Sora Hinokage

Illustrator: Tsukasa Kiryu



Stuck in a Time Loop

When All Else Fails, Be a Villainess

Sora Hinokage

Illustrator: Tsukasa Kiryu



Stuck in a Time Loop

When All Else Fails, Be a Villainess

Stuck in a Time Loop: When All Else Fails, Be a Villainess Volume 1 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9


Sora Hinokage
Illustrator: Tsukasa Kiryu
Stuck in a Time Loop
When All Else Fails, Be a Villainess

All things must come to an end. Over time, everything deteriorates and, eventually, crumbles. Living things can't escape the inevitable end of their lifespans. But endings aren't always a bad thing.

Knowing there's an end means you can live every day to the fullest. Since tomorrow isn't promised, you try your best today, and in that way, you give everything you have to every second of every minute of every day.

Death has a very important role to play—to make life shine.

But what if there *isn't* an end?

Let's say you had to repeat the same days—the same life—over and over again. Let's say that no matter what you did or what you thought, the next day would come no matter what. And the next day, and the next. What if you knew that it would go on forever like that? Would you really be able to live your life always doing the right thing? I bet that would be pretty difficult.

I certainly wouldn't be able to do it. And that's because I know that while *living* is simple, *dying* is much, much more difficult.

Prologue: My Tenth Time Loop

“This place *again*?” I muttered with a sigh. I stood inside a burning house, surrounded by flames with no way out. The ceiling looked like it would collapse at any moment. And if that happened, I’d get squished flat as a pancake. Well, I wouldn’t survive that long anyway.

“Nngh... Haah...” Crimson blood flowed from my belly, darker than the flames. The wound hurt so much that I couldn’t even feel the heat of the fire. I could never get used to this pain, no matter how many times I had experienced it. Pain was pain, after all.



That's right. This wasn't the first time this had happened to me. This was the ninth time now that I would die, suffering, in agony.

"But...why...?" Why had this happened?

I was stuck in a loop, repeating the same time period over and over again, and I didn't know why. The first time I had experienced the time loop was incredibly exciting. I had been a bit bewildered, but my overriding emotion was happiness. I couldn't accept my death, and I remember thinking how I had wanted a chance to do it all over again. So when my wish was granted, I had thought it might be some kind of miracle.

But then it happened a second time, and a third, and by the fourth time I had begun to grow frightened. Because no matter how many times I had repeated it, I couldn't escape this painful death. Every time I would tell myself, "Next time will be different!" but it wasn't. The outcome never changed. Without fail, I ended up dying a painful death. There was no happy ending waiting for me. And if that was my fate, then I just wished this hell would hurry up and take me.

But *that* wish wasn't granted.

"How long is this going to continue...?"

I felt myself fading. I was starting to feel the pain in my stomach less and less—death was swiftly approaching. In a few seconds, I would die. And if I died here, that meant I'd wake up in that same place, once again. I was sure of it. I mean, this was the *ninth* time this has happened to me. At this point, It didn't take a genius to figure out that death wasn't the end.

"If I just...have to keep on...repeating this..."

Then why didn't I just live my life the way I wanted?

In my last moments, this was my strongest thought. No matter how much I wished otherwise, I couldn't escape from this endless cycle of pain. Someone always ended up killing me. I did my best to always smile and be friendly, so people wouldn't hate me—so people wouldn't kill me. But nothing ever changed.

Worrying about every little thing other people said and did was exhausting. It

was *my* life, and yet it felt like someone else was always pulling the strings. And I was sick of it.

That's it. I've decided. I'm just giving up.

I'm going to stop being so considerate of other people, and I'm going to stop fearing death. I'm going to live my life the way I want to live it on my tenth time loop. And I'm going to survive until the end of my life, and I'm going to get my happy ending. That's my wish.

And I won't let anyone stand in my way.

I didn't care if I had to get my hands dirty in order to do it. I *had* to beat this time loop. Because when I did, I'd finally get the thing I've been wishing for all this time—my ending.

♦ ♦ ♦

I was submerged deep, deep down in a body of water. My back hit the bottom, then all the water rushed into me at once. It was the feeling of awakening after coming back from the dead.

I was about to start all over again.

I regained consciousness. I was standing still, my eyes closed. All around me, I could hear the lively sounds of a party. I knew that when I opened my eyes, he would be standing right in front of me.

"Selene."

It was my fiancé, Lord Etoile Weldon. He was someone that loved to smile, but right now he looked glum.



I'd had enough of that face. And I knew what he was going to say next. The time loop always began this way, in this place.

"I've got something important to tell you. Will you hear me out?" He asked me.

I stared at him silently.

"Honestly, I..."

"You want to marry Soleil and call off our engagement, right?"

"Wha—?" Etoile was terribly shocked that I beat him to the punch. And the mood among the smirking onlookers—those who knew what he was going to say—immediately changed. "How did you...?"

"Yes, how indeed? Perhaps you should use your beloved Astromancy to figure it out?"

"But, I..." Etoile trailed off.

"I'm only joking. I know very well that you can't do that," I said reproachfully, my voice full of venom. How did I know? Well, how could I *not* know after hearing the same lines repeated over and over again? But of course, they wouldn't understand that.

"Are you done, then?" I said. "If so, I'll take my leave."

"W-Wait, Selene! Where do you think you're going?"

"Why do you care? I'm not your fiancée anymore, am I?"

He hesitated, looking down. It seemed he had nothing else to say.

Why did he try to stop me? Well, I'm sure it was nothing important.

I let out a little sigh and turned my back to him.

"Goodbye. Best wishes to you and Soleil."

And so marked the beginning of my tenth life, stuck in this time loop.

♦ ♦ ♦

I still didn't know why I had to keep repeating this cycle over and over. By this point, though, I was fairly sure I'd figured out its structure. The loop had a fixed

starting point, and I always returned to it.

Now that Etoile had broken off our engagement for the tenth time, I hated his guts. A long time ago I would've been shocked, but now it was refreshing. Familiarity is a frightening thing; my memories carried on from one time loop to the next. The single most important thing I'd discovered was that death did *not* end the loop. It didn't matter how I died, or the circumstances surrounding my death. If I was killed, died in an accident, or committed suicide, nothing changed. Even if the place and time of my death differed, the end result would always be the same.

I'd tried all kinds of things in previous loops. When I'd chosen to kill myself and didn't escape the cycle even then, I was absolutely brokenhearted. No matter how I died, I kept finding myself in this time loop. After that, I became completely apathetic and wasted an entire cycle.

"Looking back on it now, that really was such a waste," I said to myself. I shouldn't have just given up. I should've tried everything I could. Every time I went through another cycle, the time loop would chip away at something deep inside me anyway. But after killing myself and still returning, I just couldn't stay calm and keep trying. I gave up because I thought I had no choice.

"Here we go..." I arrived back at my manor. It was the second-largest residence in the royal capital, and even though it was supposed to be my home, I always felt like I was entering someone else's house. I wasn't welcome here.

Usually, when a noblewoman returned to her manor, she would be received with a greeting. But it was already highly unusual that I walked home instead of taking a carriage.

I was used to this kind of treatment even before *the time loop...*

"What are you doing here?"

"Father..."

I ran into my father as I passed through the manor entrance. It was unusual for him to be here at this time of day. This hadn't happened in any other time loop.

"What about the party?" Father asked.

“It was boring, so I left.”

“What did you just say?” His expression tightened. He seemed to already be irritated, and my smart reply had only made matters worse. “Did I misunderstand you? I could’ve sworn you just said it was *boring*?”

“You heard me correctly. In my opinion, it was an *incredibly* boring party.”

“You...”

“You already know everything, don’t you, Father?” I knew that my father was aware that Etoile had planned on breaking off our engagement to marry Soleil instead. And that was only natural—he was my father and the current head of the Vixent family.

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, don’t act like you don’t know. Not that it matters...to either of us.”

“Selene, did you hit your head? I think you’ve forgotten yourself.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve experienced far more painful things. And because of those experiences, I’m wide awake now.”

“What...are you talking about?” He repeated.

I was sure my sudden change in behavior was surprising to my father. He was staring at me in disbelief; I’d never shown even the slightest hint of rebellion before. But perhaps since he was already bothered, my attitude only made him angry.

“Well it certainly looks like you’ve hit your head. It’s time to discipline you again.”

“No need. I don’t want anything from you. And I have no intention of doing your bidding any longer.”

“How dare you! I’ll make it so that you never speak to me in that tone ever again!”

Father activated his power, Sun. He brandished his right hand, and a gleaming ball of light formed above it. “This is going to cause more than just a scratch. If you’re going to apologize, I suggest you do it now.”

“Ha. That’s my line,” I said. “You’d better stop unless *you* want to get hurt yourself.”

“Is that so? Then I’ll just have to teach you a painful lesson, like always!”

Father released the ball of light, attacking his own daughter without hesitation. I hated that about him, and that was why I had no qualms about dealing with him.

“What a weak light.”

“Wha—? Impossible!”

My Shadow swallowed the bright ball of light Father had released, erasing it in an instant. He looked absolutely stunned at the turn of events.

“How do you have a power of protection?! And—is that Shadow?!”

“The opposing power of your Sun.”

“Wh-Why, it can’t be! You were awakened and not Soleil? And to the power of Shadow, of all things!”

“It certainly looks that way. So sorry things didn’t work out how you planned, Father.”

In this kingdom, there were six families that—besides the royal family—wielded the most power. One thing all six families had in common were the powers of protection.

One of those families was mine, the Vixents. Our family’s inherited powers were that of the Sun and Shadow. The other families only had one power, but for some reason, the members of my family would inherit either Sun or Shadow. That being said, in the history of our family, only one person had ever inherited the power of Shadow.

And since that person gave birth to a tragedy, the ability was always seen as a sign of great misfortune.

“What’s going on? It’s bad enough that you’ve inherited any powers at all!”

“Afraid of what will happen once I learn the ways of the world, Father?” I asked him. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Why are you laughing?! What’s so funny?!”

“Heh heh. Hmm, I wonder?”

In a previous time loop, my father had discovered I had latent powers and hid that fact from society. Shadow was abhorred because of its symbol as an ill omen. If word got out that the power of Shadow, not Sun, had been inherited by the current generation, my family would face a very chilly reception indeed.

The preferential treatment they were given for being wielders of the power of protection would be shaken. And so my father had isolated me in the mansion and wouldn’t allow me to go outside, hoping and praying all the while that my younger sister Soleil would awaken to the power of Sun instead.

“Selene... How long have you been able to use that power? Who else knows?”

“Only you, Father.”

“I see. Good. Selene, under absolutely no circumstances are you to leave this mansion!”

“I refuse,” I replied coolly. Father’s eyes practically bugged out of his head with shock. He was having quite the surprising day. Perhaps he just couldn’t believe how I’d just changed. He probably never even dreamed this would happen. Not once had he thought about how much I had put up with. How one day, I might not be able to take it anymore, and finally explode.

“Tch... Do you have any idea what you’re saying?”

“That’s what I’d like to ask you, Father. You don’t have any right to keep me here.”

“Nonsense! You are my daughter and I am head of this household!”

“Not anymore.”

Among the six families with inherited supernatural powers, there was a condition for being the head of house. Gender, age, birthplace, and even personality didn’t matter. Only this one condition was enough to determine it: they *must* have inherited the family’s ability.

“As you can see, I have inherited our special ability. Therefore, I have the right to become head of house.”

“I don’t care about rights! I’ll never accept it! I am the current head of house!”

“Unfortunately, your opinion doesn’t matter, Father,” I said, “because you’re growing weak.”

“Wh-What?!”

Each family’s supernatural abilities were passed down from parent to child. If the child’s ability grew powerful, that would in turn weaken the parent’s own power. And when the child’s power matured, the parent would lose theirs completely.

“Your attack just now was laughable. That’s proof that the power has transferred to me and yours is now fading. Powerless weaklings have no right to call themselves head of house.”

“Heh. Heh heh. I see. Apparently you just don’t understand!” Father shouted.

A bright light emanated from his body. The temperature in the room skyrocketed due to the power pouring from him. “Did you really think that attack was at full power? I went easy on you because you’re my daughter!”

“That’s amusing, seeing as how you’ve never considered me your daughter before.”

“Selene! You... No, I’ve had enough. Now that you’ve developed powers, no options are off the table! I shall confine you to the cellar!”

“Terribly sorry, but that just won’t happen.”

I used to think Father’s glow was beautiful—a divine radiance. But not anymore. Now Father’s light was nothing more than an eyesore.

I no longer needed a dazzling light. I wanted it gone.

“Be consumed by the light, Selene!” Father cried.

“No, Father,” I replied. “*You* shall be the one who’s consumed.”

The stronger the light became, the darker and stronger my Shadow was, a jet-black vortex sucking in all the light around it. Even the brilliance of the sun was powerless in the face of perfect darkness.

“Seal the light—Shadow Cage!”

Father's Sun power melted its surroundings using heat. The energy created by highly compressed light was tremendous; it had the force to destroy fearsome monsters with a single blow. It was the strongest of all the supernatural powers, and it was the one that could most greatly impact the other forces.

But even that power could be consumed by mine.

A shadow stretched out by my feet. It rose and swelled, expanding as it sucked in the light. In the blink of an eye, Shadow had enveloped the mansion and devoured Father's light.

"I-It can't be! How can Shadow consume Sun?!"

"I told you how. My power is stronger than yours. Your light is too faint before me, Father."

Shadow reached Father's body and smothered the rest of his light.

"D-Damn it!" Father cursed.

"Did you know, Father, that the power of Shadow has the ability to consume all other powers?"

"S-Stop it!"

"I'm going to take every last bit of power you have."

"Stoooooooooooop!"

Even Father's screams were absorbed by Shadow. His face twisted in pain.

But you know, Father—you did the same thing to me. You tortured and killed me before.

"My power... My power..." Now that I had stolen his power and he was reduced to nothing, he crumpled, falling to his knees.

"How pathetic. But think about it—being powerless is better than being murdered, isn't it?"

"Y-You bitch... Are you insane?! Do you really think you'll get away with this?"

"Yes, I do. Because *I'm* the head of house. I don't need *your* permission for anything. Starting today, you will ask for *my* permission, Father."

I came closer and looked down upon him. I didn't feel an ounce of remorse. I didn't care that he was my father and that I had done this to him. If anyone heard about what happened today, I'm sure they would say I was a terrible person.

But I just *didn't care*. There was no way anyone could understand. How could anyone, after all, be expected to get along with their murderer?

Of course, this man wasn't the sole source of my previous deaths. But I would still spare no mercy for someone who would kill his own daughter.

"Selene..."

"What is it, former head of house who happens to be my father?"

"Bitch!"

He drew the sword hanging at his hip, expression filled with malice. The blade seemed to shine with the desire to kill me.

I laughed mockingly and brushed it away with my right hand, which was cloaked in Shadow. "It's no use. You can't hurt me as you are now."

"D-Damn it!"

"You still won't give up, hm? Well then, I've no choice."

It didn't matter who it was; if they insisted upon getting in my way, I would stop at nothing, especially if I was destined to be in this murderous loop forever. After all, it's kill or be killed, right?

I manipulated Shadow to coil around Father's body and bind it. Powerless as he was, it was quite simple.

"Argh...!"

"You really are so weak."

♦ ♦ ♦

"P-Please stop, Father! Why are you doing this to me?"

It had been my fourth time loop. My father had confined me to the mansion's cellar. He'd locked me inside there immediately after he found out I had come into my power. One day, he had suddenly barged in and tried to kill me.

“This is all your fault!” Father had yelled. “It’s because of you that Soleil’s power hasn’t awakened! If not for you, I’m sure she would have her powers!”

“Wh-What? It’s not my fault!”

“Silence!” His shouts had rumbled throughout the cellar. But I was the only one who could hear them. I had to bear his screams, his anger, and his malice, all on my own. “It *is* your fault! It’s your fault because you were born!”

“Father...”

The reason he had been angry with me wasn’t only because I had inherited our family’s power. The other families had already begun to shift authority to the next generation—only the Vixent family lagged behind. The royal family and the other nobles must have harassed him about it. We were not allowed to let our powers die out. That, paired with his always-present frustration with me, only intensified his abuse.

“You make me sick,” Father had said. “My life’s in shambles, and it’s all because of you!”

Cruel words.

As I listened to my father lament his fate, I couldn’t help but think that truly, I was the one who had been ruined.

“Now die.”

“Father... Don’t I mean anything to you?”

“You’re nothing but a stain,” he had said. “You should have never been born!”

♦ ♦ ♦

If I had tried to fight back, I think I could’ve done it. At that time, I had awakened to my power, and I knew that my father’s own power had weakened. But I was naive. I never thought my father would actually kill me. Even though he was angry, I thought deep down he still loved me.

“I was foolish to have ever trusted you.”

“S-Stop it! Selene, I’m your...”

“Father? Yes, I know that, unfortunately. And so what of it? Just because

you’re my father, that isn’t a good enough reason to stop me.”

“Wh-What...are you...? Urgh...” He let out a pained groan. If I strangled him for a little longer, he’d die. And I knew if I killed him right then and there, I wouldn’t feel a thing. In fact, I expected his death would herald some new changes. There was absolutely no reason for me to hesitate.

But it was a clear voice that stopped me.

“P-Please wait, sister!”

“...Soleil.”

She rushed over to our father, tears in her eyes. She stood between me and him and spread her arms out wide. “Please stop, sister! Don’t be so cruel to Father!”

“Why not?” I said.

“Because he’s our father!”

“I know that. I’ve known that for longer than you. You don’t have to tell me that.”

Soleil Vixent was my little sister, and unlike me, was the child of my father and his legal wife. He absolutely adored her. He treated her the exact opposite way he treated me. Blessed with a bright, cheerful personality, Soleil was loved by everyone who met her. I’d envied her so many times I couldn’t even count.

My mother was Father’s mistress. She was not a noble, but a commoner. My father had a purely physical relationship with her, and so having a child with her had never even crossed his mind. He was horrified when I had been born.

My mother had been frail and reportedly died right after giving birth to me, leaving me with Father. To cover up his shameful indiscretion, he lied and told everyone I was his wife’s child. I think when I was young, he had been kind to me. But everything changed once my sister was born.

Once Soleil arrived, I became nothing more than a hindrance. Back when the servants had no idea I was the child of Father’s commoner mistress, they all treated me politely. But their attitudes drastically changed once they found out the truth.

It’s funny how things could be so different, just because of who my mother was. Why did this have to happen to me? I always had difficulty accepting the fact that Soleil was treated more favorably than me. But...

“What’s wrong with you?” Soleil asked. “You’re not acting like the kind sister I know!”

“Kind, hm?”

I just couldn’t bring myself to hate her.

After all, she’d done nothing wrong. She had never intentionally tried to wrong me, and she didn’t dislike me. She just behaved the way she thought she should.

She didn’t have a mean bone in her body. She purely adored me, in her own way. In all the other loops I had acted like a kind older sister in front of her, and I didn’t dislike it.



But still...

“I’m sorry, Soleil,” I said. “But I’m different now.”

“Sister?”

“I’ve taken over as head of house.”

“You have?”

“Yes. You saw my power just now, didn’t you? Shadow’s power.”

I’d decided that I was going to live for myself, as I pleased. I didn’t dislike Soleil at all, but if she insisted on getting in my way, then I needed her to know that I was not, in the end, kind. I had become a fearsome and terrible villainess. I wanted her to understand who I really was. I manipulated Shadow to take the form of a gigantic monster.

“S-Sister...!”

“Soleil. If you don’t want to get hurt, then don’t get in my way.”

She said nothing.

“Selene, you bitch! Don’t you dare touch Soleil!” Father glared at me, still bound.

I let out a sigh and released Shadow from him. He doubled over coughing. “I saved your life, Father. I’ll indulge Soleil and let you live this time.”

“Grr... Selene!”

“But there won’t be a second chance,” I said, every word dripping with hostility. “If you interfere in my affairs again, I *will* kill you.” That was his first and last warning, and if he didn’t heed it, then I would finish the job I had started.

Now... I’d finished all there was to do here. It was time for me to take my leave. I turned my back on them.

“W-Wait!” Father cried out. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“To the party. I remembered that I have something to do.”

“What?”

“Well, I’ve become head of house, haven’t I? I need to tell everybody!” I smirked at him. He threw out his right hand, frantically trying to stop me.

“N-No, you wait!”

“Bye for now, Father.”

I ignored his pleas and disappeared into the shadows.

♦ ♦ ♦

The party was ongoing, the commotion I’d left behind lingering in the air.

“Why do you think she reacted that way, Etoile?” one of the nobles asked.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Etoile replied. “I’ve never seen her like that before.”

After Etoile explained what had happened, the nobles surrounding him looked perplexed. They had expected me to be sad or flustered. Though I had been born to a wealthy family, just as they had, they had always thought they were better than me.

But I hadn’t reacted how they’d hoped at all. I’d left with my head held high. And now...

“Good evening, everyone.”

“Selene?”

I made my triumphant return. Everyone including Etoile was stunned to see me. And it was no wonder—I’d left after making such a scene. I’m sure they never expected me to come back.

“What’s wrong? Don’t tell me you came to take back what you just said?” Etoile said.

“Ha ha! Absolutely not! I don’t care one bit about my engagement with you.”

“Then why did you come back?”

“To make an announcement.”

“An announcement?”

“That’s right. My first one, as the new head of House Vixent,” I said,

simultaneously revealing my power. The shadow that lay at my feet enveloped the room.

“I-Is that one of the powers? Wait, that’s Shadow!”

“That’s right. That is my power.”

“Selene...” Etoile said.“Y-You inherited a power and have become head of house?”

“Exactly. The former head of house, my father, has lost his powers. Starting today, I have taken over.”

Etoile wasn’t a fool; he knew exactly what that meant. He probably figured it out right away. Me becoming head of house meant I now had all the authority Father previously had. I would not only be in charge of my household, but I would be responsible for any and all agreements made between my family and others.

“Oh, don’t worry. You and Soleil can carry on with your little engagement for all I care.”

“Wh-What did you say?”

“I said, do as you please. You getting married to Soleil has absolutely no impact on me or the Vixent family at large. So if you want to marry her, go ahead.” I shrugged. “Who cares as long as you love her, right?”

“I...”

Of course I already knew there was no love shared between them. Father had told Etoile of his plans—that one day Soleil would become head of household, not me. That was why Father chose Soleil to marry Etoile. All Etoile really cared about was power and authority. He only wanted to marry the person who took over House Vixent to elevate his own status. I felt like a fool for ever having trusted someone like him.

“I want everyone to remember that I, Selene Vixent, am now head of House Vixent!”

Uneasy murmurs seeped into the room.

“I-Is this true?”

“Her power is undeniably supernatural.”

“Shadow... What an ominous power...”

This party had been attended by all the major nobles of the kingdom. Word would spread very fast after tonight.

There was no going back now. I had no intentions of doing so, of course, but my announcement just strengthened my resolve.

Trust no one. Trusting myself was more than enough.

I wouldn’t care who was watching, or what they thought of me.

I’m going to live for myself. I’m going to escape from this time loop, no matter what. I’ll do anything to make that happen...even become a villainess.

Chapter One: The Little King’s Petition

Everyone at the party was shocked at my announcement. They were also frightened by the growing shadow at my feet. They stood like prey with nowhere to run, trapped by my dark power.

My business here was complete.

I suspended Shadow’s power and turned my back on the crowd. I heard Etoile’s voice say, trembling, “Wh-Where are you going?”

“Home, of course,” I answered without turning around. I had nothing more to say to him.

As I took a step forward, I heard him faintly ask, “Are you...really Selene?”

I turned around and grinned. “That’s not very nice of you. You mean to say you don’t recognize your own ex-fiancée?”

I heard his throat catch. I was being sarcastic, of course. I knew exactly what he meant. The person before him now was wildly different from how I ever was before—I’m sure he was completely bewildered. At least, that’s what his expression seemed to convey. However...

“I am me. Selene Vixent. Didn’t you know?”

It was true that I’d changed. But that didn’t mean everything *about* me had changed. Inside, there was still the Selene that he’d known. After all, I *was* the same person. It was just that no one had tried to see that—I had been standing right in front of him the whole time. And if he *had* noticed...

“Not that it matters. We no longer have anything to do with each other.”

Our ties to each other had been broken. He was just a stranger to me now; I expected nothing from him. I turned my back on him once again and slowly began to walk.

No one called out to me.

Only the sound of my footsteps resounded in the quiet room.

♦ ♦ ♦

I walked, cloaked in darkness. I could have used Shadow to get home instantly. But I didn't. For some reason, I just felt like walking.

"It's chillier than I thought it would be," I murmured to myself. The night breeze was frigid. There was no one around. I felt like I was the only person in the world.

But even though I felt alone, I wasn't sad. Having company didn't guarantee happiness. I now knew that better than anyone. Plus, I had the future to think about—I had no time to be lonely.

"Perhaps I should just rest. I'm quite tired," I said aloud to myself as I walked, but I soon stopped. I was still quite far from the manor; at this pace it would take me more than an hour to reach home on foot. I had wanted to walk to clear my head, it had done the trick, and now I was satisfied.

I slipped into the shadows. All I had to do was use my power and I could return home in an instant. I was just about to emerge from the shadows in my bedroom when I noticed something. I felt the presence of several people. I recognized the presence of Father and Soleil, but there were more than ten other people inside the room.

I quickly changed destinations and emerged in the garden. But I wasn't alone.

"Ahh, I see."

"I've been waiting for you, Selene."

Standing in front of me wasn't just my father, but several soldiers, all wearing armor and equipped with swords. They were positioned in a protective formation around the manor.

"What a lovely welcome, Father."

"Isn't it? I've gathered around five hundred of House Vixent's guard here."

"Nearly all of them," I remarked.

The noble families who had supernatural powers were allowed to have their own soldiers. Apparently I'd spent too much time at the party; during my

absence, Father had rallied the guard and planned an ambush. The presence I felt from my room must have been them. It was clear that they had planned to either attack or capture me as soon as I returned.

I heaved a sigh. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t use my soldiers without my permission, Father.”

“They’re not yours! They’re mine! Because I am head of house!” Father’s face warped with irritation and impatience. Yet he did nothing, hesitating, and his hesitation spread to the guard; they exchanged uncertain glances.

“No, you’re wrong. I am the head of house now. I give the house guard orders, not you.”

“Silence! I’ll never accept that you’re head of house!” Father’s furious voice echoed throughout the garden.

I was fed up at his denial. I let out another deep sigh, which seemed to only anger him further. He clicked his tongue and gave orders to the guards. “Seize Selene! If she resists, cut off her arms and legs for all I care!”

“Yes, my lord!”

The guards drew their swords and stood ready to fight.

“Telling the guards to dismember your own daughter? You’re truly the lowest of the low.” I snapped my fingers and the guards froze. A shadow snaked its way around their bodies, sealing off their movements.

“Wh-What is this? Shadow’s power?!”

“Astute observation.”

“Argh... My lord! Please use the power of Sun on us!” A guard cried in pain.

My father said nothing.

“My lord?” The guard pleaded again for Father’s help, but was met with only a pained expression. That was enough to show the guards that he had been lying all along.

“Heh. Now do you all see? Father, you must tell them everything.”

“Sh-Shut up!”

“It doesn’t matter how much you all plead with him,” I told the guards. “Father no longer has supernatural powers.”

“Wh-What? What does that mean?!”

“Exactly what I said. He no longer possesses the power of Sun. He’s lost his powers.”

The guards’ confusion was clear. They reacted exactly how I expected them to, which exasperated me; it proved that Father had not told them the whole truth. At most, he had told them I had awakened to my powers and gone mad. But he had most likely said nothing about himself, and especially not the most important thing: that he had lost the right to call himself head of house.

“My father has lost the right to be head of house, and I have replaced him. I am head of house now. The person whom you obey is me, not my father.” Now the guards would no longer follow his orders, because after all, they were not Father’s subordinates; they existed to protect House Vixent.

Since Father had both lost his position as head of house *and* his powers, the guards had no reason to obey him. One by one, they sheathed their swords and got down on one knee.

“Please excuse us, my lady.”

“You’re excused. But do be more careful next time.”

“Yes, my lady!”

And that was the moment when I stole Father’s power completely and took full control of House Vixent.

♦ ♦ ♦

There was a dream I often had.

A warm family. A happy future. A scene always too far away, always too out of my reach. Even if I stretched and stretched my hands out towards that beautiful light, I never reached it. Eventually the ground would disappear from beneath my feet, and I would fall straight into a pit of blinding darkness. What

would follow was despair.

I would suffer and be killed.

I would cry and be killed.

I would give up and be killed.

It didn't matter what I did. It didn't matter if I cried for help or just screamed. No one would hear me. Fate would toy with me, beckon me towards a pitiful denouement.

And then the cycle would start all over again.

It was why I was afraid to sleep—I was afraid to wake up. I didn't want to see that painful sight again: the despair and fear I felt during my first time loop.

♦ ♦ ♦

I was about seven years old when I learned that I was the daughter of my father's mistress. Father told me himself. Devastated, I locked myself in my room.

I stayed there alone, crying in the dark. But no one came to save me. My once kind father had told me that he didn't even want to look at me anymore.

The servants who had previously doted on me became cold once they discovered the truth. In the midst of this loneliness and despair, I had begun to sense that I had a supernatural power inside of me—the power of Shadow.

But I had been taught that Shadow was an abomination. I was afraid, but not of myself, not because I had this power—I was afraid because I knew that once it was found out that Shadow had awakened within me, Father and everyone else around me would treat me even worse.

So I hid it. I didn't tell anyone about my power—I decided I would never use it.

Seven more years passed. I was no longer a child. I had grown so much that one might almost call me an adult. So much time had been spent crying, but I was finally starting to accept reality.

It wasn’t necessarily a good thing, but I had no other choice. Their treatment of me hadn’t changed in the past seven years; to them, I was just something in their way. They whispered about me when I walked down the hallway. And even when I locked myself in my room, I could still hear their voices.

A few days earlier, my fiancé had broken off our engagement. Everyone at the mansion was talking about it, to the point that it made me uncomfortable to be inside my own home. I didn’t belong, even where I lived.

I could hear them and feel their eyes on me even when I was in my room. So instead, I spent most days outside, in the garden, sitting beneath the trees. Their shade blocked out the sun, and the gentle breeze rustled through their leaves. Out here, I didn’t have to worry about malicious gossip or cold stares, branding me an outcast.

Once I had to start caring about what others thought of me, I realized how much more comfortable I was alone.

“Sister!”

“Soleil...”

Yet there was one person who still tried to talk to me. Soleil, my half sister. The sole reason I had been put in this position in the first place. To her, I should have been the pitiful older sister, useless, someone to abandon. And yet she still came running over to me, her smile as bright as the sun.

“I had a feeling you’d be out here again!”

“Yes...it’s peaceful here.”

“May I join you? I want to talk to you!”

“But why?”

“Soleil!” I jolted when I heard a voice call my sister’s name. The person walking towards me filled my entire body with fear.

“I’ve been looking for you.”

“Father!”

“You shouldn’t run around like that or you might fall...” His voice trailed off

when he noticed me. “Selene.”

“Father...”

Our eyes met—he visibly became angry. “Selene! Just what do you think you’re doing, bringing Soleil to a place like this?”

“I didn’t do anything!”

“Silence! Don’t you dare talk back to me!” He curled his hand into a fist and raised it high above his head. He’d already lost his patience. He was always that way with me, but since I was with Soleil, he treated me even worse.

“Wait, Father!” Soleil frantically grabbed onto Father’s clothes and tried to stop him, but she was too weak. No one could stop him now.

He swung his fist down towards me—his own daughter—with his full strength. He did not hold back. Fear surged into my heart. I was so fearful that my body began to tremble uncontrollably.

“Noooooo!”

It was involuntary. I was scared and wanted to protect myself. In response to my turmoil, my supernatural ability activated on its own.

“Wh-What is this? No, it can’t be!” Father uttered.

“Huh? What?” I realized Father was now standing a few steps away from me. He didn’t look hurt. But he was shocked at the dark shadow flowing out of me. “N-No, this is...”

“It’s impossible!” Father exclaimed. “*You* had supernatural power? And the power of *Shadow*, no less?!”

It was too late. The power I’d hidden from him for seven years was now revealed. From that day on, Father locked me in the deepest room of the mansion and wouldn’t let me out. At first, they had kept me fed, but eventually the food stopped coming.

“I’m so...hungry...” It took all my strength just to speak. I could barely stand. The door was locked firmly shut. Maybe a month earlier I could have opened it somehow, but now, I couldn’t budge it, not even a little bit. I couldn’t even drag myself to the door.

I felt myself growing weaker. In a vague, instinctual way, I knew what was going to happen next.

“It’s...almost over.”

I knew I was going to die. And strangely, I wasn’t afraid. In fact, I felt the opposite; I would finally be free from this hell.

If I was reincarnated, power and status wouldn’t matter to me. I wanted to be normal; to be born into a normal family, live a normal life, and die a normal death. Those were my last thoughts. I closed my eyes.

And yet...when I opened my eyes, there I was, at the party. So I fell into the depths of despair.

♦♦♦

“Ugh... Morning already?” I woke up and looked out the window. Though filtered through the curtains, the morning sunlight was so bright that the cobwebs in my brain immediately vanished.

I got out of bed and looked around my room. Then I looked down at myself.

It was just like yesterday; I had no injuries. My skin was flawlessly intact.

“I guess nothing happened.”

I was cautious, but it seemed my worries were unfounded. Apparently neither my father nor any of the servants had tried to harm me. I was never worried about Soleil.

I stretched, a bit of yesterday’s fatigue still lingering. My body, too, felt a little heavy.

“I should change...” After looking around, I found fresh clothes folded neatly beside my bed. Although this was to be expected, it had never actually been so in the past. I used to be a noble’s daughter in name only; in reality I had been completely neglected. Not once had I had my clothes put out for me.

I picked them up. “Maybe I’ll try it.” I decided not to get changed and instead clapped my hands twice, looking towards the door. At once, it opened and a

maid appeared.

“You called, Mistress?”

Wow, it actually worked...

“Will you dress me?”

“Of course.” The maid began helping me change. Though it was common for the daughter of a noble to have a servant help her get dressed, I hadn’t been afforded that treatment since Soleil was born. It was known that the maids were to station themselves outside the doors of their master’s rooms so as to wait upon their every command. I was just a little surprised when I tried it, and it turned out to be true.

“Here you are, Mistress.”

“Thank you. Is breakfast ready?”

“Yes. Shall I bring it up?”

“Hmm. No, I think I shall eat in the dining room for a change.”

“Very well.”

At the manor, I’d always taken my meals alone. I wasn’t allowed to eat with Father and the others, so the servants would leave a tray in the hallway outside my door, and I would eat alone. My room had once been the only place I belonged. But now...

