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


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Stuck in a Time Loop: When All Else Fails, Be a Villainess Volume 2 [Complete]

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Chapter One: The Endless Now

Every life ends. The moment every living creature in this world is born, they begin walking towards their fixed ending point—death.

Everyone knows this, so everyone fears that moment—that day—when death will come. And they all pray to live for even just one second longer.

They think death is frightening and painful. But it's not all bad. *Because* there's an ending, they try to live life to its fullest, without regrets. They understand their life is limited, so their life seeks out another life, and together they leave behind proof that they were here in this world.

If all their wishes come true when they're alive and they live a life with no regrets or things left undone, then death is no longer a tragedy. And to those whose lives were full of nothing but pain and sorrow, death can arrive as a welcome savior.

Life needs an ending.

There's no point in continuing to live a life that has no end, an endless now. A body that never dies, or whose time rewinds after death... has nothing but emptiness.

♦ ♦ ♦

There was a room hidden in the basement of the royal castle. In it stood a giant stone slab. Only the royal family was allowed entry into the secret chamber, and yet even though I had no royal blood, that's where I currently stood.

The first time I came here it was without permission, and it was then that I learned of the stone slab's existence.

But now I was here with the king himself. Life is full of surprises. And that's why it's so meaningful. I savored that fact as I faced the reality that was thrust at me and let out a sigh.

“It’s that time again, isn’t it?”

The stone slab loomed before me. There was a human-like figure drawn in the center, with a circle around the left side of his chest. The circle most likely indicated their heart. Toward the circle, six hands stretched out from all directions.

The first time we saw it, we determined the six hands represented the six guardians, each reaching out towards the king’s heart. As their name suggested, the guardians’ duty was to protect the king.

However, the way they were depicted in this drawing did not make it look like they were protecting him at all, but instead trying to take his heart—in other words, his power—for themselves.

The moment we touched the slab, we were surprised to see it change before our eyes. The upper left part of the slab where the sun and moon were drawn and the shadow of the person drawn in the center had both changed. Those two spots turned from gray to black. We didn’t know what new thing was now drawn on those spots. But because of that change, we realized the stone slab was still hiding something.

So we hatched a plan to steal a portion of each guardians’ powers so we could try to make the slab change completely.

It was fortunate that I was a bit of an anomaly among the guardians. I had awoken to the power of Shadow. Though it traditionally was seen as a symbol of misfortune, Shadow had the ability to absorb the other supernatural powers.

I used that power to make contact with the other five guardians. Some I had to fight, but in the end, I was able to get all of the supernatural powers.

I thought we’d finally learn the secret behind the stone slab and the mystery of why I was stuck in a time loop. I believed that if I discovered the truth, I might be released from the hell of that never-ending cycle.

I had my hopes up. And that’s why the disappointment was crushing.

There were no new changes in the stone slab that lay before me. I slowly reached out to touch it, but stopped halfway.

Dier watched over me from my side, his eyes soft as he called my name. “Selene.”

“I know.” I pulled back my hand and raised my eyes up to the slab.

“Just checking, but you looped again right after you touched the slab, right?”

“Correct.”

“Were there any changes?”

“I looped before that happened so I didn’t see anything. But I *felt* like something changed.” I gazed at the slab as I went over the situation with Dier.

I currently had five supernatural powers inside of me, besides Sun. But they were a portion of the powers I had absorbed from touching each guardian. If I touched the slab, the slab would absorb the powers and then change the rest of the picture. Or at least, that’s how it should’ve worked out.

But the moment I touched the slab, I woke up in bed. And I hadn’t been killed or anything. It was the first time I’d looped for a reason other than death out of all my ten time loops. Before, I would always loop back to the moment right before my ex-fiancé broke off our engagement.

This time, I’d merely returned to 1 p.m. the day before I touched the slab. I didn’t understand the logic of it, but it seemed like I had a new starting point to my loops now. Maybe the only reason I looped back a day was because I didn’t die. I didn’t know anything concrete about the loops, really, and that’s why we’d returned to this room.

“I just don’t understand *why*.”

“I know. But I’m glad that you didn’t have to suffer and be killed again.”

“You already said that. Don’t tell me you looped back too,” I joked.

“Ha! Not likely.” Dier chuckled with exasperation.

Dier Veldt. He was once a member of this kingdom’s royal family, but once he had awakened to the powers of Moon, the whole world forgot he existed. And he hadn’t just been erased from their memories—all traces of his existence had disappeared as well. It was almost like Dier Veldt had never been born in the first place...

The only person who remembered him was his younger brother, the current king, who also had supernatural powers. Dier had once thought that by living, he would only make his brother unhappy. He was fed up with his pointless, endless existence, and one day had approached me, asking me to kill him.

He was immortal. No matter what kind of injuries or illnesses he suffered, he would instantaneously recover. Even if someone crushed his heart or cut off his head, he'd continue living.

He was one of the few people who knew I was stuck in a time loop, and shared the memories of my previous time loops. We had an understanding that we would use each other as we saw fit in order to achieve our goals. We were each other's accomplice.

Dier wanted to learn the secret behind the power of Moon, and why he had been forgotten by the whole world. He'd hoped to find the answers in the stone slab, just as I had.

He didn't show it on his face, but I was sure that he was disappointed too. And there was another person who felt the same as I did.

"I'm just glad you're safe, Selene," that person said.

"Safe, yes," I replied. "But unfortunately, I didn't learn a thing."

"Still. I'm happy I got to see you again."

"I see..."

The young boy who smiled gently at me, although it was hard to believe, was Euclis Veldt, the king. He was the one all of us guardians were supposed to protect. He had inherited the royal powers of the king and ascended to the throne at an incredibly young age. But because he had come into his powers, everyone had forgotten about his older brother Dier and as result, he became the only one who would remember him.

Euclis adored Dier, and the tragedy that befell his older brother was almost too much for him to bear. He blamed himself for what happened to him. They had been together the moment Euclis had awakened to his powers. And at that same moment, Dier awakened to his power of the Moon, and his existence was forgotten by all.

Euclis thought maybe the reason why everyone forgot his brother was because he had awakened to the royal powers. That was why the first time I ever met him, he had—just like Dier— asked me to kill him.

I wondered what would've happened had I not turned him down. How would the powers have changed after the king died? Would they have all disappeared? Would my problem have been solved?

But there was no need to think about the what-ifs. I had said no, and in all honesty, I was grateful to my past self for doing so.

"It's a shame I didn't learn anything from it," I remarked. "I got all the way to this point and yet didn't make any progress."

"That's not true," Dier disagreed. "Since you experienced a loop, you know that whatever's happening to the stone slab has something to do with it. That's what we suspected, but now you know that for sure."

"He's right," Euclis added. "I don't think this is a meaningless loop at all."

"Euclis is right. There must be a reason to it. And even if it's hard to see right now," Dier said, "I think that's great progress."

Euclis, who had been standing behind myself and Dier as he spoke, slowly walked forward until he was in front of us. He hesitantly touched the stone slab. "Ah...!"

"Euclis!"

Euclis grimaced as he touched the stone and at once Dier pulled him away from it and into his arms. Although he'd only been touching it for a moment, sweat had already begun beading upon his forehead. I wondered if the slab had absorbed part of the king's powers.

"I told you not to touch it without asking first!"

"I'm sorry, Brother."

Dier seemed startled by his brother's sudden behavior. Worry and panic was etched on his face. It was obvious deeply Dier cared for his brother. Euclis looked guilty.

"But look." From the cradle of Dier's arms, Euclis pointed to the slab.

Both of us turned towards the slab and widened our eyes in surprise.

“That’s...”

“The slab, it...!”

Turned color. Just like the first time Dier and I touched it, the gray stone turned black, but this time, it changed colors only around the figure standing in the center.

Perhaps it was just as we’d thought: the figure was supposed to represent the king and his powers. Euclis’s touch must have made the powers inside of him react and thus the slab changed color in that section.

Euclis told Dier he was fine and then pointed towards the slab again, explaining, “As you can see, I touched the slab and it changed colors. But you didn’t loop. Right, Selene?”

“That’s right. Nothing happened.”

“Thank you. So when I touched it, you didn’t loop. And the slab changed. But the first time we tried it, we failed. That must mean we didn’t meet all the conditions to change the slab,” Euclis said with a serious look on his face.

Our theory was that once the slab absorbed the powers of all the guardians, the entire thing would change. With Euclis having touched the slab, it seemed like our theory was correct and we would fulfill the slab’s conditions when it could absorb the powers of the remaining five guardians.

It was clear to see whose powers were left to absorb just by looking at the drawing. The spot Euclis touched was the central figure which represented the king and his powers. It all made sense what he was saying, but in that case...

“Why did I loop back then? There shouldn’t have been a problem if I had all the guardians’ powers inside of me.”

“I have a theory about that. Do you want to hear it?” Euclis asked.

“Of course.”

“Thank you.” He smiled happily. He cleared his throat and continued with his gaze on the slab. “The conditions were fulfilled. But it failed. That means that there’s still something lacking.”

“Lacking? How could it be lacking if the conditions were fulfilled?”

“Because the conditions only *appeared* to be fulfilled,” he explained.

They only appeared to be fulfilled, but weren’t actually fulfilled. Perhaps one of the powers was a fake. Or maybe I hadn’t absorbed enough of the powers, so the slab was unable to transform properly. I pondered the possibilities with a hand on my chest.

“I don’t think any of the powers weren’t genuine,” I said. “I stole the powers directly from the current guardians, after all. It’s hard to believe any of them could be fake.”

“I agree. I’ve seen several of them in person, and it didn’t feel like any of their powers weren’t completely legitimate,” Dier said.

“Right. So then what about the strength of the powers?”

“I think I absorbed the same amount from anyone, just like I did with my father when I...”

It hit me then: I’d absorbed a portion of all of the guardians’ powers, starting with the battle against my father—the former head of house who once possessed the power of Sun.

I reflected on that as I observed the slab once more. The portion of the slab which remained its original color was centered on the six guardians.

“Six...”

There were six guardians. Star, Earth, Water, Air, Forest, and Sun. My power of Shadow was the opposing power of Sun.

Perhaps I had misunderstood. I once thought that Shadow and Sun were just two sides of the same coin—that I could have one or the other in order to fulfill the conditions of the slab. And when I touched it, the drawings of the moon and sun had changed color. It seemed that it had reacted to what I had absorbed of my father’s powers from my fight with him.

But what if I had been wrong?

“Maybe the power of the sun is missing?”

That must be it. But both the powers of Sun and Shadow were inherited through the Vixent bloodline. And once one power awakened in a Vixent, the other wouldn't appear. After I awakened to my powers, I had absorbed the powers of Sun from my father, and then touched the slab.

As I pondered this, Euclis murmured, "Perhaps it's not that it's lacking. Just that it's incomplete."

"Incomplete?"

He nodded. "I think the former head of house's powers were already weakened. Even if you absorbed the same amount of that power as you did the others, the quality of that power wouldn't be as strong."

"The quality of it...so it was weaker than the others."

"That's right. This is all just a guess, but judging by the state of the slab, it does seem like it's lacking the sun's power."

"It's true that all six guardians drawn on the slab haven't changed color, so that makes sense." Dier seemed to agree with his younger brother. I was beginning to come to that conclusion myself. However, if that were true, then there was nothing I could do about it.

"There's nothing to be done about it, though. There's no longer a Sun guardian in this world. Once I had awakened to Shadow, my father's power disappeared." It was a power that could never be obtained again. The only possible way for it to return would be if I had a child and that child awakened to the power of Sun. But that thought was so far-fetched I had to laugh at myself for even imagining it.

How could I have a child—*use* a child—just to reach my own goals? That kind of behavior was intolerable.Though I'd sworn to do everything I could in order to live, that was something I would not do. Such a thing would make me no better than Father.

Euclis looked at me. "Are you sure it won't show up again?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Is there a reason for why two people can't wield the powers of Sun and

Shadow at the same time?”

“A reason? Why, I don’t know.” That’s just how it was. I didn’t know the specific reason—it’d just been something I was taught. Was it written down anywhere in the Vixent family documents?

“There are many books and documents regarding the powers in the castle.”

“I know. We snuck in and read them,” I breezily confessed to the crime of trespassing. Euclis only chuckled. I was currently standing in a room where only the royal family was permitted to enter. At that point, who cared if I’d snuck into the royal library?

“I’ve read them too. According to the information I’ve reviewed, there’s only ever been one recorded Shadow guardian. However, nothing said specifically that no one had been born with the powers of Sun at that time,” Euclis pointed out.

“Oh!” I gasped out loud. I’d read through all kinds of books in the royal library as well as those that were kept in the Vixent manor. I wanted to learn more about the Shadow power I’d inherited. But since what I found was little more than legend and scraps of gossip, I’d ended up disappointed.

I was born into the Vixent family as a Shadow guardian. I just naturally assumed that Shadow and Sun were two sides of the same coin and that one was born with either one or the other. But other than me, there was only one other Shadow guardian known to exist. One story wasn’t enough to prove that Sun and Shadow were mutually exclusive powers. Euclis was right.

None of the documents described a Sun guardian from that time, but not a word said they *didn’t* exist.

“Maybe at some point during history, people began to believe only one or the other was born, and that belief got passed down to now without question.”

“That would definitely make sense.” Although it did seem rather dense. I couldn’t believe that not only did I not think of that, but neither did anyone else in my family, or any of my ancestors. We’d all just passed on a bunch of assumptions through the years. It was such a huge misunderstanding, one that was almost absurd.

“It’s only a guess of course. We can’t be sure, but...” Euclis said.

“No, it’s more than enough. I’d overlooked it this whole time. You’re very smart to have realized it.”

“I’m glad I could be of help.” Euclis smiled brightly at me and I felt the urge to praise him. Perhaps his childish face brought out my maternal instincts.

It was hard to believe Dier and Euclis were siblings. Sure, they resembled each other in certain ways, but their personalities couldn’t be more different.

I stared at Dier as I thought that, and he gave me a puzzled look. “What?”

“Your brother is smarter than you.”

“Ouch. Could you not insult me?”

“H-Hey! My brother’s definitely smarter than me!”

“That’s enough, Euclis. Now I just feel even more pathetic,” Dier groaned.

“Ha ha.”

They were brothers after all. They were in tune with each other, and their gestures and smiles were similar. If Euclis had not developed his powers, if they had continued to live with each other, would they have resembled each other even more?

After all, that was the natural way of things for siblings. In my case, it was...

“Soleil.”

“Your sister?”

“Yes. She’s the only living person who could develop the powers of Sun.”

“Is it possible you yourself might develop them though?” Euclis asked.

“I doubt it. If I could wield both of them, what would explain the other ability taking so much time to show up?”

“I guess that’s true.”

There had never been any confirmed reports of someone who could wield more than one power before. In this world’s long history, there was one case where members of one supernatural family married into another. They had two

children, and in this instance each child wielded a different power.

I felt like the reason why my power felt so great was because it was my only one. I couldn't imagine having two.

I thought the most likely scenario was that Soleil would awaken to the power of Sun. "How was Soleil when you saw her? Did you feel like she was awakening to the power of Sun?" I asked Dier.

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because you see her more than I do."

"Oh, you noticed that?"

"Obviously." Ever since I became head of house, Soleil often asked Dier how I was. I'd seen them multiple times talking to each other in the corridors.

"If you knew, why didn't you ever say something?"

"What, you want me to talk to her? I have nothing to say."

"For someone who doesn't have anything to say, you sure are worried about her a lot," Dier pointed out. "You make extra careful not to run into her even at the mansion."

"I just don't want to waste time thinking about pointless things."

I had a goal to achieve. I was busy making contact with the other guardians to steal their powers so I could find a clue to my time loops. She wasn't a guardian nor a head of house, so I had no business with her. Therefore, I had no reason to talk to her or be involved with her.

But now... Now I had to be involved. And honestly, it made me feel a little depressed.

"I suppose I'll have to ask her tomorrow."

"And what are you going to ask her?"

"'Have you awakened to supernatural powers?'"

"Don't ya think there's an, I don't know...more *delicate* way to put it? You're gonna scare her." Dier let out an exasperated sigh.

“Then why don’t you ask her?”

“I can’t do that.” He immediately refused, which was unusual for him. I thought that he might grumble at first but do it anyway, so I couldn’t help but stare at him. He looked serious when he said, “You two are sisters. You should resolve your issues amongst yourselves.”

“That’s not very convincing coming from you, Dier.”

“Shut up! Just forget about me! It’s true that you helped me out before, but I said what I needed to say in the end! Didn’t I?” Anxious, Dier looked over at Euclis for confirmation.

Euclis tenderly smiled at him and nodded. With relief, Dier continued, saying, “Anyway, you need to face your sister yourself.”

“Sounds so arrogant coming from you,” I said.

