should I hunt for our dinner, or—”

“No, no, I wouldn’t dream of letting the Augur’s guests hunt for food. We have

been preparing for a feast. Please, stay with us until this afternoon, and our quotas will be finished and we will throw a feast welcoming the Augur and her guests."

"I couldn't—" Leise started.

"Nonsense, only a few more hours, and you will enjoy the fruits of our yearlong labor to have this feast. The timing is perfect, too. Sir Calvri will not return for another two days, he and a group of soldiers are exterminating a nest of *Gufudu*."

"*Gufudu*?" I ask unable to help myself.

"Big-armed beasts with lots of teeth," Leise answers, "Very dumb, but dangerous in groups."

"Right you are. Sir Calvri has been keeping us safe beyond his duty. Truly I am gladdened for people like Sir Calvri who go beyond their duty to help us."

Leise frowns darkly, and I am sure my own features mimic hers. After Calda, I didn't think there were any good people from Renforcer.

"You have had no troubles with Renforcer's soldiers?"

"Not in the slightest, my Lady," the old man says hobbling past houses of much nicer construction than the ones in Belebend. He leads us to one of the houses, and pushes a wooden makeshift door open.

"Please have a seat." He waves to the nearby cushions, a luxury item I hadn't expected to see outside of Leise's hideout. "Now what did you want to discuss? I am always your servant."

Leise glances at me, and I blink before realizing she is about to reveal who I am.

"You see, I would like it if you could gather the villagers and any of the smaller villages nearby together here in Joz."

"Oh? Are we forming a rebellion?" The old man cackles rubbing his hands together. "Are these two secret emissaries promising supplies and troops for the return of the great Verklärt!"

Leise's eyes bulge, "What? No! NO! Definitely not!"

The old man waves unconcerned. “Ah, you can’t fault an old man for his fun and whimsical hopes.”

Serene giggles behind us, and I frown at both of them. A rebellion is way out of my league. I don’t want to suddenly become like the previous *Silver Siren* said to take out an entire kingdom.

Leise places a hand on her chest to calm herself.

“So who are our guests? Not that I mind having two lovely ladies in my home.” He winks at me and Serene.

“Oh, you old dog!” Serene says laughing. I turn away, hiding a crimson blush at his advance.

“Kahaha! I still have it.”

Taking a deep breath Leise looks at the old man, the serious image of an Augur in place. “I have come here to bring the gift of Song to the people of Verklärt.”

“Oh? Song? Been a long time since I heard the word; probably not since the Sirens disappeared. I thought they were all hunted to extinction.”

Leise shakes her head, “I have brought the *Silver Siren* to sing for us—” Leise stops as the old man’s eyes bulge and he collapses backward. I rush to his side, checking for a pulse, only to realize he’s unconscious.

“Well, that could have gone better,” Serene mumbles, a slight smirk on her face. Leise appears less amused.

***

“GUUH!” screams a Renforcer soldier as he slams into a well in the center of the village.

“How dare you!” another ran at Serene, only to find himself disarmed and smacked with his own sword on the rear. Serene twirls away laughing.

“You will have to do better than that!” Two more soldiers charge her.

I hide my face in shame as Leise calms the villagers—this is all my fault. We’ve hit nine villages in three days since we left Joz. Fortunately we haven’t caused any more village elders to pass out. Leise learned how to break it to the different

village leaders.

So here I was, standing in front of over thirty people, singing freely, silver hair and all, without a single scream, when without warning Renforcer's soldiers arrived. They too froze in place, until I finished my song, and tried to arrest me.

"Gaah!"

"Nope, too slow!" Serene says, sending the soldier into a trough sputtering, where he's helped up by another equally disarmed, abused, and knocked around soldier.

"Curse you, woman, we won't forget this!"

"Pft, why would I care, I'm just a mercenary for a Stretta inspector," Serene says waving toward me. I freeze, mind racing, only to remember Rag's bluff.

"That's right, I am here as a Fluxer under Rag Evans."