“Wonderful. I’ll be down in the dining room, then.”

♦ ♦ ♦

I left my room. As I walked down the hallway, I passed by where the servants were lined up, all of them bowing their heads to me.

“Good morning, Mistress.”

“Yes, good morning.”

Just yesterday, in these exact hallways, these same servants were bashing me, and now, I was the most respected person here. They had completely changed

their tunes and were treating me politely. Before, when they saw me, they looked at me like I was some disgusting thing.

“Brownnosers,” I muttered. They probably couldn’t hear me. Although they treated me with respect, I didn’t feel happy about it.

I arrived at the dining room. The moment the door opened, a delicious aroma wafted through the air. Breakfast had already been laid out upon the long wooden table, with the chef himself standing next to it.

“Good morning, Mistress. This way, please.”

“Thank you.”

He led me to sit at the head of the table—the position reserved for head of house; where Father had always sat. Until now.

“Enjoy.”

“I’m sure I will.” I picked up my utensils and began to eat. The tinny sounds of my cutlery striking my plate filled the room. The moment the delicious flavors spread through my mouth, I relaxed. “It’s delicious.”

It had been so long since I had had good, real food. What was normally brought to me wasn’t like this. To put it frankly, I was usually given scraps. Offal. Tasteless soups with moldy bread. Sometimes, just vegetables, close to rotten.This meal felt like the first meal I’d had in a very long time.

“Thank you, it was wonderful.”

“I’m pleased to hear that, Mistress. Please let me know if you have any meal requests.”

“I’ll give it some thought.”

Now that I had finished eating, I rose from my chair. I realized something, and turned to ask the chef, “Has everyone else already eaten?”

“Only you, Mistress.”

“I see. So Father and Soleil haven’t eaten yet.”

“Correct. The former master hasn’t been feeling well since yesterday...”

“Is that so?”

The chef nodded. Although I assumed it was my fault, I didn't feel an ounce of guilt; my father got what he deserved. The only thing bothering me was...

"And Soleil?"

"Lady Soleil is just fine. I believe she is in the former master's room."

"I see."

Soleil was being kind, as usual...or perhaps I should say, *naive.*

I left the dining room, though I wasn't headed back to my bedroom. As the new head of house, I had also inherited Father's duties. So instead of returning to my bedroom, I made my way to the study, and sat myself down in the chair reserved solely for the head of house. In front of me was an absurdly large desk, upon which piled a heap of documents.

"I suppose I'll begin."

Today was my first official day as head of house. What would follow would be my daily life. And my *last* life.

The Vixent family was the most powerful family among the six blessed with supernatural powers. Our influence was rivaled only by that of the royal family; we had our own domain, assets, and employees. In every aspect, we were treated favorably, and so we held ourselves apart from the other families. In turn, they held high expectations of us. Thus the responsibility given to the head of the Vixent family was enormous. The mountain of documents on the desk was proof of that.

"I admire Father for doing this work..." I admitted. "But that's about all."

I spent the day evaluating each of the documents, rifling through people's opinions about the management of the domain as well as the kingdom's policies. Even though all I did was sit at a desk, I was exhausted. The fact that my father had done this day in and day out without complaint was truly impressive.

I sighed. "Maybe it was a mistake to become head of house," I muttered to myself. Just then, I heard a rap at the door. I had no idea who it could be. Perhaps it was my father, come to protest, but if that were the case he probably

wouldn’t have even bothered to knock. “Come in.”

“Pardon me.” A man in butler’s clothes entered the study. I recognized him: until today, he was the man who had directly assisted my father.

“Mistress, a guest is here to see you.”

“A guest? Here, to see me? Who is it?”

“Duke Grantz Acthard.”

“Acthard...” The Acthards were related to the Vixents, and the head of the family was Grantz. If I remembered correctly, he was friends with my father...

“What does he want?”

“I asked, but he would not say. You do, however, have an appointment with Lord Grantz.”

“An appointment? I don’t remember that. Oh,” I realized, “my father...”

“Yes. The former master made the appointment.”

So he had come to see Father, not me. Because he had refused to state his business, it was probably some sort of secret. I doubt it had anything to do with me.

“Send him away.”

“Are you sure, Mistress?”

“Yes. I wasn’t the one who made the appointment. If he still wants to speak with Father, however, I won’t stop him.”

“Very well.” The butler bowed and left the room.

I resumed my work. A few minutes later, there was another knock at the door.

Another guest?

“Come in.”

This time there was no response before the door opened suddenly. An unfamiliar man stood. I could immediately tell that he was not a servant; he wore the fine clothes of a noble, and a slight smirk curled his face.

“Good afternoon, Selene Vixent, the new head of House Vixent,” the man said.

“Who are you...?” I asked, although I could guess. I recognized the crown on his suit.

“I suppose this is the first time we’ve met. I am Grantz Acthard.”

I stared at him silently. I already knew. “What do you want?”

“When I heard that you had become the new head of House Vixent, I rushed over to pay my respects at once.”

“Oh?”

What a liar. I know he’s come to see Father. He only said what he was saying because when he arrived at the manor, he was informed that there was a new head of house. I could tell by his expression that he had an ulterior motive. And since he was close to my father, I was sure he was hoping to forge a good relationship with the Vixents. I pitied Father.

“In that case, please leave.”

“Pardon? But I just got here. We haven’t even had the chance to speak yet.”

“As you can see, I’m busy. I don’t have the time to deal with you right now.”

“Wha—? Don’t you think that’s a bit rude?” His smirk vanished. My challenge had irritated him—his brow wrinkled.

So laughably transparent.

“You’re the one who’s rude.”

“What are you talking ab—”

“I only gave you permission to see the former head of house. I never gave you permission to see *me*. You were told that, weren’t you?”

He gritted his teeth. “That’s...”

From his reaction, I deduced that he had lied to the butler and told him that he would see my father, but instead had come straight to me.

“Was there a reason you dared to come into my study without permission?”

“I-I’ve been friendly with House Vixent for a long time...”

“You’re mistaken. You were friendly with the *former* head of House Vixent. Right now I, Selene Vixent, am the mistress of this house. And I have absolutely no intention of being friendly with you.”

“Grr...” In his anger he balled his hand into a fist. But it didn’t matter that he was offended—he had no recourse. Because I was right.

And it made me feel *fantastic*.

“Will you leave?”

He didn’t answer.

“If you won’t...”

The shadow at his feet began to roil.

“Wh-What is that?!”

“...then I’ll make you.”

“The power of Sha—” Starting from his feet, he was pulled into his own shadow and dragged inside of it until he disappeared.

The room was suddenly quiet again. I let out a deep sigh and glanced at the door. “You can come in now.”

“Pardon me.” It was the butler again. I had sensed he had been waiting in front of the door this whole time. “Please forgive me.”

“It’s fine. He was the one who took it upon himself to barge in here.”

“But I am the one who let him inside...”

“I see. Well, you’ll just have to be more careful next time. And while you’re at it, go ahead and cancel every appointment made by the former master. Keep only the very important ones.”

“Yes, Mistress, right away.”

“Wonderful.”

The butler bowed and left the room.

I resumed work once more, totally fatigued. I sighed again. “What a pain...”

It was required for the head of house to interact and make dealings with other nobles. But it was depressing to know that, from now on, events like this would keep happening.

♦ ♦ ♦

Right after Selene sent her guest away, the former master, Ralde Vixent, exited his room. He had been resting, but had waited to leave his room until Selene left. A passing butler noticed him.

“The former master? What’s the matter?”

“I-I...!” Ralde jolted and froze in anger—not because someone spoke to him, but because that someone had referred to him as the *former* master. Word had spread throughout the mansion that he was no longer in power.

They all knew there was no point any longer in calling him “Master.”

Ralde composed himself, tamping down on a scream and suppressing his angry words. “It’s nothing. I’m in a hurry.”

“Please wait. Where are you going? If you aren’t feeling well, you should rest...”

“It’s no concern of yours! Plus, I have appointments today! I can’t just spend the whole day in bed!”

“E-Er, regarding that matter...” The butler told Ralde what had transpired a few minutes ago. Anyone who knew the man could easily guess his reaction to the news. He rushed down the hallway, towards her.

♦ ♦ ♦

I heard a clamoring coming from the hall. I had a feeling what was going on. I paused my work and let out another dreary sigh. “So many guests today...”

The door burst open. As expected, Father rushed into the study, his face a bright red. “Selene! What is the meaning of this?!”

“Whatever are you talking about, Father?”

“Don’t play dumb with me! You sent my guest home!”

“Oh, that?” I figured. Thankfully, my father was even more transparent than the duke. “It seems as though you’re misunderstanding something, so let me clear things up for you. My original intention was not to send him home.”

“What do you mean?”

“I told him I had no intention of meeting with him, but if he had business with you, then I wouldn’t stop him. He was *your* guest, after all. However, he apparently did not see you, and came straight to me instead.”

“Wh-What?” Father’s face twisted with irritation. I could hear his teeth grinding. He had certainly guessed the implications of all this. The duke had only been friendly with him because of his position. Frustration, anger, and sadness were clear on his face. I could relate to those feelings. But that still didn’t change my opinion of my father.

“I was right to not meet with him. I had no idea he was so rude.”

“Wh-What happened?”

“It is as I have said. Despite the fact that I said I would not meet with him, he intruded upon my study to ‘pay his respects,’ as he called it. He was so rude, in fact, that I sent him home at once.”

“O-Oh, I see...”

I thought he might chastise me or yell at me for this, but he accepted it quite easily. It must have been a not insignificant shock that his old friend had come to see me instead.

“Thus I’ve forbidden him from ever coming here again.”

“What?”

“You don’t mind, do you? After all, he didn’t want to see you.”

“B-But...”

“I also canceled all the appointments you made,” I added. That made his face flush with anger.

“S-Stop this nonsense at once! How dare you do such a thing!”

“How dare I? I *dare* to do anything I please, because I am the head of house now. I have no obligation to keep your personal appointments.”

“They were *my* appointments! I have the right to decide what to do about them!”

“Wrong. I will be making all of the decisions from now on,” I said firmly. The moment my voice changed, Father began to tremble a bit. “I don’t care about the personal appointments you made. I will only honor those related to business. There’s nothing more for you to do here.”

“Selene...”

“Would you leave? This is *my* study. No one may enter here without permission. I swear, you’re just like the duke.”

“Y-You...!” He took a step forward. I let out another sigh and manipulated Shadow to bind him. “Th-This...!”

“Go. You have no place here.”

“S-Selene!”

I used Shadow to forcefully transport Father back into his room. He would be there any moment now.

“He never learns, I swear.” How long was he going to live in denial? I thought that maybe giving him a day would be enough to cool his head. Apparently not.

He had always been an emotionally volatile person, especially at home. He’d probably come back. I had a feeling another argument would be on the horizon. Maybe some fresh air would be best? Unlike Father, I didn’t have any appointments for the day.

“Hmm...” I glanced at one of the papers on my desk. It was a party invitation. And not just to any old party. “Sounds good to me. I think I’ll go.”

In all my previous time loops, I was never allowed to go to these special parties. They were exclusively for the six supernatural families, mine included.

♦ ♦ ♦

The powers of protection. First wielded by six knights who served the royal family, the founders of this kingdom. The knights held distinct powers, unique to each individual.

Back then they called it magic. But nowadays, we call them supernatural powers. The name wasn't really important. What *was* important was that no one else but those knights could use those skills.

The knights supported the royal family and sometimes guided them, and together, they established this kingdom. Upon the kingdom's founding, the king bestowed upon each knight the highest rank, along with glory and honor to their names.

Even now, the glory and honor granted upon them and their family names survived. Their powers were passed down to their descendants and were now used by each family's head of house.

The guardian of stars, House Weldon.

The guardian of earth, House Boden.

The guardian of water, House Wasser.

The guardian of air, House Cielo.

The guardian of forests, House Frusch.

And finally, the guardian of sun and shadow, House Vixent.

Those were the six families descended from the guardians. And now, I had become the head of house for one of them.

Our main role was to support the royal family and protect the kingdom. All other duties were considered supplemental. Ultimately, as long as we could protect the king and the kingdom in the event of an emergency, our raison d'être would be preserved. On the other hand, having such a vital role...

"What a privilege—receiving such good treatment all because of the deeds of my ancestor."

“Did you say something, Mistress?”

“It’s nothing.”

As I was changing in my room, I realized I’d been talking out loud to myself. Though I had been murmuring, my maid heard me. I was so lost in my thoughts I’d forgotten she was even there.

Several days had passed since I became head of house, and ever since, all the servants treated me with such attention, as if it was second nature to them.

“Is this dress to your liking, Mistress?”

“Hmm, no. I think I will wear my normal clothes for today.”

“B-But...of course, Mistress.” The maid assisted me in donning my usual outfit. “Mistress, forgive me, but are you sure you have enough time? I believe the party starts at...”

“No need to worry. I can use Shadow and arrive immediately.” My supernatural power had the ability to create tunnels between shadows that I could move in. There were limitations: I had to spend more time in the shadows depending on the distance needed to travel, and I could not travel without knowing the destination. But other than those restrictions and some others, it was incredibly convenient.

“Pardon me if I am mistaken, Mistress, but is it not forbidden to use supernatural powers inside the party?”

“It’ll be fine; I won’t transport myself directly inside. I’ll teleport myself just outside the castle with Shadow and then walk. I have plenty of time.”

Tonight’s party was special. It was being held inside the ballroom of the royal castle. Only the highest-ranking nobles—those who served the royal family—were permitted inside, along with the supernatural families. These balls were held once every six months, and allowed all the families to socialize with each other, for the friendships between the heads of house to deepen, and for everyone to share in each other’s comings and goings.

Until now, Father had always been the one to attend. Attendance wasn’t mandatory, and originally, I hadn’t intended on going at all; too much trouble.

But now I thought I should show my face at least once, in order to show off my new position.

Plus, this was a chance for me to see the other heads of house.

“I’ve finished dressing you, my lady.”

“Thank you.”

Now that I was finally dressed, I looked at myself through the large mirror in front of me. I stood, wearing the familiar clothes I always wore. Since it was a special party, I considered wearing fancier dress, but in the end this suited me best. “Yes, I much prefer this outfit.”

“It looks quite lovely on you, Mistress.”

“Thank you. Well, I’ll be off.”

I activated my power and slipped into the shadows. In the western skies, the sun was sinking—the perfect time to create long shadows. I teleported myself near the party, landing in a spot behind a wall.

“Hm? What was that?” The moment I emerged from the shadows, I thought I felt someone’s eyes on me. I immediately looked in the direction I felt their gaze was coming from, but saw no one. And then the sensation that I was being watched vanished.

“Was it just my imagination...?” It hadn’t felt like the stare of an enemy; rather, more of an observer.

It nagged at me, but the party was about to begin. I cautiously circled around to the entrance, slipping through the opulent white doors and into the party itself.

“So bright...” I blurted out the first thing that came to my mind. And I wasn’t commenting on just the lights—it was the entire scene itself.

Everyone was dressed in clothing much too flashy and far too bright. Frankly, it hurt my eyes. It was exasperating to think that anyone could ever enjoy coming to such a party.

“Selene?”

I decided I'd go home as quickly as possible, but just then, from behind me, I heard a familiar voice. *Oh, right. Of course* he's *here.*

He was a member of House Weldon, the guardian of stars and one of the six supernatural families. He hadn't officially become head of house yet, but it had already been decided that he would, and very soon. It was Etoile, of course. My ex-fiancé.

"Good evening, Lord Weldon."

"I'm surprised to see you here. You really have become head of House Vixent."

"Why the surprise? I said as much the other day. Plus, wouldn't your power allow you to see that I would be here today?"

He didn't answer. I was alluding to the ability inherited by those of House Weldon, the guardians of the stars: Astromancy, or the ability to see the future. With his eyes, Etoile could see the future of his designated target. Beyond people, he could also target objects and sights. If he used Astromancy on himself, a prophetic dream would deliver a vision, or a headache would warn him of impending danger.

Astromancy was an important power, since it could give insight to the future of the kingdom. The Weldons were the most highly regarded of the six families.

But I knew one thing: Etoile couldn't see my future. The only time the power of House Weldon could not be used was against the wielder of Shadow.

I discovered this fact during my previous time loops. One of the reasons he gave me when breaking off our engagement was that he couldn't see my future, and that frightened him. That fear estranged him from me, made him distance himself, eventually leading him to cooperate with my father in his plan to drive me to my death. When I saw his face, I remembered it all. I remembered that devastating sight.

I averted my gaze and began to pass him by.

"Selene!"

"Let me give you one warning," I said in a low, cold voice the moment he tried

to stop me. “You and I are nothing to each other now. Never speak to me with such familiarity again.”

“Fine...”

I would never forgive him. In some ways, I hated him almost more than I hated my father. And most of all, I hated the old me for expecting anything from him at all.

Once I imparted those final words to him, I walked away. He didn’t say anything. No—he *couldn’t* say anything. We were strangers to each other now.

“I want my only discomfort here to be in all this brightness.” The party was more uncomfortable than I’d imagined it would be. And it wasn’t just because of him. People were staring at me, and the reason was obvious.

“That’s the new head of House Vixent...”

“She’s the eldest daughter, right? What a surprise...”

“Yes, even though the former master had already announced that Lady Soleil would be his successor. Perhaps he changed his mind?”

“Rumor has it that there was a dispute, and that she used her powers to force her father to submit to her.”

“How frightening! The Shadow guardian... All we can do is just pray that she doesn’t bring ruin upon our kingdom.”

Honestly! They were having a free-for-all, saying whatever they pleased. Though I’d expected this to happen. Because of my father’s constant abuse, it didn’t bother me much to hear people bad-mouthing me. But being used to it didn’t make me grateful. At any rate, I just wanted to do what I came here to do and then hurry home.

It was a surprise, however, that although many people were saying bad things about me, none of it was that shocking. In fact, the comments were kinder than I had expected. Perhaps they reined themselves in because I was now head of house, and they were afraid of the attention their comments might draw. If that were true, it was amusing.

“Speaking of which...”

I looked around. I was searching for the other guardians, those besides Etoile and myself. I'd actually never met them. I'd seen some of them briefly when they came to visit Father at the mansion, but there were others I'd never seen before.

I began my search by looking for the ones I did recognize. The ballroom was surprisingly large, with too many attendees to count.

I didn't see them at first glance. *Perhaps they didn't come.*

Attendance wasn't compulsory—it was possible they had just skipped out on this party altogether.

"Coming here was pointless..."

Or maybe not?

The main event was about to begin. All at once the lights suddenly dimmed save for the stage, which remained brightly illuminated. Now it was time for the hosts of the party to speak. The royal family stepped onto the stage.

First was a person with gleaming golden hair and emerald green eyes. His skin was glowing and beautiful like a woman's. He was like a doll, dressed to look like a king.

But he was young. Too young.

The current king was a child of only twelve years old.

"Everyone, thank you so much for taking the time out of your busy schedules to attend our party." A woman standing next to the king spoke. His older sister. On age alone, she would've been a better fit to rule the kingdom. But she wasn't eligible.

In this kingdom, only men were allowed to rule. This was because the royal family's supernatural power was only inherited by men. Their ability was very different from the ones the six families wielded: their power had the ability to nullify our powers.

This child's ancestor was our king not because he was the most worthy or capable of it, but because he was the only one our ancestors couldn't use their powers on, and so, he was the most powerful of them all. And it is only the

most powerful who get to stand on top.

That was the most likely reason no one from the six families had been able to claim the throne for themselves. Though of course, that was my guess.

“That’s the king?” It was my first time seeing him with my own eyes. He’d only become king a few months earlier, when the previous monarch passed away. In previous time loops I hadn’t been allowed to go outside much, so I never got the chance to see him. I’d heard rumors, of course, but now that I saw him in person, his youth was almost shocking. The fact that they had made him king only proved the immense weight this kingdom put on the supernatural powers.

The reason I came to this party was to see the other guardians, and to see the king.

I didn’t know why I was stuck in this time loop. But I believed it might be because of my powers. What other reason could there be?

Before Soleil was born, I had been formally educated about this kingdom and the supernatural powers, and so had a much more thorough and intensive knowledge of these topics than that of the general public.

Many things about the supernatural powers were still unknown. Mystery especially surrounded the king’s supernatural powers, and there were secrets that were only passed down to the royal family. So if anyone had an inkling as to why I was stuck in this time loop, it would most likely be the king rather than the other guardians.

“He’s just too young,” I muttered. Now that I had seen him, it seemed impossible. He was only twelve. How could a twelve-year-old trap me in a time loop? I just couldn’t come up with a valid reason. My interest in him waned, and I was beginning to consider that the other guardians surely must be more suspect—

“Huh?”

He made eye contact with me. Or at least, I thought he did. The boy-king was just standing there onstage, quite far away from where I stood. From his vantage point I was just one face among many. At first I thought he was gazing out at all of us. But he was looking right at me, beaming.



It was like I was being drawn into his eyes. No, I *was* being drawn in. My senses, my consciousness, all were being drawn in towards him. Before I knew what was happening, I found myself standing in a blank, empty space.

“Where am I...?”

Just a few moments ago I’d been at the party. There was no way I had suddenly fallen asleep. My senses were sharp, and I remembered everything that happened.

I’d made eye contact with the king and—

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Selene Vixent.”

“You’re...”

The young king, His Majesty Euclis Veldt, stood before me, smiling.

Instantly, I understood the situation: this was a space created by the king’s powers. This supernatural power, wielded only by the royal family, had induced some kind of unknown phenomenon.

Though I now understood, I remained cautious. This was not normal, even within the realm of the supernatural. So I wanted to know what was going on.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Euclis Veldt, of the royal family.”

“I know that. I’m not asking for your name or title. I’m asking *what* you are.” I spoke in a forceful tone, one even I thought was almost too bold. I was fully aware that I was being extremely rude to a member of the royal family. But there was no one here to witness or overhear it, so I brazenly continued.

“What am I?”

“Answer me. And depending on your answer—it can’t be?!”

I can’t use Shadow? Is it because this space holds no shadows?

No, it wasn’t about the dimension. I couldn’t even feel the usual sensation that came with manipulating the shadows. My supernatural power itself was sealed.

“This is my dreamworld. You can’t use your powers here without my permission.”

“Yes, I can see that...”

So this is the power of the royal family? The power to seal the other supernatural powers...and within dreams, no less.

“I had no idea the royal family held such power.”

“Yes. I’ve kept it hidden just so I could show it to you today. Now you’re one of only three people who know my secret.”

“Three people? So there’s someone else besides me?” I asked, but he neither confirmed nor denied. He just smiled. It may sound cliché, but his smile was kind and warm—soothing—like bathing in a pool of sunshine. It made me feel strangely relaxed.

Is this feeling also part of his powers?

“Please, don’t be so guarded. All I wish is to talk to you.”

“Talk? What would a king wish to talk to me about?”

“Why, many things. First of all, congratulations. I heard you’ve become head of House Vixent.”

“Yes, very recently.” I wasn’t surprised that he had already found out.

“It must be hectic, taking on all those responsibilities, and so suddenly.”

“There’s a lot to do,” I concurred. “But surely you have much more responsibility. How difficult it must be to rule over an entire kingdom as a child.”

He laughed. “Yes, quite. It can be tough. But it’s harder on the people around me. My sister, for example.”

“I see.”

It wasn’t unusual in this country to rule from a young age. The previous king had been in his late teens when he ascended the throne, and the same had been for the king before him. Though this king was especially young, he was only slightly younger than when the previous king came to power. And there

was a reason for such youth; the men of the royal family had very short life spans. They all died young.

The previous king had died before turning forty. In the hundreds of years since the formation of the kingdom, there wasn't a single man in the royal family who lived over the age of forty. Once the next person in line inherited their supernatural power, their predecessor would rapidly decline and pass away. It's as if their lives were tied to the power.

I told the king my thoughts. "It's almost like a curse."

"Yes. I think the same thing." He smiled, though it was tainted with a hint of sadness. It was hard to believe the sorrow hiding in his expression belonged to that of a twelve-year-old boy.

He was born with supernatural powers within him, ascended to king, and then eventually, his short life span would burn up.

A cruel fate. Unbearable, but in a way that was different from my own suffering.

"What do you think of the supernatural powers?" It was an unexpected question.

I faltered, but gave a calm reply. "They're all just powers, aren't they?"

"That's right. Powers. But you said mine was like a curse, correct? I think my power is a curse."

A curse...

This kingdom had been united by—and prospered because of—the supernatural powers. Yet the king himself thought them a curse. And not just his own power, but *all* the supernatural powers. On top of that, he didn't seem scared of Shadow, not like everyone else.

What a strange child...

"Then I wonder who cursed us?" I mused.

"I don't know. But it's how I feel. It's like something is fundamentally wrong with the alignment of this world..." He trailed off and looked down, as if he were upset.

His words made me frown. “I don’t understand you. What are you getting at?”

“I’m talking about our powers—our existence. I have doubts regarding both. That’s why I have a favor to ask of you.”

“A favor?”

“Yes. Selene Vixent, I want you to...”

He told me his request. And I couldn’t believe my ears. I was in shock. It was the most unbelievable thing I’d ever heard.

“Won’t you do this for me?” he asked.

“Are you serious?”

“Completely. I invited you here just so I could ask you this favor. I lied when I said I just wanted to talk.”

“Have you lost your mind?” I couldn’t even consider it. It wasn’t the sort of request someone asked for with a warm, serene smile on their face. “Are you broken?”

“Maybe so. That’s why I’m asking you to do this.” He looked at me with a serious expression. And I could feel very strongly that he was sincere.

He really *was* asking me to...

“Could you at least tell me why?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t tell you that either.” He looked away. He was hiding something—there was no doubt about that. He knew something I didn’t.

“Then my answer is no.”

“You...can’t?”

“Of course I can’t!” I exclaimed. “How could I do such a thing without knowing the reason behind it?”

Though even if he had told me the reason, I probably still would’ve refused.

“Right...”

“Perhaps you should ask someone else if they can do this.”

“I’m not so sure about that. I had thought maybe you could, but...I suppose not.”

“Why did you ask *me* in the first place?”

“If I answer you, will you grant me my favor?”

His emerald green eyes wavered slightly when they locked onto mine.

And it was then that I had a thought. It was just instinct, and there was no basis for it, of course, but...perhaps he was trapped in the same cycle as I was.

“Are you...?” I refrained. “No, I won’t ask.”

“I see. Fine. I apologize for approaching you with such an odd request.” He bowed his head. “You will wake up from your dream soon. Please forget everything that happened here.”

“How could I forget? It’s left too deep of a mark. But don’t worry; even if I did tell someone about this, they’d never believe me.”

“Aha ha ha...”

“However...I will consider it.”

“What?”

Both our bodies began to sparkle and fade. He was right—we were about to wake up.

“I won’t grant your request. But I *will* try to come up with another way to help you.”

“Thank you.”

The last thing I saw before the space vanished was his smile, brighter than the sun.

Chapter Two: Guardian of the Moon

“Now please, enjoy yourselves everyone.” The ballroom filled with applause. Apparently the speech had ended.

“Time still passed...” I murmured to myself.

The king and his sister stepped off of the stage. I made eye contact with the boy. He grinned. What I’d just seen hadn’t been just a dream; both the sensations and his voice still lingered clearly in my mind.

“Though he looks like a child...”

He told me to forget it, but that was impossible. No one would be able to forget such a thing. I hoped that one day, I would have the opportunity to learn his true intentions.

The lights in the ballroom returned to their full strength. My eyes hurt from their glare. I wished it could have just stayed dark, but then all of sudden...

“Lady Vixent?”

A woman approached me, dressed in fine clothes and with a smile on her face. She was definitely talking to me, but I didn’t recognize her.

“Yes?”

“Congratulations on becoming head of house! My family has been friendly with the Vixents for many years. I’m looking forward to continuing our relationship in the future.”

“Yes...” *Oh, I see.* Suddenly more men and women I didn’t know began gathering around me. I didn’t know a single one of their names, though clearly, their goal was to have me learn them. They were jockeying to protect their positions by gaining the favor of one of the six heads of house.

The purpose of these parties was to deepen the relationships between families. Nobles outside the six supernatural families attended because they wanted to befriend us. Their machinations were incredibly transparent, and easy for me to spot.

There were others in the center of their own clusters. These people should be the heads of the other houses. I saw four other clusters crowded with people, and Etoile was in the center of one of them.

“As long as we have Lord Weldon, our kingdom will be safe!”

“Yes, especially with his Astromancy; he can see the future!”

“Thank you.”

His groupies were even more blatant than mine. Greed for his power and all of its influence oozed out of them. None of them wanted anything from Etoile himself; it was his power and protection they wanted.

This wasn’t new. And since I knew Etoile quite well, I had no desire to get to know him any further.

I turned my attention to the other three groups—the one closest to him in particular. In the middle stood a man with short hair.

“Feeling nervous, Sir Boden?”

“Excuse me. I’m not used to events like this. I actually don’t interact with people very much.”

The man had a muscular body and tanned, brown skin. He was tall—head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd. And he looked uncomfortable. He was Gordov Boden, guardian of earth and head of one of the six families.

“We heard you drove away a group of magical beasts the other day. Because of you, Sir Boden, we can rest easy at night.”

“I didn’t do anything special. I only did what any knight is required to do.”

“Sir Boden, please, don’t be so humble. You are a true defender of this kingdom!”

“I will do my best to live up to your expectations...”

His family consisted of both nobles and knights. In addition to being head of house, he was also captain of the royal knights. I’d heard that even without supernatural powers, he would be formidable, and it looked to be true; all his time seemed spent on fighting monsters to protect the kingdom. Even standing

still, he didn't seem to have any weaknesses. It was like a huge boulder was before me...

"Lady Vixent? Are you looking for someone?"

Nearby, I heard a man's voice address me. I'd forgotten that people were talking to me as well. It was annoying—I wanted them to leave me be—but I knew acting on my annoyance could potentially cause future trouble. I suppressed the desire to dismiss them entirely. Perhaps I could use the situation to my advantage.

"Not in particular. You see, I've just become head of house, and I'm curious about the people from the other houses."

"I see. I heard that the six houses don't often interact with each other."

"Indeed. I'm meeting most of them for the first time tonight. I'd love to introduce myself, however..."

"It's difficult right now, isn't it? If you'd like, I could tell you what I know about them."

"Oh, my family keeps relations with the other families too! But of course our connection with House Vixent is our first priority."

"Thank you. I'm glad to hear it."

It was as easy to guide them as I had thought. I didn't even have to have them introduce themselves, that was how desperate they were to befriend me. Clamoring like chicks with their beaks open, begging for their mother to feed them... How funny.

"Lady Vixent, please look to your right."

Unlike Sir Boden's group, I could barely see who was at the center of the group I was now looking at. Then I caught a glimpse of her in between the other partygoers; a woman with light green hair.

"That is Lady Mystria Frusch."

Frusch...the forest guardians. She was a female head of house, just like me. Judging by her appearance, she was close to my age. Until now, I thought I was the only woman acting as a head of house. She must have also succeeded, and

quite recently.

“You are always so beautiful, Lady Frusch.”

“Hee hee. Thank you.”

“Would you do me the honor of a dance later?”

“Of course.”

About ninety percent of her group were men—and mostly young men, at that.

“She seems very popular.”

“Yes, she’s quite a tolerant person. And such beauty. It’s no wonder she holds such support from men. Of course, you are also very beautiful, Lady Vixent.”

“Thank you.”

How irritating. Can we just get on with the explanation already?

She *was* very beautiful, though. Even I could admit that. But most of all, there was a tranquility about her. Though we were in the midst of a raucous party, looking at her made one feel as if they were in a forest, at ease, lounging in the shade of a tree. She emitted that kind of quality.

Still...

“Hm?”

Suddenly we made eye contact. She’d noticed my stare.

“One moment,” she said to the group of men around her, slipping past them and walking my way. The people in my circle naturally cleared a path as she headed straight for me.

“Good evening. We haven’t met before, correct?”

“That’s right.”

I couldn’t believe she came to me first. Up close I realized why men had crowded around her; her voice was clear and gentle, and her body delicate, more so than mine. She inspired a certain protective instinct from those who saw her.

“Are you the new head of House Vixent?”

“Yes. I’m Selene Vixent.”

“Mystria Frusch. I’m so pleased there’s another woman as head of house. I’d love for us to get along.” She extended her right hand for a handshake.

“The feeling is mutual.” I had no reason to decline, so I shook her hand. I’d prepared for her to squeeze or pinch me, but it was a gentle handshake. Her hand did feel a little cold, though.

“By the way, I saw you looking at me. Was there something you wanted to speak to me about?”

“Nothing in particular. Since I just became head of house, I was curious about the heads of the other families.”

“Oh, I see. Well, you can ask me anything you’d like and I’ll do my best to answer, as long as it’s nothing private.”

“Do you have many secrets?” I asked, probing further.

She smiled and looked around. “I could maybe answer that, but not in a place like this.”

“Then I’d love to meet you in a more appropriate setting sometime.”

“Yes, I feel the same. I believe we girls will have much to discuss.” Her expression exuded innocence, as if free of hidden connotations. It reminded me of the young king. It was relaxing talking to her, and gradually, I felt like I was letting my guard down.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me,” she said. “Everyone is waiting.”

“I’m sure. Let’s talk again soon.”

“I’d love to,” she said, and then made her way back to the throng of young men awaiting her return.

She was a graceful and cheerful woman, and so I was keen to know about the secrets she supposedly had. Was it the kind of secret women often kept, or was it, perhaps, the kind of secret that would be the key to unlocking my time loop? After all, why would a woman like her have secrets in the first place?

“Now...”

I looked around, searching for the other two heads of house. I wondered if someone else would come forward and advise me of them, and was about to ask, but for some reason the people around me kept their distance. They didn’t leave me; rather, it seemed that they *couldn’t* approach me—as if something was holding them back.

“What’s going...?”

Suddenly I felt a sensation like cold water running down my back. I whirled around.

“So you noticed me before I could even speak.”

“And you are...?”

How long had he been behind me? No, that wasn’t what I should be worried about. It was his very presence—the sensation he gave...

“Pardon me. I didn’t mean to startle you. I only wished to say hello.”

“Hello...?”

“Yes, as a fellow head of house.”

Ahh, so he’s one too. It was the first time I’d been able to discern a head of house just by feeling, without knowing their name.

“I am Alexei Wasser. A pleasure to meet you, Selene Vixent.”

He was head of House Wasser, the guardian of water. His hair was aquamarine, and he had deep blue eyes. The complete opposite of Sir Boden, he had a slender body and pale, lustrous skin. The fine noble’s clothing he wore suited him well.

He held his hand out, just as Mystria did. I shook it.

“Yes.”