“Enough already. If I don’t say it, who else will?”

“I suppose you’ve got a point.”

Even if someone had something they wanted to say to me, most of them would be too afraid to actually say it. Thinking about it that way, perhaps Dier *was* the only one who would actually give me a piece of his mind.

“Ha ha.”

“What’s with the laughter all of a sudden?”

“No reason. Anyway, this whole thing is getting annoying. I’ll ask her tomorrow myself.”

“Go ahead. I’ll be right by your side, watching over you.”

“I can’t be there for you, but I’ll be cheering you on from the castle. Good luck, Selene!” Euclis said.

“Thanks.” I looked up at the stone slab. “We’ve done all we can for today, I think.”

“I think so too,” the king said.

“Yep,” Dier agreed.

There wasn't any other information we could glean from the stone slab today.

"Well, shall we call it a day, then?"

"Actually, can I ask you something first?" Dier said. It seemed like something was bothering him. "There's something I need to apologize to you about. I..."

"You don't need to say it. I've already heard it."

"Huh? But how could you—Oh, that's right. The loop."

"Exactly."

Before I looped, he apologized to me here. He told me he didn't really want to die, and that he wanted to keep living with everyone. And that he wanted to rid the world of the supernatural powers. His true wish wasn't to just die, but to live *and* die—as a normal human.

He didn't have to say it out loud. I'd realized it a while ago. Although he said he wanted to die, he was always thinking about living. It seemed like deep down, he was afraid of death, and fought it at every turn.

"You don't want to die. You want to live normally and die normally. Right?"

"Yes, that's right." He gave me a wry smile. "I'm feeling a bit torn. It took a lot for me to get up the courage to say it, but you already know everything."

"Don't worry. When you wake up tomorrow, you'll remember dreaming about our conversation."

"That's true, but...I still feel like I lost somehow."

"It's not a competition."

He was surprisingly a sore loser.

"So you don't disagree then? I want to rid the world of the supernatural powers. Of Euclis's, too." He looked over at his younger brother, who nodded.

"I feel the same way," Euclis said. "This power is special, and I understand that it's convenient, but...I can survive without it."

"Ha ha. You said the same thing." Before my loop, Euclis said the exact same thing. It was strange. Of course it was obvious why; he was the same as he'd always been. If it wasn't clear now, I had, in fact, experienced time loops

before.

I smiled while listening to the two of them talk.

“It’s fine. There’s a good chance the powers have something to do with the time loops, and it’s not like I ever wanted these powers to begin with.”

In the end, I agreed with Dier. I didn’t need special powers. I didn’t need my mansion, my status, my authority. I just wanted to live a normal life and die happy.

“It’s strange,” Dier said. ”When we first met, our goals were the complete opposite.”

“Well, I was wrong back then.”

“That’s true.”

In that case, we did the right thing by teaming up. We had become accomplices to help each other reach our goals. And now...

“My wish hasn’t changed since then,” I stated. “And if ridding the world of the supernatural powers helps me accomplish that goal, then I’m all for it. I don’t care what happens to the kingdom as a result of it.”

“That’s not your concern anyway,” Euclis pointed out. “It’s my job to take care of the kingdom.”

“I’ll help you,” Dier said. “I won’t be able to return to the royal family, but I can offer you support.”

“You’re better suited for the job of king than me, Brother.”

“Oh, stop. You’re doing a fine job of things at your age. There’s no one more suitable for the role.”

“I agree,” I said. Dier and I were of the same mind. The young king was carrying out his duties, which proved that he was worthy of his title.

“Are you sure?” Euclis asked Dier.

“Yes. You should have confidence. Plus,” Dier reminded him, “I’ll be right by your side.”

“Brother!”

“Good for you, Euclis,” I said.

“I’m so happy!” Euclis beamed. I didn’t see a trace of the person who had once begged me to take his life. Right now, he was just a little boy, one who adored his older brother and cherished every second he got to spend with him.

And in the corner of my eye stood the stone slab, with its incomplete color transformation. If I touched it again, I would lose this moment. Although I would remember it, they wouldn’t. Well, Dier would remember it eventually in his dreams, but Euclis would completely forget this ever happened. I was okay with that. But I did feel guilty about stealing this moment away from them.

I took a step forward.

“Selene?”

“I’m going back to the mansion. You two can stay here and chat for a bit longer.”

“What? If you’re going, then I’m coming with you,” Dier said.

“Idiot. You finally have time to talk to your brother. I don’t want to interrupt.”

Once they left this room, they would have to act like complete strangers again. So this was their only time they had to talk. I wasn’t so insensitive that I would get in the way of that.

Dier was perfectly capable of sneaking out without anyone seeing him, especially with his brother’s cooperation.

“I’ll see you later, okay?”

“A-All right. Thanks, Selene.”

“Thank you!” Euclis said.

“You don’t need to thank me,” I said, and then quickly slipped into the shadows. I passed through the world of darkness and traveled to a spot near the mansion.

Once we achieved our goals, I would lose this convenience. Even though it had taken some getting used to, I had grown quite accustomed to this comfortable way of life.

But humans weren't meant to do such a thing—to have supernatural powers. And if I'd been born in a normal family, then being able to do this wouldn't have even been a possibility. It was something I often thought about.

Fate was an ironic mistress. I had a power that many people would do anything to have, and yet because I had it, I longed to be like everyone else. I sincerely did not want this power.

So then why *did* I have it? Who would want this power?

All sorts of questions swirled inside of me as I made my way towards the entrance of the mansion.

"I finally found you, Selene."

The moment I opened the door, I saw a woman standing there. And the moment I saw her, a sentence popped into my mind.

She ruined it.

The time I spent with Dier and Euclis had been pleasant and peaceful. Although I had a lot on my mind, I could nevertheless relax around them. Seeing this women, then, after such a happy moment, was all the more unpleasant. In one fell swoop, her fake smile ruined everything.

"Where were you?" she asked. "It's dangerous to go out without an attendant, you know."

I didn't respond.

Her voice dripped with insincerity. She spoke to me, the head of House Vixent, as if she were my sister. No, as if she were a concerned mother.

I let out a little sigh and said, "Why are you here, Mother?"

"Hm? Is it strange for me to be here? I just came home, that's all."

She was Shioria Vixent, my father's wife and Soleil's mother. She and I were not biologically related, but since she was still technically my mother, I still called her as such.

I did everything I could to avoid her. I had a feeling my efforts were mutual; she didn't live at the mansion, but instead at a separate villa owned by our

family. She had moved out the day it became widely known that I was the daughter of my father's mistress and had never returned...until today.

I stared at her.

"You look at me as if you hate me."

"Well, I *don't* like you."

"Goodness, someone's awfully blunt."

"Things have changed since the last time you saw me."

Now I was the head of House Vixent. Even if she was the wife of the former head of house, right now it was I who had the greater power and authority. Out of the two of us, *she* needed to watch her attitude. But regardless of attitude, I didn't like her.

The *why* was obvious: she hated me. But she didn't always feel this way.

Shioria and I had no relationship. I was the daughter of my father's mistress, and I was only brought into the Vixent family in order to conceal that fact. She knew all about it, of course. Obviously she knew why another child suddenly came in the house, especially one she hadn't birthed herself.

She knew all along, but at first she was kind to me. Father was nice to me because he didn't want anyone suspecting my true origins, that I was his lover's child. It was Shioria who should've been angrier about the whole thing. And yet she treated me like I was her real daughter. But once Soleil was born, her attitude towards me changed drastically.

After that, she seemed disgusted to even see me. She would say cruel, abusive things to me, and would tell me to "get out of her sight." If I talked to her she would completely ignore me. To have someone who had once been so kind to me now shun me out of nowhere saddened and shocked me. And as time went on, I grew to hate her.

Looking back on it now, I realized I was hurt that she had betrayed me.

"You're such a cruel child. You hurt my feelings."

"Can we stop with the terrible acting? I didn't *hurt* you. You're the one who hates me."

“Ha ha. I never said I hated you.”

Then why did you act that way? Why did she leave the mansion and start living at the villa? I wanted to ask her that, but I refrained. I knew engaging in any kind of conversation with her would be pointless.

I suppressed my growing emotions and took a deep breath. Then I turned towards her again as she blocked the doorway.

“Get out of my way.”

“Even though it’s been so long since I saw you last? Let’s talk some more, shall we?”

“I have nothing to say to you. You’re standing in the front doorway.”

“I know that. Let’s go inside and have a nice long talk.” She smiled at me. She knew I would never agree to that.

“I told you, I have nothing to say to you. Just get out of my way!”

“That’s not very nice of you. I didn’t come here for idle chitchat.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, and she gave me a confident smile.

Her smile was so creepy it sent chills down my spine. I’d never felt that way before. No, actually—that’s how I felt when I fought against that monster. But of course she was human, and not a monster. But I still held that association.

“Can you make it short? I’m busy.”

“Because you’re the head of house?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Ha ha. Well, that won’t be necessary anymore.” She sneered at me.

I *really* didn’t like the look on her face. I glared at her. “What are you talking about?”

“Selene, there’s no reason for you to be head of house anymore. Because there’s a new head of house.”

“Will you stop joking around already? Father isn’t the head of house. He doesn’t meet the requirements. He lost his powers.”

“I know that. I’m not talking about him.”

I heard footsteps. Someone was walking up behind her. I had a feeling who it was, because Dier and I were just discussing her. There was only one person Shioria could be talking about.

“She’s the new head of house.”

“Soleil...”

Just as I expected, it was Soleil who appeared behind her mother. Nothing about her seemed to be different at first glance. Her expression looked a bit darker than usual, though. She looked at me and frowned.



I had a feeling Shioria had forced her to come here.

Does Father know?

Regardless, I denied Shioria's claim. "What are you talking about? Soleil can't do it. She doesn't meet the requirements either."

In order to be head of House Vixent, you had to have the supernatural powers. In fact, that was the *only* requirement. That's why I had stolen my father's position for him. Conversely, it didn't matter if you were the rightful heir to a family—if you didn't have the powers, you couldn't become head of house. Although Soleil was the oldest "official" daughter, she had no right to be the head of house.

"She does have the powers."

"What?"

So it's true?

"Show her, Soleil."

"It can't be..."

So two people with powers were born in the same *family?*

"I'm sorry, Sister." Soleil spoke a quiet apology. Suddenly, a bright light shot out from her. It was warm and powerful, just like the sun.

"This is the power of Sun?"

"As you can see, Selene, Soleil has awakened as the guardian of the Sun!" Shioria declared triumphantly.

I couldn't believe it. I'd predicted it of course, but actually seeing it was another thing. But at the same time, my heart pounded with excitement.

Now I could steal the powers of Sun.

Chapter Two: The Sun Rises

Soleil shone with the brilliance of the sun. There was no doubt that this was a manifestation of our house's supernatural power of Sun. In my mind her image overlapped with that of Father.

The light weakened and then vanished.

"Soleil..."

I stared at her but she silently averted her eyes. The fact that I could sense her reluctance made it clear that she wasn't herself. Meanwhile, Shioria, standing next to Soleil, had a triumphant smile on her face.

"Now do you understand? Soleil is the rightful head of House Vixent."

"When did this happen?" I ignored the smug Shioria and asked my sister, whose gaze was still averted. Because she had never awakened to her powers in any of my previous timeloops, I had assumed Sun and Shadow couldn't awaken in two people at the same time. "How long have you had that power, Soleil?"

"Sister..."

"Answer me."

She looked away silently. She didn't seem to want to answer, so I decided to take the lead. "Was it the same time I awakened to my power?"

At once her eyes widened with surprise and her body began to tremble. Apparently I was right. I thought back on my conversation with Dier and Euclis. They had awakened to their respective powers around the same time as well.

Whatever the case, Soleil had awakened to her power, and had been in possession of it ever since I awakened to mine...

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because..."

"Oh? You two are sisters and yet you didn't know?" Shioria didn't appreciate being ignored and butted her way into the conversation. I shot her a glare that

told her not to interfere, but she just smirked at me. “She did it out of consideration for you. Didn’t you, Soleil?”

Soleil didn’t answer.

“Consideration? What kind of consideration do you mean?”

“Don’t you know? You didn’t have a place in this house. And if other people discovered Soleil had awakened to her powers, that would make people treat you even more poorly. She didn’t want to see her sister in such a pitiful situation.” Shioria confidently spoke about Soleil’s feelings as if she were her spokesperson. Soleil didn’t deny it, and instead guilt came over her face. Even if the way Shioria described it wasn’t exactly how she felt, it was clear that it was pretty close to it. Soleil was kind. But most of all, she was naive.

“You should be grateful for her kindness. After all, she’s let you live a wonderful little dream all this time.”

I let out a deep sigh, then looked at Soleil and Shioria in turn. “I understand that Soleil has awakened to her powers. And that does give her the right to be head of house.”

“Yes, as you can plainly see.”

“But did you forget? I also have the right. Unlike Father, I have not lost my power.”

“Yes, you poor thing. Born with that sinister power of Shadow...” She gave me a pitying look.

I knew it wasn’t just a provocation. Nevertheless, I continued my argument. “I inherited the position from Father. I am the head of house now. I did not lose my powers as Father did, and I have no intention of giving it up at your convenience.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that.” Once again Shioria flashed me an arrogant smile. “That’s why I’ve come to ask you for it.”

She’d been smiling this whole time, ever since the moment I showed up. It didn’t matter what we were talking about; that creepy, arrogant smile never wavered.

It disgusted me to the core.

“Give up your seat as head of house to Soleil, Selene.”

“That’s what you came here to ask me for? Did you really think I would just say yes?” Obviously I would never agree to that. The reason I became head of House Vixent was because of how useful this position would be in achieving my goal. And I hadn’t succeeded in that yet. We were just getting started. There was no way I was giving up my position to anyone now.

“Are you sure? This is a good chance, you know.”

“A chance for what?”

“If you accept my proposal, then everyone will know you willingly gave up your position.”

“And why would that benefit me?”

The corners of Shioria’s mouth lifted into a frenzied smile. “You don’t know yet? Sooner or later you’ll have to give up, because Soleil will steal the position you worked so hard to get! But if you’re so keen to experience such humiliation I certainly won’t stop you.”

“Ah, I see.” I let out an exasperated sigh. She was saying that if I gave up my position willingly, I would avoid the dishonor of having it stolen from me. I understood very well what she was getting at. What absolute nonsense.

Did she *really* think a threat like that would make me give up my title? I’d wrested the title from Father and completely undermined his authority. The last thing I was interested in was my reputation. Since Shioria had hidden herself away at the villa all this time, she clearly had no clue as to how I’d behaved. That made her words even more hilarious. And the fact that Soleil was playing along with this farce... Well, I just felt sorry for her.

“Get out of my way, you two. I have nothing more to discuss with you.”

“So the head of house position...”

“I have no intention of giving it up.”

“Goodness, how stubborn you are! I wonder who you got *that* from.” She dramatically shook her head with exasperation. “Fine then. I’m sure you’re just

confused from having the conversation sprung on you so suddenly. Tomorrow... No, I'll give you until the day after tomorrow to decide. I'll come back then."

"No need. It doesn't matter how long you wait. I won't change my mind."

I grew impatient with Shioria when she wouldn't move and walked straight forward. If I kept walking, I'd bump right into her shoulder. But I didn't care. Because the head of house was...

"*I'm* the head of house." I faced Shioria straight on. We were both within arms reach of each other. I had a feeling she wouldn't back down at this point. I lightly lifted my right hand and manipulated my own shadow.

I heard Shioria gasp. Finally, the smug smile crumbled from her face. Now it was a mixture of panic and irritation as she stepped away, out of my path. "Impertinent girl..." she muttered, expressing how she truly felt. I pretended not to hear as I passed by her. Now I was right next to Soleil.

"Sister..."

I kept walking, saying not a word to her.

♦ ♦ ♦

After Selene walked past Shioria and Soleil, the two of them were left alone in the hallway. Soleil silently stared at her sister's retreating back, not moving a muscle. "Sister..."

Although she didn't say it out loud, all sorts of emotions were swirling inside of her. But Shioria wouldn't allow her to speak her true feelings. "No, Soleil. You mustn't."

"Mother..."

Shioria Vixent was Soleil's biological mother and as such, Soleil did not dare to defy her.

"There's no room for guilt. Remember what I said? The only thing who's done anything wrong here is Selene. She stole your rightful position from you." Shioria leaned in close to Soleil and whispered evenly into her ear, as if trying to

cast a spell. Soleil began to tremble at those words.

“B-But, Mother...”

“You dare talk back? To *me?*”

“I-I’m sorry, Mother!”

“Ha ha. Very well, then. My beautiful, beautiful Soleil...” Shioria caressed her daughter’s cheek. Gently, but there was something off-putting about it as well; it didn’t look like the way a mother would comfort her daughter, but more like how a child would touch their favorite toy.