"…Huh?" The soldier who had his sword taken by Serene looks confused; one of his men whisper into his ears. It was almost humorous watching the man's eyes grow wider and wider with every passing second.

"I am so sorry! I was just told about your arrival. Is there any way we could just forget this ever happened?" The man all but pleads, falling to his knees.

Serene grins widely, "I don't know…"

"Please! We will do anything!"

"Well, strip off your armor, and leave everything here. Then forget we were ever here," Serene says with the biggest smile I have ever seen. "Wouldn't that be a suitable punishment?"

"Huh? Uh… Yes?" I almost feel guilty as I watch Renforcer's soldiers fall over themselves to strip their armor and run fleeing into the forest.

"Remember! We were never here!" Serene yells after them laughing as she pilfers their coin purses.

"Miss Serene," Leise says stepping up next to her, "remind me never to get on your bad side." I couldn't help but agree as chuckles and giggles could be heard from the watching villagers.

***

OUR journey was coming to an end. A week of travel on Bianca ended in a village near Belebend, so Leise could send Bianca home to rest before her next journey.

Leise taught me how to fly and communicate with Bianca during our short time together. After a day spent in the Village of Tamber, we made the rest of the way to Belebend on foot.

I could already make out Belebend in the distance, children were running toward us. A forlorn smile crept onto my lips. This would be the last of our trek. The final walk before we returned to Rag and the others, and then our journey to Stretta would begin. I'm not sure if I accomplished what Leise expected of me these past few days, but seeing smiles on the faces of people who have long since lost any hope is more than I personally could have ever dreamed of.

Chapter 29 A Country Illuminated Red

“WHAAT! You’re leaving us, Miss Kanon?” a boy exclaims, tugging on the hem of my jacket.

“I want to hear more songs!” one of the girls cries.

Truth be told, I actually want to teach these children more about music and different songs, but—

“I’m sorry. My time in Verk is ending; it’s time for me to return to my own journey. But I’m so happy you all came to love singing!” I grin. The children bashfully smile back.

“We’ll sing even if you’re not here, Miss Kanon! So you hafta come back to hear us once we’re better!”

“We’ll be better than you at singing by the time you come see us again!”

“Really? I look forward to it, then!”

I’m not sure whether I’ll ever return to this country, or even this particular village. I most likely will never come back. I am on a journey to find my way back to Earth; once I succeed I don’t expect to ever return. But I wasn’t lying when I said I look forward to hearing them sing.

A week has passed with me, Leise and Serene riding Bianca across Verk to spread Song to every village. Leise would start by introducing me, and I would sing to the crowds of old, young, sick, and healthy alike.

At first, the occasional Renforcer soldier would give us trouble, but after the officer Rag scared into submission spread the word that I was supposedly from

Stretta, the rest of the soldiers watched in the background. Serene's disposal of the only soldier to attack us might have had something to do with it too.

My time as an idol on tour—as I like to think of it—in Verk had come to an end, bringing me back to the village where everything began.

"Klar is recovering, but should be fully healed by your next visit!" jests the boy supporting Klar. Klar bashfully nods beside him. His healthy complexion is a sign he is on the road to recovery.

It's too bad Laut wasn't here for this, but I'm sure someday he will be able to play with Klar and the other children. I hope that's someday soon.

"Thank you very much, Miss Kanon. Everyone, why don't we say goodbye with a thank you?" Leise suggests.

"Thank you very much!" the children shout in unison.

The adults standing behind the children all bow their heads, tiny smiles adorn the *People of Darkness'* lips. Embarrassed, I frantically lower my head to them. Thus, the first village of Verk I ever saw was also the last. The children saw me off as I left the Village of Belebend.

***

LAUT welcomes us back at the tent with a beaming grin. Rag is already waiting for us under the shade of one of the larger trees; he looks as disgruntled as ever.

Breit is sitting down tending to some supplies without even a bruise marring his features, but the moment he spots us—or rather Leise—he instantly jumps to his feet and excitedly greets Leise after being apart for a week.