I felt no ill will from him. Still, he clasped my hand tightly, with seemingly no intention of letting go.

“Yes, very nice.”

“Pardon?”

“You’re quite beautiful. Once I saw you next to the princess of House Frusch, I knew...you’re even more beautiful than she is.”

“What are you...?”

“That’s it! I’ve decided!” Suddenly he tugged on my hand, pulling me to his chest in a tight embrace.



Our faces drew close to each other. He looked down at me, and I looked up at him in return.

“Selene Vixent,” he said. “Will you marry me?”

I was completely baffled. Yet I wasn’t flustered; everyone around me was positively ruffled, and apparently it was easy for me to remain calm in the face of everyone else’s upset.

“Hm? Didn’t you hear me?”

“I heard you.”

“Wonderful.”

“I heard you, but if you could please say it again?” I wanted confirmation, just in case.

He smiled and cleared his throat a bit before speaking. “Will you marry me?”

“I see...” So I had heard him correctly after all. I let out a little sigh. Now that I’d confirmed it, my answer was obvious.

“I refuse.”

His eyebrow twitched slightly with surprise. “Oh? And why not?”

“*Why?* Surely you know why.”

“I do not. You don’t want to be my fiancée?”

Judging from his response and his expression, maybe he really didn’t understand? He looked as if he hadn’t expected my rejection. He hadn’t done anything to me, but I could never love a man like him.

“Of course I don’t. First of all, we just met.”

“True. We haven’t even had a full conversation.”

“Do you really think anyone in their right mind would accept such a proposal?”

“Yes, because I’m the one proposing.”

I stared at him silently. He was serious. His words dripped with supreme confidence. It was obvious that he absolutely adored himself—a complete

narcissist. And I could never love a narcissist.

“Are you promised to another?”

“No. My fiancé broke off our engagement just the other day.”

“Well then, perfect timing, isn’t it? You met me right after your fiancé was out of the picture! This must be fate.”

“You’re wrong. And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t make assumptions about my fate.” Perhaps it was because I realized just how much I despised men like him, but with every word he spoke, my irritation grew. “I’m going to be blunt. I know we just met, but I hate you.”

“Hate?”

“That’s right. I hate you. And that’s why I will never marry you, not in a million years.”

Surely such a brutal rejection would damage even *his* confidence, and he’d withdraw. Since he was the head of house of one of the six families, I had thought it would be a good idea to at least be friendly with him, but I simply couldn’t get along with someone I despised.

“I think we’re done here. You’re making me uncomfortable, so please go aw—”

“Pfft, Aha ha... Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! I love it! This is the first time that anyone’s ever spoken to me like that in my whole life!”

He burst out laughing. It was a high-pitched laugh that was loud enough to echo throughout the entire ballroom. He had had the complete opposite reaction than I anticipated. It startled me. I thought he’d either get angry or fed up with me.

“You’re just wonderful, you know that? I knew I was right about you. You’re the perfect woman for me to marry!”

“What in the world are you saying? I said no!”

“True, but I don’t care. We can just take our time and get to know each other better.”

“What?!”

I was completely lost. I couldn’t follow the conversation at all. What was *with* this man?

“I’m done.”

“What? Where are you going?”

“I’m going home. If I stay here a minute longer I’ll be sick.”

“I see. That sounds terrible. Get some rest. Come see me when you’re feeling better!”

I turned my back on the high-strung man and left the ballroom. As I approached the exit, I heaved a deep sigh.

“I’m exhausted...”

What *was* that, anyway? Why was he so ridiculously optimistic? I hadn’t expected any of the heads of houses to be like him. It almost felt like his energy was following me, which was just depressing.

“I just want to hurry home and go to bed.”

I’d achieved my goal of seeing the heads of houses, although one of them hadn’t been in attendance. “The guardian of air...”

What were they like?

The last man I met had been so outrageous that I found myself worrying about the other one. Well, there was no rush. I would meet them soon enough.

I walked along the corridor lost in thought. I used Shadow to return to the spot where I'd first arrived. Out here, it was dark and quiet, a sharp contrast to the bright and lively ballroom. No one else was here but me, which only made the difference more obvious.

I was about to go home, but then I stopped. "It wasn't my imagination after all."

There was another presence here besides my own. I didn't know where, but I was certain someone else was here. "What do you want from me?" I said, loud enough that they could hear me.

But there was no answer. The only response was the sound of the night breeze whirling through the air. Did they really think I wouldn't notice them? In this situation? How very foolish.

"I know you're nearby. If you have business with me, show your face and speak to me." This time I spoke more softly, but there was still no response, even after several seconds. And yet it didn't seem like they'd run away. They were still close, watching me; the sensation of their gaze hadn't gone away.

"I see. So you have no intention of revealing yourself." What they wanted was a mystery to me. But now that I knew they were there, I couldn't just ignore them. "Fine. Have it your way."

I manipulated the shadows—not to return home, but to fight. "I'll *force* you out."

There was only one person nearby. I couldn't see them, but I could feel them. And as long as I could feel them, I could catch them.

"Shadows still appear at night. Their depth and size don't affect my power."

As long as there was even a sliver of a shadow somewhere, I could latch on to it as a starting point and make it grow. The shadow cast down at my feet by the moonlight suddenly expanded to cover the surrounding earth. There was no reaction inside the shadow, meaning...

"Up there." Not on the ground. They must be higher up. There was good visibility on top of the wall, so I'd be able to see if someone was up there.

But there was no one there, which left only one option as to where they were: in one of the surrounding trees. I transformed the shadow into countless whips. Shadow's whips were retractable and stronger than an actual whip—if I transformed them further, they could even be used as blades. It would be as easy as reaching up into the tree myself and catching them.

"There you are."

The shadow reacted to the largest tree on my right side. At once I cast all of Shadow's whips out towards it but then—it disappeared. The presence disappeared right when I thought I'd caught it.

I felt it again behind my back, but soon after it disappeared. Next, it was on my left, and then again it was right in front of me.

It was moving, and so fast I couldn't track it.

This was no ordinary human.

"I won't hold back then. After them!" I made even more shadows, with even more whips. They immediately tried to catch the presence speeding around me. Even if I couldn't track them with my own eyes, the shadows upon the ground kept growing. If they stepped through the shadows, I would be able to see where. If I could get them right at the moment they stepped into the shadows, and then morph the shadows to catch them...

"Too fast."

But they were too fast and I was too slow. By the time I'd noticed them, they'd already moved. Clearly these were not the movements of an ordinary human. And neither did it seem like a monster. So there was only one possibility of who it could be.

The guardian of air.

The one person who hadn't attended the party. I'd never met them, just as I wasn't previously acquainted with the other three, but it was possible that they knew of me. And it was equally possible that they wanted something from me—otherwise, why go to such lengths?

What *did* they want? They just kept running around and around, but hadn't

attacked me once. And they were so fast that they could easily escape altogether, but they didn't.

"How annoying." It was irritating that I didn't have the first clue as to what their motive could be. All their quick flitting around without my being able to catch them was just plain stressful. If they wanted to just irritate me, then I'd say they had more than achieved it.

"Let's just end this already." Suddenly blood spurted through the air. The tip of the whips changed into sharp points, snaring the stranger that had been dashing around. No, not just snaring—driving right through them.

"I didn't want to kill you, but avoiding that seems impossible now. Remember, this was your decision." I couldn't see their face. They hid it with a hood, and their entire body with a gray robe. Just from their body type, they seemed to be a man.

He lay unmoving on the ground. Surely he had died from that attack. I approached him.

At the very least, I should take a look at his face.

"How naive. It takes a lot more than this to kill me."

"What?"

He was alive. He hadn't died after all. He forced his body up, wrenching out the shadows still pierced through him as he did so.

Impossible! The shadows had pierced his vital organs! There was no way he could have survived such an injury. And even if the injury wasn't fatal, there was no way he should be moving right now.

And yet...

"How are you moving?"

He had completely escaped my shadows and stood calmly before me. I was stunned. His wounds had already closed.

"Did you heal yourself?" As soon as I spoke the words, I knew that couldn't be the case. It seemed less like it was the work of healing and more like he was rewinding time; all the blood that had been spilled out of him had reverted back

inside him.

“Who *are* you?”

He stood there silent and unmoving. From inside his hood, red eyes peered at me.

“I’m no one. I’m...just a monster.”

“Are you? Well, you certainly speak well for a monster.”

“There was a time when I was human.”

“I see. And that’s why you’re so fluent in human speech?”

As we spoke, he healed completely.

It turns out my theory that he was the guardian of air was wrong. But he possessed some kind of special power, though I wasn’t sure if it was *supernatural*. At the very least, none of the supernatural powers I knew of were this monstrous.

“So? What business does a monster like you have with me?”

“I came to fight you.”

“Did you? Well, that’s strange. Because all you’ve been doing so far is running away.”

“I was waiting for you to show me your true power. There’s no sense in doing this unless you come at me with the intent to kill.”

Here he comes!

“Shadow! Act as my shield!”

He swung his right hand, from which crimson blood flowed. The resulting splatter took the shape of arrows and shot towards me.

I’d expected his attack, so I quickly manipulated the shadow at my feet to form a defensive barrier in front of me.

“So you have the power to manipulate blood, hm? You, too, have a supernatural power.”

“Who cares about that?”

“I see... Then what *are* you interested in?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

He manipulated blood. I manipulated shadows. We both fought to the death.

“I want to see if you can kill me.”

“You’re a strange man. It almost sounds like you *want* me to kill you.” What a busy day it had been. Looks like I wouldn’t be going to bed early tonight.

“Now come at me, and intend to kill!”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.”

His previous attack *did* have murderous intent. Unlike before when he was just running away, I now felt a clear hostility.

This man was strong. If I didn’t call upon the fullest extent of my power, he really would kill me.

“Shadow Dance!” I unleashed an omnidirectional attack centered around me. The shadows at my feet changed into a giant wave and spread out in all directions, moving fast. The shadow was solid with no gaps as it continued its spread until it struck something. Escaping to the left or right would be impossible. The only way out would be...

“Above.”

The man sprung high up into the air, demonstrating a leaping ability that far surpassed any ordinary human. Although he jumped towards the moon with impressive ability, I was not intimidated. After all, by choosing to escape from above, he left no place for himself to hide.

Not only that, but there was no footing. Once he had leapt, there was no way for him to change directions. In other words, he couldn’t evade me at the same breakneck speed he had earlier.

“I’m going to sew you up.”

I summoned forth my shadow whips again, sharpening the ends of each whip into needlelike points. I slung them through the air towards the man. I had him. I was confident my attack would land.

“So naive.” The man intercepted my attack instead of dodging it. He snatched my whip with his bare hands and manipulated the blood dripping down all the way to his wrists, hardening it into a sword.

With one swing, he had beaten back my Shadow.

“It’ll take a lot more than that to kill me.”

“Evidently.”

He shifted his position in the air, transforming his blood-sword even further. In his left hand appeared a bow, and in his right hand he created an arrow...

And loosed it.

Not one shot, but four in succession. The arrows zoomed towards me, but I easily defended against the attack with Shadow. Even though it was fast, if I knew where it was coming from, I could defend against it with ease.

“Too far away to reach me,” I remarked.

“You’re a sore loser. I suppose that’s a good thing, though.”

My plan was to catch him with Shadow the moment he landed, but he had predicted this; upon landing he instantly started teleporting. He was far too fast for me to even see—surprisingly even faster than before.

“Seems like we had both been going easy on each other...”

He had superhuman physical abilities and the power to control blood, not to mention the fact that he could instantly heal himself even after being skewered alive. No wonder he said he looked like a human but was actually a monster. Though I watched and waited for a moment when I could catch him, truthfully he was just too fast for me to touch.

By this point all my energy had been focused on defending myself against his attacks, since I didn’t know where he’d teleport next. But his most troublesome ability was...

“Are your regeneration powers unlimited?”

“Who knows? Should we test it and see?”

“A fine idea.”

If his healing powers had no limit, I wouldn't be able to kill him, and so would hit a dead end. Or would I? There *was* one other method—however, it was risky.

"Stuck? Then let's just end this."

I felt his presence nearby, and immediately spread out a shadow wave. If he escaped into the air again, he wouldn't be able to continue pursuing me.

"I won't fall for the same thing twice. Besides I've already figured out how strong Shadow is," the man said, at once transforming his blood into a huge scythe and cutting through the waves of Shadow in a single blow.

"The force behind it is so weak."

"Grr..." I had no choice but to take the risk: I had to abandon all defense and challenge him head-on by using myself as bait in order to draw him out. If I made a mistake here, I'd die.

No—actually that wasn't true. There was no risk. After all, I was intimate with death. I didn't need to prepare myself for it because I already knew the pain of it, the anguish...and what lay beyond.

That was why I laid my life on the line without a single hesitation.

"What?!"

It happened the moment I deactivated Shadow and came close to him. He slowed down. He had been caught off guard. And I couldn't let this chance slip past me.

I took hold of two parts of the wave that had been sliced off with his scythe, transformed them into a bed of nails, skewered him from either side with it, and stopped him in his tracks.

"Argh!"

"This is where it ends."

"Ha ha! I thought I showed you that I can't die!"

"I know. And that's why..."

A shadow stretched out at his feet—not to attack him, but to pull him inside.

“...I’m going to trap you in there forever.”

“Gaah!”

There was no time for him to resist. My Shadow covered his entire body and immediately plunged him into the deep darkness.

Inside the shadows there was no air and no bottom. Only the endless feeling of falling. I and those I had given permission to were the only people who could move freely within the shadows. And just as I’d done to that troublesome noble I’d kicked out of the mansion, no one could freely leave the shadow unless I freed them myself.

Even if he possessed a supernatural, immortality-granting power, he would die inside of that space.

“I’ll have to be careful about using Shadow to teleport for some time...”

I was certain the battle was over. But just then, someone grabbed onto my leg. “Wha—?!”

What’s going on?!

I hadn’t opened the shadow, so why was his hand emerging from it? His firm grip on my ankle refused to let me go.

He’s going to pull me in!

Upon realizing that I couldn’t simply trap him inside, I frantically released the shadow’s hold on him. The man then appeared covered in blood, crimson liquid gushing out of him like a fountain.

“Oof!” He rolled onto the ground, choking and coughing, inhaling big gulps of air to compensate for the lack of oxygen inside the shadow.

“You escaped from the shadow by yourself?” Impossible. How could he leave the shadow without my permission?

Anyway, with my final gambit having failed, I was out of options. He was far too fast for me to outrun.

Slowly, the man rose to his feet.

Looks like I’d reached the end of this time loop. Oh, well. I’d just have to look

forward to my next life. But before then...

“At least let me see your face.” I sent out a shadow towards him, aiming towards his head. Of course, I attacked intending to kill. Though he easily avoided my attack by shifting his head, my shadow caught his hood, and for the first time, I saw his face.

“Damn it. So not even you can kill me, hm?” he said, smiling sadly. For some reason, that smile seemed familiar.

He had glossy, jet-black hair and dark red eyes, richer than rubies. The moonlight was too faint for me to clearly tell but it looked like he had fair skin. I had assumed he was some kind of bandit, but no—he was much too handsome for that. But what surprised me most was that suddenly, he lost his will to fight. There wasn’t a trace of hostility in him anymore.

He let out a big sigh. “I’m exhausted. It’s been a long time since I had so much exercise.” He plopped down on the ground. Truly, he had abandoned any intention of fighting. Yet just a moment ago I’d been so certain that I was going to die that I couldn’t hide my bewilderment.

“What’s *with* you?”

“Oh, sorry. As you can see, I don’t feel like fighting anymore. If you want to run away, go for it. If you want some more entertainment, feel free to keep attacking me. You can’t kill me, after all.”

“Such confidence.”

“It’s not confidence. It’s conviction. Because no one can kill me.” His words were sorrowful, and in his sorrow he gazed up at the night sky. He wasn’t exaggerating, and he wasn’t threatening me either. All at once I seemed to understand his state of mind.

“You really wanted me to kill you, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I did. But no one can kill me. I thought maybe you might be able to, though. But as you can see, it didn’t work. I didn’t die...*again*.” He heaved another big sigh. He seemed to be deeply regretful of that fact.

“I’m the one who should sigh!” I told him. “Consider how I feel—I just met

you and you asked to me to *kill* you!”

“Ha ha ha, I guess you’re right. Sorry for dragging you into this weird situation.” He gave me an innocent smile.

When we spoke like this, there was no sense that he was some terrifying monster. Instead, he was just a normal human—just a normal man. I didn’t perceive anything other than complete resignation in his words.“You should be sorry! Just one person asking that of me tonight was more than enough!”

“Huh? What’s that mean? Someone else besides me asked you to kill them?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Hmm...can I ask who it was?”

The status of the person in question held me back, but only for a moment; it wasn’t like he swore me to secrecy or anything.

“It was the king.”

The boy-king had beckoned me into his dreams and said, “Will you kill me?”

It was an inconceivable request from a twelve-year-old. He didn’t tell me why either. So I refused.

I doubted the man in front of me would believe what I said, so I answered him truthfully. His eyes widened in surprise and he froze, looking for a few seconds as if he’d forgotten to breathe.

“Oh...I see. He’s still hung up on that?”

“Pardon?”

In his eyes there was a fondness different from the initial surprise. He looked like what I’d said had made sense to him, and like he accepted it. It was such a strange reaction, almost as if...

“It seems you two are acquainted.”

“We’re more than acquainted.”

“What do you mean?”

“Heh. He’s my little brother,” he said with a faint, sad smile.

I knew that smile, because I'd seen it before. It was the exact echo of a smile I'd seen earlier, and in my mind, images of the boy-king and the mysterious "monster" in front of me overlapped.

"Who *are* you?"

"I haven't introduced myself yet?" He stood up and faced me. "I am Dier Veldt. The former first prince of the kingdom of Werkst."

"The first prince...?"

"You don't believe that I was a prince, do you?"

"Of course I don't! There has only been one prince."

And that was the current king, Euclis. I was certain that he was the only son born to the royal family. Though I'd lived and died many times, I retained all the memories and knowledge I held from each of my time loops.

There was one prince, and that prince was Euclis. If I trusted my memories, then that meant this man was lying.

But if that *were* true, then why did my instincts tell me otherwise?

"I know it's hard to believe, but it's the truth. I was the first prince. Until he awakened to the royal supernatural powers, that is."

"The supernatural powers... But aren't *your* powers supernatural?"

"Yes. I awakened to the power of Moon. I'm the guardian of the moon."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

The guardian of the moon. He must have some connection to my family, the guardians of the sun.

"I'm not surprised you haven't heard of me. Only the royal family knows of the existence of the guardian of the moon. For the same reason as your power of Shadow."

"What did you just say?"

"The power of Shadow is rare within your bloodline, isn't it? And once, it brought forth catastrophe. There was also someone else like that. During the same era that Shadow was born, there was someone who rebelled against the

king.”

“And that was the guardian of the moon?”

He nodded.

The whole thing was so unbelievable. What basis was there for his story? The only evidence for it was in his supernatural power. Normally, a story like his wouldn’t be worth believing. But the more he told me, the more I *wanted* to believe it.

Even though I shouldn’t be able to accept it, what he was saying strangely made sense to me.

What was this feeling?

“Do you mind if I tell you a story, one from long ago? One you haven’t heard; only the royal family knows it. Interested?”

“Very.”

“It’s a long story.”

“I don’t care. I won’t be able to sleep tonight anyway.”

No one would be worried about me or troubled if I came home late. I was free to choose when I would return home. Plus...I found the idea of being here, standing in the moonlight, more peaceful than going home.

“All right. Then listen to my story, and you’ll find out why I was born.”

♦ ♦ ♦

Centuries ago, when the six guardians and the king first founded the kingdom, there was a man who possessed a power that could seal the other supernatural powers. It was a time of monsters and natural disasters. In those turbulent times, the people had wanted a powerful ruler.

A powerless king was worthless. That was why the people supported the king and his guardians. With their immense power, they had brought peace to the kingdom and security and reassurance to the people.

However, the peace didn’t last for long.

Peace and tranquility—they had desired and achieved both of them, validating their strength. However, once the people got what they wanted, they realized something. The guardians were so different from regular people, and that difference—their supernatural powers—was frightening. Though they were the very ones who had desired it, the people had begun to fear their powerful ruler.

And then, a new generation came.

A child was born to the king and his wife. Not just one, but two—twin boys. The supernatural powers were hereditary, and though twins, both boys could not inherit the king’s power. Which child would inherit their father’s supernatural ability? Whoever did would become the next king.

It turned out to be the youngest child. The moment he displayed his power, his succession to the throne was solidified.

Or at least...it should have been.

But then something unexpected happened. Usually, the supernatural powers existed from generation to generation in one person, with the same applying to the guardians. Only *one* person inherits the powers. But not that time.

The eldest twin also had a supernatural power—one that was different from any other power in existence, and by far more powerful.

He was the guardian of the moon. He had been granted immortality and the ability to control blood. In exchange, he could not walk in the daylight, though his powers were more than strong enough to compensate for that weakness.

Viewpoints between the guardians and the nobility were split.

Some people thought the younger brother should become king, while others asserted that the older brother was much more powerful.

Rumors spread like wildfire until the controversy had taken the entire kingdom by storm.

After that, things progressed rapidly: the kingdom divided into two factions and fell into war.

The kingdom had been built upon power, and that same power had brought it to ruin. While power can grant one the ability to control destiny, it can also breed discord.

That was the first and last time a guardian of the moon was born.

♦ ♦ ♦

"That last part about that moon guardian being the last one is a lie, of course."

"Because you're one? But no one, including myself, has ever heard of you."

"That's because this power is cursed."

I had a visceral reaction upon hearing that word; Euclis had said the same thing in my dream.

"Cursed, you say?"

"Yes, and I'm not being sarcastic. This power is *actually* cursed. I awakened to my power right after my brother awakened to the king's power. And the moment my brother used his power, my existence disappeared without a trace from everyone around him. What else would you call that besides a curse?"

"Your 'existence disappeared'? What, you mean they completely forgot you?"

"Yes, that's right. And it didn't just affect their memories. Any proof of my existence—objects, events I was involved in—was erased. As if I'd never been there, not even from the beginning."

He clenched his hands into fists. His frustration was obvious.

The cost of wielding the supernatural power of Moon. He didn't mention that in the story, but it didn't look like he was lying. And if this *was* the truth, then he was right; what else was his power other than a curse? Furthermore, if I believed what he said, it was clear why we didn't know about him. However...

"I don't know. Let's say you're telling the truth. Why pick a fight with me?"

"Because I want to die. I told you that already."

“So then why didn’t you just ask to be killed in the first place? Why engage me in an elaborate fight?”

“Because I *can’t* just ask, unfortunately. My body rejects death; the moment my life is at risk, my body moves by itself. So because of that, I can’t take my own life.”

That made sense. The whole time we fought he was at full power. Not because he wanted to, but because his power was *forcing* him to.

“What a troublesome power. But what would your death accomplish?” I couldn’t believe I was saying those words. I didn’t have to ask him that. I understood the desire to die; I’d once chosen that path myself.

“I just want to die. That’s all. I’m sick of this endless, meaningless life. And as long as I’m alive, it torments him. He’s too nice.”

“So the king hasn’t forgotten you.”

“That’s right, and I don’t know why. I just know he’s the only one who remembers me. I’m happy he does, but at the same time, it’s cruel. Everyone else has forgotten me but only he remembers. We were close, and so he thinks it’s all his fault.”

“I see.”

I now understood why he wished for me to end his life: he thought if I killed him, it could be enough to save his brother. Or perhaps he knew he could save his brother with his supernatural powers?

“He’s kind. We talked once, after this all happened. He cried and apologized to me. I didn’t know what to do.”

“Were you in a completely white space?”

“Yeah, I’m surprised you knew that. You’ve been there too?”

“Yes, just a while ago.”

I could now identify the other person the king was referring to when he said another person knew his secret. Before he used it on me, he had used his power once before, with his brother.

I sighed. “How exasperating. You two are peas in a pod, you know that? Both of you trying to sacrifice yourselves on behalf of the other...”

Generosity has its limits. I simply couldn’t comprehend it. Not in my current state, at least, with so many time loops behind me.

“I understand both of your situations. But at the same time, I just don’t get it. Why did the both of you seek me out, thinking I could help?”

“Hm? Oh, the answer is simple; you’re the Shadow guardian. As I said in the story, while most of the guardians backed the younger brother, only one supported the older one.”

“And that was the Shadow guardian?”

“Exactly. Back then, they were the other outcast. They’d been born with the powers of Shadow and not Sun.”

I see...

The existence of the Shadow guardian invited catastrophe. But that was only half the story; the world had concealed the existence of another person. And the only person who knew that was the very person who had been erased.

If this was all true, I couldn’t dismiss this as just a strange one-off and continue on with my life.

I sensed there was someone else, a person controlling all this behind the scenes. There was no other way to explain it.

And did that “someone” have a hand in me being stuck in a time loop?

“That’s part of it, anyway,” the man continued, as I stood and pondered over all this. “But that’s the reason we both sought you out.”

I thought he had finished, but it seemed like he had something else to say. “Is there more?”

“Yes. This reason is mine alone. No one else would be able to notice, but...” As he spoke, he pointed at me. “We’re the same.”

“The same?”

“Not our personalities. I’m talking about our circumstances. We’re in the

exact same situation. How many times is this one for you?”

My heart skipped a beat. Not once had I ever dreamed this would happen. Though I’d been shocked many times, nothing had shaken me to the core like this exact moment. I couldn’t believe it—no, it was more than mere disbelief.

Does he know?

“How many times?”

“That’s right. You’re experiencing the same things over and over again...aren’t you?”

I gasped. That confirmed it. He *knew*. *He knew!* He knew that I was stuck in a time loop.

“But how did you know?” I asked him. “Are you stuck too?”

“No, not exactly. But I had a feeling you were. I was pretty certain before, but now I’m positive.”

“What?”

What is he talking about? So he didn’t *know this whole time?* My emotions were at a high, but one feeling reigned over them all: confusion.

“What do you know? How much do you know?” I asked hesitantly.

“Hmm... That’s hard to answer. I’m very confident in my memory.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My memory. My memories, especially my recent ones, have been strange. And it’s not that I can’t remember things—more like the opposite. I’m *remembering* things. Several separate memories...that took place on the same day.”

Is he saying that he remembers a set of different events occurring on the same day?

Then...

He continued. “At first, it felt like I was dreaming. I actually thought that events from my dreams were overlapping with real life. At the end of the day I’d go to sleep, and when I woke up and tried to recall the day before, my

memory was mixed up with things I knew hadn't happened at all. There were even memories I shouldn't have even known about."

But according to him, it wasn't like he was watching someone else's memories—it was as if he was remembering them from his own point of view. He had no memory of these experiences, and yet he was remembering them. For him, remembering the past was complicated. The whole thing was so unnatural it was bewildering, but there didn't seem to be any effects on his physical body. And eventually he had a revelation.

"Within those memories, everyone essentially stuck to a set routine and repeated the same things they would do on a given day—except you." He held me within his intense gaze. "In each memory, you were the only who would act differently. My memories would split off according to how you acted, almost like you were searching for a different path each time."

"And that's how you figured it out."

"But something felt off. I predicted your circumstances off of those memories, and fighting with you confirmed it. You fear death even less than me. You shocked me there with that last move."

"Ah, yes...that."

I'd accepted my own death—not resigned myself to it, but just accepted it as fact. And that was why he knew his prediction was right. One of the reasons we fought, I now realized, was for him to confirm his thoughts about me. Now that he had figured out so much, it seemed pointless to keep trying to hide things.

"Well done. As you suspected, I'm stuck in a time loop. I experience the same time period again and again, and when I die, I go back to the beginning."

"I see. How long has this been going on?"

"You mean since the loop began? Or how many loops I've experienced?"

"Both, I guess. If my memories are correct, then you should've just begun your tenth time loop."

He was right. I let out a little sigh and nodded. "That's right. You really do know, don't you?"

“What, you didn’t believe me?”

“Well, isn’t it quite unbelievable? After all, the only person I can really trust is myself.”

“You...”

If he possessed memories of the time loops and observed me, then he should know the way I’d been treated until now. Besides me, he was the only individual who could accurately infer what was motivating my decision to, for the first time, truly begin living for myself. Of course I didn’t expect anything from him, or for him to really understand.

But there was someone else—not just me—who *knew*. And having that lightened my heart, ever so slightly.

“So what are you going to do now?”

“What am I going to do? Couldn’t your memories answer that question?”

“I only know what happened up until yesterday. I have no idea what you’ll do tomorrow. That’s why I’m asking. What’s your goal? What do you want?” His eyes were serious. Though it might have been a simple question, to him, it was highly meaningful. He wanted to know something specific.

“Sorry to say, but I’m not doing this because I want to die. I only want to live my life, and at the end of it, be free from this time loop. That’s all I’ve decided.”

“Hmm...”

I thought he might look disappointed, but the smile he gave me was actually, for a brief moment, relieved.

“So, do you have a plan for how you’re going to do that?”

“No, not yet. I’m searching for one. I intended to start with the supernatural powers.”

“I see. It does seem likely that this abnormal situation has something to do with the powers. I suspected that myself.”

“Oh?” I had a feeling I knew what he was going to say next.

“I’ve got an idea. Want to work together?”

“No.”

“That was fast! I’m shocked...”

“Ha ha...”

I couldn’t help my laughter when I saw how crestfallen he was, mainly because he’d been so vigilant while we fought. And perhaps, because he was someone who shared my secret.

“I don’t play well with others. Your death wish doesn’t interest me. I wouldn’t be opposed, though, to us using each other as we see fit.”

“True. I guess that’s more fitting anyway.”

In the end our goals were complete opposites; he wanted death to save him, while I wished for a real life. But at the same time, it seemed we would be walking the same path.

“I’m going to help you in order to make my wish come true.”

“I’m going to live for myself, by any means necessary.”

Although our goals were different, our interests were one and the same.

“Then it’s decided. We’re allies. Or maybe a better word would be accomplices,” he corrected himself.

“That’s right.”



Perhaps normal people would conclude this exchange with a handshake, but not us; we were accomplices.

When he offered his help, something inside me reacted—a happiness, deep inside my heart.

“Then let’s get right to business. Starting tomorrow, you’ll...”

Chapter Three: The Secret Room

A new morning arrived. I woke up at my usual time and slowly sat up in bed. My body felt a little heavy—I was still fatigued from yesterday.

“No surprise there, considering what happened,” I murmured to myself as I got out of bed. I clapped my hands, and at once the maid on standby outside my door entered the room.

“You called, Mistress?”

“Yes. Help me get dressed.”

“Of course.”

The servants did everything I asked. It made things incredibly easy; I didn’t even have to dress myself. If this lifestyle continued, perhaps I would lose my independence. But considering the tiring events of yesterday, I decided to temporarily give myself grace. And no one would blame me for it—after all, it was expected for the daughters of nobility to live this way.

“There you are, Mistress.”

“Thank you. You may leave.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“Something the matter?” Usually the maid would excuse herself immediately, but today, for some reason, she lingered, fidgeting.

“Oh, if it’s about the man outside,” I said, “there’s no need to worry. There is a matter I wish to discuss with him. You are dismissed.”

“Y-Yes. Pardon me.” The maid hastily exited the room. Once the door shut behind her, I stared at it and let out a little sigh.

“You can come in now.”

“Got it.”

I heard a man’s voice. Although it hadn’t even been twenty-four hours since we met, he strangely already felt familiar to me.

He entered my room with a stiff frown.

“Did you sleep well last night?” I asked.

“Yep, thanks for asking. Although all your servants are staring at me like I’m some kind of shady character.”

“Well, technically you *are*, so you can’t blame them for that.”

“Hey! You didn’t explain anything?”

“How in the world would I explain this?”

“Good point...”

Dier Veldt: a member of the royal family whose existence had been entirely forgotten. The only ones who knew his true identity were me and his brother, the king. Currently, it was as if he had been reborn.

Even if he told anyone he was royalty, people would just assume he was mad, suffering from delusions of grandeur.

Since I returned home late last night, I hadn’t given anyone in the manor any kind of explanation about him. But it was a situation that was difficult to explain, especially since his very appearance was so unsettling.

I could tell my maid had wanted to inquire about him. Seeing him was probably perplexing everyone.

“Well, you stand out.”

“Is it my black hair? I know, but my hands are tied. It’s not like you can choose your hair color. And a hood doesn’t help hide it either.”

“That’s right. A hood makes you seem like even more of a delinquent.”

“You really don’t have a filter, do you?” He released an exasperated sigh and touched his hair, which was so black it looked like it would melt seamlessly into perfect darkness. In our kingdom, black hair was extremely rare.

Black hair reminded people of Shadow, and had a negative, frightening connotation to it. So for a strange, black-haired man to show up at the mansion one day without warning—and clothed in a dark hooded robe, no less—was very suspicious indeed.

“Are you sure it’s okay for me to stay here? I’m grateful you’re giving me a place to live, but are you sure it’s not a bother?”

“I’m not doing this for you. I’d like to keep my accomplice within reach...for my own goals.”

“Got it. I’ll make myself at home then.”

“Go right ahead. I won’t be put out by it anyway; it’s the servants who will look after you.”

“You’re really...” Dier let out another sigh.

We were now accomplices. Our goals were contrary to each other, but we were headed in a similar direction. We weren’t really a team; we were using each other, so that I could live my life and escape the time loop, and so that he could die and be released from his curse of immortality.

“Are you sure *you’re* all right with this arrangement?” I asked him. “I’ll do anything and everything to get what I want. I won’t hold back if someone gets in my way, no matter who they are, royalty and the other houses included.”

“I know that. You know, there was something that surprised me.”

“And what was it?”

“In my memories, you never retaliated, no matter how cruelly the others treated you. You always tried so hard to gain their acceptance, no matter what they did to you.” As he spoke, he looked up at the ceiling with a faraway look in his eyes. He was recalling my past time loops, all of them until yesterday. And that was how he knew that the tenth version of me was different from the rest.

“I’ve moved on.”

“It took a long time. Most people wouldn’t have lasted as long as you did. You’re far too nice, you know that?”

“You must be joking. How could *anyone* see me now and think I have even a sliver of kindness inside?”

“Because I’ve watched you this whole time. You *are* kind. Sweet, even.”

I wasn’t kind at all. There was nothing redeemable about kindness. Kindness

held no value to me.

I let out a sigh. “That’s enough. I’ll inform the servants that you’ve become my new bodyguard.”

“You think they’ll accept that?”

“I am the mistress of this house. If they don’t accept it, they can leave.”

“So headstrong. I guess that suits you.” He nodded.

He could recall all of my past time loops; that’s why he knew that the path I had traveled down thus far hadn’t been easy.

But it made me who I was today.

♦ ♦ ♦

We gathered in my study after breakfast. I sat down in my chair while Dier leaned against the wall.