“You don’t need to think about anything. Just do exactly as I say and you’ll be happy.”

“Yes, Mother...”

But what is happiness? Soleil wondered to herself. But since she was unable to actually say it out loud, she quietly tucked the question away inside her heart.

♦ ♦ ♦

“Are you serious?”

“Do I look like I’m lying?”

Dier had returned to the mansion late and now studied my face. His doubtful gaze continued for several seconds and then he let out an aggravated sigh. “No.”

“Good, then you understand.”

“It’s not that I was doubting you. It’s just...sudden.”

“I agree with you.”

I’d explained everything to him: how Soleil had awakened to her power and how Shioria had returned to the mansion and immediately tried to force Soleil into taking my position.

“Were you able to have a nice long talk with Euclis?”

“Yes, thanks to you. He says thank you as well.”

“Good, I’m glad.”

“Sorry I wasn’t around when things were so rough.”

“It’s fine. I had a feeling this would happen, remember?” I knew that if anyone could awaken to Sun, it would be Soleil. And with that expectation in mind, I had planned to speak with her about things tomorrow. Things may have happened the way they did, but at least we got that conversation out of the way. I could think about it optimistically, but at the same time I knew what Dier meant.

“So what are you gonna do? I doubt you’re planning to go along with this.”

“Of course not. My title is very convenient.”

“Convenient, huh? Well, no matter the reason, I know you’ve got no intention of giving up head of house. And I’m glad for that.”

“I bet you are. It would create a lot of trouble for you if your identity was discovered.”

My bodyguard was the forgotten prince and the immortal guardian of Moon. After the incident with the guardian of earth, people had certainly taken notice of him. If word got out that we were working together, I knew that something even worse than me losing my place as head of house would occur.

“But even if you don’t have any intentions, that’s not going to make Shioria go away.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m the head of house. She can’t ignore my wishes.”

“So you’re just going to keep ignoring her?”

“Yes.”

Honestly, the situation did worry me a bit. Was continuing to ignore her a good idea? If that’s what it took to protect my position as head of house, I wouldn’t mind. But our goal wasn’t to protect my status as head of house. It was...

“Now, how can we steal the guardian of Sun’s powers?”

If it were just stealing, that’d be easy. Even though Soleil had awakened to her powers, she was naive. She wouldn’t brandish her powers and try to attack me. Confronting her head on and snatching her powers myself would be easy enough.

However, we had our positions to think about. I might be head of house Vixent, but since she had awakened to her powers, she was now also a candidate for the position. It seemed this was the first instance of two potential heirs awakening to their powers at the same time in the same family. Or at the very least, there weren’t any records of such instances happening before.

To start, this development would cause a ruckus among the nobles. And if I forcibly took Soleil’s powers from her, the worst case scenario was that I could make an enemy out of the other nobles. Their opinions, of course, mattered little to me, especially if they were weak. The problem was the motives of the *other* guardians.

Each one individually was another matter, but making enemies out of all them would be a serious hindrance to my plan. I wondered if there was a way to settle this as quietly as possible. Dier also gave it some thought and offered up a suggestion of his own.

“Why don’t you just sneak in and borrow her power while she’s sleeping? Shadow would make it a piece of cake.”

“Dier...”

“What?”

“You come up with some surprisingly nasty ideas, you know?”

“Wha--!?”

I *was* surprised. It sounded like Dier was suggesting I sneak into a young girl’s room and attack her in her sleep.

He hastily made excuses. “I’m not saying to do anything bad to her! Anyway, *I’m* not the one who’s gonna do it!”

“I know that. I’m just surprised you came up with the idea before me, that’s

all.”

“I didn’t come up with it. I thought that’s the thing you’d suggest in the first place.”

“Ha ha. It’s too late for those excuses now. You’re the one who came up with it.” I was teasing him, but I did agree with his opinion. “It’s a good idea, Dier. I’ll do it.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“I’ll try it tonight. Want to come with me?”

“I’ll pass on that one.”

“Oh, what a shame.”

If he agreed to come with me, I would’ve been able to tease him about how terrible he was to sneak into a girl’s room at night.

♦ ♦ ♦

That night, I went along with Dier’s suggestion and snuck into Soleil’s room. Thanks to Shadow, I could sneak around the manor without being seen quite easily. I slipped into her room without incident. However...

I let out a sigh. “I see...”

There was no one in the bedroom. The blanket and pillows were piled up neatly on the bed, with no sign of being used. The room itself was unnaturally neat. I took a walk around the room to check just in case, and then made a round around the mansion. I returned to my study and found Dier waiting for me.

“How’d it go? Did you get it?”

“She wasn’t there.”

“Wasn’t there? She wasn’t in her room?”

I shook my head. “She’s not anywhere in the whole mansion.”

“You think they were onto us?”

“I don’t know. I think they’re just generally cautious of me and probably moved somewhere else after our confrontation this afternoon.”

I had a feeling they were probably at the villa. Since Shioria had spent such a long time living there, Soleil had certainly been there quite often.

“So what will you do?” Dier asked.

“Hmm...”

If I knew where she was, I could sneak into her room as planned and borrow her powers. But the fact that they had moved her out of the mansion proved that they were on alert. Soleil would probably be heavily guarded. The risk of fighting and possibly being seen was too troublesome.

“I think I’ll have to give up on sneaking.”

“Yeah, it’s probably safer that way.”

“Yes. But we need to come up with something else.”

“It’s a matter of timing now.”

Dier was right; if I had the right timing, I’d have the perfect chance to borrow Soleil’s powers from her. This didn’t necessarily mean I’d completely lost the chance to steal them in her sleep. I tried to think about what would be the most effective method.

“It would be easy if she attacked me first.”

“Nah. She’s too kind for that. Even if you completely rejected her, she’d just be worried about it.”

“That’s true.” The scenario itself would be tough to manufacture.

Most of all, Shioria backed her. Soleil was her biological daughter and she never disobeyed her mother. However, if she ordered her to fight me... Suddenly an idea popped into my head. I wondered what would push her to that situation. I had a hunch that the driving force behind Soleil becoming head of house wasn’t Shioria...but instead, my father.

♦ ♦ ♦

The next morning, I immediately noticed that something in the mansion had changed. As I was walking to my study from my bedroom, a servant bowed, and was about to walk away when I stopped them. “Stop right there.”

“Yes, Mistress?”

“What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry, Mistress, but what do you mean?”

I let out a sigh. “Don’t play dumb with me. Did you really think I wouldn’t notice?” I spoke in a firm voice and saw the servant begin to tremble. I looked around. It was clear that there were fewer servants walking around the halls than normal. I’d barely seen anyone on my way from my bedroom to my study. Since I had lived here for so long, I was very sensitive to any subtle changes that occurred in the mansion.

“Where is everyone?”

“W-Well...” The servant’s eyes darted around awkwardly. It was clear she didn’t know how to respond.

“Just answer me. I already have a hunch.”

“Y-Yes, Mistress. Lady Shioria told the servants to relocate to the villa...”

“I knew it.”

“I’m so sorry!” She swung her head down and apologized.

“It’s fine. It’s not your fault. Anyway, you stayed, so I can’t blame you.”

“Yes, Mistress...”

“How many stayed?”

“About half... everyone else went with Lady Shioria and Lady Soleil to the villa,” she whispered.

It seemed as if Shioria had planned this before she’d even seen me the previous day. She had announced to them that Soleil had awakened to her powers and since she would one day be head of house, the servants had to obey them. The servants were probably bewildered. Soleil demonstrated her

powers in front of them and they accepted what Shioria said as the truth. They acknowledged Soleil had the right to become head of house.

However, I was the current head of house, and I also had the right to remain as such.

They weren't sure who to obey, and about half of them ultimately decided to go with Shioria. It seemed like the Vixent family had been split into two factions; ones who followed me and ones who followed Shioria and Soleil.

"What a pain..." I muttered to myself as I walked down the hallway.

The mansion had grown a bit quieter now, and I could hear the anxiety in the servants' voices as they discussed my confrontation with Soleil. They wondered if they'd made the right decision by staying behind.

The two powers were the opposite of each other. My power of Shadow was looked down upon and disliked, but Soleil's power had been passed down through the generations. Not only that, but she had been expected to become head of house ever since she was born. The more time that passed, the more supporters Soleil would gain. All these thoughts churned through my head on my way to the study.

"About time you got here."

"Sorry I'm late. I was listening to quite the disturbing story."

"About the servants?"

"So you noticed too."

Dier nodded. "I could tell immediately. There's only about half of them left, huh?"

"That's right. And I'm sure you know why."

"So they went to be with Soleil."

"It certainly seems that way."

Dier and I talked over the situation as I sat down in my usual chair. Even despite this situation, I had work to do as head of house. I went through the pile of documents on my desk as we discussed our future plans.

“We should come up with some sort of counter,” Dier said.

“Specifically?”

“Well, that’s what we’re gonna start thinking about now.”

“Good point.” I thought back to what Shioria had said yesterday. She said she would give me time to consider it and would come back the day after tomorrow—in other words, tomorrow—and ask me one last time.

Of course I was going to give her the same answer as last time. I had no intention of giving up my position.

“After that, it all depends on her reaction. Would she suggest a fight?”

“It’s hard to believe she would. We talked about that yesterday, remember?”

“I know, it’s just a hope.” I’d prefer fighting it out than having to come up with some kind of difficult strategy. After all, that would definitively solve who had the right to be head of house. Whoever was the strongest deserved the title. So it would be much quicker to fight it out and see who won.

“You think you could even fight against Soleil?”

“Who are you worried about here?”

“True.”

I appreciated Dier’s concern, but it was needless. I wouldn’t hold back against anyone to further my goals, no matter who it was. That included Soleil, whether she wanted to fight me or not. The moment she stood in my way, she would become my enemy.

“So like you said, it all depends on how they react tomorrow.”

“That’s right. So we should prepare as much as we can today.”

“But first we gotta attack this mountain of work, huh?”

“True...”

Honestly, I wished I could just make Soleil do all of this work. Did either she or Shioria recognize that being head of house came with a lot of responsibilities, and they couldn’t just do as they pleased?

♦ ♦ ♦

It was the day of reckoning. But of course, so far it was just like any other day; I woke up, finished getting ready, and walked to my study. Dier was inside waiting for me, and we did our work, the same as the day before.

I reviewed documents, gave my stamp of approval, and moved them from one pile to the next.

Before long it was noon. I looked at the clock.

“What’s taking them so long?” Dier muttered.

“Right? It’s pretty quiet.”

I combed through my memory. I was certain Shioria said she’d be back today. Surely she hadn’t forgotten? Or perhaps the circumstances had changed? Honestly, I needed them to come. If there weren’t any developments in this matter, I wasn’t sure what to do next.

“Well, might as well have lunch,” Dier said.

“True.”

I was just about to stand up when I sensed someone was in front of the door. *Thump, thump, thump!* Dier and I exchanged glances, and I sat back down.

“Come in,” I called, and the door opened.

As expected, it was Shioria and Soleil.

“Good afternoon, Selene.”

“What took you so long, Mother?”

Shioria had that creepy smirk on her face. Soleil hesitantly entered the room beside her. Apparently she hadn’t forgotten at all. I breathed an inward sigh of relief.

Now we could move things forward.

“That almost makes it sound like you were waiting for me. How kind of you.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I have things to do and I didn’t want to waste my

time by waiting around for you all day.”

“Oh, is that so? Well then, I’ll get to the point.” Shioria dramatically cleared her throat. She stared at me with a smile and waited a few seconds before speaking. “Selene, will you give up your position as head of house to Soleil?”

“I will not.” I answered immediately.

I had no intention of doing so no matter what she said. There was no other answer in my mind. However, Shioria didn’t flinch. She had already expected my reply. She flashed me an arrogant grin.

“I see. So you’re going to continue to resist.”

“Of course I am. I already told you. No matter how long you wait, my answer is going to be the same.”

“It seems to be that way. Well then, you’ve given me no other choice.”

I turned my focus to Soleil. What she said now would determine my next move. The best outcome for me was that she would agree to a fight so we could finish this once and for all.

“Selene. I challenge you to a fight.”

I couldn’t hide my surprise. I wasn’t expecting *Shioria* to challenge me to the fight. I was so pleased I almost began to smile, but I managed to suppress it.

“A fight?”

“Yes. I want you two to fight to determine who gets to be head of house.” I frowned. Why was she challenging me to a fight all of a sudden? I didn’t know her very well, but I had a feeling that this wasn’t like her at all.

“Are you kidding? As if I would accept that request.”

“Why not?” Shioria smirked and walked over to the window. I stayed in my seat and watched her. “I’m sure you’ve realized the number of people in this mansion has decreased.”

“Yes, I hear they were duped by a certain someone into leaving.”

“Oh, that’s not very nice! You know, they abandoned you because you’re like that.”

“Please. You only managed to succeed in luring half of them away.”

“Oh, it’s more than that.”

“What—”

She interrupted me and threw open the window. She pulled back the curtains I’d closed for Dier’s sake and at once the sunlight and breeze entered the room. Dier retreated to the back of the room so the light wouldn’t hit him.

“What’s the meaning of this?”

“I’m sorry to startle you. But it would be faster if you’d see for yourself.”

“See what?”

“You still haven’t realized it? Look outside.” She beckoned me closer to the window. She was smirking, but it didn’t seem like she was plotting anything. I slowly and hesitantly walked over to the window and looked out.

The weather was good and from outside came in a nice breeze. But something was off. I was about to voice that observation when suddenly I realized what it was: The people who should be outside were not. I didn’t see one member of the Vixent guard outside.

I looked over at her and she smirked. “Now you understand.”

I didn’t answer.

“That’s right. The house guard is now under our command.”

When I became head of house, command of the guard transferred from my father to me. They solely obeyed the head of house—the one who possessed the supernatural powers—and were sworn to protect the Vixent family.

They boasted numbers of around five hundred strong and were the strongest force of all the guardian families.

I was careless.

I was so distracted by what was happening inside the mansion I neglected to look outside. The curtains were always drawn tightly in my study, so I wasn’t aware of what was going on.

And since Dier couldn’t walk outside during the day, he hadn’t noticed, either.

So Shioria was right. Much more than half had gone to their side.

“See? I’m doing you a favor by giving you a chance to fight.”

The members of House Vixent were now leaning heavily toward Soleil. Not only did she have the power of Sun, but she also had the house guard, which could be a real threat. It seemed like the advantage I had in terms of numbers had completely disappeared.

“So? Do you accept my proposal?”

“Fine then. I’ll take it.”

I still had the overall advantage. If Soleil and I faced off, I would win. My power was greater than hers, and my personality was more suited to battle. She was too kind. There was no way she would ever fight me at full power. This match was decided before it even began.

“Good. Let me introduce you to the person you’re to fight.”

“What are you talking about? Aren’t I fighting against Soleil?”

“Oh, I didn’t tell you? It’s not just us.”

Dier realized what she was getting at before me. It took me until the door opened. Someone had been outside the door.

“You can come in,” Shioria called, even though it was my house. Two figures entered the room, and I couldn’t hide my surprise.

“You will be facing off against Soleil and two others.”

Shock and confusion ran through my brain. This was a matter House Vixent should take care of internally. We shouldn’t be involving the other nobles. Especially since the six families all shared equal responsibilities as guardians.

“Let me introduce them. Although I assume you’re familiar with these two?”

“Gordov Boden.” The guardian of earth and the man called the strongest in the world stood before me. The other man was the captain of the Vixent Guard. His name was...

“Isles.”

“Lady Selene, I’m very sorry to have to face off against you in this manner.

However, the members of Vixent Guard have decided to serve Lady Soleil, the guardian of Sun."

"I see. I have no intention of blaming you. I know that you were enlisted to fight under Sun originally."

"That's right. Thank you for understanding." Isles bowed his head deeply. I had my own thoughts on the house guard's betrayal. However, the bigger problem lay standing beside him.

"What's the meaning of this, Sir Boden?"

"Forgive me, Selene Vixent. I'm here under His Majesty's orders."

From the shadows, I could sense Dier reacting slightly to the mention of Euclis. Euclis was involved in this? That was hard for me to believe. He was on our side and knew our situation. Why would he order anyone to face off against us?

But the only person who could order the captain of the royal knights and the guardian of earth to act was the king.

Ahh, so that's it.

Euclis was still young. I'd heard that a portion of his duties were administrated by the ministers and his older sister. So it was probably the ministers who gave the orders, but it was carried out under Euclis's name.

"So you've curried favor with the ministers, I see."

"Hm? Whatever do you man?" Shioria was playing dumb, but she was the only one who could've done this.

The ministers had more to gain if Soleil was the head of House Vixent. The citizenry didn't think well upon Shadow—they thought it ominous. They would prefer if the Sun guardian was the one in power, as it had been for years before.