"You did well to come back safe and sound! Are you hurt anywhere? How were things with the different villages? Did you get a chance to see Klar? He is doing much better now. What in blue blazes happened with Calda? Rag would not speak to anyone since Kanon left," Breit asks in a rush of words, sending a glare toward Rag who ignored him.

I probably shouldn't laugh at him, but it's so cute how he worries about Leise. We explain everything that happened and caught him up on the events with Calda.

From his barrage of questions, it is obvious Rag told him nothing. There's no way Breit wouldn't have asked Rag when he came back. No doubt Rag blew him off and ignored him. We were in such a hurry to beat any possible reprisals from Stretta, Leise had rushed us to Bianca when we returned. Serene took only a few moments to notify Rag and pack our belongings.

By the time we finished telling Breit all that had transpired, he looked more drained than relieved. His expression seemed to change a hundred times over while he listened to us each tell our part.

"Truly, what a relief it is you are unharmed. If not for the pathetic state I was in at the time, I could have—I truly am a useless bodyguard, aren't I…"

"Yeah, get this, guys! Breit kept trying to drag himself toward one of the villages you were visiting, so I repeatedly told him if he went, Sis will feed him to Bianca."

"M-Master Laut! D-Do not tell her—Ugh," Breit's face contorts with embarrassment.

"Breit, I want you to think about your recovery first and foremost. I told you not to worry me further," Leise strictly scolds him. "Just because you are mostly healed now, doesn't change my instructions!"

"Y-Yes, Ma'am! You have my utmost apology!" Breit says on the verge of tears. He bows his head.

Her gentle expression once his head was bowed didn't escape me.

"You've finished chatting, right? Let's leave while it's still light out," Rag states before I get a chance to revel in our success. I could tell he's been annoyed since we got here, but still—he could feel something about saying goodbye. But he quickly tries to push the conversation ahead, "So, you don't have the gall to tell us to leave by ship now, right?"

"Of course not. I have every intention of asking Bianca if she will allow you to ride her again. That is one of the reasons I have been teaching her to get used to Miss Kanon," Leise says, to my relief. But she continues apologetically, "But I can no longer leave this country, and there is much I need my Father to do for me…"

"Ah, that's true. You have been working with the villagers to repair the burned

plantation too. I'm sure you will have a lot on your hands."

"I'll go!" Laut interjects.

"What are you saying, Laut! You will only cause problems for them," Leise instantly admonishes. Laut's jubilant expression crumbles. "Plus, you have Klar to help care for. And I have things I want you to do for me too, Laut."

"You do?"

"I want you to take on the role as my messenger to Belebend and maybe some of the other villages. I think it's time we have a stronger form of communication. I will need you to plot out new paths Renforcer doesn't know about."

"Lady Leise!" Breit shouts in a panic before Laut can respond. "You mustn't! Master Laut should not take on such a dangerous role! I should—"

"Breit. Did you already forget what I told you only moments ago?"

"No, not at all, but…"

"Laut, can you do what I am asking?" Leise asks again.

Laut hesitates for a moment before quietly saying, "Does that mean it's okay for me to go into the different villages?"

"Yes, it does. But just because Calda is gone and Kanon's songs may have had some effect on the different soldiers, does not mean it is completely safe for you. You must always be cautious."

Laut nods.

"And one more thing, I would be happy if you could keep me informed about any friends like Klar you make, and how they are doing."

Laut's face brightens at the mention of his friend and the thought of new friends. "Of course! I'll do my best!"

Leise smiles satisfied with his response. Breit hangs his head in pathetic dejection.

As the person with the most medical knowledge here, Breit of all people should be aware of his own limits. He should be proud he put his life on the line to protect the village and Leise. If not for him, things might not have started

changing for Verk.

Well, it's just like him not to be proud of what he accomplished, but be vexed over what he can't do. Good luck, Breit! I quietly root for Breit, when Rag sighs behind me.

"So? I take it the gigantic white lizard will listen without one of you guys present, right? Kanon isn't gonna get eaten along the way, forcing me to jump for it, right?"