“So what are we gonna do?” he asked.

“Well, I’m going to learn more about the supernatural powers. To start, tell me everything you know about them.”

“It’s not much. I wasn’t in the royal family for very long, and there’s not a lot of texts on the powers. I probably only know as much as you do.”

“That can’t be true. You’ve been looking into this ever since your curse went into effect, right?”

He told me the current king was five years old when he awakened to his powers—or seven years ago. Dier awakened to the power of Moon immediately after Euclis got his own powers.

“How ironic,” I remarked.

“Yeah. If it weren’t for this power, right now I might be...”

“Not necessarily.”

Which was the cause, and which was the effect? Though it was probably coincidence, I’d also awakened to my power seven years ago. Just like the brothers.

If my power was a curse, then we’d both been cursed that day.

I sighed. “Anyway, back to the main point. Can you tell me what you discovered from your research? Or have you done nothing in the past seven years?”

“Tch...” He let out a sigh and pushed off the wall to walk over and stand beside me. “Yeah, I researched. But only about my own power. My knowledge about *all* the supernatural powers is the same as yours. I only wanted to know about my own power, and what I could do to die.”

He clenched his fist tightly, as if he could compound all his regrets of the past

seven years in his hand. He clenched it so tightly, in fact, that he broke skin and blood trickled down his hand, though it healed almost instantly.

This was Dier's power...the curse of immortality. Time healed his wounds, no matter how deep. Even if he wanted to die, his body automatically defended itself against all attack. It was a power he couldn't control.

"I tried all kinds of ways to die. I challenged you because I thought maybe a supernatural power could do the trick. But in the end, nothing worked."

"You shouldn't have put your hopes in me."

"You're right, and I'm sorry. I really don't know much. There's not a lot of information out there about the power of Moonlight. The only other place to look is..."

"The royal palace."

Dier nodded. "The palace has a library. There's that, and one other place. If I got in there...maybe I could get some more clues."

"Hmm... Well, let's go there tonight."

"What? It's the royal palace! You heard me, right?"

"Yes, I heard you. With my power, I can easily slip into the palace."

"That's not what I meant, but...whatever."

I knew what he wanted to say: trespassing was illegal. But that was an unnecessary worry.

♦ ♦ ♦

Late that same day, some time after midnight, we went down quiet streets, the pale moonlight gently illuminating our path.

"It's so nice and quiet at night," I mused.

"You like the night better than daytime?"

"Between the two, yes. It's not day itself that I dislike exactly, but the sun; it's bright, hot, and annoying."

“Think so...?” By my side, he looked up at the night sky.

I glanced at his profile and murmured, “I’m surprised you don’t feel the same way.”

“Me? I guess I never gave it much thought. Remember what I said before? Because of my power I can’t walk in the daytime. If I’m exposed to the sun, my body will immediately catch fire. And I *still* won’t die—I’ll just be in a lot of pain.”

It was like the vampires I’d read about in books. The first time he told me he couldn’t withstand the sun, I mentioned that to him, and he laughed and said I was right. But his smile was melancholy, his face lined in resignation.

“Anyway, I hate the sun.”

“Yeah? Well, since I can’t even *see* the sun, the fact you can even feel its brightness and warmth makes me a little jealous.”

“Well, I wish we could switch places then.”

“Ha ha. No you don’t. Immortality is nothing to be jealous of.”

If an ordinary person overheard us commiserating, they’d probably think the both of us had fantastical problems.

He wanted to die but couldn’t. I kept having to start over every time I did. On the outside looking in, some might think it was a convenient ability. Some might be jealous. But that’s only because they didn’t know what it was actually *like*.

I’d felt the incredible anguish of death many times—it was the kind of pain you never got used to.

Dier understood that. His body might be immortal, but he still felt pain. Sunlight burned him—every injury he suffered, he felt.

He’d gone through it—endured it—dozens of times. Who would feel envious, hearing that?

“I know you’re not planning on walking the whole way to the palace.”

“Not exactly. We’re heading to a spot near the palace and will then use Shadow to slip inside.”

“Wouldn’t it just be faster to use Shadow from the beginning? You can travel anywhere as long as you’ve been there before, yeah?”

“That’s right. It’s what I’d do if I was alone.”

Via Shadow, I could travel to any place I’d been to before, regardless of distance. It was also possible to go somewhere I’d never been to—it just had to be within a certain radius of my current location. My powers could create a direct tunnel there as long as shadows were present.

But only I was guaranteed freedom inside the shadows. Outsiders could not travel, or even breathe, within the shadows.

In other words, any ordinary person would asphyxiate and die if they were inside the shadows for too long.

“The farther you travel, the more time you spend in the shadows.”

“I see. No need to worry about that, though. I’m immortal, remember?”

“True, you won’t die. But it would be painful.”

“See? Told ya you’re nice,” he said, chuckling. I realized I was being considerate only after he pointed it out, and honestly, I was a bit embarrassed over it.

“Well, if you’d like to hurt yourself, go right ahead. We can travel there now.”

“Nah, I hate pain. But I also hate long travel times. Just leave it to me.”

“What do you mean, leave it to y—Hey!”

He suddenly circled around behind me, slipping one arm around my shoulders and the other behind my knees. With me fully swept up in his arms, he kicked off the ground and leapt high into the air.

“What in the world are you doing?”

“Moving us closer to the palace. Hang on.”

“You’re certainly willful, aren’t you?”

“This is faster, isn’t it? Plus, we’re accomplices now. Wouldn’t hurt to make use of each other’s skills for our own benefit.”

With the moon at our backs, he raced through the air, flashing me a grin, his crimson eyes gazing right at me. It felt like I'd been kidnapped by a bandit.

I sighed. "Fine. But if you drop me, there's going to be hell to pay."

"Yeah, yeah."

The rushing air filled my ears. Floating in midair was surprisingly pleasant, and from up high, the view of the town was quite refreshing too.

"You help me and I'll help you, hm?" I said.

"That's right. Might as well take advantage of each other's powers, you know?"

"I suppose so."

In no time at all, we arrived at a location in front of the palace, though we landed some distance away to avoid alerting palace security.

"Now it's your turn. I can't take us inside because of the guards."

"All right."

I closed my eyes. In my mind's eye, I could see all the possible areas we could travel to with Shadow. Dier told me the general location of the palace library. According to him, it was usually empty in the middle of the night.

"I think we can get to the library. It's empty."

"It always is this time of night."

"Then let's go."

"Yep."

I grabbed Dier's hand. "It won't take even a second to get there from here. But you—is something wrong?"

Dier was staring at our clasped hands. "Oh, nothing... It's just... It's been a really long time since I held hands with someone. I forgot how warm it feels, that's all. It's nothing."

"I see... So it's nothing important," I said, but at the same time I knew exactly what he meant; I'd felt the same thing.

We clasped our hands tightly together so we wouldn't get separated and slipped into the shadows. It was only for a moment: a sense of sinking, and then pushing.

"We're here."

"Huh. You're right."

I opened my eyes and saw countless books lined up on shelves. We were inside the royal library. Every sort of book imaginable, from all over the kingdom, seem to be stored here.

The shelves were so tall one would need a ladder to reach the books on the uppermost ledges. Truthfully, it was imposing.

"This place brings back memories, doesn't it?"

"It's my first time here."

"I know. Well, no time to be sentimental. Let's start searching."

"Right."

We were looking for anything about the supernatural powers or the kingdom's history. We believed that in this library, all sorts of information—knowledge we didn't possess—lay here, and began our search.

We perused books for two and a half hours. Only the two of us were in the quiet library. We passed the time in silence, leafing through the books.

Suddenly, the sound of Dier slamming a book shut echoed through the room.

"This is useless. I can't find anything helpful. You?"

"Same here. I've already read most of the books about supernatural powers and the kingdom's history that are here, and even when I found some I hadn't, they said things I already knew."

I'd been hopeful, since this was certainly the largest library in the kingdom and was supposed to contain all the knowledge in the world. But apparently our hopes had been in vain.

Dier had already told me the truth about the kingdom's history and the guardian of the Moon. That would have been enough for me, if I hadn't met

him. But it was old news now.

“There are some books we haven’t read yet. What do you want to do? Keep going?”

“Hmm...”

There were a lot of books, and although they were on the same subject, the various authors made it so that the content in each of them would be different. Though it would be a good idea to review each one in order to discover all the different opinions and points of view, I didn’t want to waste our time doing that. I closed my book.

“I think we’ve done enough here. Let’s take the rest back to the mansion and continue there.”

“Take them with us?”

“Yes. Look at them all. You really think anyone’s going to notice if a few go missing?”

“No, but...not only are we trespassing, but stealing? We’ll get locked up if anyone finds out.”

My eyes had adjusted to the darkness and I could see Dier’s sheepish smile. He was surprisingly naive despite the hardships he’d experienced. I could tell he was a good person, through and through.

“We’re not stealing. We’ll bring them back later.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“Oh, will you shut up? I won’t change my mind, no matter what you say!”

“Figured,” Dier said, laughing.

What was he laughing about? It’s almost like he was having fun.

“You’re weird,” I muttered.

“Huh? Did you say something?”

“No. Let’s go to our other option.”

“Okay, but you’ve got a plan, right? After all, that’s the most secure spot in

the castle. Only the king's allowed in there. I've never even been in there."

The next place was the other spot Dier had mentioned earlier, an area in the palace's cellar—a secret room excluded from the public record.

I'd never heard of it. Only the royal family and a select few guards knew it existed. Dier didn't know what was inside the room. Perhaps the only person who *did* know was the king.

"Can you use Shadow to get us there?" he asked me.

"No. When I was trying to find where the library was, I searched for the cellar room, but I couldn't find it."

"Maybe it was outside the radius of your power?"

"No, the entire castle is visible to me while we're inside of it." Dier gave me a puzzled look. I continued my explanation before he could say anything. "I can see an open space in the cellar. A hallway with several guards posted around it leads there, then it continues. The secret room is probably at the end of it."

"So you did see it, then."

"I said *probably*. I'm not totally sure. The only thing I'm sure of is that there's a hallway there. I couldn't find the secret room itself. Not because there weren't any shadows there, but because it was as if my powers were being rejected."

"Then...!"

The moment I said that, both of us came to the same realization.

Powers being *rejected*. That was proof of supernatural power besides ours at work here. Only a supernatural power can counteract another. And as of right now, the only thing that can nullify supernatural powers is the one inherited by the royal family.

"Something's going on, then."

"Agreed."

"Then what should we do? If we can't use Shadow to get in, we'll have to enter the old-fashioned way. But that would cause a commotion. No problem

for me, but a big one for you.”

“That’s true. In this case, I’m quite grateful for that.”

“Hm? What’s that supposed to mean?”

I looked at him and smiled.

♦♦♦

A hallway led to the secret room. It was the only path inside, and knights took shifts standing guard around it. These knights were among the best swordsmen in the kingdom—any ordinary person would find it impossible to break past them. But of course, we weren’t ordinary people.

Two knights currently stood in front of the room.

“Hm? Hey, did you say something?”

“Huh? No. Why?”

“I thought I heard someone talking to me.”

“What do you mean, someone? We’re the only ones here.”

A silhouette reached out a hand. When he showed his form, he caught the knights’ attention immediately.

“Wha—?! Somebody’s he—Argh!”

Before the knights could even take a defensive stance, they were knocked out cold.

“Phew. Done.”

“Good work.”

Now that it was quiet, I emerged from the shadows. I looked at the guards. Indeed, they were just unconscious, not dead.

“You didn’t kill them,” I pointed out.

“Of course not.”

“Oh? But won’t them seeing your face cause problems?”

“I knocked ’em out before they saw me. Anyway, I had no idea that you’d make me do this.” He shook his head with exasperation. His face truly seemed like it was pouting.

I reminded him: “Didn’t we say we’d use each other’s powers to our advantage?”

“This could’ve been done without me.”

“I can’t have anyone seeing my face. Weren’t you worried about that too?”

“You’re so thickheaded, you know that?”

“Such a rude thing to say to a lady! Where’s your decorum?”

“Yeah, because decorum’s real important at a time like this,” he said with an eye roll. He let out the biggest sigh I’d heard so far today.

“We’ve got to hurry. We can’t have them waking up before we’re done.”

“You’re right. Let’s go.”

The door was right in front of us. I could already feel active supernatural energy here; my own reacted to it. The feeling was a sort of resonance, something I’d felt it faintly when I went up against Dier—a clashing of powers.

I reached out towards the door.

“Wait,” Dier said. “I’ll open it.”

“Why?”

“You feel it too, yeah? The supernatural energy coming from this door is enormous. If you touch it something might happen, so I should do it, just in case.”

“I don’t mind if something happens to me. I’ll just restart the loop again.”

If I died here, I would just start over. It’s not like my life would actually *end*. But it would be annoying to start over at the party.

“Still, your power couldn’t detect this room, right? Who knows what’ll happen. You might not be able to use your powers inside. We should be careful,” he said.

“I guess you’re right. But isn’t that what you want?”

He wanted to be free from his cursed immortal life. If there was a place where his powers were nullified, then maybe his wish could be granted there. He should be happy about that.

“You don’t look so pleased.”

“I’m just not expecting anything,” he said, reaching for the door.

He’d been worried something would happen if we touched it, but nothing did.

“It’s heavy. Won’t budge a bit.”

“Seems like it.”

Though he leaned his entire body weight against the door and pushed, the door didn’t move an inch.

It was a set of double doors, and neither the right nor left side would move. We tried pulling them as well, but it was useless.

“Maybe the doors won’t open unless you have the king’s power... Nah, that can’t be.”

“But it’s possible. It’d explain why only the king can enter.”

If this place was tied up with the powers, then it was likely. We were just about ready to give up.

But for some reason, when I placed my hands on the left door, and Dier placed his on the right, there was a *click*—like a key had unlocked the door.

“What was that?”

“Hey, look...”

The doors pushed open immediately. We truly must’ve unlocked them somehow, though I didn’t know how or why. But the doors were finally open.

“So this is the secret room. The one only the king can enter?”

“It seems that way.”

It wasn’t very big. There were no lights inside and yet, it was bright. The walls, ceiling, and floor were all pure white. The color was what gave the room its

brightness. It was the same space I'd seen before.

"It looks just like it did then..."

"Huh?"

"When your brother invited me into his dream."

That place was also pure white everywhere. But there was one difference. Unlike the place in Euclis's dream, this room wasn't empty. In front of us stood a towering slab of stone that reached high into the air.

"Was that in his dream?"

"No, it wasn't. This is the first time I'm seeing it."

"Me too."

There was a drawing on the stone slab. At first glance, I couldn't tell what it was depicting. It wasn't an abstract drawing; it was more surreal than anything. What was at the center—a human?

There was a circle drawn near the person's heart that several other people were reaching towards, each of them distinct in a way that set them apart from each other. For example, one was engulfed in flames, while another was a woman dripping with water.

"Are those the six guardians?"

"You think so too?"

"Yep. And the one in the middle must be the king."

"I agree," I said.

So the six people were reaching out their hands towards the king's heart, or at least that's how it looked. Nature surrounded them. But we were focused on the king and the six people.

"What do you think it means?"

"What, the picture?"

I nodded.

Dier answered immediately. "The guardians don't look like they're trying to

protect the king. It looks like they're reaching for his power."

"That's what I thought you'd say."

"What do you think?"

"The same as you. It *definitely* doesn't look like they're protecting him."

From all angles it seemed as though the guardians were after the king's heart. But we had always been told the guardians protected the king—that they established the kingdom together. This picture certainly didn't seem to align with that story.

It confused us both.

"This isn't enough information. Anything else in here?"

"Nothing besides the slab. Also, I can still use my powers here."

"Me too."

I realized that as well. Since I could activate Shadow inside this room, we could instantly teleport and leave when we wanted.

"At least we don't have to worry about how we're getting back. Now that we have the time, I want to investigate a bit more."

"Investigate what? There's nothing else here."

"We don't know that for sure."

I thought back to when we somehow opened the locked door. We opened it by touching it at the same time. By doing so, we must have fulfilled some kind of condition required in order to open it.

So what would happen if we touched the *slab* at the same time too?

"What are you doing?"

"Try touching the slab."

"Hm? Oh, got it." He realized my meaning and touched the slab.

I could immediately feel our powers react. It was painful, like getting struck by lightning. I could feel our powers being absorbed from the points of contact.

"Ah!"

“Wh-What’s going on?”

We immediately let go at the same time and jumped away from the slab.

And that’s when we saw the change.

“Hey, look!”

“The drawing’s changed!”

The differences were on the very top and to the bottom left. The place where the sun and moon had been drawn, along with the earth, had transformed: once gray, those parts of the slab had turned black.

We looked up at the slab.

“Did the facade of the slab peel off or something? But how?”

“No idea. But it definitely reacted to our powers.”

“Yeah. You felt it too?”

“Yes. It felt like my powers were being sucked in from the places I was touching the slab.”

Maybe we had let go too soon. I reached out and touched the stone again, waiting.

“What are you doing?” I said to Dier. “Touch it!”

“Right...” He hesitated for a moment and then touched the slab again. A few seconds passed, but nothing happened. Our powers weren’t being absorbed like before. I could only feel the cool surface of the rock.

“Nothing’s happening.”

“Seems so,” he said.

It really must have been a mistake. If we had kept our hands on the slab for longer, maybe the entire picture would have changed. But now it was only partially different.

The areas surrounding the six guardians had been transformed, but the center of the slab remained the same.

“What a mystery...” he muttered.

“I know.”

This was the place Dier had put most of his hopes in, but there was no more information to be gleaned here.

I let out a deep sigh. “We should head back. Staying here for too long is dangerous.”

“Wait. There’s still something else.”

“What?”

I was just about to fully give up when Dier stopped me. He was looking closely at the slab. “There’s a secret here. It’s hiding something we don’t know about, I’m sure of it. You noticed it too, didn’t you? The Moon and Shadow guardians aren’t in the drawing.”

“Yes. But wouldn’t that be because the slab was probably made before the kingdom was established?”

“Then where are Shadow and Moon?”

“Huh? I don’t see...”

I considered it, recalling what had been depicted in the lower left of the slab. I hadn’t noticed it at first because it was too abstract, but it was Shadow.

“I’m surprised you remembered it wasn’t there before.”

“I’ve got a good memory. It was the king’s shadow, cast by the light of the sun.”

“I see...” The person forgotten by the world had a good memory—how ironic.

“I think this drawing was made by the first guardians, depicting all their powers. Sun, earth, air, water, forests, stars...and then the moon and shadows. And the only spots that changed colors once we touched the slab...”

“Were the places where the moon and shadow were drawn.”

“Yep. Nothing happened when we touched it a second time. I think that means we’ve done our part. In order to get the entire slab to change...”

I realized what he was trying to say, and what that meant. The possibility—or perhaps I could even call it—hope.

“The other guardians have to channel their power into the slab.”

“That’s what I think, at least. If we wanna know its secrets, then we’re going to have to bring them all here,” Dier said.

“Secrets...”

The stone slab was certainly hiding *something*. If we learned what it was, would I be able to escape from the time loop? I wasn’t sure. But what I felt right now was an indiscernible sense of unease.

I felt like whatever secret the slab concealed was something I wasn’t meant to know. I had no evidence to make me think that. But it just felt like something very bad would be waiting for me—for us—if we proceeded.

“Ha ha... A bit too late for that, isn’t it?” What was I so afraid of? It was foolish; I wasn’t even afraid of death, so what else could possibly scare me?

“What’s the matter?”

I shook off my thoughts. “Nothing. So if we have the other guardians’ powers, we’ll be able to learn the truth.”

“I think so. But that’ll be difficult. How will we get them to cooperate with us?”

“We don’t need to.” He was so sharp—how had he not realized it yet? I pointed to the top of the slab. “You see that? The part where the moon was wasn’t the only thing that changed color. The sun did too.”

“Yeah, because they’re from the same family, right? The same type of power.”

“True, but that’s not why. With that logic, why didn’t your power affect the part where the king is drawn?”

“Hmm, you’ve got a point.”

Though his theory was valid, it didn’t pan out. There was just one other thing I could think of.

I’d absorbed my father’s power of Sun.

“Shadow has the power to absorb the other supernatural powers. I’ve already

absorbed the power of the Sun.”

“You did?”

“Yes. And that only skims the surface of what Shadow can do.”

With Father, his power was transferred to me and thus weakened. That’s why I was able to steal his powers completely. But I wouldn’t be able to do such a thing to the other guardians. I would probably only be able to absorb a portion of it.

“And it was only a fragment of the power of Sun. If it reacted to that, then maybe I could absorb the powers of the other guardians and make it do the same thing.”

“Oh, I see... What?! Wait, are you serious?”

“Of course I am.”

“You’re scary. You know, depending on how you do it, that could be a felony.”

I knew that. I was just thinking about my options. Being afraid of possibly committing a crime wouldn’t stop me. I’d already made up my mind that this time around, I was going to live *my* way.

“I’m going to escape this time loop no matter what it takes. If that means I’ll have to take their powers by force, then so be it. I won’t hesitate to get my hands bloody.”

I’d steal their powers. And I sensed that the moment I did, my destiny would change—radically.

Chapter Four: An Elegant Dance

“Well, where should I begin? Who’s first?”

Dier didn’t answer.

“I can’t make up my mind.”

“You really are going through with this.” As I deliberated things over in my office, Dier watched me, letting out a relenting sigh.

It was the day after our late-night trip to the palace, and we were discussing our next moves.

“Of course I am. Stand aside and just watch if you don’t agree. That is, unless you’re thinking of interfering.”

“I’ll help you. I want to know the secret behind that slab too, remember? Plus...”

“What?”

“I just feel like I shouldn’t leave you alone.”

“So you’re treating me like a child now?” I laughed.

“No. I just feel like what you’re planning to do is way too big to do alone. And you’re not like me—you’re not afraid of death.”

“Well, of course I’m not,” I answered, exasperated.

The only thing I feared was stagnation. Of nothing changing and this nightmare endlessly repeating itself. Not dying, not at all.

“I’m trying to say you have no sense of danger. I can’t just stand around and watch you.”

“As if you’re one to talk.”

“You’re not wrong, but if you’re going to be reckless, at least let me do it; I actually *want* to die. If we get into a situation where there’s a chance of death, I want to be leading it.”

“That’s fine. When that times comes, I’ll rely on you. Ha ha...” I couldn’t

believe I was actually telling someone that I'd rely on them. I laughed because I surprised myself. "Hey, who do you think I should attack first? The guardian of the forests?"

"Don't immediately start this whole thing with an attack! And why the woman first?"

"Because she's a woman—she's an easier target."

"You shouldn't say things like that. Also, going after a woman is actually riskier."

"Why?" The guardian of forests being a woman wasn't the only reason I thought of her first; unlike the other guardians, her powers weren't suited for combat. She was mainly a healer, with the ability to treat injuries and cure sicknesses. Her power wasn't one for fighting enemies. Though it was all hearsay, so I couldn't be certain—only her family knew the full extent of her ability. Despite the fact that I belonged to one of the supernatural families, I didn't necessarily have a complete knowledge of what the other families were capable of with their powers.

Instead of answering, Dier first started digging through the shelves against the wall, looking for a map. Once he found it, he spread it out on the desk.

"There are tons of reasons. I'll start off by correcting wrong information. The idea that the powers of Forest aren't suited for combat is completely false. In fact, it's just as powerful in offense as it is in defense."

"I wondered if it was a lie."

"Well, not exactly—she *does* have healing power. But that's not her main power."

According to Dier, the power of Forest included two other abilities: the ability to freely manipulate plants, and the ability to speak to animals. Both seemed like trouble.

"With her power, she can use the entire forest as cover. She'll be able to detect you the moment you enter the forest—she'll sense your powers before you can even reach her house. And you'll also have her forest animal friends to deal with. Sneaking in will be impossible."

“I’ll force my way in, then. I don’t mind that.”

“I’m trying to tell you that this isn’t going to be simple. If she finds you, you’ll be in a world of trouble. Her power over plants allows her to create a doll—a clone of herself—that she can control. That wasn’t her at the party. It was a doppelgänger.”

“Wait, that was a doll?!”

I thought back to our conversation. Her voice, gestures, and even the tiniest details of her physical appearance seemed human. She in no way seemed like a doll. Even when we shook hands, I remembered how cold her skin was. Nothing at all felt off.

“Do you finally get how difficult it’ll be to attack her? You’ll have to successfully get into the forest undetected, search for her, and find her. And the risk of her finding you first is extremely high. If you fail on your first try, you won’t have another chance.”

“It certainly sounds that way. I’ll probably go for her last, then. Or at least until I’ve had more time to prepare.”

“But you won’t give up?”

“Of course I won’t. I’ll do it, even knowing the risks. But I won’t attack her first.”

I would hold off on her for later. But maybe not last; there was someone who would be even more difficult to attack: the guardian of stars, Etoile Weldon. His power was deadly. Astromancy allowed him to see the future. He could sense every impending tragedy, every stroke of bad luck, and he knew when something was about to happen before it ever did.

Surprise attacks wouldn’t work on him. His one weakness was that he couldn’t see any future involving me, but even if I tried to attack him, he’d know, because he’d see an attack coming even if he couldn’t identify who it was. And the very fact that he couldn’t see the perpetrator would alert him that it was me, since I was the only one his power didn’t work on.

His power was vital to the kingdom, and much trust was placed in it. If he told others that he saw a vision where I was going to attack him, I’d already be

labeled a criminal before I even made a move.

“I’ll have to steal the Star guardian’s power in a way that doesn’t involve attacking him.”

“He’s your ex-fiancé, isn’t he? Would he let you borrow it if you asked him?”

“Absolutely not.”

“That was fast.”

I was certain, and that’s why I didn’t have to take time out to think about it. There was no way he’d cooperate with me. And I wouldn’t ask him for help either.

“He’s engaged to my sister Soleil now. He’d listen to her requests, but not mine.”

“So have your sister ask him for you.”

“No. She’s just a normal person. I can’t get her involved in this.”

“Hm...” He made a strange face—a little grin—but it made me uncomfortable.

“What’s that face?”

“Nothing, I’m just surprised that you’re worried about your sister.”
“I’m not worried about her.”

“Yes, you are.”

“I am not. Don’t get the wrong idea.”

I wasn’t worried about her. I just wasn’t angry at her, unlike how I was with my father and Etoile. Soleil hadn’t done anything wrong. But no other emotions were involved.

“Anyway, back to the topic at hand. The two remaining guardians are the guardians of earth and water. Which one do you think would be easier?”

“Hmm... If we’re talking strictly combat, then Water. Earth is a master of combat.”

“Was? Did you already fight against him?”

“Yes. I challenged him for the same reason I challenged you. And you can see

the result.”

He’d challenged the guardian of earth in hopes of dying.

“Then you probably shouldn’t let him see your face again.”

“No, that’s nothing to worry about. I was wearing a hood and it was nighttime, so he didn’t see anything. Though he was strong, I found out when I fought him that he still wouldn’t be able to kill me.”

“That’s something only someone very strong would say. So the guardian of water is weak, then? Have you fought him?”

“No, not him. I fought the guardian of earth first. But I haven’t heard any rumors of Water being strong, so I thought there was no point in fighting him.”

“I see. Well then, I’ll start with him first.”

Neither of us brought up the guardian of air. We had both omitted him because not only did he not attend the party, but he was said to roam around the world. I had no idea where he was right now. That would be troublesome in a different way from the guardian of the forests, so I’d save him for later too.

“Okay then, but what specifically are you going to do? You’re not going to actually attack him, are you?”

“It’s an option. But you don’t have to worry. I don’t have to pick a fight with him to get him on the battlefield.”

“Oh? Sounds like you have a plan.”

“I do.”

I had a special plan I couldn’t use on any of the other guardians—one I knew would work.

And that was because once, the guardian of water had asked me to marry him.

♦ ♦ ♦

Two days later, Dier and I left the mansion and walked through the capital. We were headed to a particular residence. The head of one of the supernatural

families seemed to attract quite a lot of attention.

“Aren’t you hot?”

“Of course I am.”

“Then why not wear something else?”

“Are you saying that on purpose?”

“Pfft. Yes.”

I laughed and took another look at what he wore. Dier was wearing robes from head to toe, with a hood concealing his face. He looked incredibly suspicious. I knew he had to be working up a sweat, walking out here with no shade and in heavy clothes.

“Damn it. Why couldn’t we have done this at night?”

It was two in the afternoon. At this time the sun was at its highest point in the sky, meaning it was the hottest part of the day, where the sun’s rays would be at their brightest. For someone who couldn’t be exposed to sunlight, it was a rough environment to be in.

“Just be patient. We’re almost there.”

“I know that.”

We kept on going until we arrived at a grand mansion. Everything about it was of the highest possible quality to acquire in this kingdom, from the architecture to the very land the mansion was built on. And it was no wonder; it was the mansion which belonged to the guardian of water.

There was a large fountain in the mansion’s courtyard, as well as several sculptures with water features. There was even a river flowing through the property, befitting its owner’s powers.

“Guess this is to be expected, huh?”

“Yes. It’s so humid here though, I don’t like it.”

“That’s not very nice.”

“But it’s *true*.”

I was fairly sure the servant showing us inside heard me. But I didn't care. We walked until we arrived at the front door.

"Welcome to my home!" The person we were there to see immediately appeared: Alexei Wasser, the guardian of water. He welcomed us with a friendly smile. "I've been waiting for you, my fiancée!"

"I'm not your fiancée."

"What are you saying? Then why did you come to see me? Isn't this your answer to my proposal?" he asked and approached me, gently clasping my hand.

It made me feel sick. Even though we were just holding hands, like I'd done with Dier, for some reason having this man touch me was aggravating.

"Don't touch me without permission."

"Ooh, you're a shy one!"

"No, I'm not."

The way he leered at me was creepy. I hated him from the bottom of my heart. It was frustrating that I just couldn't turn around and go home.

I'd told him I needed to discuss something with him. He'd gotten the wrong idea, and though it was my fault, I didn't want to admit it.

"Let's talk somewhere else."

"Yes, let's! Somewhere just the two of us can be alone..."

"We won't be alone. He's coming with us."

"Him?" Alexei glared at Dier. "I don't recognize this man."

"He's my bodyguard."

"My name is Dier. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I see. Well then, come in," Alexei said, clearly sounding antagonistic towards Dier. Perhaps it irritated him that I came with another man. At any rate, I preferred his irritation to his constant smirking at me. I was glad I'd brought Dier with me. Still...

“Are you sure that was a good idea?” I whispered.

“Hm? What?” Dier whispered back.

“Telling him your name. The king still remembers you, right? Shouldn’t you be more...I don’t know, secretive?”

“Oh, I guess you’re right. I forgot.” He brushed me off with a smile. I sensed something more was lurking behind that smile, but I didn’t press him on it. That was a problem between the brothers, and I had nothing to do with it.

“Come, come! Let us speak to our hearts’ content!” Alexei led us to some kind of parlor. I’d admit that he was treating us graciously. However...just looking at him filled me with annoyance. So annoyed, in fact, that I was quite rude in return.

“What’s the matter? Did you fall in love with me all over again?”

“No. Where do you get all that confidence from, anyway?”

“It’s not confidence. It’s conviction. There’s no other man in this world better than me!”

I stared at him silently. The truly incredible thing about this man was that he absolutely, without a doubt *believed* the words that came out of his mouth. He didn’t have a speck of doubt in his eyes.

He believed in himself to a frustrating degree. And that’s why he probably could never have imagined that I could refuse his proposal.

“I thought I turned you down very plainly. I have no intention of marrying you.”

“I heard you, and that’s fine. Before long, *you’ll* be the one to propose to *me*. You’ll say you’re just *dying* to be my fiancée!”

“That will never ever happen,” I insisted. “Even if the entire world turns on its head, and the sky becomes the ground and the ground becomes the sky, I will never ever ask you to marry me.”

“You’re very headstrong. I like you even more.”

I didn’t understand him—what was there about my attitude to even like? I’d

rejected him as harshly as I could.

“Are you simply a fool?”

“Of course not! My intelligence is top-notch! I’m very gifted.”

“Gifted people don’t go around saying they’re gifted.”

“No, those are pretenders. People who are the real deal can freely and publicly declare without shame just how wonderful they are. Like me!”

I didn’t buy that. But he was so convincing that for a split second, I found myself believing him. Talking to him scrambled my mind.

I just wanted to hurry things up, state my business, and leave.

“Anyway, if you aren’t here to accept my proposal, why did you come here?”

There it is. The moment I’ve been waiting for.

“I thought I would give you a chance.”

“A chance?”

“Correct. I’ve said that I will never marry you. But I’ve been thinking that refusing you indefinitely was perhaps a bit too cruel. So I’ve decided I’d give you one chance. I want you to fight me.”

“Fight you?”

“That’s right.”

I knew that it was forceful, and logically, made no sense. He’d question why in the world I would want to *fight* him.

But there was one thing I was sure of: even though he’d be baffled, he’d accept.

“Certainly!”

I knew it. Thank goodness he’s so predictable.

“I’m not sure what you have in mind, but this opportunity is very attractive to me. I’m going to show you the fullest extent of my power, and steal your heart *and* your body!”

“That’s some confidence.”

“Of course. But remember what I said? There’s no other man in this world better than me. I’m the best at everything.”

“I see.”

Of all the guardians, who was the strongest? Ask anyone, and most people would say the guardian of earth, Gordov Boden. He was said to be the strongest man in the kingdom, with his success in having defeated so many monsters.

Alexei must have known this. So the fact that he still insisted upon calling himself the strongest was far too conceited. It irritated and annoyed me even more.

“All right then. I’ll be the one to break that confidence of yours.”

“I think you’ll find yourself bowing your head to me in defeat.”

♦ ♦ ♦

“Kinda scary how easily you played him,” Dier said.

“Yes, well. He’s a simple man.”

We were heading towards the place where we would have our match. Alexei was leading while Dier and I kept pace a bit behind him, whispering to each other.

“You’ll be fine, won’t you?”

“Afraid I’ll lose?”

“I know your strength. It’s his confidence I’m afraid of.”

“Oh? It’s a relief to me, personally.”

Alexei wouldn’t have accepted my challenge if he weren’t so confident, so I was grateful he had the personality that he did.

“Shall we begin?”

Alexei had shown us to an area in his garden. It was paved with stone, with no obstructions and—since we were outside—no ceiling. The moon shined directly onto us.

“Sure you want to fight here? There’s no water.”

“I don’t mind. There aren’t many places where you can fight with Shadow, correct? So it’s only fair.”

“I see. Well, if you agree with this location, then we may begin.”

“All right. The first move is yours. Come at me with all you’ve got!” He welcomed my attack with both arms spread wide. The gesture irritated me; it seemed patronizing.