I felt a bit sorry for Gordov. He wasn't in a position to refuse an order from the king. Our eyes met—he gave me an apologetic look. I decided not to question him any further on the matter. I shifted my gaze back to Shioria.

"So? I just have to fight the three of them at once?"

“I wouldn’t suggest something so fiendish!” She laughed.

Personally I thought asking me to fight the strongest man in the world was fiendish in and of itself, but that wasn’t the point. I let out an exasperated sigh and Shioria continued.

“You’ll both have a team of three, and each team member will face off. Whoever’s team wins the most matches will earn the right to be head of house.”

“I see. What’s the order of the matches?”

“I would tell you to wait and see, but I suppose I can be kind and tell you the order.” She gestured to each one in turn. “First, you’ll fight Isles.”

“Yes, milady.” Isles bowed his head.

Then she pointed to Gordov. “Next is him.”

Gordov widened his eyes slightly and then assumed a cool attitude. I could tell that was his message to me that he was here under duress.

I didn’t have to ask for the final one, but she told me anyway.

“And last is Soleil.”

Soleil had an uneasy look on her face as she made eye contact with me. She might be even more unwilling to be here than Gordov. It almost looked like she was pleading with me for help.

“The matches will be in one week. Make sure you have enough people by then. If you don’t have at least two people, the match will be over before it even begins. I could lend you a member of Vixent guard if you want?”

“No thank you.”

“I see. Well, I’m looking forward to it. I’m sure it’ll be an exciting fight, Selene.”

“I’m looking forward to it as well.”

Shioria and I glared at each other. She had her usual smile on her face. So I ended up accepting a match to battle for the head of house after all. The two opposing elements, Sun and Shadow, would go head to head... or would they?

♦ ♦ ♦

Silence fell upon my study after Soleil and the others left. It seemed my hunch was right and they had all returned to the villa where Shioria lived. Now that we were alone, I pulled the curtains closed.

“So what are you gonna do?” Dier asked quietly.

“I’m going to fight, obviously. Why would you ask me that now?”

“That’s not what I mean. She said have your people ready by then. But it’s just you and me.”

“That’s true. What *should* I do, then?”

I was trying not to let it show on my face or in my behavior, but on the inside I was panicking a little. More than the task of finding a third fighter, the bigger issue was Gordov, and the fact that his match lay right in the middle.

Duels between nobles had long-established rules, ones that hadn’t changed even in modern times. In the case of a duel set to have three people, if one side ends up not having enough members at the time of the duel, one match is automatically forfeited. The duel is reduced to two matches, and the other side must choose between two fighters—either the first or last fighter from their roster—to fight in the duel.

For example, let’s say I was only able to get myself and Dier for the duel. In that case, Soleil’s team could choose to either have their first or second fighter compete, or their second and third fighter compete. So either way, we would have to battle their second fighter.

In other words, there was no way to avoid fighting Gordov.

“I guess I’ll be the one to fight Gordov, then.”

“No, you can’t. If anyone’s going to fight him, it has to be me.”

“You can’t beat him.”

“That’s awfully blunt of you.”

“It’s true. I’ve experienced a fight with him already. I can attest that he *is* the

strongest man in the world. Among all the guardians—including you—he's the superior fighter."

I stared at him silently. There was no need for him to tell me that; I was already quite aware. After all, I'd seen Gordov and Dier fighting firsthand. Both of them were superhumanly strong, and when they fought, it took Dier every bit of his strength to defeat Gordov. No matter how hard I fought, then, I wouldn't be able to beat Gordov. I could gain no advantage from Shadow since his powers weren't in opposition with mine, and his powers generally were just much stronger.

Still...

"You can't fight him, though. Because..."

"I know, but..." He lowered his gaze with dissatisfaction.

Other people would be watching the fight, and because of that, even if Dier participated in the duels, he wouldn't be able to fight at his full power. He was only fighting because we needed the numbers.

"I want you to fight their first competitor."

"The captain of the guard? It won't be a problem unless he's got supernatural powers."

"Yes, but we still have Soleil."

The Sun guardian was capable of boosting other's strength using their supernatural powers. They could make a human dozens of times stronger than they actually were.

"He might not have powers, but it'll be like fighting a monster," I said.

"That's rough. Isn't that against the rules, anyway?"

"Well, there aren't any rules that say they can't do it, so no. I'm planning on doing the same thing, anyway."

"Ah, I see." It finally dawned on Dier what I was talking about.

The battle against the catastrophic-level monster was still fresh in our minds. He fought in that battle as well, and I used Shadow to cover his body so that he

was able to fight while still concealing his powers. I had essentially created the illusion that I was imbuing him with the power of Shadow to boost his natural strength when in reality, I had merely cloaked him with a shadow, and he had fought with his own strength. And he hadn't even been using his full power.

"I'll just do the same thing as I did then."

"Got it. Then there's no way I lose."

"Well, we'll be in trouble if you do."

"Enough about me... our biggest problem is you, remember?"

"I suppose."

He stared at me with concern. "This is Gordov we're talking about. You can't beat him unless you come up with some kind of strategy."

"I'm aware."

I would lose if I fought with traditional tactics. To be brutally honest, my odds of winning were abysmal. But I had more of a chance to beat Gordov than Dier, since he couldn't fight at full power. It was a *slim* chance, but it was a chance nonetheless.

"Maybe we should just find a third instead of having you fight him?"

"That could work."

If we found a third person, we could still win the duel even if our third lost to Gordov. Dier could win, and then if I beat Soleil at the end, victory would be ours.

The problem was finding someone who would take our side. The opponent they'd be facing was Gordov Boden, guardian of earth, the strongest man in the world. I couldn't imagine there'd be anyone who would *want* to fight him.

"How about Lawrence? At least he knows about our situation," Dier said.

"Hmm, good idea. Shadow is connected to him, so I could catch him and force him to participate."

Once I used Shadow to travel to a specific destination, it would be permanently linked to that location. I'd used Shadow to travel to Lawrence's

shadow before, so now I could find him anywhere in the world. I was sure he wouldn't be thrilled about it, but I could get him to listen to me if I used force.

After all, two of our opponents this time were guardians, so no one could complain if I enlisted another guardian myself.

"I'll go ahead and get him, th—"

Thump, thump, thump!

Someone with very bad timing knocked on my door. I felt like letting out an exasperated sigh as I called out in response. "Who is it?"

"Pardon me, Mistress Selene. But a guest is here to see you."

"A guest? I'm not expecting anyone."

"I understand, but the guest is...well..." I could hear the maid's hesitation on the other side of the door.

Irritated, I repeated my question in a harsher tone of voice. "Who is it?"

"The guest's name is..."

"Enough already! I'm tired of waiting!"

"P-Please wait, Lord Wasser!"

The door swung open and the man in question elegantly floated into the room. He flashed me that smile I despised so much. I could tell he was arrogant as ever, and to be perfectly frank I couldn't stand the man. He was the guardian of water, Alexei Wasser. A very eccentric man who had once proposed to me.

"Long time no see, my beautiful fiancée!"

"And when did we become engaged?"

"From the moment I saw you! I've been thinking of you as my fiancée this whole time, of course."

"Ha. You've really got guts saying that after I beat you."

"Oh, I remember. But remember what I said? One little loss isn't going to make me give up. There's no other woman in the world more worthy of being my fiancée than you!" One affected word after the other spilled from his mouth

and when he finished, he had the gall to wink. I was thoroughly annoyed by the exchange and let out a little sigh.

“What are you doing here? I’m busy.”

“I know that. I’m sure you’ve got your hands full, what with the battle with your sister looming ahead.”

I was slightly surprised and shot him a suspicious look.

“You want to know how I know that, correct?” Alexei asked.

“You are so...”

“But first! Let me confirm something: have you assembled your team of three?”

“You already know the numbers and everything...” I let out a sigh and decided to be honest. “I’m short one person. I was just about to leave to find our third. So now that I’ve explained it to you, will you please leave me alone?”

“Ha! No need! Because you already have your team!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your third! He’s here, right in front of your eyes,” he said, jabbing his thumb towards his chest. He seemed to be declaring himself as the third member of the team.

“Are you serious right now?”

“Of course! That’s why I came all this way, after all.”

I was so surprised it took my brain awhile to catch up. Alexei was going to help us? But...

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s all for you, Selene Vixent.”

“I don’t understand.”

That didn’t explain why he was taking our side. It wasn’t as if we were close friends or had even cooperated with each other before. Plus, this was a Vixent family matter. I couldn’t think of one reason why an outsider like Alexei would

want to participate.

“Actually, I was invited,” Alexei explained.

“Invited? By whom?”

“By your mother, Shioria Vixent!”

“I see... So she approached you too, then.”

She was able to manipulate Gordov into participating by using the king’s orders. And apparently she had tried to get Alexei to join their ranks as well. But he wasn’t among their team members, which meant...

“I turned her down. I have absolutely no intention of being your enemy! But most of all, she said she wanted to steal away your position as head of house! There’s no way I would participate in such a thing.”

“I see... Well, I suppose I should thank you for that.”

If both Gordov and Alexei were on the enemy’s side, there would be no chance of victory for us.

“It’s a bit too early to thank me. Remember what I said? I came here to help you.”

“I heard. But are you serious? You gain nothing by joining my team.” I meant what I said; such a thing sounded absolutely pointless to me. Alexei wouldn’t benefit from helping me in any way—at least, none that immediately sprang to mind.

“Oh, but there is! You’ll remember me as the man who rushed to your aid!”

“So you want me to owe you a favor.”

“Do I really look like that kind of man? All I want is to fight alongside you.”

I looked into his eyes carefully. It didn’t seem like he was lying. Perhaps he really was being honest. I shifted my gaze over to Dier, who gave a slight nod. Once I confirmed he shared my opinion, I faced Alexei. “That’s fine, but you’ll be fighting Gordov.”

“Bring it on! I’ve always wanted a serious fight with him! They call him the world’s strongest man, right? Well, I’ll take that title from him!”

“Well, if that’s your decision then I won’t stop you.”

I’d never expected our third to win against Gordov anyway, so the result didn’t matter.

“Fine,” I said, deciding, “then I’ll let you fight Gordov Boden.”

“Leave it to me! I’ll show you a stunning victory!”

“Pfft. I won’t get my hopes up. But fight to your heart’s content. We’ll make sure you have a proper burial.”

“That’s no way to talk before a fight,” Dier muttered behind me.

Now I could see our path to victory. Dier would win the first match. And even if Alexei lost, all I had to do was beat Soleil.

All of that was much better than either Dier or me having to fight against Gordov too. And much better than leaving someone else to fight my sister.

♦ ♦ ♦

Shioria and Soleil returned home to the villa, which was much smaller than the mansion. Servants who used to work at the main house were already there, and the house guard was patrolling outside.

“You must be tired, Soleil,” Shioria said. “Go on back to your room and get some rest.”

“What will you do, Mother?”

“I still have work to do. Don’t you worry about that. You just go rest. We’ll see each other at dinner.”

“All right...”

Outside of mealtimes and when they left the villa, the two of them rarely spoke to each other. Though they lived together, they didn’t act like a typical mother and daughter would.

Shioria watched as Soleil trudged up the stairs to her bedroom. Just as she was about to head to her own room, a man called out to her.

“Shioria.”

“Hm? Oh, it’s unusual for you to come see me.”

The person who stopped her in the hallway was her own husband, former head of house Ralde Vixent. He frowned at her; he was clearly angry. She greeted him with a smile, as she always did.

“Is something the matter?” she asked.

“That’s what I want to know. Care to explain yourself?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb with me!” he shouted. Several nearly servants startled, and shrank back.

But Shioria didn’t even flinch. Not a single muscle in her face twitched.

Ralde continued, trembling with fury. “You challenged Selene to a duel, with the head of house position at stake?! I never heard a word about this!”

“Well, of course you didn’t. Because I didn’t tell you.”

“What did you just say?! What in the world are you thinking, proposing a duel without my permission?!”

“And with whose authority are you demanding that I ask your permission?”

“Wha—?!”

Shioria continued smiling at him as she coldly spoke. “Ralde. You’re no longer head of house. The person who holds decision making power solely lies with the current head of house and guardian of the supernatural powers. That means only Soleil—and technically Selene—have that right. Not you.”

“Soleil... Soleil’s here, isn’t she? Call her down!”

“Why?”

“So I can question her! I want to know why she didn’t tell me she had awakened to her powers!”

Ralde hadn’t even known Soleil had awakened to the power of Sun. He only found out the previous day, when he heard word of the duel against Selene. Up

until that point, he hadn't a single clue. He was angry at Soleil for not telling him about her powers...and at his wife, for acting without even consulting him first.

"Question her?"

"That's right!"

"And what right do you have to question her, may I ask?"

"What? Why, I..."

"You don't *have* the right," Shioria repeated. "You're no longer head of house. Soleil's the one who deserves to be head of house. You have no grounds to accuse her of anything." And with that Shioria gave Ralde a patronizing smile.

That smile was so creepy it made Ralde's anger bubble up even more. He clenched his hands into shaking fists and screeched. "You...!"

"Yes?"

Ralde paused, and eventually shut his mouth. Not once, in the face of Ralde's vehement anger, had Shioria's smile faltered. Looking at Shioria was like staring at a likeness of her drawn on paper rather than the real thing—time stopped the moment one met her gaze. The effect was eerie, and inside Ralde felt sickened.

"If there's nothing else, I'm leaving. I have many things to do."

He didn't answer.

"But don't worry. I'm going to actually do something for this family. Unlike you." And with that, she walked past Ralde.

A chill raced down Ralde's spine. The moment she walked past him, he felt something sinister. Inhuman. It was more like— "Wait." Ralde called, stopping her. He wanted to confirm where this feeling came from.

"What is it?" Shioria paused and turned around.

"Who are you?" Ralde asked, peering at her suspiciously.

"Why, I'm Shioria, of course," she answered with a smile.

"Are you really...?" Doubt crept up in his mind. He'd felt something was off about her for a while now. Shioria began acting strangely some time around

when the secret behind Selene's birth had been exposed.

The Shioria he remembered from before was calm and gentle, and had a smile that reminded him of a flower blooming in a pool of warm sunlight. This woman, in contrast, was like some kind of doll, one that had a creepy smile plastered to her face. Shioria had been nothing like her. She had been more effusive with her emotions.

When she heard that his lover was pregnant with Selene, she was furious, sobbing as she shouted at him. It was no wonder, since he had cheated on her. But she also knew that the child—that Selene—was innocent, and so she had treated Selene like her own daughter.

But once people discovered the circumstances regarding Selene's birth, her attitude towards Ralde abruptly changed, and soon after she fled from the mansion and began living in the villa. She rarely spoke to either Ralde or Soleil, and spent her days cooped up in her room. This went on for about a year, until one day she suddenly emerged from the villa, completely changed.

At first, Ralde took this to mean that Shioria had recovered from whatever she was going through and was relieved. But he noticed that this Shioria always smiled, and never showed any emotion, not anger or sadness, not like before. The change had Ralde quite dejected; he'd broken his wife's heart. But at the same time, he felt himself wondering, *"Is this really the Shioria I knew and loved?"*

And now, at this moment, that doubt had resurfaced.

"I know you, Shioria, very well—I've watched you more closely than anyone. I know something is off about the way you're acting. You're like a completely different person."

"Isn't it natural you feel that way? We've barely spoken like this for some time now."

"No, that's not it. If there was a slight change in your personality, I wouldn't be saying this. It's like you're a mon—" Suddenly chills raced through Ralde's body, different from the chills he felt before—these were the kind of chills one got when their life was in danger.

The reason was clear; for the first time Shioria was glaring at him, that ever-present smile still glued onto her face.

“You’re...”

“I’m Shioria. Your wife.”

No, you’re not! Ralde’s heart was shouting.

Now there was not a single doubt in Ralde’s mind; he was certain. Something had changed his wife. He didn’t know what it was...but he knew, instinctively, that it was dangerous.

“There’s no need for you to worry. This is for your sake as well, you know.”

“My sake?”

“Yes, that’s right. Isn’t the woman who stole everything away from my beloved husband just *despicable*? Doesn’t she make you angry? Don’t you just want to kill her?”

Her icy demeanor had now revealed itself as cold-blooded malice. It wasn’t the kind a human was capable of showing, and was so fearsome all the nearby servants cowered, completely unable to speak. Some were even frozen on the spot.

“I’ll make all those wishes come true. I’ll make you forget that horrid woman who stole everything from you.”

“Shioria...”

Her eyes glowed with hatred so intense it was almost palpable.

Ralde realized something; the objects of this hatred weren’t merely himself and Selene, but also anger towards his late mistress.