Rag just called this country's sacred beast, Bianca, a *'gigantic white lizard'*…

I survey Leise and her family's expressions to see their reaction to his rude comment, but Leise only returns a soft smile.

"Yes, you will be fine. Bianca is very smart… Does Renforcer work as your destination?"

"No, we're headed for Stretta," Rag states.

Leise's face stiffens for a moment, but she quickly regains her smile, "Very well. I will ask her." Leise suddenly straightens and looks directly at Rag, "I am very grateful to you, Mister Rag… I may have been mistaken about Sorcerers. Please forgive my rude behavior until now."

She bows deeply.

"I don't remember doin' anything that requires you to treat me any different from when we first met," Rag dismisses and averts his eyes. He always ends in a quip when thanked.

She smiles at him. Warmth spreads through me. An Augur and a Sorcerer are getting along. The tense and suffocating air between them is, if not gone, much smaller than when they first met.

***

THE time to depart Verklärt has finally arrived.

"Thank you so much for everything you did, everyone!" Leise thanks us for the hundredth time.

We are currently in the deepest area of the forest, close to the shrine where

Bianca lives. I finish rubbing Bianca's neck, something I grew used to doing while traveling with her to the various villages across Verk.

Serene, Rag, and I mount Bianca's gigantic scaly back. Rag sits behind me as I take the front, and Serene is at the rear.

Bianca immediately shook, wings stretched out. She's isn't as intimidating anymore, although there's still a visceral fear every time I see her fangs. I swallow hard rubbing her scales, smiling when she rumbles contentedly.

Leise, Laut, Wild, and Breit all came to see us off.

"It was my pleasure! I was happy to be able to teach the children across Verk how to sing! I'm sure you still have a lot of hardship ahead of you, but don't give up! I hope if nothing else, the music I have brought will help aid you through the challenges that still lie ahead."

"We will always remember everything you did for us! Please stay well during your journey, Miss Kanon! I will be praying you find a safe way back to your world."

"Thank you!"

Leise and I grin; I can honestly say a friendship has developed between us. The week of traveling has brought us together in a way none of the friends I have back home will ever match. I am reluctant to leave the people of Verk. If I don't keep smiling, I might break down in tears. It's kind of sad to think we'll soon leave this sultry heat for the frigid cold of the North.

"Miss Kanon! I've decided!" Laut suddenly speaks up with determination.

"Decided what?"

"You once said how there used to be many countries in the same position as Verk in your world, right?"

"U-Um, y-yeah?"

I might have said something like that to him a long time ago. I don't really remember it, aside from the fact I rattled on based on worked up emotions. Laut's expression is quite serious. Leise, Breit, and Wild are staring at him with concern. Maybe what I said really struck a chord with him. Now I'm embarrassed

I can’t remember.

“You said the people of your world came together to protect what you called human rights, where all are equal?”

I nod—I kinda remember saying something like that.

Laut continues with a wide grin, “In that case, I’m sure the day will come where the people of our world will work for similar freedoms for people everywhere and not just those in Verk!”

A wide grin pulls at my lips, “Yes! Yes! I’m sure one day your world will find some commonalties that stretch across borders!”

“That’s why I’m thinking I’ll study all about this world, become super strong like Dad, and then when I’m old enough, I’ll absolutely bring change to this country!” Laut declares confidently.

Leise’s eyes mist. Wild places a hand on his son’s shoulder. Laut looks up at him and smiles sheepishly.

Wild slowly turns toward us—toward Rag. “I hated Sorcery. I believe it removes the feeling of having to kill someone with your own hands.”

Rag had been ignoring the conversation until then, but Wild’s words caused him to look up from behind me. I can’t read his emotionless expression. The suspense kills me during the quiet pause until Wild continues.

“But it appears even Sorcery is capable of healing people. Just like my little girl…and her mother…” Wild looks fondly at his daughter. He has the look of a man who sees his wife in his daughter.

Rag says nothing; he merely stares at Wild. Breit is the one who frantically speaks up.