In that case, there was no need to hold back. In order to absorb his power, I had to weaken my opponent as much as possible—I needed to put Alexei in so much pain that he could no longer stand.

“Shadow. Penetrate.”

The shadow at my feet swirled and lifted up around me like a tornado. Under my control the shadow morphed itself into a wave of knifelike points that all hurled themselves towards Alexei at once. Though I went after him seriously, I wasn't trying to kill him.

When I looked over at Dier, he made a face that seemed to say, "Don't you think that's overkill?"

To be honest, I also thought I might be overdoing it in my attack—maybe it was because Alexei had irritated me too much.

Yet my worry was unfounded; Alexei blocked my shadow with a jet of high-pressured water. Not quite a jet—more of an entire wall, really. It flowed all around him, repelling my attacks.

"Good, good! That was pretty strong! You're the best, you know that? I love women like you."

"I see. That's nice."

Alexei had a cocky smile on his face. It seemed that I was the one underestimating him, and not the other way around.

The guardian of water—the supernatural power he'd inherited was quite simple. The power— "Waterdance!"

—allowed him to freely create and control water. Steam curled around him, and in the blink of an eye, a wave of water rose into the air. It was a current, as turbulent as a raging river, and changed directions with a flick of his hand. A column of water spouted from his feet and shot straight towards me.

"Shadow." Right after the shadow expanded, I created another that beat back the flowing water. Water splashed against it, some of the spray still landing on me. "Chilly."

"Now that I've gotten you wet and cold, shall I warm you up? We can take a hot bath together if you'd like."

"Absolutely not!" I went on the offensive. Rather than attacking him head-on, I aimed for the side. I connected the shadow at his feet with my own, dove inside, and in an instant emerged from his own shadow to try to grab him.

I used the void to my advantage and positioned myself behind him. I gained hold of his leg and attempted dragging him into the shadows, but he blocked me with a wall of water.

I couldn't keep my grip, so I made shadow-whips and lashed at him instead. But he blocked that too.

"You misjudge me! Did you really think it would be *easy* to catch me off guard?"

"Apparently."

He was a tougher opponent than I imagined. Most surprising was the versatility of his element. We had similar fighting styles; while I transformed shadows and manipulated them at will, he did the same, but with water. But although our styles were similar, water was much more flexible than shadows.

Water didn't have a defined shape. It could change forms, could easily flow into any place or situation; even now, he could make the water change shape the moment before he defended and dodge my attacks with ease.

"What a pain."

That wasn't all. The steam around us kept growing thicker. His ability encompassed not just the water he created, but all the water in the surrounding area. The wetter and more moist the terrain became, the more tools he had at his disposal by which to attack, making things increasingly dangerous for me. The longer this went on, the bigger my disadvantage would grow.

If only I could just trap him inside of a shadow, things would be so much easier...

"You keep trying to pull me into the shadows. Unfortunately for you, it won't work."

He predicted my plan and had a membrane of water coating my shadow. Although his feet looked as if they were planted on the ground, they were actually standing on a thin layer of water. His power blocked mine, disabling me from controlling the shadows cast below.

He didn't have Dier's physical prowess, but what he *did* have was control—he could manipulate his element with a finesse I didn't have with my own.

"I'm surprised. So you're not all bravado."

"Bravado? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, right. You mean every word you say."

I settled myself, concentrating. Currently, we were evenly matched, both on the offensive.

"Hm? You're being awfully quiet over there. Is that all you have for me? Don't be shy now. Give it all you've got—I can take everything you can give."

All that I've got...

Perhaps he was right. Perhaps I should stop holding back. This man was strong, and though it pained me to admit it, I had to.

"Hm. Well, if you insist."

Though I'd been attacking him, I hadn't been using deadly force. That would have to stop. In order to absorb his powers, I needed him cornered. If things kept going like this, we'd remain at an impasse.

"Shadows all around us?!"

"Yes. It's a shadow barrier."

"Ooh, so you can do that? You don't *truly* want me out of your grasp, do you?"

"That's right. If you're able to escape, I can't kill you."

Once I began to *really* fight—fighting to kill—it felt like I had a breakthrough. I hated this man: walking on eggshells and being careful with him during our fight had thrown me off. But he had asked me not to hold back anymore.

Why not kill him, then? It didn't matter whether I killed him or I failed in doing so—this wouldn't be the end.

"Yes, I love that look in your eyes! So serious."

"You seem laid-back. Shouldn't you focus on defense? Because if you

don’t...I’ll skewer you.”

The shadows by his feet turned into thorns, spearing his hands and feet. He’d twisted at the last moment to avoid any of his vital parts getting stabbed, but blood still gushed out from all over his body.

“Argh... So you weren’t using full force before?!”

“Correct. I was going easy on you. But I’m done doing that.”

It was surprising how hard it was to *not* kill my opponent. It limited me more than I thought it would. Our supernatural abilities were greatly influenced by our mental and physical states; thus the impact of a hesitant attack was markedly different from a determined one.

“Ha ha! It’s been so long since I last bled. Now I want you more and more!” Not to be outdone, Alexei molded the water and attacked. This time it seemed like a tidal wave, as if he wanted to crush me with mass instead of sharpness.

“Sealing us in together was a mistake! You forget that water can fill any container!”

His goal was to suffocate the shadows. But it wouldn’t work; my shadows absorbed everything.

Even water.

“Hey...you’re absorbing my water!”

“Did you forget? I can connect shadows.”

The water flowing inside my shadow barrier was being drained through the shadows and funneled to the outside. That way, water couldn’t accumulate from within the barrier.

“I see! It’s simple, then! I’ll just control the water so it doesn’t flow—huh?!”

“It took you a while to realize, didn’t it?”

“Th-This...”

The shadows bound his body. Now he wouldn’t be able to move.

“I can make shadows anywhere. Even on the surface of water.”

“So that’s...it...!”

The moment he tried to unleash his big move, his control of the water he was using to defend himself wavered. I wouldn’t let that opportunity slip past me. I sent out a thin shadow to slip in and coil itself alongside the water that shielded him.

The rest was simple. I’d manipulated the inner shadows I’d threaded past his defense and bound his body directly.

“You used your move to create this opening, didn’t you? And the barrier was to guide my attack.”

“That’s right.”

“Heh... Ha ha ha! You got me! I admit total defeat!”

For some reason, his grin this time didn’t irritate me. It was clearly different from all the other instances when he’d smirked at me. This time, he looked satisfied somehow.

The barrier shattered. And the battle was over.

When we were released from the dark space, the moon seemed brighter than before. Or perhaps I thought so because I’d won.

“Is it over?”

“Yes, it’s—you’re soaked. Why?”

When I turned around I saw Dier, standing, completely wet from head to toe. He didn’t seem too pleased about it. I thought maybe he’d gotten pulled into our battle, but the whole time he had been on the outside of the battlefield.

“Did it rain while I was inside the barrier? What a disaster.”

“Um, no. It’s your fault.”

“You shouldn’t blame others, you know,” I said. “If it rained, it was just your bad lu—oh.”

“Finally realized it, huh?”

So that’s what happened.

When Alexei's tidal wave had attacked me inside the barrier, I absorbed it within my shadow and redirected it to flow outside the barrier. Which meant...I'd funneled it directly onto Dier.

"It was my fault."

"Told you so. I thought you might have done it on purpose."

"I did not! It was just a coincidence."

"Was it really? It was a direct hit. *Achoo!*" Dier sneezed violently. Since it was nighttime and he was soaking wet, I figured he must be freezing.

I was definitely at fault. I even started feeling guilty, just for a moment, until I remembered that Dier was immortal. A little cold was nothing to worry about.

"Hey! You don't feel at all bad about this?"

"That's not true. I did feel bad."

"Past tense?! You know I can still get sick, right? I may not die, but it'll still hurt."

"Oh, I see." So I *did* do a bad thing. "I'm sorry. I'll be more careful in the future."

He stared at me silently.

"What?"

"Nothing, just surprised that you can actually give a sincere apology." He really did look surprised. I wanted him to apologize in kind.

"What do you think I am, anyway? Whatever. Next time I'm definitely not going to apologize!"

"You're so extreme. So? What happened? Did you win or what?"

"What do you think?" I stepped aside and gestured to Alexei, who was lying spread-eagled on the ground.

"Hey, you didn't kill him, did you?!"

"No, though I intended to."

"So you didn't hold back."

“I had no choice. Things would have gone on forever if I hadn’t.” It was the truth—Alexei was very strong. If I hadn’t attacked with the intent to kill, I might’ve lost.

“What about the absorption, then?”

“There was no problem.”

I had absorbed Alexei’s power when I bound him up. I touched him directly, without any resistance—probably because the battle had exhausted him. But unlike with my father, I hadn’t completely drained him of his powers. I only skimmed them. Alexei could still use his abilities.

“He needs medical help. Shall we call someone?”

“No need...” Alexei responded, slowly sitting up. This surprised me. I thought it would be difficult for him to get up on his own, considering I had just absorbed some of his power and he was also suffering blood loss from my attacks.

“Surprised?” Alexei asked. “I also have the ability to heal, though generally it’s quite weak. But for light injuries like this, it’s enough.”

“I see.”

He seemed to be telling the truth; some of the wounds on his extremities had already healed. The small injuries were gone, and only the major ones remained.

“It seems you don’t need assistance, then. In that case, I’ll take my leave.”

“Please wait. You’re leaving already?”

“Of course I am. The battle is over. I won. Don’t tell me you’d like to continue?”

“No, I lost. I told you, remember? I admitted defeat. At least, *this* time.”

“This time?”

I’d taken a step towards the gate, but at Alexei’s words I paused and turned around.

“I won’t lose next time,” he continued. “I’ll be victorious over you.”

“There won’t *be* a next time. You had one chance, and only one chance.”

“Oh, come on! You have to challenge me again. I demand it!”

“I told you, it was a one-time-only deal! Honestly!”

Unlike Dier, for some reason talking to Alexei completely tired me out. It was all so ridiculous that I felt my exasperation grow. Day in and day out, I was always so tense, so perhaps interactions like this were good for me. However...

“Why are you so obsessed with me?” I asked him. He’d only known me for a few days, after all, and this was only the second time he’d seen my face. Not only that, but he’d just gotten whipped by me—literally and figuratively—*and* repeatedly rejected. And yet, he wouldn’t give up. I wanted to know why.

“Because you’re attractive.”

“Attractive?!”

How very cliché. I was a bit disappointed—that wasn’t the answer I’d been expecting.

“You’re very attractive,” Alexei explained, “because you know who you are, and you don’t waver from that. You don’t let others influence you. You’ve got a strong sense of self, one that doesn’t bend. And *that* strength is beautiful. When I say you’re attractive, I’m not talking about your powers or your status. I’m talking about the personal beauty and strength that you carry.”

A strong sense of self. So he wasn’t talking about my appearance or my power, but my resolve and conviction. That was what he saw in me.

I was finally able to recognize the source of my irritation with him; I had sensed that he could see me for who I really was. He’d seen my innermost thoughts and feelings.

“You see things differently than others. I like that about you too. There truly is no other woman like you. And that’s why I won’t give up,” Alexei said, resolute. “You will be mine. And next time, I’ll take all of you.”

“Ha ha. Well, that’s impossible.”

I knew now that he wasn’t a bad person. He held a genuine affection for me, and I had a feeling that if I asked, he’d gladly cooperate with me.

Since it was easier to see everyone else as an enemy, it would please me to see Alexei join me as an ally. But even still...there was no chance of me falling in love with him. It was a matter of personal preference. His personality...just wasn't for me.

But most of all...

"The only way you could ever be my partner is if you couldn't die, even if you tried."

That was the only kind of person suitable for me right now.

"Goodbye, Alexei."

I turned and began my departure. Dier fell into step beside me seamlessly, as if he were my shadow.

"Such a cruel woman. You ask a human to be immortal," he said.

"Ha ha. From someone who *is* immortal, that almost sounds like a joke."

Chapter Five: The Strongest Supernatural

Living things need sleep. Sleep helps the body to reset from everyday life and is necessary when recovering from fatigue. It's not just a habit. Neglecting sleep burdens the body and, in the worst-case scenario, can be fatal.

We sleep in order to live, and as such, sleeping is a part of life. We rest so we can live the next day.

But me? I'm immortal, so I don't need sleep. I don't need sleep in order to live, because I *would* live, no matter what I did or didn't do. Regardless, I would continue living. Tomorrow would come even if I didn't want it to.

To me, sleeping *was* a habit. And every time I slept, I had nightmares. Well, more like memories—of when I could still hold my head high and say I was human.

But I'd started having different dreams lately. Maybe "dreams" was an understatement. These "dreams" were actually memories, memories of everything up until present day.

But they weren't my memories. They were hers.

Her past, which she had relived so many times, unknown to anyone else, kept accumulating in my head as memories.

She was born privileged and lived a privileged life. Then one day supernatural powers she never wanted awoke inside her, and her innocent soul became tainted by loneliness, despair, hatred, and resignation.

Sadness and pain flooded these memories. They made my heart ache. I could relate to her, though she'd been cursed in a different way than I was. I couldn't leave her alone.

It's why I...

"Ugh... Oh, it's morning." Through gaps in the curtain, the morning sun weakly filtered through the room, and though it didn't touch me at all, the

unpleasant sensation wrenched me out of my sleep.

I yawned and stretched. “Whew... That dream again. I just keep having it lately.”

Recently I’d been dreaming every day. Dreaming about her past—of nine yesterdays I had never experienced, all of them crowding my mind and my memories. The only thing I knew was that she had gone through nine time loops and, in every single one of them, was sad. She had suffered, unable to resist, a helpless slave to fate.

“I can’t watch this anymore.”

Luckily, she’d gotten over a lot of things now. From those nine time loops she became stronger, and though saying those experiences were necessary would be irresponsible, right now she was looking forward, and only forward.

I was curious about her future. It was that curiosity, as well as my own goals, that led me to be her accomplice.

She’d experienced hell, a different one than mine, and I wanted to know where she was going next.

I left my room after I got dressed. The spacious rooms and high ceilings of the corridors reminded me of my time as a prince. If my life had continued on that path, I never would be where I am now, walking the halls of her mansion.

“Hey, is he a guard?”

“Seems so. That’s what the mistress said, anyway.”

“But who is he? And where’s he from?”

“No idea. Still, look at his hair. Pure black. How unlucky...”

“No kidding. I do think he and the mistress suit each other, though.”

I heard two maids gossiping to each other as I walked down the hall. They probably thought I couldn’t hear them, but unfortunately for them, I had good ears. I heard every word they said. But I was used to it; the servants had been doing this every day since I got here.

“Tch, don’t they ever get sick of it?”

I'm sure she thought the same thing. She was very observant; even if she hadn't heard it directly, I was certain she was aware all of this was happening. I also knew she didn't care about the opinions of others.

But seeing it still worried me. This was her house, and she was its mistress, yet not a single person in this household seemed to truly be on her side.

"E-Excuse me!"

"Hm?"

All of a sudden, a voice called out to me.

It honestly surprised me. The only person who'd ever spoken to me directly since I got here was Selene herself.

I turned around, and saw a small, pretty girl.

"You're..."

"It's nice to meet you! I'm Soleil!"

I had a guess it was her younger sister. I'd passed by her several times throughout my stay, but since Selene was always with me, she'd never said a thing to me.

"Hello, I'm..." Just then, I remembered the mistress's words.

You're my chosen bodyguard. There's no reason for you to be formal or polite to anyone here. Both within and beyond the walls of this mansion, I want you to act confident.

I thought she might've said that to preserve my dignity and be considerate, knowing that I was once a prince and was now forced to live as a nameless commoner. Honestly, formality made me uncomfortable. So I was actually grateful for her consideration.

"You need something?"

"Yes. You're my sister's bodyguard, aren't you?"

"Yeah. She need something?"

"No, um... I was just wanting to ask how she was doing?" She spoke haltingly, hesitant as she asked after Selene.

“Why are you asking me?”

“Well, she seems so busy lately... I don’t want to bother her...”

They were sisters, weren’t they? So why all the hesitation? Of course I couldn’t ask her *that*. I’d been around long enough to know that family was a complicated matter here, and that it wasn’t my place to intervene.

“She’s good. Almost *too* good.”

“Really? I’m so glad!” she said with a smile. She looked thoroughly relieved. I decided to ask her something that had been on my mind.

“Are you scared of her?”

“What?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. Sorry. Forget I said it.” That question wasn’t a fair one to ask. Plus, I didn’t need to ask to know the answer.

“Yes...I’m scared of her.”

I knew it.

“But deep down, my sister is *kind*. I know she is, so...”

“You... I see.”

No one here supported Selene. Since that sorry fact was true, at the very least *I* could be on her side. But I felt embarrassed even thinking that—she wouldn’t want me as an ally because I felt *sorry* for her. And she didn’t need my worry anyway.

“Despite how she appears, she’s actually a very lonely person. Please look after her, all right?” I said.

“Huh...? A-Ah, yes.”

“Good. Well, see ya. I’ll tell her you’re worried about her.”

I wasn’t sure if that would please her or not. She generally didn’t let her emotions show on her face. But at least I don’t think it would upset her.

♦ ♦ ♦

Thump, thump, thump!

The sound of someone knocking on my door resounded through the room. I told them to come in, and the door opened with no response. That made it clear who my guest was.

“Hey.”

“You’re late,” I said, glancing at the clock on the wall. I told him to come at nine, and he was ten minutes late.

“My bad. I got caught up making small talk.”

“You’re a bad liar. There’s no one here for you to make small talk with.”

He had most likely overslept. The sun weakened him, and so he preferred the nighttime. Him not being a morning person didn’t surprise me. It wasn’t his fault, of course, but there was no need for him to excuse himself with such an obvious lie...

“I’m not lying,” Dier said. “I was on my way here when someone stopped me.”

“Oh? Someone so odd lives in this mansion?”

“She looked very much like you.”

Ah, so that’s it. Of course I knew exactly who he meant. So he wasn’t lying after all. She *would* talk to Dier.

“She asked me how you were, and I told her you were doing almost *too* well.”

“I see.”

“That’s cold. She’s worried about you. Why don’t you just talk to her?”

“It’s none of your concern. And I don’t have the time.”

He gave me a faint smile and shook his head, exasperated, as if asking why I couldn’t just be more sincere. That expression irritated me. I didn’t know what Soleil said to him, but I wasn’t that kind. There was no reason to talk to her now.

“We need to move on to our next plan.”

“The next one, eh? So who’s your next victim?”

“The guardian of earth.”

“Thought so.”

It seemed he already knew what I would say and only asked to make sure. He probably knew the reasoning behind my decision as well.

There were four people left. Three of them needed to be dealt with later for their own complicated reasons, and so the only one left was the guardian of earth, Gordov Boden. Boden’s only problem was his strength.

“And that’s a big problem. You learned that from yesterday’s battle. Alexei was much stronger than we’d anticipated. And Boden’s even stronger than him.”

“That’s right. I’ll trust your word on that, since you’ve fought him before.”

If I could just find a way to penetrate that strength...but I doubted it would be simple. I couldn’t fight him using the same methods I’d used on Alexei.

“First of all, how would this even start off? It’s not like you can just tell him, ‘Hey, I wanna fight you.’”

“Don’t make a fool out of me. Of course I wouldn’t do that.”

“That’s basically what you did yesterday.”

“Alexei *wanted* me to come over. I just used that to my advantage.”

But Boden was different. He was a knight who spent all his time protecting the kingdom. He had a strong sense of integrity. I doubted he’d fight for no reason.

And attacking him would be difficult. Since he was stronger than Alexei, I couldn’t go easy on him, not even for a moment. One wrong move and I’d lose. If I lost, he’d find out who I was immediately. And failing even once would make trying again much more difficult. So it was imperative that the first time we’d fight would be the last.

“Don’t worry. I have a plan.”

“Oh? And would you let me in on said plan?” Dier asked.

“Yes. Actually, I need you to pay very close attention to it.”

“Huh? Uh-oh, I’ve got a bad feeling about this...”

How sharp. That just made things easier for me, though.

“Now, let’s get down to business, shall we?”

♦ ♦ ♦

On the outskirts of the royal capital, right at the foot of the mountains, one could hear animals among all the vast forest and shrubbery.

In this place, where humans seldom visited, two people walked side by side.

“Thank you so much for honoring my request today, Sir Boden.”

“Of course! My job is to protect the citizens of the kingdom, which of course includes you, Lady Selene Vixent.”

“I’m very grateful. This was a personal request, so I wouldn’t have blamed you if you’d said no.”

“I wouldn’t have. No knight—or guardian, for that matter—would turn you down in good conscience.” As he spoke, he lightly touched the sword fastened at his waist.

The other day, I sent word to Gordov Boden telling him of the appearance of a frightening stranger, whose motives were unclear but seemed to be targeting us guardians. I asked for Boden’s assistance in settling this matter before anyone could get hurt, and explained that although I could locate this stranger, in no way could I handle them alone, and so needed his aid.

He immediately accepted. Once he found out citizens’ lives were in danger, he agreed without hesitation. He was a true knight. Even *I* felt a bit guilty about deceiving him.

That’s right—the request was a complete lie. There was no stranger targeting the guardians. I’d called him out here so that I could fight him.

“It’s so strange though,” Boden said. “I knew nothing about this man.”

“He attacked me only just recently. You and I are probably the only ones who know about him so far.”

“I see. You said it was after the party?”

“Yes, and he was very strong. Luckily I was able to get away, but I knew I wouldn’t be so lucky next time.”

That wasn’t a lie. Actually, unbeknownst to me, there were rumors that a battle had broken out outside the party. So I just used those rumors to my benefit.

“If we leave him to his own devices, people will get hurt. This needs to end here, with us.”

“Yes, but first...” Suddenly Boden drew his sword. We hadn’t yet arrived at the place I’d been hoping to reach. But I soon realized why him drawing his sword was necessary—a strange growling noise erupted in front of us.

“Monsters.”

Yes, monsters. Not animals or bugs, and of course, not humans. They were what one might imagine a monster to be. No one knew where they came from, but they rampaged all over the world and were feared by humans everywhere.

“Selene Vixent. Is there a connection between this monster and the stranger?”

“I don’t know.”

The reason I chose this location was so that I could enact my plan without anyone else interfering. I didn’t know monsters were out here. In fact, before this, I’d never seen a monster in my life.

“So this...is a monster?”

Though I’d heard of them, seeing one with my own eyes filled me with an eerie feeling. The monster was big enough to make Boden, who was a giant, look small, and its appearance couldn’t be compared to any other four-legged beast I’d seen before. It didn’t look like a tiger or a lion... Neither came close. Any beast I knew the name of paled in the face of this creature.

“Get back. It’s my job to slay monsters.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll leave it to you.”

I hadn’t expected this to happen, but it was a good opportunity for me to witness what exactly he was capable of. Right now, I had no intention of fighting, but I was looking forward to watching him.

Let’s see how strong the “strongest man in the world” really is.

The monster moved first. Its claws tore into the ground as it charged Boden. It was quite fast considering its size; in no time it closed in on him, brandishing its sharp claws.

“Hmph!” He stopped the monster’s attack with his sword. I could tell the attack had been powerful; its impact traveled through Boden’s body as he braced himself on the ground. The force was probably enough to dent a steel shield.

It was supernatural strength.

“Aaahh!” Boden pushed back, countering with his own force. Even though the monster was more than ten times his size, he easily sent it flying through the air.

It charged again. This time Boden was faster than the monster and reached it first, slashing at it before it could defend itself. The monster screamed—Boden’s sword had slit its throat.

That would be the end of any ordinary animal. But this was a monster. It would take a lot more than a slit throat for it to die.

Boden knew that better than anyone, and his attacks didn’t ease up. He kept attacking the monster in successive blows, giving it no quarter. After suffering many small wounds, the monster’s legs buckled, and then finally, it collapsed.

Boden used the opportunity to heave his sword over his head with both hands. “You’re finished.” He lowered it in a flash, beheading the monster in the blink of an eye.

“Phew. Are you hurt?”

“No. Thank you so much.”

“I was only doing my job,” he said, shaking the blood off his sword before sheathing it.

“Monsters are terrifying.”

“Yes. That’s why I recommend not trying to fight one if you happen to come across them.”

“I see... I’ll keep that in mind.”

Monsters were indeed frightening, yet this man was even more so. Not once had he used his supernatural powers. He’d overpowered the monster on physical strength and swordsmanship alone.

Pure strength. Honestly, there might be no limits to this man’s ability.

If I attacked him, I would certainly lose.

I just couldn’t see a way to best him myself, and internally, I raised my hands in surrender.

“I’m so grateful to you.”

“A knight’s job is to protect the citizenry.”

I wasn’t talking to you. It’s true that you’re strong...mighty enough that I can’t hold a candle to you. Certainly, you are the strongest man in the world.

But you don’t know. The world *doesn’t know...the power of a man who cannot die.*

“That malice!”

From behind the monster’s corpse, a silhouette appeared. I had to applaud his perfect timing; the sun had just set. Nightfall was approaching.

To myself, I silently whispered: *It’s up to you now, guardian of the moon.*

“Selene Vixent. Is this the suspicious person you spoke of?”

“That’s right.”

“I see...”

Dier appeared before us, wearing his black robes and a mask to conceal his face. I wouldn’t have been able to recognize him at first glance. At the moment he was nothing more than a stranger emanating a terrifying malice.

“I want you to get back as far as you can, but stay within my sight.”

“Yes, of course. I’m sorry I can’t be of more help, but I leave this in your hands.”

“Good.”

You’d better pull your weight here too. Otherwise our efforts will be for nothing.

What am I, your workhorse?

I thought I heard a voice answering my thoughts. And then Dier lunged forward.

In the next moment he vanished from my sight. He headed straight towards Gordov. He was much faster than the monster—so fast, in fact, that I couldn’t track him with my own eyes.

However...

“Hmph!” Gordov caught Dier’s fist with his sword. He was able to react and counter, even against Dier’s speed.

“I recognize these moves. This is our second time meeting.”

That’s right—he didn’t catch Dier’s fist reflexively, but because he knew it was coming.

Even though Dier had concealed his entire body, Gordov recognized him as a former opponent, one who had now reappeared in front of him.

“I won’t let you get away this time!”

The earth suddenly ruptured in an earthquake. Dier and I struggled to

maintain our balance. Meanwhile, Gordov was undeterred and swung his sword downwards.

“As expected, it’ll take a lot more than that to defeat you.” His sword slashed through the air, splitting only earth.

Dier stood behind Gordov, unharmed by either the sudden earthquake or Gordov’s sword. Gordov slowly turned around to face him.

The earthquake just now was caused by Gordov: as guardian of earth, the earth was his to wield.

Though he hadn’t used his supernatural abilities against the monster, he was using it now, immediately, against Dier—proof that he acknowledged Dier’s power. Gordov was a formidable warrior; he had the military prowess to slay monsters with only his raw strength and was a wielder of supernatural powers.

Still...I *needed* Dier to win.

My plan was quite simple.

I couldn’t fight Gordov by myself as I had fought Alexei. But in order to absorb his powers, I had to either provoke him into a fight or persuade him to let me do it. Persuading him into giving me some of his powers would be difficult, but a battle was inevitable.

I just couldn’t have taken him on alone. Once again, I was grateful for Dier’s presence.

“You remain fast. Though you look the same as you did before, I still can’t believe you’re human. What’s behind that mask? A human’s face or...something else?”

Dier wouldn’t answer. Since he was now my bodyguard, there may be circumstances in the future that would require him to stand in front of Gordov as my escort. If Gordov had his heard his voice even once before and could recognize it, there was a risk of Dier’s identity being revealed. Knowing that, I’d instructed him not to say a word.

“Not going to answer, eh? Fine. I’ll have to rip that mask off and see for myself.” This time Gordov made the first move—he stomped the ground,

sending tremors all around. Dier staggered for a moment, but quickly regained his balance and approached Gordov with a swing of his sword. Gordov's physical abilities were so finely honed that he could kill monsters single-handedly—but Dier's speed surpassed that.

"You dodged, as expected. But I'm not done." The surface of the earth swelled and condensed into deadly, sharp thorns designed to attack Dier. All of the earth was Gordov's to control; everywhere he stepped was his territory. The situation was similar to when I fought Dier.

Back then, I expanded Shadow's area of reach to try to compensate for Dier's speed. There was no need for Gordov to do such a thing, because the very land was at Gordov's disposal. That and his strength were factors I could tell were making Dier more hesitant than he had been fighting me.

He manipulated his blood to create two swords whose shape fluctuated constantly. He instantly stepped forward and attacked, lashing at Gordov like a whip. Gordov made the earth form a wall in front of him and blocked Dier's blades.

"That's right—these blades. I haven't forgotten this technique!" Even after Gordov dodged the attack, Dier wouldn't let up. He kept going, attacking in rapid succession in order to prevent Gordov from being able to dodge another attack.

"A blood bow this time?"

Dier held a bloody bow in his left hand and a bloody arrow in his right, both ready for use.

"What? Where are you aiming?"

Dier wasn't aiming at Gordov. With his bow to the sky, he aimed and loosed the arrow upwards, where it split into dozens, splintering like a tree branch.

The split arrows rained down upon Gordov from all different directions.

"Did you have an attack like that before?" Gordov asked, but this time he jumped backwards in a dodge. He must've realized that he wouldn't have the time to use the earth to shield himself from the barrage of arrows overhead.

The shower of arrows stabbed into the ground. Since they were made of Dier's blood, he could make use of them even after they had been shot. The already loosed arrows transformed, rising from their positions in the ground to shoot at Gordov in quick succession. Dier was aiming for Gordov's legs, hoping that he could strike him when he stopped moving.

But Gordov easily defended himself, since his mastery of the earth meant he could deflect all the arrows coming towards him, no matter where or from what direction they came.

"You've surprised me," he said, but he didn't look flustered at all. It was clear Gordov was a highly seasoned warrior. And that, beneath his mask, Dier was growing impatient.

What needed to happen was for Dier to incapacitate Gordov and make him unable to fight. Once Gordov was unconscious, I would swoop in and absorb his power. In short, I needed Dier to win.

"You can manipulate blood, and that speed... You're supernatural like me, aren't you?" Gordov was starting to perceive Dier's true power. When fighting Dier, it was easy to see he wasn't a monster. And if he was human, the only way to explain his powers would be to say that they were supernatural. Gordov's conclusion was only natural for him to make.

Dier didn't reply. Instead, he willed his blood into two swords again and attacked. Even though Gordov's attacks had a wide reach, Dier was still too fast to be touched. As long as Gordov kept attacking the way he was, then Dier would have the advantage.

Or at least...he should have.

All at once, everything surrounding me, even myself, felt incredibly heavy—as if some unseen force was pressing down upon me, trying to crush me flat.

What is this force? Gravity? I see—so the guardian of earth can manipulate even gravity.

"Looks like you're slowing down," Gordov remarked.

I heard a muffled noise coming from Dier, who was currently captive by the tremendous gravitational pull Gordov had summoned. Gordov's earth-thorns

had caught him.

Dier quickly transformed his swords into whips to break free from the thorns. Gordov immediately brought down his sword, but in a flash, Dier's blood-sword returned to parry the strike.

"Not even you can move in the face of this weight, can you? That means I'm more powerful than you."

Dier was being held down. And in that moment, I knew. The tremendous strength that Gordov had shown when he fought the monster was part of his supernatural abilities, not just raw strength. Within the purview of the guardian of the earth was the ability to control gravity. He could increase the gravitational pull exerted on an object or person. He used it on himself to increase his weight, and thus amplify his own strength.

Dier was about to be crushed, both by Gordov's sword and the increased gravitational pull Gordov exerted. He squeezed out every last bit of his power, summoning the blood from his feet to attack Gordov.

Gordov once again evaded by jumping backwards. Dier used the opportunity to put distance between them. In this battle of constant back-and-forth, there was no time to breathe. I was exhausted, even though I was just a spectator.

Now that they were farther away from each other, they stood face-to-face.

"Who are you?" Gordov suddenly asked.

This puzzled me. If Gordov was asking for Dier's name, there was no way he was going to get it. Since they had fought once before, this wasn't their first encounter. I couldn't figure out why Gordov was asking such a thing.

Just then...

"Don't misunderstand. Once I fight someone, I never forget them. Especially if I couldn't defeat them."

So then what was the purpose of that question?

"What I want to know is, are you *that man*?"

Dier didn't say a word.

“You don’t know what I’m talking about? I remember that battle very clearly. You were fearfully strong. But at the same time, you acted so carelessly—as if you’d given up on everything. As if you didn’t care if you died. Or, no—as if you *wanted* to die.”

Well, he was right about that. Dier wished to be free from his immortal life—he wished for it to end. The reason he challenged Gordov in the first place was because he wanted Gordov to kill him.

“Things are different with you now. I feel a strong will within you. A strong desire to *achieve something*. Is that why you’re better than before?”

Dier...

Gordov saw right through him, just as Alexei had done to me. Alexei’s probing had discomforted me.

But how did this make Dier feel?

“I’m sure you have no intention of answering me. But still, I wish to know: What changed you? What gives you this hope? This *strength*?”

“Heh.”

Just then, Dier chuckled. I heard it from beneath his mask. But he still didn’t answer; instead, he made some sort of gesture and then swung his fist. He ran through the gravitational pull so fast he was just a blur to me, even though I could still feel the full force of the increased gravity restricting my every move.

“That speed! I can’t believe you can still move like that!” Gordov exclaimed with surprise.

Dier delivered several successive blows with his fists. At some point the swords from both hands had disappeared, and he switched to physical combat, blood covering the surface of his fists.

Dier had recovered his usual speed. Had he been holding back this whole time? It hadn’t seemed so. But if he hadn’t been, how was he so fast now, even under the influence of Gordov’s gravitational force?

The answer was in his arms: blood coated his fists, all the way up his arms, to his armpits.

Ahh, I see.

He was reinforcing his flesh with blood. He couldn't resist the gravity with strength alone, so he had boosted his physical ability by linking it with the power of his blood manipulation. He'd resorted to hand-to-hand combat instead of sword fighting so that he could reinforce his body with his blood.

"So that's what you did!" Despite being midbattle, Gordov must've reached the same conclusion as me. Though he was able to block Dier's fists, his speed still forced Gordov on the defensive.

Gordov seemed incapable of manipulating both earth and gravity at the same time. But if he were to release his control of gravity, there would be nothing holding Dier back.

The moment he released his gravity field, Dier would be exponentially faster than he was even now, and there would be no way for Gordov to successfully counter. Therefore, Gordov *couldn't* release his hold on gravity. But if this was going to turn into a purely physical fight...

"Argh..."

Dier was stronger. In the face of his overwhelming speed, Gordov had his hands full just defending himself. The tables had turned. If Dier kept up his constant barrage of blows, he would win.

If he kept it up.