And at the same time, he understood this: the person in front of him *was* his wife Shioria. But this wasn’t the same Shioria as before. Something else was inside of her. No—something was *possessing* her.

No one knew.

No one knew how the supernatural powers had come to be, or where

monsters had come from either.

Chapter Three: Hatred is a Beast

This room was one that only the king could enter. It was the only place where a busy monarch could ever truly be alone, which meant it was also the perfect place to discuss secrets.

The boy-king Euclis Veldt bowed his head before Dier and me.

“I’m sorry, Brother. I’m sorry, Selene.”

“Please lift your head, Euclis,” Dier urged.

“But I’m the one who’s caused you two so much trouble.”

“This isn’t your fault.”

“It *is* my fault! If I was in more control...”

He was apologizing for Gordov taking Shioria’s side, of course. Gordov, who had obeyed the king’s orders and joined her team.

“We know you weren’t the one who gave the orders, Euclis,” Dier assured him.

Euclis finally stopped apologizing. He wasn’t the one who gave Gordov the orders; it was his ministers who managed political decisions for him and gave orders in the king’s name. Euclis himself only found out about the situation after hearing rumors about a duel amongst the Vixent family.

“Still, it’s because I’m still a child that I couldn’t help you...”

“Well, that’s...”

“There’s nothing you can do about that. It’s not like you can get older overnight,” I told him.

“Selene...”

Seeing him so depressed irritated me a little. I wasn’t intending to speak up, but I couldn’t help it.

“This isn’t your responsibility,” I said. “You didn’t decide this. But shouldn’t you be angrier? And tell them not to make decisions without your permission?”

“You’re right...I should’ve gotten angry at them.” He lowered his gaze to the floor apologetically.

Come to think of it, I’d never seen him angry before, although I hadn’t known him long. I couldn’t even imagine him getting angry. He might be one of those people who couldn’t get angry even if he tried.

The more I thought about it, the more it became clear how much trouble there was in ruling a kingdom. A boy of twelve should not be put in that position in the first place.

“Hey, Euclis. Can’t you say something and get Gordov to back off?”

“I’m sorry, but I think that would be difficult.”

“Why? If it was the king’s orders, can’t the king undo it?” I asked.

Euclis looked conflicted while he answered. “Under normal circumstances, yes. But I’m just a child, so I can’t speak up about political matters.”

“You really are just a king in name only, aren’t you?”

“Yes. That’s right.” He gave me a sad, pitiful smile.

I was certain that he went through many struggles unbeknownst to us. After all, he was just a twelve-year-old boy, but one who carried the weight of an entire kingdom’s expectations on his shoulders. And yet despite that, he wasn’t actually allowed to make any decisions. Even if he did, the controlling ministers surrounding him wouldn’t allow it. He was trapped.

“So only the ministers are allowed to make political decisions?”

“No, the person who mainly gives the orders is my sister.”

“Your sister...Oh, right. The girl who was standing next to you at the party.”

“Yes. She normally does the work of the king in my place.”

Guinevere Veldt was Euclis’s older sister.

Since I wasn’t particularly interested in politics, I didn’t know much about her beyond her name and that she was either the same age, or one year older than me. But at any rate, she was Euclis’s sister, and by extension, Dier’s sister as well.

“What’s your sister like?”

“Well...she’s a very serious person, and she’s very smart.”

“I see. So she’s the complete opposite of your older brother.”

“Who do you mean?” Dier asked, purposely playing dumb and averting his eyes. Suddenly I realized something. Dier often spoke of Euclis, but never mentioned his younger sister Guinevere. In fact, I didn’t think I’d ever even heard him say her name once. That was why I had completely forgotten that there was another sibling amongst them.

I was curious, so I decided to ask him about it. “Did you and your sister not get along?”

“That’s awfully straightforward.”

“Am I wrong?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t that we didn’t get along, but...” He trailed off as if to say *“our relationship wasn’t that great, either.”* He let out a little sigh and then glanced over at Euclis for a moment, then back at me. “Our personalities never meshed well.”

“So you *don’t* get along.”

“I said, that’s not it. It’s not that simple. She’s...a very logical person.”

“Logical, eh?”

According to Dier, Guinevere was better suited to be the monarch than either Euclis or himself. She was elegant, calculating, intelligent, and a leader. She was the kind of person who was born to be a ruler.

However, there was one major thing she lacked: supernatural powers.

The ultimate requirement to be the monarch in this kingdom was one must have the supernatural powers. Even if one had all the ideal attributes for leadership, if they didn’t have the supernatural powers, they were not capable of being the monarch.

And right now, that person was Euclis.

“So it’s as I said. You didn’t get along, huh?”

“No, that’s not it. Anyway, she forgot all about me once we awakened to our powers.”

“That’s right.”

“Yeah. We never got along because our personalities didn’t mesh...okay, so we *didn’t* get along, but it’s not like we hated each other or anything. At least, I didn’t hate her. I don’t know how she felt, and there’s no way of finding out now,” he muttered, sounding a bit sad.

Surely he cared about his sister in his own way. The reason he never talked about her was probably because he knew he didn’t have to worry about her.

“So Guinevere was involved in this decision, then.”

“Most likely, yeah.”

“I know she was, because I asked her and she told me she gave the orders,” Euclis said.

“Oh, so you asked her directly?”

“Yes. I asked her why she did such a thing. And her expression didn’t even change one bit when she answered me. She said, ‘The head of House Vixent should be the Sun guardian. It’s better for the royal family that way too.’”

“‘Better for the royal family,’ is it?”

“Yes.”

“I see,” I said. “Yes, I can tell she’s very logical.”

The Sun guardian had the ability to boost other people’s power, while the Shadow guardian was feared by many since it was believed to be a sign of ill portent. And since the two of us were facing off, others would feel pressured to take a side and decide which one would give them the most benefit.

If I were in their position, I’d probably make the same decision. It was more beneficial for the kingdom to side with the Sun guardian, since they could easily assemble an army from the House Vixent guard, and also because they were more likely to have the support of other nobles.

So as a result, I couldn’t blame Guinevere for that decision. After all, she was

making the most logical decision for the sake of this kingdom's future.

"Guinevere Veldt..."

The princess who possessed all the qualities of a monarch, yet wasn't given the right to rule simply because she didn't have the supernatural powers. Yet because Euclis was still a child, she was, as of now, the real ruler of the kingdom.

My interest in her was piqued now that Dier said he didn't get along with her. I wanted to talk to her, but that would have to wait. I was confident that opportunity would come sooner or later. I'd just have to look forward to it then.

"Enough about Gordov. If we can't rescind the order, we'll just have to face him head-on."

"Well, we're not going to be the ones to face him," Dier pointed out.

"That's true. At least that's one positive thing we've got going for us."

"I'm glad that you have someone to help you."

Both Dier and I nodded in response to Euclis.

I was quite grateful for the person who, albeit recklessly, volunteered to go up against the strongest man in the world. Alexei Wasser, the guardian of water. I didn't care for his personality, and honestly I didn't care for him in general, but I did appreciate the fact that he agreed to fight for us.

Although I really wish he'd stop calling me his fiancée.

I let out a little sigh.

"Thanks to him, I think we have a chance to win. Scratch that—I think our win is virtually guaranteed."

We had a team of three each, and duels among each member. Whichever team won the most matches would be declared the winner; it was simple, really. Even if Alexei lost his battle against Gordov, it wouldn't matter as long as Dier and I both won.

"I'm sure you know this already, but it's all over if you lose, Dier."

"I know that," Dier said. "Can you stop putting all this weird pressure on me?"

“There’s no way you’ll lose, right?”

“The pressure!”

Dier’s opponent was the captain of the Vixent guard. He would benefit from the physical boosting ability the Sun guardian possessed. Even though Dier wouldn’t be able to fight at his full ability, I didn’t think he could lose. I was sure of it.

“Good luck, Brother.”

“Thanks. I can’t lose.”

“That’s right! You can’t,” I added.

Because if Dier lost, then we all lost. And if we lost, I’d also lose my position as head of house. I didn’t have any attachments to the position, but I needed it in order to achieve my goals. It allowed me to stand on equal footing with the other supernatural guardians, and gave me the freedom to do as I pleased. I couldn’t lose it.

“We’ll win. No matter what.”

“That’s right. What about you, though? Your opponent is...”

My opponent was my younger sister Soleil. I had a hard time believing she was a willing participant in this battle. Shioria was just using her.

Still, the reasons didn’t matter.

“I won’t let anyone stand in my way. I will show no mercy to anyone who tries, no matter who it is.”

Even if she was my own sister.

The day of our match came in the blink of an eye.

With our team fully assembled, we could take our time preparing without panic. And now it was the day of the match.

We were given the right to decide the location, and we chose a coliseum within the kingdom's boundaries that was often used as a fighting arena.

The coliseum had a ceiling that blocked all sunlight, and was large, with sturdy walls and a solid ground. The supernatural guardians could fight here without holding back or fearing they'd cause problems for ordinary citizens.

"This isn't a bad place," Shioria commented once upon my arrival to the venue.

I faced off against her. "I'm glad you like it," I replied.

We reviewed the rules once more.

"This match is three against three. There are no changes in your line-up, correct?" I asked.

"Yes, that's right."

"Good. Well then, I'll reveal our fighting order as well. He's first." Dier, in servant's garb and a saber on his hip, took a step forward. He bowed politely, just like a servant would.

"This is my assistant, Dier."

"I've heard he's your bodyguard, is that correct?"

"Yes, you can think of him that way."

"Ha ha. Not a bad opponent." Shioria laughed and then looked at who was standing behind Dier. "I'm surprised. I thought you wouldn't find a third, so you would end up having to fight twice."

"It's a shame I didn't meet your expectations. I won't be fighting him."

"That's right! I, Alexei Wasser, will be fighting second!" Alexei gracefully breezed past Dier to make his appearance. He faced off with Shioria with a smirk. "This is the first time you and I have spoken directly, Shioria Vixent."

“Yes, I’m honored to meet you, Lord Wasser.”

“Likewise, I’m sure. I wish we could have met under different circumstances.”

“I agree. It’s a shame we had to meet like this.”

“A shame, is it?” Alexei flashed his winning smile. “It certainly doesn’t look like you think it’s a shame.”

“Oh? It doesn’t?”

“It doesn’t. I sense something sinister in those eyes of yours. You’re holding a grudge from me turning down your invitation, aren’t you?”

“Of course not! It’s just... I’m concerned you’ll come to regret siding with Selene.”

“Ha ha! That’s impossible! I chose right; this is an opportunity to show my future wife just how dashing I can be! Matter of fact, I’m *grateful* you gave me this chance!”

Neither Alexei nor Shioria budged as they bantered back and forth. It seemed their personalities clashed too. Perhaps the main reason Alexei turned down Shioria’s request was simply because he disliked her. But that wasn’t important.

“I’m counting on you,” I told Alexei, referencing his battle against Gordov.

“Leave it to me. I’ll show you a stunning victory. Isn’t that right, Sir Boden?”

“Please have mercy on me, Lord Alexei.” Gordov was calm, as usual. I wasn’t sure if it was just my imagination, but there was something about Gordov that seemed relieved.

Now that I had introduced my first two fighters, Shioria returned her gaze to me. “And you’re fighting last, aren’t you?”

“Yes. And Soleil is fighting last for you?”

“Of course.”

Soleil quietly stepped out from behind Shioria’s back. She wore her usual glum expression, and seemed somewhat frightened.

“Are you ready, Soleil?”

“Yes...”

What a liar.

I knew she didn’t really want to fight. It was written all over her face. I let out an inward sigh. Now that I had my team assembled, this fight seemed more of a farce than ever.

Once Shioria saw the match between Dier and the captain of the Vixent Guard she might understand that this fight was pointless. And then maybe she’d understand there was a future that didn’t involve us fighting.

I had to laugh at my own naivete.

No matter who my opponent was, I would show them no mercy. Yet despite saying that, I couldn’t help but be concerned about Soleil.

I took a deep breath and said to Shioria, “Shall we begin?”

“Yes. Let’s begin.”

The guardians of Sun and Shadow. Two supernatural powers born to the same family—and thus, the reason for this fight to decide who would be head of house.

“I’m counting on you, Isles.”

“Yes. Leave it to me, Lady Shioria and Lady Soleil.”

Our first opponent was Isles, the captain of the Vixent Guard. He was formerly the captain of the royal knights until my father recruited him to work for us. His proficiency as a swordsman went without saying. He’d been a part of the house guard for twenty years and had fought under the command of my father. He had much more battle experience than either me or Dier.

Besides the supernatural guardians, there were few who could fight against him. It was clear that Shioria had no doubt in her mind that he would win.

However...

“I know I’ve said this several times now, but you mustn’t lose,” I warned Dier.

“I know. Leave it to me.”

One could say I was of the same position; I didn’t believe Dier would lose

either.

Honestly, I felt rather sorry for Isles. Perhaps if he was facing off against a knight of equal standing, he would win even without Sun's protection. But he wouldn't be so fortunate now; this time, his opponent was a man who had once defeated the strongest man in the world.

"Both competitors, come forward!"

We had a judge to facilitate the match, and he stood in between Dier and Isles. By the way he was dressed, I guessed he was a knight. If Sir Boden had arranged for him, then he must be trustworthy.

But the judge was really just for show; the competitors themselves would decide the victor of their matches, and no one else. The result would be clear.

"There is no time limit! The fight will continue until one person surrenders or is otherwise unable to fight! There are no weapon restrictions and no restrictions on the use of abilities. Are you both in agreement?"

"Yes."

"I'm fine with those rules."

"Then begin!"

As soon as the judge gave the signal, he quickly backed away so as not to get caught up in the fight.

Yet even though the match had begun, neither competitor made a move. They both touched the weapons at their hips and glared at each other before drawing them.

"Why aren't you drawing your weapon?" Isles asked.

"I could ask you the same," Dier replied.

"It seems we're both after the same thing."

"Seems so."

Apparently both Dier and Isles wanted the other to make the first move so they could counter. But since they both had that idea, neither of them moved.

Isles drew his sword first.

“You seem very skilled.”

Dier belatedly drew his sword. “I’ve practiced a lot. After all, I didn’t want to be at a disadvantage against a knight.”

“I see. Well, in that case...” Isles’s demeanor completely changed. “I don’t need to hold back.”

“Wouldn’t want you to.”

With tremendous speed, Isles charged toward Dier and slashed out with his sword. Having predicted such a move, Dier blocked with his own blade. With swords crossed, the two of them pushed against each other.

“This power... Are you doing it as well...?”

“Yes, I am. I’m borrowing her powers!”

Their swords bounced off each other as they both jumped back, putting distance between each other. They both knew that they weren’t fighting with only their own strength. Isles was benefitting from Sun; his body glowed, and overflowed with heat—proof he was under Sun’s protection.

Meanwhile, a hazy black fog floated about Dier’s body—Shadow’s protection. But it also concealed his own supernatural powers.



“Don’t call me a coward,” Dier said.

“Of course not. I have no right to call you a coward. In fact, I feel relieved.”

“Relieved?”

“Yes. Because now our fight will be on equal ground.” Isles readied his sword while Dier aimed the tip of his at Isles.

“You *are* a knight, aren’t you?” Dier asked.

“Yes. I still think of myself as one.”

The two of them traded fierce blows. By my side Alexei seemed impressed. “They’re both giving it their all. It’s quite a fight.”

“Yes, it is.”

In actuality, Dier was much faster and stronger than this, but since he was fighting within the scope of my supernatural powers, he fought matching that strength.

Unlike Sun, Shadow couldn’t give another its protection. My shadow was just cloaking Dier’s body, doing nothing to boost his physical abilities. However, I had made it to *look* like that’s what I was doing. Dier was merely keeping his own power in check as he fought. I had to make sure to focus just as much as he did.

I couldn’t let what happened when we fought that monster—where Dier slipped from my shadow because he was too fast—happen again.

“Goodness, I had no idea Shadow had such an ability,” Shioria commented.

“Then you must not be very knowledgeable.”

“I suppose not.” Shioria gave me a confident smile, and although she looked surprised, she hadn’t faltered. It seemed she still didn’t think Isles would lose even after discovering Shadow’s supposed boosting ability. But I would soon crush that confidence.

“Show them, Dier.”

Show them your true power.

In the middle of the match, Dier and I made eye contact. He was asking me if

he could use more power, so I manipulated Shadow to cover for him. I wanted to show him that to a certain extent, I could provide back-up.

He chuckled. “Thanks.”

“Oof!”

Suddenly, Dier’s offensive speed increased, and he pushed Isles back. Isles rolled on the ground and soon landed on his feet, glaring at Dier.

“That’s not fair. So you *were* holding back on me.”

“Not necessarily. I was just being nice. It wasn’t for you.”

“Is that right?” Isles gripped his sword, looking serious as he stared steadily at Dier. I could tell how deeply he was concentrating.