“Oh, yes! This is long overdue, I forgot in all the mayhem of Lady Leise, Kanon, and Miss Serene’s departure, but thank you very much for healing me! Thanks to you I am alive,” Breit lowers his head.

Laut speaks up before Rag can answer. “Aaah! Right, Mister Rag! I have one last favor to ask!”

“Huh?”

Laut, not knowing fear, stares at Rag with a twinkle in his eyes. “Can you let me pet Boo before you leave?”

I forgot Laut has wanted to touch Boo since he first found out about him—and Boo fled at his attempts. Boo is sleeping in Rag’s coat pocket.

At first he was sleeping upside-down under Rag’s ponytail, but Rag gently pulled him off and plopped him into his long coat’s pocket before mounting Bianca.

The three of us had changed into the warmer clothing we were wearing when we arrived in Verk. Flying without walls or something to block the frigid air is going to be hard enough as it is—at least warmer clothing will offer some meager protection from the elements.

What will Rag do? He’s frowning, yet—

“…Don’t wake him up,” he says, pulling Boo out of his pocket and gently lowers him over the side of Bianca for Laut to pet.

Laut beams at the fluffy white body with obvious jubilation; I keep my mouth shut. He must have really wanted to pet him. Laut can be childlike at times, but he occasionally shows a mature side and has a courageous personality. I’m sure he can overcome whatever obstacles get in his way on the path to changing his country for the better.

“Come now Laut, finish petting Boo,” Leise urges.

Laut must have had his full, because he immediately nods and slowly steps away.

“Thanks, Mister Rag! He’s super cute!”

“Yeah,” Rag quietly mutters and places Boo back in his pocket. “Let’s go,” he says, kicking Bianca’s sides as if she were a horse. I glare back at him, rubbing her scales. One does not infuriate the giant flying snake, especially when at her mercy in the air. No, now that I think about it, no one should ever irritate a giant snake.

“Bianca, please take care of them,” Leise says, gently patting Bianca’s neck. Bianca responds by sticking out her red tongue and stretches her large wings.

“Stay well, you guys. Oh and Leise, your cooking was delicious,” Serene says.

“Thank you. Please be in good health as well, Miss Serene!”

I strain my ears to listen to their comments through the torrent of wind kicked up by Bianca as she explodes into the air. I frantically try to think of what to say before we leave. But the wind swirls up a small twister of dirt and brush, making it impossible to keep my eyes open. I can tell Bianca is ascending into the air with her usual grace and speed.

“L-Leise!”

“Miss Kanon! Truly, truly, thank you so much! I will never forget about you for the rest of my life!” Leise’s shout cuts through the intense wind.

“Me either! I absolutely won’t forget! Leise, everyone, stay well!” I shout through my tears.

A deep and wide forest stretches out below us. I can no longer see Leise. Instead, I see an ocean dyed the same red color as the sky, and a tiny dot where the Village of Belebend stands.

In this moment, I thought the color red truly suits the country of Verklärt. They call the citizens of Verklärt the *People of Darkness*, but just as Leise’s eyes are red, I think red is a far more suitable color.

“Let’s go as far as we can before stopping. Hold on tight so you don’t fall off.” I shout in warning to Rag and Serene.

Tears stream from my cheeks as Bianca picks up speed, catching a wind current to ascend higher. The time I have spent in this country has greatly changed my image of everyone, especially Rag. I’ve learned a lot about him, and there is much more to him than meets the eye.

Not long ago, I thought he was just a scary, confident, coldhearted man. I giggle as I stare out into the sky, wind in my face. I’m certain I’ll learn all sorts of things about him and many others during my time in this world. Perhaps I will learn about this world as well.

I have the sense I will learn a lot at our next destination—Stretta…the land of Demon Children and Sorcery.

“Oi, it’s all great and well that you suddenly made us fly off, Rag, but I’m getting hungry here. Land somewhere and feed me,” Serene shouts smacking Rag from behind.

“~~YOU GLUTTONOUS WOMAN! Learn some restraint, would you!”