Dier's opponent was the strongest knight in the world—he knew better than anyone that he had to, that he couldn't stop and end things here. And that was why he didn't slow down his attacks. He would keep punching Gordov until he collapsed. So much damage had accumulated from the small blows he had already landed that I suspected just one big punch would be enough to knock Gordov out.

And if Dier could land that big hit, he would win.

He approached Gordov head-on and tried to slip into the slim pocket of his personal space.



“I won’t let you!”

Just then, Gordov deactivated the gravity field, thus releasing Dier from his control. Dier’s enhanced blood increased his speed exponentially.

But it also created a gap.

Dier hadn’t expected Gordov to turn off the gravity field at that moment. And since he also wasn’t expecting the burst of speed that resulted from it, he mistimed his chance to attack. He stopped, slamming on the brakes to try to get back the timing he missed.

“Oohhh!” Gordov met him, slashing down his sword with a heave.

It was a desperate attack. Gordov abandoned defense, countering with a move so forceful that it was intended to end this fight, even if he had to sacrifice himself to do it. Dier responded with a swing of his fist, ramping up his speed yet again.

“Arghh!”

“Oof!”

Gordov’s slash landed on Dier’s shoulder, and Dier’s punch connected with Gordov’s stomach. They hit each other at roughly the exact same time. And then there were a few seconds of silence.

“You’re...strong,” the loser gritted out, before dropping his sword and collapsing to the ground.

The victor remained standing, gradually loosening his fists. He let out a deep sigh.

“That’s my line. Seriously, this guy is way too strong!” Dier muttered as he finally spoke, taking off his mask in front of an unconscious Gordov.

The battle was over. Dier was victorious.

I slowly walked over to them both. “Nice job.”

“*That’s* all you have to say? After all that hard work?”

“What? Do you want me to say how dashing you were or something?”

“No, I definitely don’t expect anything like that,” he said with a relieved chuckle.

The mood was unusually relaxed between the two of us, but that was most likely because with the battle over, and we were no longer in the middle of such high stakes.

“He is strong, isn’t he?” I mused.

“Sure is. Definitely the strongest in the world.”

“Hm? But you’re the one who beat him. So doesn’t that make *you* the strongest in the world?”

“Nah. I’m a monster, so I don’t count,” he said, shaking his head.

“I see. You’re okay with that?”

“Yeah. Anyway, it’s your turn now. I got you this far. If you screw things up now, you’ll pay.”

“No need to tell me that.”

“Good. Well, time to go.”

He stretched, turning his back to me. I could tell by his demeanor that he was tired but happy. So I got curious.

“Hey. Can you tell me why he asked you that question?”

“Huh? What question?” He paused, but didn’t turn around.

“Never mind... We can talk later.”

“All right.”

If he didn’t want to tell me, there was no sense in asking him. It was only a hunch, but I had a feeling the day would come when I would figure out the answer myself. And until then, I’d just have to wait.

“Now...”

I needed to finish things—before Gordov woke up.

♦ ♦ ♦

“Ugh...”

“Are you awake?”

“Yes... I’m alive, then?”

“You are.”

Beneath the now starry sky, Gordov woke up. He slowly pushed himself up to a sitting position. “Where am I?”

“Outside the forest. I used my powers to take you somewhere safe.”

“I see. Thank you. What happened to the man?”

“He ran away. He was severely injured. I tried to go after him, but he was just so fast. I couldn’t keep up to catch him.”

“I see... Well, as long as we’re both safe, it’s all right.” He tried to stand, but his legs wobbled and he fell back down to the ground. “Blast it... To think that I can’t even stand...”

“It’s no wonder, after the fight you just had.”

Actually, the real reason he couldn’t stand was because I’d absorbed his power, so he was even more tired than he should be.

This man impressed me yet again. Even after taking the brunt of Dier’s final blow, he was left with little more than scratches. Any normal person would’ve suffered severe damage to their internal organs after such an attack.

“I’m so glad you’re safe.”

“Just barely, though. If I hadn’t stopped him with my sword, his fist might’ve gone clear through my stomach! If he’s also injured, then I’m sure he won’t be bothering us again for a while.”

“True.”

He was probably fully recovered by now. In all honesty, it had been nowhere near a close contest, solely because Dier was immortal.

“Looks like I let him get away again. But next time, I’ll win. If you ever see him again, relay a message for me. Tell him: I’ll take him on, anytime.”

“All right. I’ll be sure to do that.”

Why did Gordov look so happy? He was a knight, someone who took up the sword in order to protect others. But perhaps that was what Gordov wanted too: someone whom he could go all out against.

However, I knew if I said that to Dier, he'd just laugh and say, "Gimme a break."

Chapter Six: The Wind's Message

"Gimme a break."

"Ha ha."

"Why are you laughing?"

"Because I knew you'd say that."

We were chatting in my study the day after the battle between the immortal and the strongest man in the world.

I had relayed Gordov's message to Dier, and a mix of fatigue and exasperation came across his face. Both his expression and his response were exactly what I had imaged they would be. I couldn't help my amusement.

"You're surprisingly easy to read, you know that?" I teased.

"Anybody in my shoes would respond the same way. I never want to fight like that again!"

"Are you sure about that? Maybe that's exactly what you want."

"Heh. Unfortunately he can't kill me. It's not enough to just be strong," he said, flopping down on the sofa. He normally remained standing whenever we talked, so today's behavior was unusual. It seemed even immortals could still feel fatigued; he must still be tired from yesterday.

"It's fine. Go ahead and rest, as long as you need to."

"Hm? You sure? Knowing you, I thought you'd be ready and raring to go after the next target."

"I'm not *that* impatient."

"You're pretty impatient," he said with exasperation. I'd never once thought of myself as impatient, so hearing him call me that made me reflect on it.

I suppose...I *was* rushing things a bit.

“Well, putting aside the matter of whether I’m impatient or not, I can’t make a move now.”

“You don’t need to worry about me.”

“I’m not.”

“Oh, is that so?” He averted his eyes, looking slightly disappointed. Did he *want* me to worry about him?

“My next target is the guardian of the forests. And I need time to prepare before I can absorb her powers. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. I guess you’ve already done the two easier ones.”

“That’s right.”

“That was quicker than I expected.”

The battles with Alexei and Gordov went so well that they almost went *too* well. I hadn’t even needed to make use of my backup plans. But from now on, the way forward wouldn’t be so simple.

What was ahead of us wasn’t just about strength. We couldn’t just lead our next target into a fight; setting that up would be much too difficult.

“I’ve checked into her forest. It’s quite big. Much larger than my own domain.”

“It’s the biggest forest in the world.”

I had once thought that I could just swiftly invade from outside the forest, but there were limits to my shadow travel when it came to a place I wasn’t familiar with. Even if I started on the outside, I’d have to show myself many times when teleporting inside of it. And if it was true that the entire forest was her territory, she’d discover me the moment I showed myself.

Finding her, in that case, would become much more difficult.

“It’s all over the moment she discovers me. I didn’t know she could make clones of herself, but the fact I didn’t know a fake had attended the party in her place is troublesome in and of itself. If she were to *really* make an effort to hide herself, I wouldn’t be able to find her at all.”

“I agree. That forest is too big. Even for me, it would take several minutes to circle the place.”

“And she’d either hide or run away while you did. Plus, there’s no way for us to discern whether we’re interacting with the real thing or a doll.”

“Huh? No, that’s not true; I can tell just by looking at her.”

That surprised me. I hadn’t noticed anything that differentiated her doll form from a real human. I had no ability that could identify the difference, anyway. So I had concluded that I would have to come up with a different plan to find her.

Come to think of it, how did *he* know the guardian of the forests that had attended the party had been a doll, anyway?

“How?”

“Blood.” He showed me the palm of his right hand.

“Blood?”

“Yeah. Dolls don’t have blood in them, right? I can tell with just one look. Did you forget that I have the ability to control blood? It gives me a certain sensitivity to it. I can smell even the trace of blood.”

“So you can even perceive blood by its smell. I’m surprised. That makes you sound like a dog.”

Dogs had incredibly sensitive noses; they could distinguish between places and people by smell alone. Even walking in a location devoid of people, they could pick up and follow someone’s scent.

“A-A dog? Not even a wolf or something a little more fierce? I’m not some cute little pup, y’know.”

“That’s true. Making that comparison was rude to all dogs, and I ask their forgiveness.”

“I’m amazed you didn’t realize you were being rude to me.”

“Oh, thank you for the compliment.”

Dier and I both laughed, although what was motivating our laughter was

different for both of us. He looked tense.

“You know...it looks like you’ve been really enjoying yourself lately.”

“Does it?”

“Yeah. You seem full of life. Like, you smile and laugh now.”

“You’re just imagining things...” I said, despite the fact that I was also aware of it. Smiles were fabrications. I could admit that before, I had forced myself to smile in order to appear composed, like nothing ever bothered me. But now, it seemed like there were simply just more opportunities to smile.

And they weren’t fake... I even felt myself truly, genuinely laughing. Was it because I’d resolved to live my life for myself and myself only, and was currently on the path towards doing so?

Was that realization making my heart feel light?

But that wasn’t the only reason. I had a feeling that the person I was speaking to played a large part in it. I didn’t have to put on airs with Dier. He wasn’t my enemy either, and so there was no reason to hold back with him at all. As a result, interacting with him felt easy. Had I gotten used to finally being able to be myself around someone?

“What are you grinning about?”

“You’re just seeing things. Also, could you please stop staring at me like that?”

“So cold...”

“Ha ha.”

When this time loop started, I never could have imagined that I could be so at peace in someone else’s company...and that there would be days when I could laugh so openly.

The glass rattled in the window panes. The weather was awfully windy today.

“I pity the people working outside right now.”

“You can go help them, you know,” I suggested.

“You know I can’t go outside when the sun’s out. I’d burn to a crisp instantly.”

“You make it sound like you’re a recluse,” I said sarcastically, but at the same time I felt a bit sorry for him. In Dier’s case, he wasn’t held back by a mental issue; he was physically unable to go outside. His supernatural power gave him physical strength but made him weak against the sunlight. He would burst into flames and burn, but he would not die.

“I never want to experience the feeling of burning alive again. I’d rather die.”

“So you’ve done it before.”

“Accidentally. It was right after I had come into my power—I went outside not knowing what would happen to me. The pain was awful. I cried, but even my own tears evaporated from the heat!”

“Don’t make me picture it, please. It’ll make me sick.”

“Oh, that’s right. My bad.”

His indestructible body was nothing more than an unwanted burden. It held no value other than in combat. He couldn’t die, even if he wanted to—he couldn’t even walk out into the sun. It was certainly a curse.

If supernatural powers weren’t inherited and were actually given to us by some higher being, then that person must seriously hold a grudge against Dier and me.

And if for some reason this person thought what they gave us was actually some sort of gift, they were sorely mistaken. Silence enveloped the room. Dier and I both listened to the window rattling in its pane.

“By the way, where *is* the guardian of air, anyway?”

“No idea. I haven’t gotten one bit of information about them,” I told him.

The wind-shook windows had us both thinking of the guardian of air from House Cielo. Air was said to be eccentric and almost never at home. It was said the guardian of air wandered the world, going wherever the wind led them.

“They’ll probably be more difficult than the guardian of forests, don’t you think?” Dier asked.

“Maybe not. If they’re just a wanderer, then surely they can be found. And even if I have no relationship to them myself, the other guardians most likely

do. I can ask Sir Boden about them."

"Why him?"

"Because he's a much better option than Alexei, isn't he? But I won't ask him right now. Your fight with him is still fresh in his mind. I'll give it some time."

"That's right. It'd be annoying to get found out right after going to all that trouble to fight him."

"Ha ha. Doesn't sound like something a winner would say."

Just then, the strong winds that had been rattling the windows blew them open and came straight inside the room. In its wake, the curtains whipped about and sunlight poured in.

"Why did you open the window?"

"Wasn't me. You know that."

"Yes..."

His body would immediately catch fire upon exposure to the sun.

It was impossible for Dier to have opened the window on his own. To start, since he had been talking to me the whole time, there had been zero opportunity for him to open the window himself. I thought the wind had blown the window open with its own strength. A light breeze would indeed be nice, but today the wind was quite strong—a veritable gust—and if we weren't careful, all the papers on my desk would soon fly away.

Since Dier couldn't go near the window, I stood up and went to close it.

"Wow. You beat that old man? Amazing!"

"What?!" Dier and I exclaimed in unison. We exchanged glances. Even though we clearly heard a third voice, there were only the two of us here. I sensed no other presence. We both looked over at the window at the same time.

"An intriguing little wind carried me here and let me hear you two discuss something *very* interesting. May I join in?"

Long silver hair, tied back, as beautiful as a woman's. Perhaps it was the hair that led me to think this person was a woman at first glance—their face was

beautiful as well. He cut a striking figure, nearly unforgettable. But I had no idea who he was.

“Friend of yours?” I asked Dier.

“Nope.”

“I see.”

This person was an outsider, one who had nothing to do with us. A stranger had overheard our conversation.

I wondered how much he heard. Not that that was important; the simple fact that he’d heard anything at all made my next move obvious.

“Shadow. Get him.”

“Oof!” The man dodged the shadow that stretched towards him by jumping out the window.

My study was on the third floor of the mansion.

A normal person could not have survived such a fall. But he landed with a relaxed air, a casualness about him, and with a quick grin at me, ran off.

“I won’t let you escape!”

No matter if he had heard only a snippet of our conversation; what Dier and I discussed was top secret. I couldn’t let him get away.

I ran over to the window to give chase. Dier started to as well but quickly remembered the weather—it was a sunny day without a cloud in the sky.

“You wait here. I’ll go after him,” I said.

“Tch. Sorry. Be careful.”

“I will.”

I jumped out of the window. With shadows as my footholds, I landed safely and reoriented myself to pinpoint the direction the man had run off towards.

He was just barely still within the range of my shadows. And in that case...

♦ ♦ ♦

The man fled from the mansion. He turned around to make sure no one was

chasing him. “Hmm? She’s not coming after me? How bor—”

“Found you!”

“—ing?!”

I reached out for the man’s hair. If I could grab it, I could drag him into the shadows. But he reacted a moment too soon. All of a sudden, he jumped and escaped from my grip.

“A hand phasing out of a shadow?! Wow, so you can do that too?”

“Not yet.”

I manipulated the shadows after my failure to grab him, forming countless hands in attack. As long as he wasn’t as fast as Dier, he wouldn’t be able to dodge what was coming. Or at least...he *shouldn’t* be able to.

“Now that was a close one!”

“What?!”

He flew through the air. No—he floated. At that moment, I realized who I was dealing with.

“You’re the guardian of air?”

“Correct!” he answered me with a grin.

“I see...”

“My name is Lawrence Cielo. I’m surprised you knew!”

“Well, who else would you be? No other human could do that.”

“Hm? Oh, right! This!” He twirled around in the air, like a child showing off a new trick. Well, I suppose describing his dramatic behavior and way of speech as “childlike” wasn’t *quite* accurate.

“Isn’t my power amazing? Since I can control the air however I like, the sky is a much more comfortable place for me to be!”

“I see. It *does* look nice.”

“Right? Wanna try flying with me? It’s so fun.”

“I’d love to. But could you come down first, though?”

I doubted he'd actually do it, but...

"Sure! Just give me a second." And he landed, just like that. For a moment I thought I was hallucinating. He had landed on the ground without a hint of hesitation or wariness. I came back to my senses and realized my chance, then stretched a shadow out towards him.

"Waah! This again?!"

"Guess I was a little too late." That lapse in attention had cost me, and again, I wasn't able to catch him. He bounced back into the air.

"That's dangerous, you know! I landed just like you told me to. How mean!"

"You do know that I'm chasing you, right? If I see an opening, then I'm obviously going to take advantage of it to try and catch you. I didn't expect you to actually land!"

"Huh? Well, *I* thought you were gonna play with me!"

"You believed me?"

"You lied to me?!"

As I watched his theatrics unfold, I thought to myself, *"Is this man a complete idiot?"*

In the beginning I thought he was deliberately acting this way to irritate me, but now I realized that this man really was *that* childish. I couldn't believe the person in front of me was the guardian of air—a head of house, just like me.

"What do you want? Why did you come to my house?"

"Hm? No real reason," Lawrence replied. "I returned to the capital because I had some things to take care of, but that has nothing to do with you. Well, hmm... Maybe it *does* kind of have to do with you? But then I felt a really fun wind blow by and decided to ride it. I just happened to come to your house, really."

"You just happened to?"

It didn't look like he was lying. But it seemed extremely unlikely that he would have just *happened* to come to my house, for no reason at all, right when Dier

and I were discussing our plans.

I could neither interpret his expression nor gleam the subtext behind his words, so perhaps he was still concealing his true purpose. I was certain his childish antics were a ploy to throw me off his scent.

“If you don’t want to tell me the truth about why you’re here, then that’s fine.”

“What? I told you the truth.”

“I don’t care what you’re plotting. There’s only one way for me to respond.”

“Huh? You don’t believe me at all, do you? And just how are you going to respond?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

I didn’t expect anyone to hear our secret discussion. But perhaps it was luck, that the person who did was the guardian of air. There was no longer any need to search for him. And he had also given me a reason to fight him. Fortunately, the mansion was nearby and the area was deserted.

So if things got a bit dramatic out here, it wouldn’t cause any trouble.

I expanded the shadow around me.

“I *will* catch you.”

“Yikes! So many shadow hands!”

Countless shadow hands stretched out towards Lawrence, who was still hovering in midair. He evaded the hands, spinning and hopping through air, and yelled, “What are you gonna do after you catch me?”

“I wonder? That’s up to you.”

“Up to me? So if I say I’m sorry, you’ll let me go?”

“I’m afraid not.”

I didn’t want an apology. What I wanted was for him to swear not to reveal my secret, and to let me absorb his supernatural power. And in order to do that, I kept reaching out with my shadows.

“Oof! Hey, this is actually pretty fun!”

Here I was, seriously trying to catch this man, and he was acting like we were just horsing around. I was annoyed. He wasn’t as fast as Dier, but his agility and ease in the air made it difficult to catch him.

But because he was enjoying himself so much, he stayed within range, no longer trying to run. If he had, there’d be no way for me to catch him.

So I would have to catch him while he still thought it was a game. I had no choice but to be a bit rough with him. He *did* trespass on my property, after all.

And if anyone said anything, that in itself would justify why I was reacting the way I was, since Lawrence had technically committed a crime. Or at least, it should justify it. At any rate, I was currently having trouble just getting a hold on him. If I could just get a little closer...

“Aha ha! This is so thrilling! Though I am getting a little bit bored.”

“Oh? How about this, then?”

I used the power of Shadow to split the earth, and with one of the shadow hands, lifted up a clod of dirt and lobbed it at Lawrence.

“Ooh! Something flew at me!”

“There’s more where that came from.” I did it again. I tried to gouge out the biggest lumps of earth I could to increase my range of attack.

“That’s dangerous! That could hurt real bad if it hit me, you know!”

“Would it? It might not hurt at all. Why don’t you let it hit you so we can find out.”

“You can’t fool me! I can dodge a lump of dirt way better than I can dodge a shadow hand! So too bad for you because those things will never touch me!”

“Ha ha. I suppose you’re right. That’s fine, though.”

I wasn’t throwing all that dirt at Lawrence to hit him. First of all, if he was capable of evading a fluid, three-dimensional shadow hand, there was no way he would get hit by a blunt object flying straight at him. The clumps of dirt didn’t seem to concern him—but that created an opening for me.

“Did you know that shadows can actually appear anywhere?”

What I was actually aiming for was the shadows the accumulated clods of earth created. A thick shadow was being cast diagonally between him and the sun, beneath the lumps of dirt. A shadow was forming very close to him, yet he was completely unaware of it. So with that carefully planted shadow, I reached a hand out...

“You can’t dodge this one.”

I finally caught him. If I could stop him from flying around for even a second, I could envelop him in the shadow hands stretching from the ground.

“Uh-oh...”

Now that I caught him, I wouldn’t let him go. I hooked the shadow hands onto him and dragged him out of the sky. Once he landed, I used shadows to pin him firmly to the ground.

“Playtime is over,” I said, looking down at him.

♦ ♦ ♦

Dier waited alone in the study with the wind-blasted window still open. Since he couldn’t come near the place where sunshine filtered in, all he could see was the blue sky outside.

“Damn it. If it were nighttime, I would’ve been able to help...” He bit his lip with frustration.

Just then, a shadow roiled. He felt my presence first, and shifted his gaze to the shadow that appeared at his side. “Back already?”

“Yes, sorry for the wait.”

“I’m just happy you’re all right. Where is he?”

“Don’t be impatient. He’s right here.”

He was the one who’d called me impatient earlier, and he certainly had no room to talk. But I did understand his eagerness, so I couldn’t totally blame him. I pulled Lawrence, now bound, out from the shadow.

“Bwaah! I couldn’t breathe in there!” Lawrence gasped for air.

“Here he is. I captured the guardian of air.”

“Good, I’m glad you caught hi—wait, what?! This is the guardian of air?!”

“That’s right.”

Dier opened his eyes in surprise, his gaze flitting between me and Lawrence. His reaction was only natural, since we hadn’t known who Lawrence was when he first came into the room. It was no wonder Dier was surprised.



“Phew, you caught me! I really let my guard down. Yep!”

“Are you *sure* he’s the guardian of air?”

“Positive. He was floating and spinning in the air. What other human could do that?”

“O-Oh. It’s not that I don’t trust you, it’s just...” Dier stared at Lawrence.

I understood what Dier was getting at. Compared to the other guardians we knew, Lawrence was flippant and childish. Personally, I felt his carefree attitude was unbefitting of a guardian.

“I’ve never met you before either, right? I’m Lawrence Cielo! Pleased to meet you!”

“Y-Yeah, nice to meet you...” Dier wasn’t sure how to respond to such a friendly introduction. He leaned over and whispered into my ear. “Hey. What’s his deal, anyway?”

“He’s the guardian of air.”

“That’s not what I meant! Just what exactly happened out there?”

“He ran away and I caught him. Simple as that.” I made clear that nothing else had happened. Dier didn’t believe me, but by the third time I repeated it, he finally gave up and relented.

Dier just couldn’t comprehend the situation. While Dier remained stuck, the situation at hand, also known as Lawrence, innocently said, “Hey, you! You were just talking about how you beat old Gordov, right? Is that true?”

“Hm? Oh, you heard that?”

“I heard it! And I heard what you said before that too. You’re after the other guardians too, right?”

We could tell that he wasn’t asking because he had any particular reason for doing so. And his questions saved us the trouble of trying to figure out just how much he’d heard.

“Why are you after us?” Lawrence asked.

“I have no intention of answering that,” I said.

“What? C’mon, it sounds so *interesting*! Can’t you just tell me?!” He grinned at me, and I aimed a shadow blade at him.

“You need to understand your place. You’re not in any position to ask questions right now.”

“E-Eek!” He squealed but didn’t actually seem to fear for his life. I realized that he didn’t say the things he did to agitate me—this was simply who he was.

This man really *was* something of a fool.

“I want you to forget about everything you heard and saw here. If you tell anyone at all, you’ll never be able to use your powers. *Ever.* You’ll never be able to fly again, understand?”

“Th-That’ll be like losing my whole body!”

“You understand me well, then.”

“Are you *really* serious?”

“Absolutely. No one can stand in my way.” I edged the shadow blade even closer to demonstrate my resolve. And to show him I would attack him at any time.

“A-All right already! I won’t tell anyone! I swear it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Despite how I may look, I can keep a secret. Also, keeping quiet seems a lot more fun.”

“How would that be fun?” Dier interjected. I was wondering the same thing. What fun could possibly be found in the knowledge that the two of us were targeting the other guardians? This man’s motives were completely unknown to me. “You’re a guardian too, aren’t you? What advantage would there be in just leaving us alone?”

“*Advantage*? No clue. Seems like it could be fun, that’s all.”

“I don’t understand you one bit. Whose side are you even *on*?” I asked.

“I’m on my own side. Duh. Who else would there be?” he answered. By the look on his face, it exasperated him that we would even ask him something so

ridiculous. “Looks like you’ve got the wrong idea. I have no intention of interfering with what you two have going on. Yeah, I may be a guardian, but it’s not like you’re gonna kill anybody.”

“And what makes you so sure?”

“Because if you were, you would’ve killed me a long time ago. But the fact that you’ve been standing here talking to me for so long means you don’t wanna kill me.”

I see... Maybe he’s not as stupid as I thought he was.

It occurred to me that that was the reason he had been so calm.

“Honestly, other people’s thoughts and motivations don’t really interest me. And I think the whole duty towards the kingdom as a guardian thing is a pain, to be honest,” Lawrence confessed. “I’ve devoted my life to traveling around the world finding things that pique my interest. I don’t care about anything else. After all, you only live once. Might as well enjoy it, right?”

“You...”

“Hm? Did I say something weird?”

“No... You’re right.” Dier looked somewhat flabbergasted, but understood.

It seemed like most things in the world didn’t interest Lawrence, so instead he went around searching for things that did. He meant it when he said nothing else interested him. That’s why Dier was surprised—because Lawrence was actually very similar to us. At the heart of it all, he prioritized living his life on his own terms.

“You’re a very free...no, irresponsible man, aren’t you?”

“Ha ha. I hear that a lot!”

That was the guardian of air: an elusive, slippery character, just like a gust of wind blowing past.

I released Lawrence from his shadow bonds. Now free, Lawrence stood up and moved his arms in circles.

“Phew! Now I can finally move again!”

“You sure you wanna release him?” Dier asked.

“It’s fine. He’s not going to tell our secret.”

“You trust him?”

I knew Dier recognized that Lawrence was telling us the truth. He was such a worrier.

“Don’t worry so much. If he tells, all we have to do is punish him.”

“He’ll just run away.”

“Unfortunately for him, he can’t run away anymore. Because no matter where he is in the world, my shadows will reach him. I’ve learned his shadow.”

“Learned his shadow?”

“That’s right.”

Shadow’s teleportation capabilities meant I could travel only within a certain area and to places I’ve been before. But once I had been there, Shadow would record that location and from then on, be able to connect to it instantly.

And it wasn’t exclusive to locations; Shadow could also remember other shadows it had come into contact with.

“It’s the same for people’s shadows. Once I’ve been inside a shadow, I can connect to it at any time.”

“I see. In that case, why didn’t you link up to the other guardians’ shadows? You had the opportunity to, right?”

“Are you a fool? If I did that, they’d surely sense something was going on. And then every time something happened they’d suspect me!”

“Good point.”

I let out a little sigh.

It was a convenient power, but since I was its sole wielder, I could be identified because of it immediately, and would instantly be assigned the culprit of whatever I planned if I wasn’t careful.

This time was different, though. Lawrence and I were already acquainted, *and*

he knew our plan. With him, I could freely use Shadow as needed.

“Anyway, you heard me. So you’d better keep your promise.”

“I know! I swear I won’t tell. Just tell me why you’re targeting the guardians.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Tch... Stingy...”

I didn’t trust him completely. The only person who had the right to know everything was someone who shared my goal. And that wasn’t Lawrence.

“Will *you* tell me?” he asked Dier hopefully.

“Can’t.”

“Ugh. So it’s just a secret between you two? No fair!”

“It’s a lot more serious than that.”

Dier was right. Our secret and our goal wasn’t something to be taken lightly, or easily shared, because we knew that what we were doing was nothing to be proud of.

“Why can’t you?”

“You’re stubborn, you know that? Shut up or you’ll pay,” Dier threatened, then looked at me.

“That’s right. But if you happen to like pain, I’d be more than happy to oblige.”

“P-Please don’t! Oh! I almost forgot!” All of a sudden he yelped loudly, startling the both of us.

“What is it?”

“I have a really important errand to run! There’s a message I need to deliver before sundown! It involves you two, so would you mind coming with me?”

“Where are you going?”

“The royal palace!”

Chapter Seven: Cloistered Maiden

As the setting sun began to color the western skies, an urgent meeting took place at the royal palace.

Lawrence and I were in attendance. At the head of a long table sat Dier's younger brother, King Euclis. Behind him stood his older sister, who also acted as his advisor. And sitting on the right and left sides of the table were the six guardians, who supported the king.

The mood was heavy. It was unusual for all the guardians to gather in one place like this. But this was no social gathering.

"Is this true?" Gordov was the first to break the silence. He crossed his arms over his chest and gave Lawrence a stern look.

Lawrence answered coolly. "It's true. I saw it with my own two eyes! Why else would I come all the way to the capital?"

Why Lawrence had returned to the capital was the reason for this meeting. It was nothing to celebrate; in fact, it was the worst possible thing to happen to the kingdom.

"A catastrophe-level monster... I'm surprised they even exist." Even Alexei, who was usually in high spirits, looked grave.

"I thought they were just a legend," Mystria said.

Just like Mystria, I thought catastrophe-level monsters were only the stuff of fairytales. Far beyond ordinary monsters, they could level entire cities. As their name suggested, they were catastrophe itself. According to Lawrence, such a monster had appeared, deep in the mountains, and was heading north towards the city of Eastor. Reports suggested it was massive—that it could swallow a mountain whole.

This monster had not appeared in any of my previous time loops. It might be fair to say that in this life, time was marching towards a different future than before.

“Lord Weldon, what happened when you used Astromancy?” Gordov asked Etoile.

“In my vision, I saw the city of Eastor being destroyed in seven days.”

“What...?”

Astromancy allowed Etoile to see the future. In other words, if we did nothing, the city would be destroyed.

A troubled look came over His Majesty’s face at Etoile’s words. “Everyone, time is of the essence. Please lend us your help. We must use our powers to save Eastor and protect its people.”

“Of course!” Gordov exclaimed.

“We certainly can’t turn a blind eye to this,” Alexei agreed.

“I’ll do everything in my power to help, for the brightest future possible,” Etoile chimed in.

As for me, I couldn’t just stand around and do nothing. And it wasn’t just because I didn’t want to make myself look bad in this meeting; if left to its own devices, the monster might eventually set its sights on the capital.

“I suppose I’ll help,” I said.

“Well, now that I’ve relayed the news...” Lawrence started.

All eyes turned on him as if to say, *“You* are *participating, aren’t you?”*

“Now it’s time to fulfill my duty as a guardian and confront the kingdom’s troubles! Yeah!”

“Thank you, everyone.”

I assumed that everyone would have no choice but to involve themselves, but just then, a surprising individual raised their hand.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I won’t be able to help.”

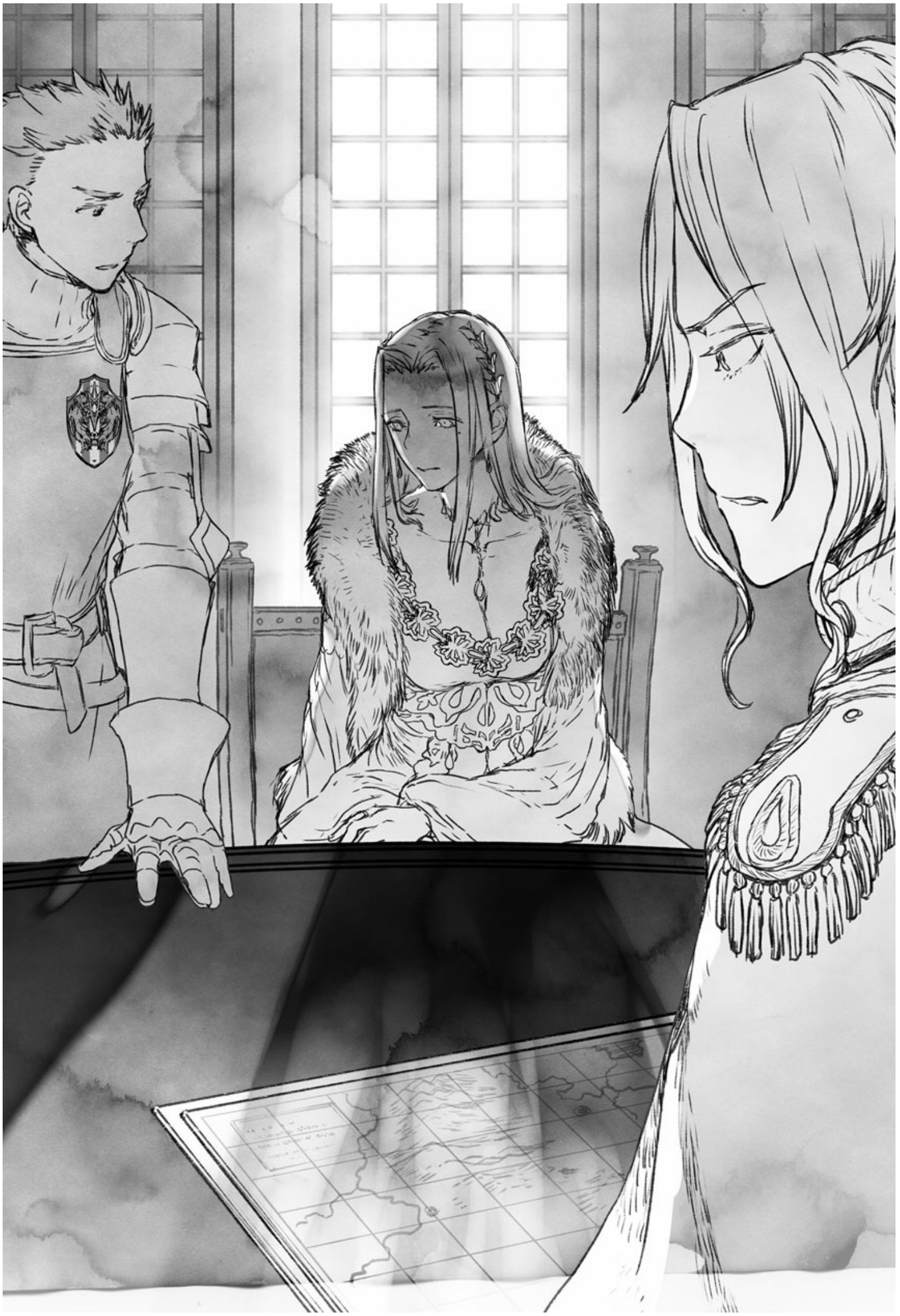
It was Mystria Frusch. It seemed only the guardian of the forest had declined.

“What do you mean, you ‘can’t help?’” Gordov demanded.

“Care to explain yourself?” Alexei asked.

Mystria spoke in a calm tone. “It is what I have said. I will be unable to assist in this matter.”

When she repeated herself, the two men’s faces grew tense.



“You must be joking, Lady Mystria,” Gordov said. “Do you not understand the severity of this situation?”

“I apologize for the confusion, but I am not joking.”

“Why?” Alexei pressed. “Time is of the essence in this matter. Surely you know that.”

“Yes, I understand.”