His technique as a swordsman, his quality of training, and his experience thus far would surpass Dier’s in every way. And I knew Dier was aware of that.

However, there was one key difference between the two men.

“Let’s go.”

“I’m ready,” Isles replied.

The match would be decided by the next blow. With one slash of the sword. In the blink of an eye, both men stood back to back.

A sword swung down...and with a clang, the tip of it pierced through the earth.

“That was a fine job.” Isles’s sword had broken. He let it fall to the ground.

“The match has ended!” the judge exclaimed. “The winner is Dier from Selene’s team!”

“You won,” I said to Dier.

“Told ya I would.”

There was no way Dier could lose. I knew from the beginning. Although Isles had better technique and more experience, there was a key difference between them—whether or not the incredible power given to them was actually *theirs*.

And in that there was a clear difference.

Dier had fought with his own power from the beginning. Someone granted additional power because of an outside source couldn't possibly compete against him. Dier's victory had been all but guaranteed. It was only natural that he had won.

"You did well, Dier."

"Thanks."

I was pleased; he had performed just as I expected him to.

Now that we had won the first match, we were perfectly in place for our victory. If Alexei won his match, our victory would be assured. But first, he had to win against Gordov, the strongest man in the world.

To put it plainly, the chances for Alexei winning were slim. Both Dier and I were of that same opinion.

"It's my turn now! Cheer me on!" Alexei said.

"Yes, good luck."

"Watch me carefully! I'll deliver you a victory!"

It seemed the only person confident in Alexei's ability to win was Alexei himself. *Where did he get such confidence from?*

"Says the person who lost to me," I muttered.

"Oh, come on. He's raring to go. Don't crush him," Dier whispered in my ear.

"How kind of you."

"Kinder than you."

Now that Dier had won his match, he joined my side with an exasperated look on his face. That's right: he had won. It was an outcome I'd expected, but one that must have come as a surprise to Shioria. I shifted my gaze over to her.

"What is it?" Dier asked.

"She seems very calm."

"You're right."

Even though Isles had lost to Dier, Shioria hadn't been flustered one bit. She

was so calm—as if this were all going according to her plan. Her serenity was creepy and mysterious.

“Does she think that not only Gordov will win, but Soleil too?”

“I’m not sure. If she does, she’s mistaken.”

Was she completely underestimating me?

Did she think that I would hold back because I would be fighting my feeble sister?

If that was what she thought, she was sorely mistaken.

“Why do you have such a frightening look on your face, my dear fiancée?” Alexei asked.

“I keep telling you it’s not going to happen.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. But there’s no need to fret. I’m going to win the next battle so you don’t have to fight.”

“I hope so.”

If such a thing occurred, it might be worth rethinking my opinion of him. However, it would truly be a miracle...

“But I don’t think that’ll happen.”

I knew how strong Alexei was. I’d fought him before and I knew that he wasn’t just all talk. At the same time, he was set against a formidable opponent.

“Both competitors step forward!” The judge called both men to the center of the coliseum.

The guardian of water, Alexei Wasser, and Gordov Boden, the guardian of earth. No one could’ve predicted that the two of them would face off against each other.

“You don’t look pleased, Sir Boden.”

“Is that how I look, Lord Alexei?”

“Yes. I know your personality well. And I know you’re in the sort of position where you can’t disobey orders from above.”

Gordov didn’t respond. He didn’t deny it: what Alexei said was true.

Alexei smiled at him. “You have no intention of going easy on me, do you?”

“Of course not. I’m going to fulfill my duty, as I always do.”

“I was hoping you’d say that! My victory wouldn’t be real if you didn’t!”

Sparks were already flying before the fight even started. Even the judge seemed intimidated. He called the match to begin so he could make his exit.

“B-Begin!”

He stepped back, just as he did during the first match. But before he got away — “Whoa!”

Water and Earth clashed, and the judge was knocked backwards by the impact.

Gordov and Alexei both moved at the judge’s signal. Gordov manipulated gravity to boost his sword, while Alexei molded water into sharp blades.

Their powers charged towards each other, creating an intense burst of wind and splashing water.

“That’s the spirit!” Alexei said. “I can’t believe you were able to take on my first attack like that!”

“That’s my line.”

With his sword Gordov slashed Alexei’s water blades in half. Alexei leaped backwards and twisted the water into a swirling maelstrom that attacked Gordov from both sides. In response, Gordov kicked off the ground and transformed the surrounding terrain to create an earthen shield. Alexei’s whirlpool was interrupted by the rising earth.

Gordov’s power had two major elements. First, he was able to manipulate the earth’s terrain. Second, he could manipulate gravity to create an explosive destructive power.

On the other hand, Alexei’s power was simple. He could create water and manipulate it at will. Though what he could do was simple, his ability was surprisingly dangerous. I knew that firsthand.

As a liquid, water was eminently adaptable, and could be shaped into a variety of forms. It could even create enough pressure to crush rocks and form sharp blades. And because of its transformative nature, it was a powerful ability that had countless possibilities.

“Waterdance! Control this space!”

Alexei controlled the water while he danced elegantly, submerging the space around him in water. He even manipulated the moisture in the air and changed it into a convenient forcefield around his body.

But as expected, Gordov wasn’t just standing around watching.

With his power Gordov made the earth roil, which in turn created waves in the water.

“It’s no use!” Gordov shouted. “A little attack like that won’t affect me!”

“Looks that way. But what about this?” Alexei challenged him. Suddenly, water shot up from the earth. Alexei could command not only the existing water on the surface, but also the water that lay hidden underground. The water source gushed up all at once, filling the space in the blink of an eye.

He had created a prison of water. The water formed a sphere, engulfing Gordov.

“It’s not over yet!”

Alexei began to shrink the sphere of water. His goal seemed not to suffocate Gordov inside the sphere, but to crush him with the increasing pressure. Even though Gordov was strong, he was still just a human. He couldn’t continue to bear water pressure coming at him from all sides.

“Now, if you’re going to surrender, then—”

Suddenly Alexei looked shocked. Gordov should’ve been frozen from the pressure inside the liquid sphere, but instead he raised his sword high and with one stroke, sliced the water prison in two.

“I can’t believe you broke it!” Alexei said in disbelief.

“Heh.” Gordov was soaked. He swung his sword in a large arc, shaking off water droplets that clung to the blade. There wasn’t a scratch on his body.

“Now it’s my turn.” He kicked off the ground and charged forward with so much force he gouged out footprints in the earth. He came right in front of Alexei in a split-second, then attacked him from the side.

Alexei immediately created a water barrier in between the two of them and managed to dodge Gordov’s attack.

Alexei backed up—Gordov pursued him. Alexei counterattacked with water, but Gordov ignored it as he charged and focused on offense. The tides had turned in Gordov’s favor, and now, he had the advantage.

“Haa, haa...” Alexei had to continually dodge Gordov’s attacks, and it seemed his stamina had reached its limit. He was panting and soaked in sweat. Alexei was clearly on the verge of losing.

“You fought well, but it seems that this is it,” I said.

“Yes, I can’t go on any longer.”

“I know. Alex—” I was about to tell him it was all right, but then I realized something. Although his defeat was clear to anyone watching, I saw that there was still fight in his eyes. And Gordov hadn’t let down his guard once.

Alexei *hadn’t* given up. He still wanted to win. Gordov knew this, and that’s why he was still on edge.

Both of them wanted to keep fighting until it was settled.

“Haa... I’m glad,” Alexei panted. “Seems like you’re not holding back one bit.”

“Of course not,” Gordov replied. “You have the eyes of a warrior, Lord Alexei. I’m a knight, and therefore I won’t hold back against an opponent such as yourself.”

“I’d expect nothing less from the man who has continued protecting our kingdom! I admire your strength.” Alexei was still panting. But his eyes were quietly trained on Gordov.

Gordov gripped his sword again.

“I hate to admit it, but I don’t think I can best you, Sir Boden.”

“Do you surrender?”

“Of course not! Once a man agrees to a fight, would he surrender just because he thinks he might lose? Do you really think I’d do something that pitiful?”

“In that case...”

“Yes, I’ll fight. Even though I know I can’t win.”

Alexei raised his right hand and stuck his index finger in the air. A small water ball appeared.

“But I don’t intend on losing!”

Gordov charged forward.

He knew that the tiny ball of water Alexei held was his trump card. But as I watched their fight I noticed something.

The water Alexei created wouldn’t disappear as long as it didn’t naturally evaporate. The longer the fight dragged on, the more water would accumulate in the space, giving Alexei an advantage.

Yet right now all the moisture in the air had disappeared. Even though Alexei had made that giant prison of water, there wasn’t even a single puddle left on the ground. It was hard to believe all that water had evaporated in such a short amount of time. So in that case, where had the water gone?

The answer lay in the teeny drop of water hovering above Alexei’s fingertip.

It was the technique he’d displayed when he made the water prison. But now, he’d compressed an entire arena’s worth of water into a single drop. There was enough pressure inside of it to burst a damn.

“Just please don’t die. Either of you.”

Alexei released the water before Gordov could attack. The explosive force of the water expanded in all four directions, even stretching towards the spectators’ seats.

Luckily we weren’t engulfed in it. Alexei had made sure of that when he carefully calculated his move. He did it knowing such a move was dangerous, but probably thought he had to try it even if he didn’t win.

Gordov coughed out the water he'd inhaled as he leaned against the wall in a crouch. Even though he'd been struck by such immense pressure, he was still conscious.

"He's so tough," I remarked.

"How's Alexei?" Dier asked.

I looked around and saw Alexei collapsed on the ground. His chest was moving, so he wasn't dead. But he wasn't getting up either.

The judge hastily ran to the center of the coliseum. "Lord Alexei is no longer fit to compete! So the winner is..."

"Wait!"

Gordov was the one who interrupted him. He was still crouched down and was without his sword. "I...can't move, either. I'm finished."

"S-So then..."

"Yes, it's fine. This match..."

"It's a tie..." I muttered, shocked by how things had actually turned out.

Not to be rude, but I didn't even have one sliver of hope that Alexei would win. That's how much of a gap there was in their strength.

I didn't think he would win, but I also didn't think it would be a tie.

"I'm thrilled with this outcome."

"Yeah. Make sure you reward him."

"You're right."

I slowly walked over to Alexei. He still wasn't moving, but lying face-up on the ground. I stood next to him and peered down at his face.

"Are you still alive?" I asked.

"Somehow," a hoarse voice replied. He was panting heavily, clearly exhausted.

"Can you heal yourself?"

"I can, but...unfortunately I broke several bones. And Water can't heal broken

bones.”

“I see. You’ll have to rest for a while then, won’t you?”

It was a miracle that he had only suffered a few broken bones after being hit with that explosive water pressure. Worst case scenario, both of them could’ve died.

“You certainly have a flair for the dramatic, don’t you?”

“Well... I had to... it was my one chance to win.”

“I see.”

“The result?”

“A tie. Gordov is conscious, but he can’t move a muscle.”

“I see...” He bit his lip. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t meet your expectations.”

“That’s not true at all. You *exceeded* my expectations.”

“But I didn’t win.”

“I thought you would *lose*. You were up against the strongest man in the world after all. I thought victory would be impossible.”

“Yes, he was strong.”

“I know. But you were able to bring a match with him to a draw.”

The fact that he battled the strongest man in the world and ended it in a tie was very impressive, especially considering he wasn’t immortal like Dier.

“You should be proud of yourself. I’ve changed my opinion of you a bit.”

“Ha ha. You can go ahead and say you fell in love with me all over again, you know.”

“Pfft. Dream on. I was never in love with you in the first place.”

“That’s...a shame.” He gave me a sad yet slightly satisfied smile...and then completely lost consciousness.

It seemed like even talking had been too much for him. The whole time we spoke he tried to pretend that he was in better shape than he was.

Honestly, such bravado.

After that, some medics came and carried Alexei out of the coliseum. Gordov also needed medical attention, but he was able to walk out on his own.

Once Dier and I watched the two of them leave, we turned towards Shioria.

“Congratulations, Selene. You’ve won one match now.”

“Aren’t you surprised that Gordov Boden’s match ended in a draw?”

“Yes, I’m surprised. I didn’t think he’d lose, but I hadn’t even considered a draw. The first match as well—I was surprised your bodyguard won against Isles when he had Sun’s protection.”

I gave Shioria a suspicious look. Why was she smiling? Now that it was essentially a tie, Shioria’s defeat was all but guaranteed.

“Let me ask you once more. If you win the final battle, what happens?” I asked.

“Then it would be a tie. We would each choose one representative to have a deciding match. The representative has to be among our established team members, of course.”

“I see.”

I didn’t understand it.

The deciding match would be between me and Soleil. Soleil just didn’t even have a fighting chance. Even though she had awakened to her power, she wasn’t as experienced in using her power as Alexei and Gordov were. Even if I lost for some reason and we had to have a tiebreaker match, she would be the only one to compete on their team.

Either I or Dier would have to fight, and I couldn’t imagine him losing to her either.

In every scenario I ran through my mind, Shioria would suffer total defeat. And yet she was still smiling.

What was she thinking?

What was her goal here?

It was getting creepier by the minute, and I started to feel like the person we were up against wasn't human.

But...

"Well then, let's start the final battle, shall we?"

If I beat Soleil, then it didn't matter what Shioria was thinking. I would solidify my position as head of house, and I could just ask her what she had planned.

I looked over at Soleil.

"It's our turn, Soleil."

"All right..."

As expected, Soleil didn't seem thrilled about it, but she did show a bit of enthusiasm now that the time to fight had come. Not quite enthusiasm—more like she had made up her mind to go through with it.

"Don't get carried away," Dier said.

"That's up to her," I replied.

Dier looked a bit worried as I walked to the center of the coliseum.

It was time to fight Soleil.

“Since this is the third match, I trust the competitors are aware of the rules. Do you both agree?” The judge asked.

“Yes, that’s fine.”

“I agree...”

Soleil and I both agreed, and after the judge looked at both of our faces to make sure, he called the match to begin.

“Very well, then...begin!”

The last battle had finally begun. If I won this match, then I would be able to maintain my position as head of house.

Meanwhile, this was a battle Soleil’s team couldn’t lose. However...

“Aren’t you coming?”

Even though the judge had called the match to begin, several seconds had passed with no movement from Soleil. She just stood there, staring at me.

I hadn’t moved either. I wanted to see what Soleil was going to do first. Of course that wasn’t all there was to it; I wanted to confirm something.

“I’m going to check one more time, then.”

She didn’t say anything.

“Soleil, are you *sure* you want to fight me?”

I heard her draw in a sharp breath and her body jerked in response.

Even though we stood here facing off against each other, I didn’t feel a hint of malice from her. She just stood in front of me as if we were about to pass each other in the corridor or something.

She was so unaccustomed to battle that honestly it threw me off guard. So that’s why I wanted to ask again, to be sure. I wanted to know what her true intentions were.

And to be honest, I still had good intentions as well. I wasn’t about to launch a one-sided attack on an unwilling participant. If she wanted to surrender, then I would recognize that.

“Yes...”

“Soleil...!”

“I will fight you, Sister!”

“Very well, then.”

Apparently my concern was unnecessary.

For the first time, I saw a glint of fighting spirit in her eyes. She squeezed her fists weakly with determination.

“In that case, I won’t go easy on you.” I would be merciless to any enemy who stood in my way, even if that person was Soleil.

I would stop at nothing to remove any obstacles in my path.

“Shadow...seize her!” I reached my right hand out towards Soleil and molded the shadow at my feet into a whip. The whip undulated and stretched out towards her.

“Sun’s sparkle! Protect me!” Meanwhile, Soleil clasped her hands in front of her chest, as if offering up a prayer.

A light as bright and warm as the sun enveloped her, creating a barrier that protected her from my shadow. Now blocked, my shadow whip simply floated around Soleil. Even after continuing my attack, it wasn’t able to pierce the barrier.

“Nicely done, Soleil.”

“I practiced a lot!”

“I can see that.”

Although the power of Sun was the same power my father had possessed, it was so much stronger I hardly recognized it. This was a boosted form which protected her from anything trying to harm her.

“Flames of the Sun!” Orange fireballs appeared above Soleil’s head.

They looked like tiny suns, burning with intense heat. From the fireballs flames fell and swirled into a fiery maelstrom that was headed straight towards me.

I brandished my left hand. “Consume them.”

A wall of shadows appeared in front of me, blocking the firestorm. But it didn’t just block them—it absorbed the flames and sent them to another place.

I had a feeling that a simple wall designed to only obstruct attacks would be destroyed by the blow, so I had Shadow divert the attack instead.

Sun was an incredibly strong power. If it were just simple fire magic, it would still be the strongest among the supernatural powers. If it were Father who had participated in attacking the catastrophe-level monster, it probably would’ve been slain much earlier.