“Calling me a gluttonous woman is rude. At least call me a gourmet. I command thee mighty Sorcerer to call up some fish from the sea below.”

“I DON’T CARE EITHER WAY! AND DON’T ORDER ME AROUND! At any rate, we’re going until we can’t take it anymore! I wanna hurry and find that scumbag and be released from this horrible curse!”

“Hahaha, are you daydreaming? I told you I will go to any lengths to stop you from doing that. Yup, I think we should stop for lunch. I say fish. And dinner with fish. And a snack with more fish. Oh and while we’re at it, why don’t we stop at an inn and take a niceeeeee long nap on a comfy bed?”

“GAAAH!”

The fight behind me seems like it’s going to continue for a long while. I smile dryly, taking in the sky in all its glory as the two argue.

In the distance the continent of Verklärt is glowing a deep ruby red in the evening sun. What new adventures await us in Stretta? Well, as long as I’m with Rag and Serene, we can overcome any obstacles.

Afterword

Hello everyone, I'm the author, Kairi Aragusuku.

Thank you for picking up a copy of *My Favorite Song~ The Silver Siren~* Volume 1. I started releasing the story in serialized format in Japanese on my own website in 2006. I wrote at my own slow pace until now, with February 26, 2016 marking the story's ten year anniversary. I'm honored and overjoyed by the opportunity to have the story translated and published in English during this very special year. I was granted this space to write to the English readers, so I would like to use it to tell you a little more about *My Favorite Song~ The Silver Siren~*.

"A snake will appear if you whistle at night"—this is one of the superstitions in Japan (and maybe other countries believe in a similar superstition, too). The superstition of what will appear in front of you changes depending on the region of Japan; in some regions it's a snake, and others claim it's a ghost. Either way, it's been long purported that whistling at night is ominous.

Then what would happen if there was a world where singing was reputed to be ominous, and the heroine of a story ended up in that world? Ah, that could be interesting! Is what I thought about ten years ago, and this idea became the basis for my story.

At the time I wanted to write a fantasy story about singing, so I threw all the character types I loved into a world where singing is ominous, and that's how *My Favorite Song~ The Silver Siren~* came about.

The characters are cram packed with characteristics I love. For example, the main hero Rag despises troublesome situations, yet always ends up getting involved somehow, and falls under the so-called pessimistic type. For some reason, I have always had a thing for characters I can torture with stomach pain from all they have to deal with…

Serene is the epitome of what I admire in a female character. She is a strong, skilled, cool, and mature woman. To top it off, she has an exquisite body, and a great style. But in all actuality... she has the biggest gap in personality among all the characters, haha. I feel like she's the source of the story's comedy.

And then there's the mysterious young man, Ernest. I thought a fantasy story must have a character like him. He's Rag's greatest enemy, and the key man in the story.

Next there is Boo, the story's mascot. Boo's inspiration comes from the Honduran White Bat species that lives in the dense forests of Costa Rica. Look them up! They are adorable!

Last but not least, is the heroine Kanon. She definitely does not sing better than the average person on Earth. But she *loves* to sing. I made her a normal high school girl hoping that would make her easier to empathize with.

When I was offered the chance to publish overseas with *Cross Infinite World* I was filled with happiness and worry. Will this story be well-received overseas? My heart races with anticipation as I write this afterword. I doubt my excitement will ever die down, even after the book is published.

Do you have a favorite character? What was your favorite scene? I would love to hear your thoughts, so feel free to send any fan mail to Cross Infinite World at Contact@crossinfworld.com

I'm deeply indebted and grateful to the people at Cross∞World and Charis Messier for picking up my work for translation. I am also grateful to the lovely artist Ako Tenma who drew my characters in such a charming way. I'm grateful to my friends and family who have warmly supported me. And last, but certainly not least, I want to thank everyone who reads my story.

Volume two sets the stage in a land to the far north. New characters with deep ties to Rag will finally show up! I hope to see you all again in Volume two!

新城かいり

Kairi Aragusuku