While Gordov and Alexei continued to question Mystria, she answered them calmly, without a hint of conflict or remorse. But that only served to irritate them further.

“How could you just withdraw? Are you insane? Even *I’m* getting involved!” Alexei exclaimed.

“The role of a guardian is to protect the citizens and the king. You are a guardian. You *must* fulfill your duty!” Gordov insisted.

Mystria did not answer. The only one who came to her aid was...

“Please calm down, everyone.” King Euclis. Hearing his voice made Gordov and Alexei come to their senses.

“Pardon me, Your Majesty.”

“I *am* calm,” Alexei muttered under his breath. Personally I thought he seemed pretty fired up. His anger was surprising; apparently he indeed possessed a modicum of integrity. I thought he was only interested in women.

“Mystria Frusch.”

“Yes?”

“May I ask why?” the king asked in a gentle tone of voice. But still, she stayed silent, and didn’t seem to have any intention of answering him.

“The king is asking you a question!” Gordov barked.

“You can’t even state why?” Alexei asked.

“Truly, I am sorry.” All she could reply with was another apology. She stood from her seat.

“Hey! Where do you think you’re going?”

“There’s nothing more I can disclose. I am feeling unwell, so you’ll have to excuse me.”

“The meeting isn’t—”

“It’s fine,” the king interrupted Gordov. He gave him a look that said: *This matter is over.* And since it was fine with King Euclis, Gordov had no choice but to move on.

“Thank you for coming. Please take care.”

“Yes. Thank you.” She bowed and made her leave.

Though Mystria left with King Euclis’s permission, Gordov and Alexei were clearly still upset; they both glared at her departure. I also felt she was being selfish.

What is she thinking*?*

Right as she passed me I heard her say, “Please come to my manor.”

“What?”

It was a quiet invitation: spoken in a voice so hushed and soft that I was perhaps the only person in the room who could hear it. There was no time to reply, as she walked straight to the exit and left the room. The moment the door slammed shut, Gordov let out a sigh.

“Are you sure about this, Your Majesty?”

“Yes. It’s clear she has her reasons.”

“Reasons that prevent her from assisting us with such a dire situation? I’d certainly love to hear what those reasons are!”

“I have faith she’ll tell us eventually.”

Alexei and Gordov didn’t accept that answer. I assumed Etoile was of the same mindset.

Lawrence was a complete fool, so I doubted he cared either way.

“Just what could those reasons be...” Her staunch refusal to help made me

curious.

Since she had gone to such trouble to invite me to her house, I had no reason to refuse the invitation.

♦ ♦ ♦

In my office, Dier quietly awaited my return. The ticking of the clock rang especially loud in the silence of the room.

“You’re back.” He spoke the moment I appeared and looked at me.

“Yes.”

“Were things straightened out?”

“I suppose you could say that.”

“What? Did it not go well?”

Explaining was troublesome. After Mystria’s departure, we discussed our next steps in dealing with the monster, though it was Alexei and Gordov that contributed the most to the conversation.

Etoile only piped up to share his opinion based on what Astromancy showed him, while Lawrence and I were content to stay quiet and listen to the others. Our final plan was that we would fight the monster and hopefully slay it before it could ever reach Eastor. In the worst case scenario, we would do our best to drive it away from the city.

“I see... Nothing else?”

“No. We leave three days from now, early in the morning. You should be ready by then.”

“All right.”

Dier seemed restless. His bearing obviously indicated that he had more he wanted to ask me. He was very easy to read.

Well, to be more precise, he was very easy to read when it was regarding his brother.

“If you’re so worried about your brother, why didn’t you come along?”

“I never said I was worried about him...”

“You didn’t have to. It’s written all over your face.”

“N-No isn’t.”

“Just to be clear, your concern is really quite obvious.”

I was right, and Dier could no longer deny it. He averted his eyes bashfully. “I don’t want to worry him anymore than I already have, that’s all.”

“You’re so awkward, Dier.” Although I wasn’t one to talk. “He looked well.”

“I see. I’m glad.” He breathed a sigh of relief.

“We’d better get going. If there’s something else, we can talk while we travel.”

“Huh? Where are we going?”

“Didn’t you listen to me? About the invitation?”

“Oh, the guardian of the forests. You’re going already?”

“Yes.”

Our fight with the monster was in three days. There wasn’t much time left to conduct my own affairs.

Tonight, I would learn Mystria’s secrets, and absorb her powers.

♦ ♦ ♦

The guardian of the forest, Mystria Frusch. Her manor lay deep within a vast forest, the largest in the world. The manor’s exact location was private, and was said to be difficult to reach unless one belonged to House Frusch.

The entire forest was her territory, and the animals who called it their home were under her command. They would repel outsiders and eliminate enemies, and so only the bravest of souls could approach.

“So this is Frusch Forest,” I said.

“That’s right.”

“For a house to name an entire forest after itself…it must be quite important to them that others know just who owns this place.”

“Well, they do. This is Frusch territory after all,” Dier said.

It was nighttime when we stepped into quiet forest. The trees here were taller than those in the capital; their branches blocked most of the glittering stars and gentle moonlight that would normally light our way.

“This forest is creepy,” Dier mused.

“Aren’t all forests creepy at night?”

“It’s not about the time of day. I’ve never seen trees like this growing anywhere else. And there’s something else...”

“Yes, I noticed.”

We had been watched ever since we entered the forest. And it wasn’t just by one pair of eyes, or two. It felt like the entire forest was watching us.

“Animals?”

“More than that. I think she’s watching us with her powers. The animals aren’t attacking us because she’s told them not to.”

“Hope so. Where’s her house, anyway?” Dier asked.

“No idea.”

“Hey, don’t tell me...”

“She didn’t tell me the location.”

She’d only invited me to visit her house. There was no mention of *where* it was. Dier let out an exasperated sigh. Just then, we heard the sound of footsteps heading in our direction.

“Someone’s coming.”

“I can tell.”

Both of us grew more cautious. Eyes were shining at us from the darkness. It was from an animal, one at least as tall as a human—and there wasn’t just one of them, but several. It was far too dark to see just how many of them there were, but faint moonlight threaded in from between the tree branches and illuminated the one closest to us.

“Wolves.”

“A whole pack of them.”

Wolves were carnivorous, and sometimes attacked humans. We braced ourselves and glared back at the wolves. A few seconds passed, but they showed no signs of attacking, and eventually, they turned their backs and left.

“What was that all about?” Dier asked.

Just then, one of the wolves stopped and turned around. Almost like...

“Are they telling us to follow them?” I wondered.

“What, you speak wolf?”

“Of course not. It just seems that way, doesn’t it?”

It was the way they just holding still, waiting there, that made me think they wanted us to follow after them. Normally I’d say such an idea was impossible, but this was no ordinary forest; in this place Mystria could observe our every move, and had every animal within under her command.

“Let’s go. I think they’ll show us the way.”

“You’re right. We’ll just get lost if we keep going by ourselves.”

Once the wolves realized we were going to follow them, they continued forward. But would they really lead us where we needed to go? The idea Mystria could control animals to this extent was terrifying; she could easily command an entire army if she wanted to.

We continued on for a while, following the wolves deeper into the forest. The scenery gradually began to shift. The trees changed, becoming larger and larger until they were gigantic. They were so large, in fact, that it seemed as if we too were changing—shrinking as they grew. Though we came across many wild animals on our way, none of them attacked us. Initially Dier and I had been wary, ready to defend ourselves against them at any time, but eventually we began to relax.

And then...

“Is this the Frusch manor?”

“Seems like it.”

In the middle of forest stood an old mansion. Though it was similar in size to mine, it was much, much older. Ivy covered the walls and roof, with spots of moss all over.

Honestly speaking, it was filthy.

“Sure this is the place?”

“I suppose we’ll see once we go inside.”

Our guiding pack of wolves had disappeared at some point in our arrival. The door was easy enough to find—right at the front of the house—so we approached. It opened with a creak.

“Welcome.” A maid greeted us at the door.

Apparently this *was* the place.

“We’ve been expecting you. You are Lady Selene Vixent, are you not?”

“Correct.”

“Please come in, and I will bring you to my mistress.”

It was the maid’s turn to guide us. Contrary to its exterior, the inside of the mansion didn’t seem as ancient; it was neat and clean, with many servants bustling about. At first glance, it seemed like any ordinary noble’s manor. And yet...something felt off. Different.

“Hey. Just want to give you a heads up.”

“What is it?”

“These are all dolls.”

“What?!”

Ahh, so *that’s* what it was! Things were off because all the servants were dolls. Dier said he couldn’t detect a human scent from any of them. In other words, this was not a manor filled with humans, but rather...a dollhouse.

“Mistress, your guest has arrived.”

“Show her in.”

“Very well.”

After a brief exchange, the maid opened the door. Inside sat Mystria, waiting for us with a smile.

“Welcome, Miss Vixent.”

All she did was smile and yet...it felt creepy. Here she was, deep in the forest, living in a house of dolls, and smiling.

“I’m pleased you came so quickly. I’ve been wanting to have a nice long chat with you.”

“I’m honored.”

I wasn’t sure why, but just talking with her made me feel...sick, for some reason. And in a completely different way than when I spoke with Alexei. With Mystria, it was like I wasn’t talking to another person, but a *thing.*

Dier told me he hadn’t sensed *anything* human inside the mansion. Did that mean the figure in front of us was a doll too? If so, I just couldn’t bring myself to sit here and speak seriously—to pretend.

“Please, have a seat. We can have some tea and—”

“I don’t plan on staying long,” I said bluntly, my words slicing through her pleasant atmosphere.

Her shoulders began to tremble, and the soft curve of her smile became faintly strained.

“Let’s get to the point, shall we? I know you didn’t call me all the way to the middle of the forest for a tea party.”

“Won’t you relax here just for a little while?”

“Listen, I won’t be as harsh as Alexei and Gordov were, but I’m honestly surprised you could even suggest such a thing, circumstances being what they are. if you’d really like to *chat*, you need to show yourself.”

“What are you talking about? I’m right—”

“Stop playing around.” I released Shadow to threaten her. But even in the face of roiling black shadows, she neither flinched nor looked afraid. That was

all the proof I needed. It showed me that no matter how much I attacked her, or even threatened to, she feared no pain; she wouldn't *feel* it.

"We know that you're just a doll."

"Oh! I see... So you've figured it out."

"Of course we have."

Actually, the only reason I knew was because of Dier. I had a feeling if I glanced even a little bit in his direction, he'd tell me so right away, muttering under his breath.

Not that I minded. Such things weren't important at the moment.

"If you want to talk to me then I demand to see the *real* you. And if you refuse, then we'll leave."

Silence continued for a few seconds. I waited to see how she would respond. If she refused to show herself, then I would have to tear this mansion apart to find her. Doing so would label me a criminal. But right now the situation was on my side.

Depending on what she was hiding, *she* could be the one guilty of a crime. Of course, I didn't want to resort to violence, so I pinned my hopes on her agreeing to my demand.

"Fine. I had always planned on revealing myself sooner or later. If you already know this is a doll, there's no need for me to keep hiding it."

"A very wise decision." I deactivated Shadow. Secretly, I was relieved I wouldn't have to use force.

"Let's move somewhere else before we talk," Mystria said. "Will your companion be coming with you?"

"Yes, he's my bodyguard. I trust him explicitly, so there's no need to worry."

"I see. Well then, if you'll follow me?"

"Yes."

She led the way out of the room—the third time today I was being escorted.

"So you trust me, huh?" Dier whispered to me.

“Why, you’ve got a problem with that?”

“Nah. Just honored, is all.”

“Is that so.”

Dier and I followed Mystria down a set of stairs, toward the basement, and then down another set of stairs.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“You’ll see when we get there.”

I wasn’t sure how to answer.

“Don’t worry. I assure you, you’re not in any danger.”

But what’s your definition of danger? I wanted to ask.

It felt like the stairs went on forever. We weren’t going down just one or two floors. Who wouldn’t feel anxious, descending deeper and deeper into the earth?

“Hey,” Dier said.

“What is it?”

“Someone’s here.” Apparently he had smelled someone—someone waiting for us. And I had a feeling that whoever it was would be the guardian of the forest.

We finally reached the bottom of the staircase, where a metal door stood.

“You’ll find all of me inside.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’ll be quicker for you to find out for yourself,” the Mystria doll said, opening the door. The door made a harsh sound upon opening, like metal grinding against metal. And then it swung open...to reveal the truth.

Countless lights flickered in the air, like a swarm of fireflies buzzing about. A single white bed stood in the center of the room. And in the bed lay a very wrinkled old woman.

“This is me,” the doll said. I compared the face of the doll to that of the old

woman's and indeed, there was a resemblance. Plants wound around the sleeping woman's withered old body. They didn't look like they were binding her in place, but rather as if they were protecting her.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. But then again, I could feel the presence of supernatural powers from the sleeping old woman; my powers were reacting to her.

"*This* is the real guardian of the forest?"

"Yes. But to be precise, we are both the real guardian. The me who is sleeping uses her consciousness to speak through me because she can no longer speak on her own."

"But how did she get like this? You told me I'd understand once I saw. I understand why she uses dolls now, but..." I just had even more questions. The only thing I understood was that the real guardian of the forests was a sleeping old lady. I wanted to know *how* this happened.

"How much do you know about House Frusch, Miss Vixent?"

"Only the general facts. He," I said, indicating Dier, "knows more than I do."

"I see. Well then, it might take a while, but I'll start at the beginning. I first became the head of House Frusch one hundred and twenty years ago..."

♦ ♦ ♦

It was one hundred and twenty years ago. Generation after generation of Frusch women—and only women—inherited the family's supernatural powers. It became only natural that for the Fruschs, a woman would be head of house.

And for the current head of house, things went as follows: she came into her powers, married a man from a well-to-do family, and commenced a smooth and easy life.

But then tragedy struck. She couldn't bear children. Once this was known, it was far too late for anything to be done about it. And worst of all, the supernatural powers of House Frusch were inherited genetically. There was no other way to transfer the powers, and it couldn't be consciously passed over to anyone else—this was why the most important duty of the house guardian was

to ensure their supernatural abilities were passed down to the next generation.

And yet Mystria's body was incapable of doing so. Though she'd tried all sorts of things to be able to bear children, nothing worked. The powers of House Frusch would end with her.

She was scared. If word got out, there was no telling how harshly she would be judged. The more time passed, the more anxious the people around her grew. They fretted, saying constantly, "When will the next generation of House Frusch be born?"

Their anxiety grew into doubt. And as she got older, their doubt turned into suspicion.

Meanwhile, her fear just kept growing stronger. So she hid it. She used her powers to create a false successor. And continued doing so for the next generation, and the next...

♦ ♦ ♦

"That is how I came to be. It's been four generations since the head of house has been this way."

"It's so hard to believe."

"Yes, but..."

The proof lay right over there, in that bed. She was in a deep sleep, as if she would never awaken. I couldn't believe it…but I had no other choice.

"So in other words, you're..."

"That's right. I'm more than one hundred and forty years old. About seven times your age."

No wonder she was so creepy. I wasn't just speaking to a doll, but to a consciousness that was entirely at odds with her appearance. And that wasn't all. The whole time, I realized, I had been quite rude to an elder over a hundred years my senior.

But it was pointless to apologize for my past behavior now, since I had no intention of changing my existing attitude towards her.

“So that’s why you refused to help during the meeting.”

“That’s right. My main body cannot leave this place. And even though my doll can, my powers are limited in range. It is only because the forest has roots in the capital that I can freely travel there. Eastor is simply beyond the scope of my reach.”

Her earlier refusal to cooperate and unwillingness to explain why now made sense. And since she couldn’t explain her reasoning, the other’s confusion and upset was only natural. She was faced with a very serious problem.

“I understand your situation. So what would you have me do? You must have shared your secret with me for a reason.”

“Of course. Only a select few members of House Frusch are even privy to this secret. You two are the only outsiders who know.”

“It’s no wonder. This kind of information can’t be shared lightly.”

If she was willing to share her secret with me, she must have quite the favor to ask.

She took a deep breath before speaking. “The reason I told you is because there’s something I want you to do for me.”

“And what’s that?” I asked. She gradually turned to face the old woman.

“As I said, I’m over one hundred and forty years old. I’ve long surpassed a normal human lifespan. My powers are the only thing keeping me alive.”

“The guardian of the forests can heal, yes?”

“That’s right. The forest overflows with vitality. I borrow a little of that energy to sustain my life. But I’m not immortal, and at last, I’ve come to my limit.”

Her smile was sad. She could sense the end of her life was near...that death was coming for her.

I wasn’t surprised. Her age and the state of her real body made it obvious—not even the power to heal could stave off old age forever.

“This may seem obvious, but once I die, my dolls will die too. And then the powers of House Frusch will disappear once and for all. But I don’t want that.

I've lived so long just to keep these powers alive! That's why I've been waiting for you."

"For me?"

"That's right. I know that the power of Shadow has the ability to absorb other supernatural powers."

"How did you know that?!" I was the only Vixent who even knew that was possible. So how could *she* know?

"I've lived a very long time. I know that Shadow can take my power—and give it to another."

"Give it to another? I've never done that," I said, but as I spoke I sensed it was possible. It just hadn't come to mind before. Perhaps I could do the opposite of absorption, like when I poured my powers into the stone slab.

And I already knew that when my target didn't resist—or was too weak to do so— I could fully absorb their powers.

"I'm to be married soon. My fiancé is aware of the situation; the marriage is a purely political affair. A different woman will bear him a child, and we will treat that child like a member of this family."

"And you want me to transfer your powers to that child."

"That's right."

"You understand what will happen if you do such a thing, right? You'll die."

She had informed me in no uncertain terms that her powers were the only thing keeping her alive. And she knew what would happen once they were gone. Or did she? She *knew* she was going to die, right? Wait, no—that wasn't it.

"Wait... Are you telling me you want me to kill you?"

"Indeed," she said, looking straight at me. "I want you to kill me."

♦ ♦ ♦

"I'll escort you back out of the forest."

"There's no need."

“Very well then. Please take care on your way home.”

“I will.”

One of Mystria’s doll-maids saw us off as Dier and I left the mansion. After we walked a few steps, Dier, who was walking slightly behind me, said, “Are you sure about all that?”

“Yes. I have what I came here to get.”

“That’s true, but...you’re not gonna respond to her other request?”

“No. While I sympathize with her, I am no saint.”

Basically, though I had turned down her request, I hadn’t wholly rejected it.

♦ ♦ ♦

“I can’t. Why should I kill a person based on someone else’s instruction?”

“You’re my only chance of this working.”

“So what? That’s your problem. It’s none of my business.”

“I suppose...that is true.”

Mystria was devastated. Looking from the outside in, my answers seemed cruel, like I was bullying her. But that wasn’t it at all. The main reason I was so irritated was...

“Let me ask you something. This future child of yours…do you plan to tell her everything?”

“Of course. I have to.”

“And if the time comes for her to receive your power and she refuses, will you just accept her wishes and back down?”

“Well...” She trailed off. It seemed as if she hadn’t thought that far ahead.

“Your position is a difficult one, and I feel sorry for you. But right now all you’re thinking about is the power of House Frusch. What about the girl’s wishes? You said the child would be another woman’s, but what about the woman who will become pregnant and give birth to that child? How will *she* feel? You’ve made this plan without considering their feelings, their futures, all

for the sake of making sure your power gets passed on."

She didn't respond.

"Let me say this another way, to be utterly clear with you. Children aren't tools to inherit a house's power. And you have no right to control the future of a child who doesn't even belong to you."

I was thinking of my father as I spoke. I was projecting onto Mystria, blaming her for what my father had done to me. In all honesty the entire situation was so upsetting to me because I couldn't help but see my father in her actions.

Just as children cannot choose their parents, parents cannot choose their children. And yet there are parents who still insist upon ruthlessly forcing their will upon them...only to find misfortune awaiting them in the end.

Without realizing it myself, I saw myself in this child—forced to inherit a power she had no say in.

"Yes... I suppose you're right. I've been thinking of nothing but how to maintain the Frusch powers. I never thought of how the child would feel..."

Considering her circumstances, she most likely didn't have the luxury to think about such things. Even with that in mind, I don't think I was being unreasonable; no matter how dire the situation was, she didn't have the right to interfere with other people's lives.

"I'm sorry. I was naïve."

I didn't answer.

"But I just can't give up on what I've tried so hard to accomplish. I've been living over a hundred years for the sake of passing on the powers of House Frusch."

"I suppose."

It was no surprise to me that she wouldn't just abandon her plans so suddenly.

"But…say that the child *does* want to inherit the house powers, some time in the future. May I call upon you again?"

“That’s fine. If that happens, you let me know, and I’ll do as you wish—I’ll kill you.”

“Thank you.” She smiled, full of joy. With my agreement, her smile seemed to emerge deep within her, happiness swelling up from the bottom of her heart.

Mystria was truly twisted inside. She was proof of how us guardians were at the complete mercy of our powers. Though I’d challenged her on the morality of her actions, she had been a victim too; her life had never been her own.

I turned my back. “I’m going home. Our conversation is over.”

“Yes. Until we meet again.”

“Oh, right, before I forget...there’s just one more thing,” I made a show of pausing to speak just before I was about to leave. “I have a favor to ask of you too.”

“That’s not very nice. You refused my favor, but now you ask of me one of your own?”

“You’re free to turn me down as well. But if you do, I’m not confident I can keep your precious secret to myself.”

In other words: if she wanted to guarantee my silence, then she’d better do as I said. I made sure my back was still turned to her before I let myself smirk.

“You’re a very cunning person.”

“I could say the same of you.”

♦ ♦ ♦

“I was able to absorb a portion of her powers. Whether or not I grant her wish is up to her future child.”

“True. But you got the power, huh?”

“That’s right.”

I currently had the powers of five different guardians within me. I’d absorbed Lawrence’s powers when I’d caught him. Now the only one that remained was Etoile’s.

“What are you gonna do next? Go absorb the star guardian’s powers? You got

all the other ones. So even if you used a little bit of force, I'd doubt there'd be any serious consequences."

"No, I'm going to wait until after we battle the monster."

"Good point. Otherwise he'd be in danger too."

"That's right. But that's not the real reason I'm waiting. I'm sure you've already realized this, but even when we add his powers, I won't have everything we need."

I'd been gathering the other supernatural powers in order to solve the secret of the stone slab. But the power of all the guardians wasn't the only thing drawn on it. They all revolved around the figure in the center...the king.

Without the king's powers, the image on the stone slab wouldn't change. So that's why I was going to postpone my plans until after we were done with the monster.

Three days later, we stood on a battlefield.

Chapter Eight: Those We Protect

We were on the outskirts of Eastor. Soldiers from all over the kingdom gathered on the border between the forest and the mountains, about twelve thousand in all. The guardians were on the front lines.

“Everyone, brace yourselves! A war like one we’ve never experienced before is about to begin! You may lose your lives! Your legs may tremble with fear! But never forget that behind us, there are defenseless citizens! And as knights, we must risk our lives to protect the people!”

In response to Gordov’s rousing speech, a roar erupted from the knights, their hearts set alight.

“This atmosphere is stifling,” I said.

“Nah,” Dier said, “this is perfect. It’d be weirder if everyone was calm.”

“Are you implying something about my attitude?”

“Maybe.”

I could say the same thing to him. I wasn’t afraid of death because of my previous time loops, and Dier wasn’t afraid of dying either, because he just couldn’t.

So for us, neither of us were in any true danger. And that was why we were both making preparations as if it were business as usual.

“You seem restless.”

“C-Can ya blame me? You didn’t mention *this*. I didn’t think that...” Dier stood next to me, staring at King Euclis—staring at his younger brother. “I just didn’t think he’d show up too.”

“Apparently, the guardians get stronger when we’re near the king.”

“And that’s *dangerous*.”

“I know. If that worries you so much, how about you stand closer to His Majesty so you can protect him?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Yet Dier still shot a worried look at Euclis. His protective nature as an older brother battled with his reticence toward getting in the king’s way, so he couldn’t just simply approach him. I wondered if Euclis sensed any of this.

“You’re so awkward.”

But as always, I had no room to say such things. Just then, from behind me, I heard a voice. “Lady Vixent.”

“Alexei...”

“Hey there. You’re looking awfully calm before such a big battle. Not that I’m surprised.”

“I thought you’d be trembling with fear. I’m surprised too,” I said sarcastically, and he answered with a grin.

“Worried about *me*? I’m touched.”

I sighed. He was disgusting, as usual. Even when I tried to provoke him he was still ridiculously positive. It was so annoying.

“If you need anything at all, don’t hesitate to call for me,” Alexei said. “I shall gladly act as your shield.”

“No need. You just carry out your duties.”

“And I will do them. But you’ve got a much more dangerous task than me. Be careful.”

“I will.”

Each guardian had their own role in this battle, assigned based on the particular nature of their abilities. I thought it was a decent strategy.

We talked to pass the time. Throughout the battlefield, tension was running high. Eventually Dier and I went to our positions.

“Just so you know, I can’t do much,” Dier said.

“I know that. Not with all these people watching. But don’t worry,” I told him. “I have an idea.”

“Up to no good again, huh?”

“I never said that. I think it’s a pretty good plan for you, actually.”

He gave me a doubtful look, one that only grew even more doubtful as I explained my plan, but I thought he’d be happy once he saw the results.

The signal rang out, marking the start of the battle.

“It’s time.”

“So it is.”

The time was finally here. The catastrophic monster was coming.

It appeared in an instant. It was massive—as if it could swallow the very heavens. It looked like nothing of this world. The best way I could describe it would be to say it was the manifestation of fear itself: it had the shell of an insect, the fangs and claws of a beast, and wings, like the dragons of myth.

“S-So that’s it...”

“Tch...”

Even the knights, who were filled to bursting with fighting spirit just a few moments ago, automatically backed up when they saw it. But the guardians were unafraid.

“Aahhhh!”

Of course, it was the strongest man in the world that made the first move. Gordov kicked off the ground, creating a large tremor in his wake. He rendered a chasm in the earth, right in front of the beast and hindering its movement. Then, he drew his sword and without hesitation charged straight towards the monster several thousand times his size.

“Abandon all fear! We are *knights*! Channel your feelings into your blades and kill this beast!”

“Yaaaaaaaah!” This incited the knights once more. All this talk was just too much for me. But Dier was right.

“They need it this time.”

The main battle was about to begin. The knights’ role was to avoid attacking the monster’s body.

The terrifying thing about the catastrophic monster was that it had the ability to command legions of other monsters. And right now, it had several hundred mid-sized monsters surrounding it. If even one of these mid-sized monsters entered the city, mass chaos would ensue.

The knights' job was to prevent such a thing from happening. Though we were supernatural guardians, we were human, just like them. They were strong enough that even if us guardians had them outnumbered, fighting against them would be tough.

"Now come, monsters! I won't allow a single one of you to take even one step forward as long as I'm here!" Alexei Wasser, the guardian of water, stepped forward. He had the power to stop multiple monsters simultaneously. His mission was to join forces with the knights and exterminate the horde of beasts.

Alexei honestly surprised me. Knowing his personality, I expected him to say he'd take on the catastrophic monster by himself. I thought he would be desperate for the glory and attention that would bring, but perhaps I was wrong.

"After thirty seconds, attacks on the right side will become more intense! Brace yourselves!" Etoile Weldon, guardian of the stars, was giving out orders. Using his Astromancy, he could see how the battlefield would change before it actually did, and could therefore give out orders that reflected the best mode of attack. What Etoile lacked in combat ability, he made up for on the battlefield as a strategist, dictating the soldiers' next moves.

Beside Etoile was King Euclis. Having the king nearby had improved his supernatural abilities dramatically. In their hands, the herd of monsters would never gain the advantage.

"Let's end this quickly."

"Yes, let's."

"Let's go!"

The remaining three guardians, including myself, would stop the catastrophic monster as a team.

A monster, one of such size and might that it could level an entire city. It lived

up to its name; it was truly a catastrophe in and of itself. The only ones who would face it were us three guardians. From the outside looking in, it might appear as if three miniscule ants were trying to lay siege to an entire human kingdom.

Ordinary ants had no hope of winning.

But we weren't ordinary.

"Listen, beast! We won't let you pass!" Gordov stabbed his sword in the ground. Immediately after that, the monster's gigantic body sank into the earth and froze. Gordov had summoned his powers to manipulate the surrounding gravity.

"I'll stop him while you attack," Gordov said.

"All right," I answered.

"You can count on me for back-up!" Lawrence chimed in.

"You're not back-up, you're in the vanguard!" Gordov barked. "Hold back here and you *will* pay."

"Ugh, I know." Lawrence was intimidated by Gordov's sharp gaze. Gordov definitely had the upper hand when it came to any kind of back and forth between the two of them.

"Let's just hurry up and get this over with then!" Lawrence said, then jumped high in the air.

Lawrence's ability allowed him to manipulate the atmosphere. All wind and air were his to control.

"It's been a long time since I worked this hard, but I'll do my best!" He raised his hands up in the sky and right after swung them down. A violent downdraft then attacked the monster. It was so strong it became a downburst, an explosive gush of air currents so powerful that it gouged out the earth, permanently transforming the topography of the area it impacted.

"Aha ha ha! It's a tough one after all. A catastrophe indeed!"

"You idiot! *Think* before you strike! You could have killed everyone here!"

“Huh? Why would I do that? You guys have nothing to worry about, okay?”

“Settle down you two,” I said.

Dier and I had slipped into the shadows right before Lawrence’s attack hit. It surprised me just how powerful Lawrence actually was. It meant that the whole time I had been chasing him, he could have escaped from me easily. I wonder if he had just chosen to hold himself back because he was inside the capital city.

“Frightening, isn’t it?” I spread out my shadow. I didn’t need to restrain myself against the monster. I transformed Shadow into a sharp blade and slashed at the monster’s feet.

“I’ll just scrape off the bottom,” I said.

“Ugh, that’s nasty,” Dier replied.

“Better not look away,” Gordov told Lawrence.

“Hm? Huh? Waah!”

The monster wouldn’t go down without a fight. Tentacles spurted out from all over its body, one of them lashing out at Lawrence in the sky. Though Gordov’s powers had slowed down its mobility, it was still perfectly capable of a counterattack.

Each tentacle would have to be dealt with. While Lawrence could attack from above, I couldn’t defend myself with Shadow without also losing my ability to attack. Pure defense wouldn’t help me defeat the monster—I needed to focus on offense.

“Leave it to me,” Dier said.

I’d leave Dier to handle defense. He was fighting off the tentacles with just a regular sword without using any of his powers. His speed and reflexes were superhuman, but right now we had an excuse for it.

“Those movements! Selene Vixent, who is that?” Gordov asked.

“It’s my bodyguard. I temporarily boosted his physical abilities with my powers.”

My shadow was coiled around Dier’s body.

“Boosted his physical abilities?” Gordov repeated. “That’s possible?”

“Yes, but it takes a lot of energy, so I can only use it on him.”

“I see. Well, he seems strong enough.” Gordov seemed to accept my explanation. But honestly, I hadn’t “boosted” Dier at all; I’d just wrapped Shadow around him.

Looks like my excuse had been more effective than I’d expected.

“Pretty clever, huh?” I asked.

“Sure,” Dier replied, “but it’s a bit difficult to move around like this.”

“Are you really in a position to complain?”

“I know, I know. I’ll protect you. Just let’s hurry up and finish this.”

“I intend to.”

We would attack the monster from both the sky and the ground, stopping it in place with gravity. The plan wasn't a bad one. And everything so far was going smoothly. However...

"Uhh, is it just me or does it not seem like we're making any progress here?" Lawrence asked.

"It does seem tougher than I expected," Gordov agreed.

"It's not just because of its size, either," I added.

"Hey, if we don't do something different it's gonna kill us first."

I understood what Dier was really getting at. And I had a feeling that all of us fighting sensed it too: that even though things were going smoothly right now, at some point we'd run out of stamina, and the monster would overwhelm us. All of our powers combined was barely enough to hold it back. If even one of us fell, the situation would worsen immediately. We had to do something.

"It looks like we have no choice," I said. "Sir Boden! We're changing our battle strategy!"

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

"Buy me five minutes," I replied. "I'll use Shadow to swallow its body."

"You can do that?!" Lawrence exclaimed. "But this thing is *huge*!"

"I can do it," I said, "I just can't fight it at the same time. Making my shadow big enough to do this requires all my concentration."

Ultimately, the three of them needed to hold back the monster for five minutes—long enough for me to prepare.

"All right," Gordov said. "We'll buy you time. Lawrence!"

"Yeah, yeah, I got it! What am I, a slave?"

Since Gordov was currently using his powers to manipulate the gravitational field surrounding the monster, he was unable to use his abilities to attack. Lawrence would maintain our team's offensive front alone.

"I'm going to step away now. Provide back up to Sir Boden," I told Dier.

“Got it,” Dier said. “Just call for me if you need help.”

“I will. But don’t worry.”

I could leave this to the three of them.

I slipped into the shadows temporarily, transporting myself to a location where the monster’s attacks couldn’t reach me. I had to focus. I would control this area with my shadow.

“Sir Boden!” Dier shouted. “Focus on your gravity manipulation!”

“That’s my intention!” Gordov replied.

“I just have to attack, right?” Lawrence asked.

The three of them were keeping the monster in check. I had to trust them and concentrate solely on what I was doing.

I let out a chuckle. *Trust* them? I thought I’d given up on ever trusting others. But all that changed when I started working with a certain *someone.*

“I trust you...” *Dier.*

♦ ♦ ♦

The battle was at a stalemate.

Alexei and the others were fending off the other monsters. There was no issue on that front; together he and the knights were putting up a real fight. The key to their success, however, was Etoile. His Astromancy allowed them to act ahead of the curve, and it was his contribution that was the backbone of their offense.

But Astromancy wasn’t omnipotent. Etoile could only see one vision at a time. In other words, he couldn’t see anything other what was happening right in front of him.

“Huh?” Lawrence said. “The monster’s being weird!”

“What?” asked Gordov.

If Astromancy had been capable of grasping the full scope of the battle, Etoile would have been able to see the full progression of the fight more clearly—he could have seen that the monster would transform, recognized the signs the

moment it began to do so, and warned everyone of what was to come.

The monster was covered in a shell-like material, tougher than steel, designed to protect itself from all manner of violent attacks. But suddenly the shell began to crumble. And not from the force of the guardians' attacks.

It was shedding the shell of its own volition.

"Wait just a minute!" Lawrence said. "Is that—"

"I can't believe it... the monster's form...!" Gordov uttered.

The monster transformed. It shed its shell and now became much smaller, like some kind of strange, evil dragon. Held aloft by its four wings, its angry eyes were trained on something.

"You've gotta be kidding me!" Lawrence cried out. "Those wings aren't just for show?"