I couldn’t let my guard down against Sun, even if it was Soleil who wielded it.

“Shadow! Pursue.” I waited until her attacks had stopped and then put Shadow on the offensive. Keeping my first deflected attack in mind, this time I increased both the speed and intensity.

I also pinpointed one spot and targeted it multiple times.

Even the strongest barrier could break. After some time, Soleil’s barrier began cracking under my assault, and in response she frantically shot off flames.

Her attack was designed to distract me, but she was too naive. A half-hearted attack like that was incredibly simple for me to dodge with a quick manipulation of Shadow.

I could already see that her attacks were weakening. It seemed that the more she continued firing off successive attacks, the weaker they became. But I knew that wasn’t true. I’d seen Father’s powers several times over the course of many time loops, and on occasion even felt the brunt of them myself.

There was more to Sun than this.

The reason Sun was weak now was clear.

“How dare you, Soleil.”

She stared at me, not speaking.

“You thought I wouldn’t notice? What are you thinking, going easy on your opponent?”

She pressed her mouth in a line. Where did her earlier fighting spirit go?

I didn't feel a hint of malice from her attacks. That flicker of determination I'd seen at the beginning of the fight was now gone. Even her previous attack was just a counter for mine.

"If you don't want to win, then surrender. Otherwise, you'll just get hurt."

"I can't..."

"Because you're following your mother's orders?"

Soleil didn't answer. Obviously she couldn't say yes. Under Shioria's watchful eye Soleil couldn't admit she was only doing what she was told.

Soleil was too sweet and kind, but at the same time, she had a strong will. Once she made up her mind to do something, she wouldn't give up easily. I knew that all too well. Although the thought that she had inherited that trait from Shioria was a bit unsettling.

After all, that's why we were in this farce in the first place.

"It's not just for Mother."

"Are you sure? Then why are you here?"

"To get you back."

"What are you talking about?" I was baffled. She said she was doing it to get me *back*? What in the world did that mean? But what she said next explained everything.

"The sister I know...was a very kind person."

"Well, you must've been mistaken."

"I wasn't! I know because I've watched you all my life! I know that truly, deep inside, you're a kind person! But right now, you seem like you're in pain."

"In pain?"

That was how Soleil saw me? She believed I was truly kind, but was just *pretending* to be strong?

I had to laugh. She was really a poor judge of character.

“I’m acting on my own free will. The only time I was in pain was in the past.”

“Sister!”

“Come on, Soleil. I’ll show you just how wrong you are.”

“Flames of the Sun!” Once again, tiny suns appeared over Soleil’s head. Their size and intensity were clearly different from before. Tears streamed from Soleil’s serious eyes as she clenched her fists with determination.

It seemed as if she was finally going to attack me in earnest. I was inwardly relieved. Because if she didn’t, this whole thing would be pointless.

“Let me see your true power.”

“Here I come! If I win, I want my sister back!”

I had to laugh, even in the face of those huge flames.

Soleil thought I was *kind*. She misunderstood me and made assumptions about my personality. But I wasn’t annoyed by it, strangely enough. Why?

Perhaps a small part of me was actually happy about that misunderstanding.

I closed my eyes and placed my hand over my heart.

“Shadow...consume.”

The sun’s light and flame were closing in on me. But my shadow swallowed everything. It was dark as night, so dark that not even a sliver of light could penetrate. My shadow was a bottomless pit of despair into which light entered, and soundlessly disappeared.

The tiny suns, which had shone so dazzlingly bright, were now gone. Soleil crumpled to her knees.

I slowly walked over to her.

“I win, Soleil.”

“Why have you changed, Sister?” Tears fell from her eyes like rain. To think she was crying on a battlefield before her enemy. It was so pathetic I almost had to laugh.

“I told you, you misunderstood. I haven’t changed at all.”

“That can’t be! I’m certain that you’re possessed by something! Otherwise you wouldn’t have changed so much...!”

“Possessed, you say?”

So that’s what it looked like to her?

She said something similar the day I took Father’s powers away from him. She said she wanted her kind sister back.

Perhaps in her memories, I was kind. But the things that happened before my time loop seemed like a distant memory to me now.

Everyone treated me poorly. Even at home, the only person who ever treated me the same was Soleil.

Even after she found out I was the child of Father’s mistress, she still called me Sister, like it didn’t matter where I came from.

So I always tried to smile and treat her as kindly as possible, which was admirable, if I do say so myself. But back then, I didn’t know anything about the world.

“Soleil, I’m grateful to you.”

“Sister?”

“But I *am* me. You might not believe me. But I haven’t changed. The person standing before you *is* Selene Vixent.”

“I...”

The tears she shed seemed sad and cold. Perhaps the reason I knew that without even touching them was because she was my sister. No—perhaps because I still had some guilt left inside.

Until the very end she had adored me, yet still I broke her heart. She’d gotten roped into this fight and now was left in tears.

But still, I had to keep moving forward. I had to trample over the ground that was wet with her tears in order to escape from this time loop.

I looked towards the judge.

“I won.”

“Y-Yes! Because Lady Soleil has lost the will to fight, I declare Lady Selene the winner!” The judge’s voice rang out through the coliseum. Even though the match had been decided, there were no cheers or applause. Only silence followed the echo of the judge’s voice.

This ridiculous farce was finally over. I let out a little sigh and then heard the sound of someone clapping. I turned and looked to see who it was. It was *her*.

“Congratulations, Selene.”

“Mother...”

“You did well, Soleil. It was a wonderful fight.”

“You’re disgusting,” I blurted out. Those words had been building up inside of me for a very long time, so I must have been quite angry to let them out now.

We won the battle and Shioria lost, yet she *still* had that same smile on her face. She didn’t think she’d lost at all. In fact, she was praising both of us. Her attitude, her words...everything about her made me sick.

“As per our agreement, I will retain my position as head of house,” I said.

“Yes, of course. You did well.”

“But allow me to ask you, as head of house. Shioria Vixent...what was your true motive for arranging this farce?”

“Now, calling it a farce is cruel. Your little sister tried so hard to get you back!”

“Knock it off. I’m sure that was all because of you.”

Shioria simply smirked.

Soleil’s kindness was too innocent. There was no way she’d have the idea to fight me. I was absolutely certain that Shioria had given her the order, and she could not refuse.

But what had she gained from doing all this? I still had no idea. That was why I asked.

“Answer me. That’s an order from your head of house.”

“What a scary face! You’re so much like Ralde in that way, you know?”

“Don’t compare me to him.”

“Ha ha. You want to know *why* I did all this? Fine, I’ll tell you. This is as good of a time as any.” Shioria had that same creepy smile plastered to her face as she looked around. I followed her gaze. “Soleil did well. I really wish we could have overthrown you, though.”

“What are you talking about?”

“But this is enough. There’s no more reason to fight after that fierce match between Earth and Water. Soleil has lost the will to fight, and you seem tired as well.”

“You still haven’t told me your motive.”

The eerie atmosphere around her continued to deepen.

At first I thought I was mistaken. But as time went on, it grew harder to believe that I was. Because I wasn’t the only one seeing it. Dier had been behind me this whole time, but he sensed it too.

“This feeling...” Dier said.

“What is it?”

There was some kind of dark aura emanating from her body. It resembled the power of Shadow when I cloaked Dier, yet it was still clearly different.

I knew this presence. Because I had fought against it before.

The aura coming from Shioria was...

“A…monster?”

“Ha ha. It’s time.” Shioria spread out her arms and a black hole appeared in the earth behind her. And out came a group of strange monsters. They walked on four legs and had sharp fangs like wolves, staring at us with reddish black eyes. There were more than twenty of them.

There were also some monsters who had wings. They looked like eagles, but their bones were visible, as if they stuck in a state of perpetual rot.

At any rate, they were creepy, and each one had the eyes of a monster.

“You really did well, Soleil! Thanks to you, killing the supernatural guardians

will be easy!”

“M-Mother?”

The smile Shioria gave Soleil sent tingles down my spine. How had Shioria summoned those monsters, and how did she have the same power as a monster?

Nothing but questions filled my mind, and I couldn’t make sense of it. But this was no time to worry about all that.

“Shadow Cage!”

“Ha ha. You’re so quick to act.”

I tried to capture both Shioria and the monsters, but I failed. Shioria retreated quite a distance back, and the monsters scattered in all four directions.

And instantly Soleil and I were surrounded.

“Selene!”

“Dier!”

“Damn it! These monsters...”

The monsters separated Dier from us. Although we were apart, I knew I didn’t have to worry about him. There were a lot of monsters, but they weren’t even close to being as powerful as that catastrophic-level monster.

I could fight them with my own power.

“Don’t worry about me! Instead...”

“E-Eek! Why are there monsters here?!”

I looked towards the edge of the coliseum. The judge was on the ground and looked as if he were about to be attacked by monsters at any moment. He was here because he’d been hired by Shioria. Honestly, I felt sorry for him.

“Help the poor man,” I instructed Dier.

“All right. Don’t let your guard down.”

“Same goes for you.”

I faced off against Shioria and her ever-present eerie grin. She looked like a

human, and she was, certainly, Shioria Vixent. Was there a monster who was able to take on the shape of a human?

Even if there were, it would be hard to explain her behavior. Her tone of voice, gestures, and so on were all exactly like Shioria. And yet, she seemed as if she were a monster who was just masquerading as a human.

“Ha ha. You’re really thinking about it, aren’t you? Wondering what I am. Am I a monster? A human? You don’t know, do you?”

I just stared at her.

“I’ll make an exception and tell you. The answer is *both*.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, as you can see, I am human. I am the same Shioria Vixent you know so well. But that’s not all. I have both the power and the will of a monster.”

“The *will* of a monster?”

I didn’t understand. But she didn’t seem to be a monster who was pretending to be Shioria. She *was* the Shioria Vixent we knew. My stepmother and Soleil’s...

“Is that really you, Mother...?” Soleil asked.

“Yes, it’s me, Soleil. Are you surprised?”

“How did you get such power? Did you become a monster, Mother?” Soleil’s subsequent scream was filled with sorrow.

That was her biological mother. Her own flesh and blood was commanding a group of monsters. I could understand why witnessing such a frightening sight would be hard for Soleil to believe.

Shioria smiled at Soleil. “It’s me, Soleil.”

Soleil gasped.

“Give it up, Soleil!” I said.

“Sister...”

I stepped in front of a flustered Soleil, protecting her. “Can’t you see? This isn’t the mother we once knew.”

Soleil looked up at me in disbelief.

“Can’t you feel it?” I asked her. “The power emanating from her. She’s a monster now.”

“Ha ha. What a cruel thing to say towards your own mother!” Shioria exclaimed.

“You’re not my mother,” I said. “You’re just a stranger.”

Shioria’s eyebrow quirked up and then she smirked at me. “That’s true. You’re not my child. You’re that disgusting woman’s spawn! And now I can finally get rid of you!” Her face was filled with joy.

The malice she felt toward me was palpable. And right then all the monsters at her command charged towards me.

“Shadow Thorn.” The shadow around me expanded, forming countless thorns that shot up from the earth, skewering the monsters.

“You really think these monsters are enough to kill me?”

“Hm, I see. Well then, it’s time for my secret weapon.”

Shioria summoned another black hole. This time, a creature with eight legs emerged. Its legs undulated and had little suckers attached to them like a giant octopus.

Shioria raised her right hand and the giant octopus rushed towards me. I quickly transformed my shadow into a dome to block the octopus. It fell with a massive impact, cracking the ground. Its legs lashed towards me once, twice, three times.

Shioria laughed. “And for how long can you hold your little shield?”

“Don’t underestimate me.”

I transformed the shadow to create an octopus just like the one Shioria controlled. The eight shadowy legs intertwined with the octopus’s legs, taking the attacks for me.

“You’re just playing with shadows and copying off of me. Not bad, but it won’t be enough.”

My shadow octopus wasn't able to completely stop the real octopus. Shioria's octopus was stronger, so several of the shadow octopus's legs broke off.

I quickly regenerated the shadow octopus's legs and continued having them absorb the attacks.

"How admirable."

"Sister! Let me help!"

"Don't move!" I yelled at Soleil. I knew she wanted to fight, but she'd already used up half of her power fighting me. She wouldn't be able to stand a chance fighting against Shioria and her monsters, and it was my fault.

This battle was tougher than I expected, and I was beginning to panic. Soleil should have been able to protect herself. But I was the one who told her not to hold back against me, so it was my fault she'd drained her powers. That was why I needed to protect her now.

It was my responsibility.

"Heh." I had to laugh. As her older sister, it was my responsibility to protect my younger sister...even though I had no room to claim such a right at this point.

"Sister..."

"Don't worry. Just stay close to me."

"All right."

"Don't worry. I'll kill the both of you together." Shioria's attacks intensified. The octopus continued attacking us along with the monsters I hadn't killed earlier. Dier was busy evacuating the judge from the arena, so I couldn't count on his protection.

I wondered if Gordov and Alexei had sensed there was a disturbance. No, even if they had, neither of them were in any condition to fight. And this had all been part of her plan. She wanted to kill us when we were all at our weakest.

I finally realized the source of her unfailing confidence—from the very beginning, she had never intended on winning this battle. She just wanted us to fight so we would tire each other out. And we'd completely fallen for it.

But who could have foreseen that?

Who could have guessed that their own flesh and blood would summon monsters, even wield their power, and then turn them against you?

“Who are you?”

“I am Shioria. I’ve told you this.”

“I’m not asking you. I’m asking the monster’s will that’s inside of you.”

“Ha ha...”

Shioria gave me a confident smile and then placed a hand on her chest. “I am Shioria...and Agia.”

“Agia...is that the name of the monster?”

“That’s right. That will be the last name you hear before you die.”

The shadow wall protecting us shattered. I took Soleil in my arms and was about to escape through the shadow, but one of the octopus’s legs stretched out behind me. Its legs weren’t just like whips—the ends of them were sharp.

I was so distracted by trying to escape with Soleil that I had given the enemy an opening. I didn’t make it to the shadow in time.

And then that old, familiar feeling came over me again.

Death.

“Goodbye, you wretched child.”

“Sister!”

Ah, so I’m going to die here?

Dier would be angry if he found out. Or would he be sad? Where would I start over? In any case, I hoped my next loop went smoother.

Resigned, I closed my eyes. But for some reason the pain never came, and I didn’t die. I opened my eyes. And I couldn’t believe what I saw.

“What...?”

“Argh...”

“Goodness! Why did you interrupt me, Ralde?”

“Father...?”

He’d blocked the attack before it reached us.

He’d used his own body as a shield and grasped the octopus’s leg. Blood gushed from his mouth as he gritted his teeth.

The person who protected me was...Father.



“But why?”

“Father!” Soleil screamed.

The sound of it snapped me back to reality. I expanded Shadow as far as it would go and along its edges created countless blades that sliced up the octopus’s legs.

“Well, you really did it this time!” Shioria said.

I faced her. So many emotions were welling up from deep inside of me.

“But too bad for you. This time, I will *skewer you alive*.”

“You...”

“I won’t let you!”

A voice rang out, and suddenly something shot down from the sky like a meteor. It gouged out the earth and stood in front of us protectively.

“Sorry I’m late. You okay?”

“Dier...”

Dier had come to our rescue. He was clutching a bloody sword in his right hand. Normally he wouldn’t use his powers in front of Father or Soleil, but Dier knew that Shioria was a monster, and he also knew that this was no time to be hiding his powers.

“You’re Selene’s…ha ha. I see.”

“What *are* you?” Dier asked.

“That’s what I’d like to know! It looks like *another* supernatural power we didn’t know about besides Shadow exists!”

We? It almost sounds like...

“There are more of you? So you didn’t plan this yourself.”

“Didn’t I? No matter. Even if I couldn’t achieve my goal, I still got very valuable information. I’ll just have to take your lives next time.”

A murky hole appeared at Shioria’s feet and slowly, her body sank into it.

“You’re just going to run away?”

“Yes. The situation has changed. Feel free to chase after me if you’d like. If you *can*, that is.”

Dier swung his bloody sword and attacked Shioria. However, an octopus leg blocked his path and ultimately, he was unable to reach her.

“Damn it!”

“I’ll play with you next time. Goodbye...Selene, Soleil...Ralde.”

“Shio...ria...” Ralde muttered.

“Don’t get the wrong idea Ralde. I still love you.” And with that, Shioria disappeared into the hole. Once she was gone, the octopus also retreated into the hole.

The hole closed up, and with it, the only thing left were monster corpses.

“She ran away. I don’t sense her anywhere,” Dier said.

“That’s what it looks like,” I said.

“Are you hurt?”

“No. You came at the perfect time. You saved us.”