"The monster can fly?" Gordov said. "But then... my gravity power..."

"Did it get stronger?" Lawrence asked.

Gordov was still manipulating the gravity surrounding the monster—he was exerting so much force, in fact, that the monster looked as if it was on the verge of being crushed. And yet at that moment the monster somehow completely ignored gravity and soared through the sky, flapping its wings so hard it generated gusts stronger than even the guardian of air could withstand.

"Oof!"

"Argh!"

The wind was powerful enough to also blow Gordov away, and in the process deactivated his gravitational force. That, inevitably, made the monster both lighter and faster.

"This isn't good!" Lawrence shouted.

Gordov's posture crumbled. Being blown away by monstrous winds had scrambled his brain, causing him to stagger. Gordov was now completely defenseless against any attack, and realizing this, Dier ran over to Gordov's side. But the monster wasn't after Gordov.

Was it just a coincidence? Or was it acting on instinct?

The monster flapped its wings, heading towards...

“Wh-What?!”

...King Euclis. Even Etoile didn’t notice what was coming because he was so focused on using Astromancy.

From high up in the sky, the monster attacked Etoile and King Euclis.

“Water!” Alexei was nearest to them and immediately activated his power in response. Water flowed into the shape of a wall that stood between them and the monster, but it was too weak—with one flap of its massive wings, Alexei’s wall of water burst instantaneously.

“Argh!”

“Ahh!”

A gust of wind sent them flying. Etoile was blown to the side and slammed into a tree, instantly knocked unconscious. King Euclis was thrown into the air.

The monster set its sights on Euclis. Maybe instinct was guiding it after all; helping it to identify the main obstacle, the one who was the driving force behind this battle.

“Your Majesty!” Gordov screamed. But his powers couldn’t reach him.

I was the only person whose powers could help the king now. I could teleport to a nearby shadow, but there was no telling whether or not I’d reach him in time.

Regardless, the moment I made a move, all my current preparations would be in vain. I had to make a split-second decision. Either abandon my preparations and go save him or—

“Euclis!”

But then I heard his voice, and my decision was made. I wouldn’t go to Euclis; I didn’t need to. The child was in trouble. But even if I didn’t move, *he* would help him. I believed it.

The beast ate the sky.

Dier ran. Faster than I could. He split from the shadow I had coiled around him, ran straight towards the child, and saved him.

“Brother...?”

“Are you okay, Euclis?!”

“Yes!”

To save his younger brother—to protect what was most important to him—Dier, without hesitation, without thinking twice, did everything and anything within his power to protect Euclis. At Euclis, the immortal “monster” smiled, more gently and tenderly than anyone ever could.

“So it *is* you, Brother,” Euclis said.

“It is. I’m sorry,” Dier replied.

“I’ve missed you so much.”

“I missed you too.”

It was a touching family reunion. But the monster’s presence was ruining what would have been a joyful moment.

“Brother!”

“I know. Once we take care of that thing, we can talk.”

“Yes, but with that attack just now, the battle lines are...”
“Don’t worry. I’ve got a reliable accomplice on the job.”

The monster was now targeting the two of them. Dier landed with Euclis on the ground, graceful and without a hint of panic. A shadow formed at his feet.

“It’s been five minutes already?” Dier asked.

“That’s right.” I used the shadow as a pathway to move in front of them.

“Lady Vixent!” Euclis said.

“You’re in charge now, Shadow Guardian.”

“Leave it to me.”

Five minutes had elapsed. I was ready. And now that I was closer to Euclis, my

supernatural powers were amplified.

I could end this fight.

“Shadow,” I said. “Swallow it whole.”

A shadow stretched, expanding out across the entire battlefield, covering the sky, blocking the sun and all its rays of light.

What I made was a shadow barrier. The same kind I’d made when I fought against Dier. I would defeat the beast by pulling it into my shadow.

Shadows contain nothing—shadows cannot sustain life. As long as the monster wasn’t immortal, once it was inside the shadows it would die, just like everything else.

“Begone.”

It didn’t even take a second. The shadows swallowed the transformed beast and just like that it quietly disappeared. In the ensuing silence, a gentle gust of wind carried the news to those on the battlefield.

“Is it over...?”

“She defeated the monster!”

The wind carried the sound of my victory.

Cheers rang out across the battlefield. Some were overjoyed, some were relieved, and some even wept. But they had all witnessed it. The power of Shadow, which had always been said to invite catastrophe, had now swallowed a catastrophe whole, and banished it. And yet there wasn’t even a trace of fear on their faces. Instead, I heard the following:

“Thank you!”

“Long live the Shadow Guardian!”

“People are so fickle...” I muttered, but deep down inside, I felt joy.

I’d told myself that I wouldn’t trust anyone again. That I would live for only myself. So the happiness I felt from being accepted by other people was a little embarrassing. But honestly... it wasn’t a bad feeling.

♦ ♦ ♦

The battle was over. Thanks to the efforts of Alexei and the knights, every last monster had been eradicated. We had a complete victory. While everyone was relishing in the relief and triumph brought on by total success, I listened in on the two brothers' reunion.

"Euclis. I'm sorry for everything that's happened. I'm sorry for worrying you so much."

"It's okay. It's not your fault. It's mine. The only reason you've suffered is because I was born with this power."

"That's not true. You've done *nothing* wrong. D'you know, I've actually always been grateful towards you?"

"What?"

Dier reached over to wipe away a tear from Euclis's cheek.

"*Everyone* forgot about me. But you didn't. You remembered me, and that made me happier than anything else in the world. Knowing you hadn't forgotten me *saved* me, time and time again. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have cared about anything."

"Brother..."

"So Euclis... Please don't try to sacrifice yourself just to save me. I want you to live. I want you to be happy."

"I...I feel the same way!" Tears flowed from his eyes. No matter how much Dier wiped them away, more kept coming: evidence of how deeply important these feelings were to him. Euclis reminded me of someone, someone who always thought about everyone but himself. Those two were certainly brothers.

"Lady Vixent?" Euclis asked, noticing me.

"I'm going home," I said, and to Dier, "Please take your time returning. It's your reunion, after all."

"Thanks. I'll come back as soon as I can," Dier said.

"There's really no need. Take your time."

I wasn't so heartless that I'd interrupt such a moving reunion. After all, we'd

done what we came here to do. I could leave the rest to Gordov and the others.

“I just need to collect a little something for my troubles first...” My gaze drifted over to Etoile, still unconscious on the ground.

♦ ♦ ♦

The knights began to clean up after the battle. They prioritized the wounded, evacating them from the battlefield first. Euclis and Dier took advantage of the frenzy and slipped off somewhere they could be alone.

“She told me to take my time,” Dier said, “but I don’t have much to spare here.”

“I know. So you’ve been with Lady Vixent?” Euclis asked.

“Only recently. We share a common concern.”

“That’s right. I’ll have to thank her later. After all, it’s because of her that we’ve met again.”

Even though it wasn’t by design, Selene had given them this opportunity; it was only because of Dier and Selene meeting and becoming allies that Dier and Euclis had had the chance to come together.

“It’s true. I should thank her too. But I’ll need to apologize first,” Dier said.

“For what?”

“I lied to her. I lied about my feelings.”

“What do you mean?” Euclis stared at him with concern. Dier gently patted his brother’s head and smiled.

“Hey, Euclis... Do you remember what happened seven years ago?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t forget it.”

“I see.”

Dier thanked his brother and recalled those precious memories—when everything ended, and the day it all began.

Epilogue: I Repeat

“Brother!”

“Euclis. You shouldn’t run. It’s dangerous.”

“Don’t worry. Aaahh!”

“Oof!”

Euclis then stumbled and began to fall, but I quickly managed to catch him before he could hit the ground. Relieved, I sighed; I got him in the nick of time, right before his knee would’ve slammed into the floor.

“See? I told you!”

“I’m sorry, Brother! Thank you!”

“You look awfully happy for someone who’s sorry. You *sure* you feel bad?”

“Yes!” He answered enthusiastically. My little brother was still young, and loved to play with me. I felt the same—I loved this, when we could just be together as two normal brothers.

“Oh, it’s gotten late. Sorry, Euclis. But I have to go back to my room.”

“Already?”

“Yes. I have to study now.”

“Oh... okay, then.” He was visibly disappointed.

I gently patted his head and said, “Don’t look so sad. We can play together again soon.”
“Promise?”

“Of course. We’re brothers, right?”

“Right!” Euclis exclaimed happily.

I went back to my room. Fun time was over. The only things left for me now were my harsh studies and even harsher training.

Euclis and I were royals. We weren’t just regular brothers. And as the eldest

and first prince, first in line to be king, I had to undergo all sorts of education and training to prepare for my future role.

The preparation was hectic, but it wasn't painful. It was only natural that I had to master such things in order to become king. And it was better that I shouldered his burden instead of Euclis.

Though Euclis was kind and serious, he was also timid, and quite shy. He could be a bit spacey at times, and required a lot of supervision. If he had been chosen to inherit the throne, the pressure would've crushed him.

I didn't want that to happen. I wanted my little brother to stay innocent, and have a happy, peaceful childhood. For him, I could take the brunt of all the bad things—bear all the pain.

"Because I'm the older brother."

And that was enough. That was enough reason for me to work as hard as I did. When I wasn't studying, or training to be king, whatever free time I had I spent with Euclis. I always wished those times could last forever.

But the end came suddenly.

"Brother... I feel...strange."

"Euclis?"

"I feel hot. And I have this weird pressure in my chest."

"Could it be...?"

My brother had inherited a supernatural power. The king's power. In other words... my brother now possessed the power that gave him the right to be king. And that trumped everything—even birth order—because in this kingdom, the royal power was the ultimate authority; it marked who would be king.

Historically, in almost every past instance, it had been the eldest son who had inherited the royal powers. And so everyone around me assumed that I would, too—it was why I had received such specialized education in the first place.

And yet... the powers had chosen my brother. Anyone else in my situation would've felt bitter about this turn of events. But not me. What I felt most of all was an overriding worry for Euclis. Inheriting the powers meant everyone's

expectations would suddenly shift to him. All the education, expectations, and training I'd received would now be forced upon his tiny body.

"Brother..."

"Euclis..."

He looked anxious.

I can't let this happen.

Wasn't there a way to transfer the powers to me instead? Maybe there had been some kind of mistake.

But then…*it* happened.

"Argh... Wh-What...?"

"Brother?"

"Aaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Brother?!"

All of a sudden a burning sensation raced through my body. And with it, came pain—a kind of pain I'd never experienced before: one so intense and all-consuming that I couldn't breathe. I thought I'd pass out.

I was fine just a few moments ago, but now the sunlight was hurting me, making me feel like I'd instantly come down with some kind of mysterious illness. Everything was off. I was disoriented, confused by my own body. But...

"Brother! Brother!"

"Euclis..."

Euclis was staring up at me, beseeching, with tears in his eyes.

"I'm...all...right..."

I wouldn't let him worry about me. I could bear this pain.

Just then, some of the guards on patrol came over. "Prince Euclis!"

"Ah! Th-There's something wrong!" He told them in a panic.

"What's going on?"

The knights looked me over, surprised. Seeing me in such pain must have taken them aback. But surely, now that they were here, I'd be able to get treatment. I'd already gotten a little used to the pain.

As I breathed a sigh of relief, I became shocked all over again by what the knights then said, and did.

"Who on earth are *you*? Just *what* are you doing here?" The knights drew their swords, fury blazing in their eyes, their blades aimed right at me. These were the royal knights—tasked to protect the king— and they had just drawn their blades against me, the first prince of the royal family. Their actions were was so unbelievable that I was completely bewildered.

"Answer me! Who are you?! What were you trying to do to Prince Euclis?!"

"What...? Euclis and I were just talking."

"Such insolence! How dare you address the prince without the proper respect!"

"What in the world are you talking about? I'm his *older brother*! Why can't I call him by his name?"

It was probably the first time in my life that I'd ever raised my voice with such emotion. That's how ridiculous this situation was. The searing pain had subsided a bit, and I could move more freely again. The knights' own insolence was irritating me.

"What did you just say?" One of the knights asked.

"Please! My brother's in pain!"

"Prince Euclis, whatever are you talking about?" The other knight said. "You don't *have* an older brother."

"What...?"

For a split second, it felt like time had frozen and the whole world had gone silent. I didn't understand. Was this just a new knight who didn't recognize me yet? That was the only reason I could think of for what he'd just said.

But it wasn't just about a lack of recognition—I could hear it in his voice and see it in his expression. He truly had no idea what Euclis and I were talking

about. He really didn't know me...or even know *about* me.

"Wait, I..."

"Get away from Prince Euclis!"

I took a step towards them. The knights immediately brandished their swords. One of the blades skimmed my arm, breaking the skin.

"Ah!"

"Brother!" Euclis cried.

"Wh-What? The cut, it..."

The cut healed right before my eyes. No, that wasn't the right way to put it... it was like time rewound itself on my body—like I had never been cut in the first place.

"I-It's a monster!" A knight shouted.

"Ugh..."

I had no idea what was going on. But it was frightening. The knights were radiating sheer hostility, towards me and what my body had just done.

Everything was frightening.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Brother!"

I ran away.

It wouldn't be until several days after I ran away that I learned that I had inherited the supernatural powers of the moon, and that, in addition to these new abilities, my entire existence had been erased from everyone's memories.

It took a long time for me to accept my new reality. I didn't have the heart to live in a world that had forgotten me. But at the same time, I was physically incapable of dying.

In this new existence, I had just one wish. I wanted everything to be a dream. I wanted to wake up and have everything be back to normal. I wanted to have fun, and to play with my little brother again.

That’s all I kept wishing for.

♦ ♦ ♦

Under the light of the moon, Dier walked through the mansion, heading for Selene’s study.

“It’s pretty late.”

After Dier had finished speaking with Euclis, he had helped the knights clean up the battlefield. Even though they told him he could return to Selene, the good-natured Dier had found it difficult to leave the knights alone without giving them a hand first.

Time had passed and before long, night had arrived. Dier hurried down the hallway. At the same time, a man was walking towards him. They both paused.

“Hm? You’re...”

“You’re the bodyguard Selene hired.”

It was Selene’s father, Ralde Vixent.

This meeting was a chance encounter—they’d been living in the same mansion for a while, but had never crossed paths until now.

“Heh. That damned Selene. What a fool. Not only has she let outsiders in to the mansion, but she’s hired bodyguards without permission....”

“She’s the head of house now. You have no right to complain about her.”

“You bastard! How dare you speak to me in such a way!”

“Sorry to tell you, but the mistress of this manor told me to make myself at home.”

They glared at each other, both with a different kind of irritation.

“Hmph. We’re done here.”

Ralde began to walk away, passing by Dier.

“How long do you plan on running from reality?” Dier said.

“What did you say?”

Ralde paused, whirling around angrily.

“I’m not talking about how you’re no longer head of house. I’m talking about the mother of your first child.”

“What?!”

“I did some digging about the both of you before coming here. And that’s when I found out the truth about why you treat your own daughter so poorly.”

“Shut up!” Ralde shouted angrily at him, but Dier didn’t stop talking.

“You loved her mother. You’ve never been able to forget her, especially after she died. And every time you look at your first daughter, you think of her.”

“Sh-Shut up! What do you know?!”

“I know. I know the pain of not being able to forget.”

After all, once he had awakened to his powers, Dier had been forgotten by everyone except for his brother. But of everything that had happened to him, the cruelest thing was that he had to remember it all. He could still vividly recall how happy he had once been.

Even though he wished to just forget it all, such a thing wouldn’t happen just because he wanted it to. Precious memories were like that.

“No matter how much you reject or deny things, reality won’t change. What you’ve lost will never be returned.”

“Tch, I...” “ Ralde bit his lip, as if he stopped himself from saying *I know that.*

“Accept it. She is *your daughter*. The daughter of the woman you loved.”

“You little brat...”

Dier resumed walking towards Selene’s room. He let out a sigh. “Not that it’s any of my business...”

He honestly hadn’t intended to say anything. He’d seen Euclis for the first time in a long time, and so he’d been compelled to speak. No matter the distance, no matter the fact that all material evidence of their connection was gone, they still thought about each other. Anyone able to face their own feelings and weaknesses would feel that way.

“Loneliness is painful.”

And it wasn't a feeling that was easily remedied. There were countless invisible obstacles in the way of people's relationships. But even then...

"You're back late."

"I know."

"Welcome home."

Dier believed the day would come when they could understand each other.

♦ ♦ ♦

I've had painful dreams. Dreams in which I had to experience everything I'd gone through, over and over again. It was like a reminder, of someone telling me not to forget.

But they'd lessened lately.

Instead, I'd started having happy dreams. Dreams of the future, of smiling with someone. Of being happy and at peace together. They were dreams of a future I'd wished for.

Beneath the royal palace, there was a secret room, guarded by both thick doors and tight security. Only those in line for the throne were allowed to go there.

"I'll go by myself from here."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Please be careful."

"I will."

Euclis slipped through the door and then closed it, hiding us from the prying eyes of the knights outside.

"It's fine now." He said, and then Dier and I slipped out from his shadow.

"Haah... it's stifling in there!"

"Stop complaining," I said. "Without Shadow, getting in here would be nearly impossible."

"I know," Dier said, and to his brother, "Thanks, Euclis."

"I'd do anything for you, Brother." King Euclis smiled happily as Dier patted his

head. His happiness was so visible that I felt a little embarrassed just watching them. Thanks to Euclis' shadow, we'd once again gained access to the secret room under the palace. We returned to this room for the stone slab in front of us, of course.

"So it *was* you two, then," Euclis said.

"Hm? How'd you know?" Dier asked.

"Back when the news first broke about the intruders, I came in here to check for myself. And I saw that a portion of the stone slab had changed color. That had never happened before. I took a guess that the two of you had something to do with it changing."

"You're so clever, Euclis." Dier patted his brother's head again, with Euclis beaming the whole time.

Their interactions were starting to make me feel uncomfortable—I was beginning to feel like a third wheel.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked Euclis. "Now you're an accomplice too."

"Yes, I'm sure," the boy king assured me.

"If you say so, then."

The boy king had once wished for death. Even though he was a child, his words carried a weight to them. But at any rate, I appreciated his cooperation; we needed his powers to fully change the stone slab.

"I can't believe you have them all now. When did you absorb the Star Guardian's powers?" Dier asked me.

"After the battle. He was still unconscious, so I went over to his body and absorbed it."

"Y-You..."

"What's wrong about that? Once I finished I brought him over to the medics right away." It was a small price to pay for my services.

Dier gave me an exasperated look.

"Well, shall we get started?" I said.

“Hang on a second. Can I say something first?”

“What is it?”

All of a sudden Dier stopped me. He looked solemn, so I automatically focused all of my attention on him.

“There’s something I need to apologize to you about.”

“What?”

“I’ve been lying to you. Lying about my feelings. I...I don’t want to die.” And then he told me everything. He told me all about his feelings, and his weaknesses.

“I used to curse my immortality. I wanted to die so badly, but having this indestructible body prevented me from doing so. I hated it. But most of all, what I hated the most was being alone. *No one* remembered me, so all I wanted was to turn back time. I wanted things to be like they were before—but they couldn’t. So if I couldn’t turn back time, at the very least I wanted Euclis to be happy. And if for some reason I stood in the way of that happiness, then I thought dying wouldn’t be so bad.”

“Brother...” Euclis looked at him with concern. Dier placed a hand on his head.

“But that was all bravado. Honestly, I just wanted to run away from my own loneliness. But ever since I started working with you, I remembered what it felt like being with someone else. How safe that feels. It turns out that what I really want is...” He placed a hand over his heart. “...is to live with everyone. That’s why I want to get rid of the supernatural powers in this world. *That’s* my wish.”

“Heh heh.”

“Why are you laughing?”

“Why are you telling me all this now?” I said. “I’ve known that you don’t actually want to die for a long time now.”

“What?!”

How could I have not noticed, when he was so desperate to live? When he had realized that neither Gordov nor I could kill him in our fights with him, he had been relieved, not depressed.

“You...you knew?”

“Of course I did.”

“You’re so easy to read, Brother.”

“Isn’t he, though?” Euclis and I shared a smile.

Dier turned away, looking embarrassed. Another obvious reaction. Or maybe...it was a human reaction. Even though he called himself a monster, we had never once seen him that way.

I now understood how Dier felt. But I also wanted to know where Euclis stood.

“What about you?” I asked him.

“I feel the same way. This power is special, and I understand that it’s convenient. But I can survive without it.”

“Heh. It’s hard to believe you’re just a child.”

“Well, I *am* the king, you know.”

Even his smile was childish. He’d be just as much of a king without his powers as he was now. The kingdom would be in good hands.

“What about you?” Dier asked me.

“Me?”

“Yeah. You want something different from us, right?” he said.

“That’s true...”

My wish was to escape from my time loop. It was my reason for living.

“If the supernatural powers are connected to that phenomenon in some way, then they’re better off gone,” Dier said.

“All right, then. Okay.”

“So we have the same goal after all.”

I had wondered if Dier thought that I’d stand in his way. But the two of them looked thoroughly relieved at my agreement, and looking at them now, I came to my own realization.

“Good. I was thinking at this point you might’ve wanted to go solo.”

“I’m surprised,” I said. “You know I’m not that cold, right? But…you’re not wrong. Not too long ago I actually might have reacted that way. ”

I promised myself I’d do everything I possibly could to get what I wanted. I’d spare no one—not even my own family—if they dared to get in my way. I was going to do it all alone.

Well, that’s what I had thought. It had been what I’d told myself: as long as I could live, truly live, I had nothing to fear from being alone.

“I’d prepared myself for a life of solitude. But once you showed up, I realized that having a little noise around instead of just silence wasn’t as bad as I thought it would.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes. It’s all because I met you.”

Perhaps it was just coincidence. But Dier was the one who made me realize everything. He had recognized my pain, my regrets, and understood them. He was truly the first person to really *see* me. I had made a vow to never put my trust in another person ever again, but at some point, I found myself trusting him.

I was so grateful for all the support he’d given me up until today. And that’s why...

“Thank you, Dier.” I meant it from the bottom of my heart.

“That’s the first time you’ve ever said my name.”

“Is it? Come to think of it, I don’t think you’ve ever said mine either.”

“You’re right.” He held out his right hand. “Here’s to being accomplices, Selene.”

“Yes.”

We never did shake hands that first time we met, but we did so now—solidifying our connection.

We stood in front of the stone slab. Last time it had just been Dier and myself,

but now it was three.

“I just have to touch here?” Euclis asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Be careful. It feels like it’s sucking your powers out,” Dier cautioned him.

“Okay. Looks a little scary... Will you do it with me, Brother?”

“All right.”

They both touched the stone slab while I watched. I felt like what was happening in front of me was connected to our futures. I didn’t know exactly how just yet. But somehow, I knew this was our first step towards it.

My duty hadn’t changed. All I had to do was place my hands over theirs. And then I would repeat...for the future.

♦ ♦ ♦

A familiar sensation ran through my whole body. This time around, however, there was no pain. Still, I could never forget this feeling.

“Huh...?” I realized where I was: I was lying in my bed. The realization was such a sudden surprise that I immediately shot up from the bed, bolting upright. The first thing I did was check the time. The clock read one in the afternoon. If my instincts were right, then someone would be knocking at the door in a few seconds.

Knock, knock.

“Dier?”

“Yeah, it’s me.” He opened the door and came in.

“Has he decided to cooperate?” I asked.

“Yep. He can do it tomorrow.”

“I see... Could I ask you something, Dier?”

“What is it?”

I didn’t really *need* to ask, but I wanted to. Dier was perceptive, so he would know what I really meant. I took a deep breath and asked, “*When* is today?”

“*When*? Wait, did you loop again?”

“It seems so.” His reaction made me certain. I’d gone back in the past—to be exact, I’d gone back in time to several days since we had defeated the monster. When Dier had gotten the king’s word that he would cooperate with us, we had left for the secret room the very next day. So in other words, I’d looped back to the day before we returned to the secret room with King Euclis.

“Did something happen? Were you murdered?”

“Calm down. Let me explain.”

It was unlike him to be so agitated. I told him what had just occurred.

“So it was the slab? But how?”

“That’s what I want to know.”

“Had the slab changed at all?”

“No. I looped back the moment I touched it. The next thing I knew I had just woken up in bed.”

When I touched the stone slab, I felt it absorb my powers, just as it had done before. But I lost consciousness before I could see any change in the slab. I hadn’t been able to check anything. Everything had happened so fast that I was still in shock. But the thing that surprised me most was...

“It seems I can loop without having to die. This is the first time that’s happened to me.”

“Looks like it. But I’m glad.”

“Glad? About what? I wasn’t able to check the slab!”

“I know, but I’m glad you didn’t have to suffer,” he said, smiling. I could tell that he was truly relieved. My suffering was more worrisome to him than the fact that I had looped again.

He was just too *good.* He had once told me that *I* was kind and sweet, but now...

“You’re ten times sweeter than I am.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“It’s nothing. But now we’re back to square one.”

“Not quite. You didn’t go back to the beginning of your loop. You looped because you tried to change the slab. So that must mean the answer to the loops lies within the slab.”

My eyes widened. Why didn’t I realize that? I wasn’t thinking straight because I’d been so shocked about looping again. But he was right. The trigger of this loop wasn’t my death, but the slab. In other words, this was evidence that the slab had something to do with my time loops.

“Now we just need to figure out *why* you looped again. And even if the stone slab holds the answers, there’s no point in doing the same thing if you’re just gonna loop again.”

“I know. We have to do something different... or maybe there was some other hidden requirement that I hadn’t met yet.”

“Let’s find it then.”

“Yes...” We hadn’t gone back to square one—this was a step forward. Even if my loops hadn’t ended entirely, I’d gotten the key to solving things. The secret of the stone slab was connected to the secret of the time loop. All I had to do was keep charging forward without hesitation.

“Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“Isn’t it obvious? To see your little brother. We need to ask his opinion.”

“You mean right now? Not tomorrow?”

“What if we wait until tomorrow and I loop again? You’ll regret waiting.”

“Tch, all right.”

I walked towards the door. Dier jogged up behind me. He came to my side with a smile. “Shall we go?”

“Yes.” We both opened the door.

We weren’t going backwards. We were going to seize a new day—a new tomorrow.

BONUS CHAPTER: I Know You

“Could you grab those documents for me?”

“Sure. You want them here?”

“That’s fine.”

Dier dropped the mountain of documents in front of me with a thud. I put aside the documents I’d already checked and moved onto the next pile.

Ever since I became mistress of House Vixent, my responsibilities had grown tremendously. The sheer amount of paperwork I now had to deal with was a major pain, but one that couldn’t be avoided. I’d chosen to become head of house, after all—I had no choice but to do this.

Luckily Dier helped, so it didn’t take up as much time as it could’ve.

“I’m glad that you’re here.”

“Why? So I could step in as your workhorse?”

“Oh, stop. You know how rare it is for me to even think such a thing.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. I’ve never been glad to have someone around before.”

Thinking about my past self, I had never once considered that I would one day be glad for someone else’s company, or to be grateful to have someone nearby. If I had, I wouldn’t be the person I was today.

“You remember how I used to be, so you should know that.”

“I don’t know what to say. I only know about what happened slightly before the loops started. Nothing before that.”

“That’s right. I thought it was after the loops began.”

Dier still remembered what happened during my time loops. We weren’t sure if it had something to do with his powers or not. But while he slept, everything that had occurred from my loops that also happened that day filled his head at once.

“Hey, what does it feel like to have a memory that’s not yours inside of your head?”

“Hm? I guess I would say that it feels like water getting poured into my brain.”

“Water, huh?”

“At first it surprised and confused me. But I got used to it soon enough, and then I started noticing your presence in the memories. I found myself watching you a lot.” He put away the documents I’d finished with while he spoke.

When he said he watched me, I thought he probably just meant it literally. Amidst all of those memories, he noticed my presence and how my actions differed each time.

“How long have you watched me?”

“It started a few days before this current loop began, I think? Guess I never told you that.”

“No, you haven’t.”

“Wanna hear about it?”

“I don’t care either way,” I lied. Honestly, I was a little curious. I wanted to know the exact moment he first became interested in me, and how. I wanted to know what he thought about me now versus from how he came to know me during my ninth time loop. “If you want to tell me though, go ahead.”

“You can never just be honest, huh? Fine, then. This busywork is getting boring, anyway. Let’s talk while we work and pass the time.”

♦ ♦ ♦

How long would this go on?

That was what I kept thinking each time I went down the deserted streets at night. It had been around seven years since I had come into my powers, and still, not a single person remembered me. Well, there actually *was* someone who remembered me—but I hadn’t seen him in quite some time. I wanted to see him. But I couldn’t bring myself to.

“How could I face him now?”

Since I'd become this way, my little brother Euclis had become the first prince and heir to the throne. Our father had died, so Euclis was now king. I wasn't able to be with my father in his last moments. Even though I knew it wouldn't happen, sometimes I was afraid that one day Euclis would forget about me, too.

Euclis was so kind. Too kind; he still agonized over what happened to me. It was just who he was.

Though he was a child still, he was now king. He stood in front of the citizens of this kingdom with all their expectations and worries on his small shoulders. If only I'd been able to be by his side, I could've at least supported him.

But I couldn't. I wouldn't be able to; the world had forgotten me. I no longer had the right to stand by him. The only thing I could do now to lighten his burden would be to slip away...

"Earth couldn't kill me either. That leaves...Sun."

I'd fought all the guardians I imagined would be able to make my wish come true. I'd put most of my hope into the guardian of earth, but it hadn't worked out. The only remaining guardian I thought *might* be capable of killing me was the guardian of the sun. I walked through the night, clinging onto that possibility.

After I'd walked for some time, I came to the Vixent manor. It was past midnight, but there were still lights on inside. The servants must still be working. "Seems rough. Now, where could the head of house be... Hm?"

As I looked for the head of house, I zeroed in on one room in particular. In that room there were no curtains over the windows—no lights were on. It seemed very dreary. With my night vision I could see quite clearly inside, but for anyone else, it would have been too dark for them to see.

There was a woman inside, sitting on the floor. She wasn't doing anything. She was just sitting there.

"Those clothes...she's not a servant."

Then I remembered that there were two daughters in the Vixent family. One was the daughter of the head of house's mistress, and as such had been treated coldly. If I remembered correctly, her name was...

“Selene. Selene Vixent...”

Was that Selene? I thought it must be, because of her clothes. And as I looked at her sitting all alone in that dark room, looking so lonely, I thought *she’s just like me*.

Our circumstances were completely different, of course. She hadn’t been forgotten by the world. But with the way she was being treated by everyone else in the mansion, she might as well have been.

After that day, I kept my eye on the Vixent manor for a while. Partly to see when I could take on the head of house, but also because I was naturally interested in Selene. Even though she was a rightful member of the Vixent family, no one paid attention to her. She spent most of her days either shut up in her dark room, or in the mansion’s garden.

She didn’t speak to anyone. Like an empty shell, she would just stare into space without a hint of emotion. Her eyes had the look of someone who had completely given up on everything. She must’ve gone through a lot to get to that point.

I pitied her.

It wasn’t like she wanted to be born that way. She was treated poorly all because of who her mother was, and was denied the ordinary happiness any other person would have. In a way, her life was even worse than mine.

If only I could do something for her… but I couldn’t. I didn’t have the right to anyway. I was a nobody.

But then I saw something unbelievable.

“I’ve got something important to tell you. Will you hear me out?”

“Honestly, I...”

“You want to marry Soleil and call off our engagement, right?”

I saw her fiancé break off their engagement. And all of a sudden her demeanor changed. She stared coldly at him while she gave him a piece of her mind. Everyone else reacted the same way I did. Everyone thought the same thing—*What is going on? Is that* really *Selene Vixent?*

And after that day, she changed. She rebelled against her father and took his title from him. She wasn't the same girl I'd seen before.

She'd awakened to the power of Shadow. As a former prince, I was well aware of that power. The power of Shadow and the power of Moon... We had both awakened to powers that were the complete opposite of the ones we were supposed to have.

Shadow was a cursed power, an anomaly. And apparently she'd awakened to it some time ago, but concealed that fact.

But ever since she broke off her engagement, I noticed a change in myself. Memories—not my own—were coming to me as I slept. They were memories of the day before. But not just one or two; nine sets of memories, all of the previous day. It was confusing at first, but once I calmed down I realized the only thing different in each memory was Selene's behavior. And now that I'd witnessed the change in her, I understood what was happening.

Something had caused these memories to appear. It made me think that maybe...she was repeating the same days, over and over in a loop.

My own power was immortality—I likened it to a curse. Her loops reminded me of that. Death wasn't an end for her. She just kept living. There really was someone out there just like me.

"In that case..."

Maybe she'd be able to grant my wish. Maybe, just maybe, she'd be the one who could change the days that hadn't changed before. For the first time in seven years, I felt hope. And at the same time, my interest in her grew.

As time passed, I fully experienced nine time loops worth of memories. She'd endured so much pain and suffering. Any normal person would've tried to run and end their own lives.

Up until this point she had never tried to hurt anyone else. She endured it without fighting back, so what had changed? Why, during her tenth time loop, had she suddenly decided to fight back?

I wanted to know why. I wanted to ask her, and to hear what she wanted. Maybe… we could work together. So that's why I went to go see her.

♦ ♦ ♦

By the time he finished speaking, we'd gone through the pile of documents. It felt like a long and short time all at once, but now we'd come to an end.

"And that's what happened."

"Seriously, you're just too good of a person."

It was very much like him to do all that.

"I'm not though," Dier said. "I have my own goals. We said we'd use each other to achieve what each of us wanted, right? We're accomplices."

"That's right."

"Plus, I know that if one day you had no use for me, you'd just keep charging ahead on your own. You're powerful enough and have enough drive. You'd be doing the same exact thing, with or without me."

"Yes, although I'm sure I'd change my methods."

He laughed and said, "Probably." He'd expected I say that.

But it was true. Whether he was here or not, I still would've challenged the guardians. And if I messed up, I would've kept trying.

"I'll sacrifice everything in order to reach my goal."

"I know. That's why you're dangerous. And it makes me worry about you."

"You don't need to worry about me. Neither you or I will come to our ends."

"Still. It doesn't matter if our physical wounds heal. The wounds on our hearts will only grow deeper. I don't want you to suffer any more than you already have."

"You're sweet. You really are."

I wouldn't say it out loud, but Dier's story relieved me. He'd seen what I had gone through and was worried about me. No one had ever cared about me, had ever paid me any mind, and yet here Dier was—the only person who recognized my suffering.

"I'm glad I saw you that day. I might not have noticed otherwise."

“I am too. It was lucky.”

“It was.”

For both of us.

We had met, and were now heading toward the same goal. I didn’t know how that decision would turn out yet, but... I was certain it had been the right one.