If Dier hadn’t come when he did, Shioria really might’ve killed us. If I’d been alone it would’ve been a different matter, but having to protect Soleil had put me at a disadvantage. I wasn’t blaming her, of course. I just wished I could have done more.

All this bloodshed, for what?

“I’m sorry. If I’d come sooner...” Dier said.

“It’s not your fault.”

It was because I was weak.

“Father! Father!” Soleil cried.

“Ugh...”

Father was on the ground, and Soleil frantically called his name over and over again. He had a large wound in his stomach and next to him was a small pool of blood, slowly growing.

“Just wait, Father! I’ll use my power!” Soleil gave the protection of Sun to Father. A warm light enveloped him. A gentle, warm power flowed through her. But the wound didn’t heal. It was still huge and gaping.

“It’s no use. Even if you use that protection to boost another person, you can’t use it to heal.”

“Then you do something, Sister!”

I shook my head.

“My power cannot heal.”

Soleil gasped.

Even if we used both the powers of Sun and Shadow, we would be unable to close such a deep wound. If we had the guardian of the forest here—but that was impossible.

There was no way to heal such a deep wound. It was so deep one could almost see the earth beneath him.

“It’s no use.”

“Father!”

“My pain has lessened...thank you, Soleil.”

“Father...” Soleil’s tears dripped onto Father’s cheek.

Father tried to move his arm. I wondered if he wanted to wipe away her tears. However, he wasn’t strong enough.

Father was going to die. I was surprised he was even still conscious with those injuries.

Even though I knew that, I had to ask. “Why did you save me?”

“Father...”

“That attack was directed towards me, not Soleil. So why did you protect me? I thought you hated me, Father.”

“Heh. Don’t get the wrong idea.” Father spoke with trembling lips. He was too weak to move his head, but he tried his best to look at my face. “I...did hate

you.”

“I know that.”

He made it very clear throughout all my time loops just how much he hated me. So why would he try to save someone he hated so much?

His lips moved slowly. “I thought I hated you...but...I never did.”

“What does that mean...?” I looked at him in surprise.

I’d always thought he hated me, and that was why he was so cruel to me.

“If you didn’t hate me, then...?”

“I didn’t hate you...I was just frustrated. Because every time I saw you, I remembered...her face.”

“My mother’s face?”

“Yes. Your mother...Nina’s face.”

I didn’t know much about my mother. She died right after she gave birth to me. That’s what I’d been told, anyway. Of course I’d never met her, and I’d never even heard her name before. No one would tell me even when I asked. So this was the first time I’d learned my mother’s name.

“Nina...my mother’s name was Nina.”

“I never told you?”

“No. Not even when I asked you.”

“That doesn’t surprise me...when I say her name, I remember...even though we only spent a short time together, I gained so much.”

He lifted his blank eyes up towards the sky as if remembering. He looked slightly happy. It made me curious about his time with my mother.

But something else I realized was...

“You loved her, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did. From the bottom of my heart.”

I stared at him.

“Just as much as Shioria.”

“Father...”

Father looked over at Soleil. His voice was weaker now, and his breathing had slowed. He was approaching death...slowly.

Dier sensed it too. He slowly slipped out of our vision so as not to disturb us. It was very considerate of him.

Unlike me, both Soleil and Dier were too sweet for their own good.

“I don’t know much about my mother. I never met her, and I never knew her name until now.”

“Selene...”

“I always wondered why I was born. No one wanted me.”

“That’s...not true.” Father’s voice was barely a whisper now. I had to strain to hear him. Both Soleil and I seemed to hold our breath as we hung onto Father’s every word.

“What do you mean?”

“Nina...was thrilled to have you. No other person could have been happier to bring a child into a world than she.”

“Sure there was. You, with Soleil.”

“I was happy Nina was expecting, too.”

I was in disbelief.

“The person I loved was bearing my child. Of course I was happy. But...once I lost her, I...I took it out on you. I covered up my sadness with anger.” Tears of regret flowed from his eyes. “Selene...I’m so sorry.”

I drew in a sharp breath.

I’d *never* heard him say that before.

Not once in all my time loops had Father ever apologized to me, nor spoken to me in such a tender voice. What in the world was going on?!

“Sister...”

“It’s too late for that now, Father.”

“That’s precisely why I’m saying it...this...is my last chance.” His death had begun.

Very slowly, as if they didn’t want to fall, tears filled my eyes and slid down my cheeks.

“Selene...I want you to live freely from now on.”

“What?”

“Yes, I know. You’re already living freely. And that’s good. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

His voice was getting smaller and smaller.

My tears slid past my lips down to my chin.

“Live freely, as you please...just as your mother did.”

“I don’t need to be told to do so. I’ll do it anyway.”

“I see...then I can...rest easy.”

“Father!”

“Take care of Soleil...”

“I will...”

As Father uttered his final wish, my tears finally fell to the ground.

Soleil’s cries of anguish filled the coliseum.

This whole thing had been a farce, from beginning to end. And I was the biggest fool of all. Because I never realized that this whole time, I’d been protected. I’d been loved.

Interlude: Time With My Sister

I thought my peaceful days would last forever.

After I went through my first time loop, I was excited at the possibilities this miracle had opened up to me.

But once it happened over and over again, I began to think of it not as a miracle, but as hell.

It never ended, even after I died. Over and over again, I had to endure the same painful experiences. No one helped me. I was all alone. Tragedy always awaited me.

In order to overcome endless tragedy, I rose up against it.

I separated myself from the weak person I'd become and decided to live only for myself. I never once thought I'd made the wrong decision in that matter. Even now, I thought that was the right choice.

But at the same time, something was missing.

What was it?

Dialogue, compromise, understanding...all of that was missing. And *we* couldn't face each other until we got that back.

It wasn't just my mistake. It was a sin that we had both committed.

Those were my thoughts as I sat beside Soleil's bed.

"Nngh..."

"Are you awake?"

"Sister...?"

She looked at me vacantly, then glanced around at her surroundings, finally realizing she was back in her bedroom. She tried to sit up slowly.

"Take it easy. You don't have to force yourself to get up."

"I'm fine...why was I asleep?"

“You don’t remember? After the incident, you were beside yourself and fainted.”

“Oh...” She let out a little voice as if remembering.

When our father died, she buried her face against his chest and cried. No matter how many times she called his name, he didn’t answer. She had lost both her parents right before her very eyes. Fighting with me had drained her strength, and once everything was over, the tension keeping her together through it all had released, and she fainted.

Even before she fought me, I could tell she had been on guard for a very long time. But it all unraveled. Everything she’d suppressed was released once she saw our father die, and she’d passed out and fallen into a deep sleep.

Now that she had remembered, she should understand that sometimes tragedies—unforgettable misfortunes—happened in real life, and aren’t just the stuff of dreams.

Her mother turned into a monster and killed our father. All that was left was herself, and me, her half sister.

“Soleil.”

“What happened to everyone else?”

“They’re all fine.”

“Are they? I’m glad to hear it.” Soleil looked relieved.

At that time, only Soleil and I remained in the coliseum. Dier had evacuated the judge to safety, and we had only been saved because he came back.

After that, Dier went to check on Alexei and Gordov, just in case. Shioria—no, the monster calling itself Agia—was definitely after the supernatural guardians.

After she killed us, I’m sure she had planned to kill Gordov and Alexei while they were already so weakened from their fight.

The only reason she hadn’t succeeded in killing us was Dier. So I was afraid she had switched gears and gone to finish off Alexei and Gordov instead.

But they were safe.

They had recovered in a hospital near the royal castle. Gordov was already fully healed, and it would only be a matter of time before the same could be said about Alexei. They were both tough. Even if they had been attacked by Agia, they probably would have been able to safely evacuate.

So her plan had failed from the very beginning.

However, I still questioned her behavior. If she was so powerful, why go to so much trouble to challenge me to a duel? If she had used her position wisely, she should have been able to achieve her goals unnoticed. It would have been especially easy to assassinate me and Soleil. If I were her, I would've killed Soleil first. She would have been the easiest target, and her ability to boost other guardians' abilities was the most dangerous.

The more I thought about it, the more contradictory her actions seemed. It was as if her wills were split inside of herself. As if she had two consciousnesses. Maybe the real Shioria was still in there somewhere. I could hope for that, but that didn't change the fact that she was my enemy.

Dier passed on the details of the incident to Gordov and Alexei. A human had become a monster—or their consciousness might have even been hijacked by a monster—which was unprecedented.

I was sure the royal castle would be in a big panic.

I was also certain that Euclis was worried, and I wanted to see him as soon as possible, but...

"You're very strong, Soleil," I said.

"What?"

"The moment you woke up, you were more concerned about others than yourself. Any ordinary person wouldn't be able to do that after such an incident."

She didn't answer.

She had lost two of her closest relatives at the same time. Perhaps she was even more emotionally exhausted than I thought she was, and she was just trying hard to hide it.

The sight of her was unbearable.

“I’ll be going now.”

“What?”

“I was just waiting for you to wake up. I’ll check on you later.”

“P-Please wait!” Soleil cried out.

I stood up and was about to leave but she grabbed my arm. I turned towards her.

“I-I want to talk to you more.”

I wanted to tell her I didn’t have time for that, but she was looking at me with teary, pleading eyes, so I acquiesced.

“Just a few minutes.”

“Thank you.”

I sat back down beside her bed. Silence reigned for a few moments.

“I thought you wanted to talk?”

“Oh, um...I’m not sure what to talk about.”

I sighed.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine...I understand.”

I wondered how long it had been since Soleil and I had talked one-on-one like this. With each loop, the time I spent alone had increased. Most of the time I’d be locked up in my room, not talking to anyone else. At a certain point, I barely saw Soleil.

Even during this loop, I was so focused on my goal that I’d barely seen her—I’d probably talked to Dier much more than my own sister. And now that we were alone together, I wasn’t sure what to say.

“We’re not very similar, are we?” I ended up asking.

“Do you think so?” she asked.

“How are we alike?”

“Well...”

“The fact that you can’t come up with an answer says it all.”

We *were* nothing alike. Our appearances, personalities, perspectives—they were all different. Even though we’d grown up in the same mansion, we hadn’t grown up in the same environment.

We didn’t share the same mother, and just because of that one fact, we ended up living very different lives.

The only thing in common was that we had the same father.

Looking back on it now, it would be more apt to say that we were strangers. But...

“We’re sisters.”

“Yes.” She answered me weakly, but clearly. Then she slowly closed her eyes. “I thought of something.”

“What?”

“Something we have in common.”

“What is it?”



She put a hand over her heart and whispered, “Father loved us both.”

“It seems that way.”

I still couldn’t believe it. His final words had been that he didn’t hate me. That he was happy I’d been born. It was shocking, but he had been telling the truth.

“I wish he would’ve told me that,” I said.

“He was awkward about those kinds of things.”

“True.”

“You remind me of him in that way, Sister.”

“You might be right.”

I hated to admit it, but in emotional matters, I *was* just like him. I gave an exasperated chuckle and then stood up. “I’ll be going now.”

I once again turned around and walked towards the door.

“Sister!” she called to stop me.

I reached for the door and froze. I listened to what she had to say without turning around.

“What are you going to do now?”

I thought about it for a few seconds.

I thought about Father’s last words. We weren’t close, and I’d be lying if I said I loved him.

But with his dying breath, he had hopes and dreams for his daughters.

“I won’t change. I’m going to live life the way I please.” I wouldn’t be bound to anything. I would just live the way I wanted to.

That’s what Father wanted me to do.

“So you should do the same, Soleil.”

I opened the door.

“Live your life freely. That’s what I’m going to do. And no one can say a thing about it.”

“All right,” she responded quietly.

Wounds that would never heal ran deep, and weren’t easily overcome. We still had a lot of problems left. But there would be nothing holding us back.

We could live however we pleased.

It wouldn’t be so terrible, having that in common.

Chapter Four: My Only Family

Two days had passed since Shioria's betrayal.

It took some time to settle all the confusion. I waited until things had calmed down and then went with Dier to the room in the basement of the castle, using Shadow to get there. Euclis was already waiting for us.

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

"I'm sorry we're late," I said.

"Thanks for coming even though you're busy. I know we keep asking you to meet us." Dier smiled at his brother, then looked at the stone slab behind him.

Euclis came over beside us and stared at the portion of the slab which had changed color. "You were able to absorb the power of Sun, weren't you?" he asked.

"Yes, it's right here," I answered, placing a hand on my chest.

After my battle with Shioria, Soleil was in such emotional distress that she fainted. Luckily it was only stress-induced, and there was nothing seriously wrong with her. She had no outward injuries, so there was no need to heal her. I went ahead and brought her back home to her room in the mansion.

And in the process of doing so, I absorbed a portion of her powers. She probably had no idea I did so.

Dier was a bit exasperated with me and teased me, saying I was acting like a thief again. But personally, I thought it was better for Soleil if I absorbed her powers from her without her knowing.

After her mother's betrayal and our father's death, Soleil was in deep emotional distress. It seemed cruel to subject her to even more worrisome things.

I closed my eyes and thought. Soleil had her own life. Father's last words were that he wanted me to live my life freely, but he was probably also talking to Soleil.

“Let’s get started.”

“We’ll finally find out the mystery behind the stone slab, huh?”

“That’s right.”

I was certain that the slab was hiding the secret behind our supernatural powers. Even when I looked at the portion that had changed color, I still wasn’t sure what was drawn there.

The sun and moon had disappeared, and the shadow had black smeared all over it. The figure in the center, who appeared to be the king, still retained his original shape despite the color change.

But it was incomplete. Only with the transformation of the surrounding guardians would the stone slab be complete.

I slowly lifted my right hand towards the slab. Inside me were the powers of all six supernatural guardians, those tasked with protecting the king.

When we tested this out before, we were unable to see any change in the stone slab, and time rewound to the previous day.

Would things go smoothly this time, or not? I was conflicted; half of me was filled with anticipation, half of me with anxiety.

As Dier and Euclis watched over me, I gently touched the stone.

“Please...”

Please let this work.

The moment my hands touched the stone, I felt it sucking out the power I had inside of me. And then the slab began to change colors.

The figures of the six guardians gradually became smeared with black and disappeared.

Halfway through the change I realized that must mean that we had satisfied the conditions. Before, there was no change, and I’d woken up in my bed the previous day.

But that didn’t happen this time. The slab had changed. However, I didn’t *understand* the change. The slab slowly darkened and changed in every detail,

but the only thing left was...

“That’s all?” I blurted out.

Now that the slab had changed colors, the only thing left there was the king. There was no other surrounding scenery, no guardians. The king was on bended knee, in a pose that looked like he was embracing himself.

Like a child enduring a deep loneliness alone.

“It’s completely changed, I think,” Dier said.

“It seems that way. But what does it mean? Oh! Brother, Selene! Look at the left part of that figure’s chest!” Euclis exclaimed, pointing to the corresponding spot on the slab.

We both squinted at it. We were able to immediately spot the change Euclis had discovered. Although the slab had turned almost entirely black, only the left side of the figure’s chest was white.

It was drawn as if there was a hole carved out of his chest.

“Is that supposed to be his heart? Or just a hole?” I asked.

“It’s not clear. Everything else is black, but this is white...it has to mean something,” Euclis said.

“I agree. I’d hoped something else would be drawn on it, but I guess not,” Dier said.

Honestly, I was disappointed.

It had been a rough road that led us to this point—calling it dramatic wouldn’t even be an exaggeration. I had to make contact with every guardian—even fight some of them—and in doing so reveal their secrets. I even had to face my own relatives. I thought I’d finally obtained the key.

And now I was left with only this baffling change in the stone slab. The whole thing was quite anti-climactic.

Why couldn’t we have at least discovered something revolutionary about our supernatural powers?

With a sigh, I touched the stone slab. And a bright light suddenly shot forth

from the spot I'd touched.

"Wh-What?"

"Light...? Selene!"

"That's..."

The light enveloped me.

It illuminated us. The light seemed to go straight through my eyes into my brain. It was no ordinary light. At once an unfamiliar image was projected into my brain.

♦ ♦ ♦

The time was centuries past.

The world was peaceful. There were small spats here and there, but by and large people helped each other out. They refined their crafts and steadily began to create a culture.

Little by little, the population increased until it had grown into a large kingdom.

After the kingdom was established, people's lives became richer and safer. But only at the beginning.

Those small spats turned into battles between the rulers of various kingdoms, which developed into all-out wars with the citizens' lives at stake.

The wars began as a way to acquire new technology, skills, and information from the other kingdoms and make use of them for each kingdom's own development. For the sake of further prosperity, much blood was shed.

Such things were only natural.

There were millions of people in the world. Not only was the world full of people of all different shapes and sizes, but each person had different thoughts and personalities. No two people were exactly alike.

Even though all these people lived their lives in the same place at the same

time, that didn't mean they would grow up to have the same thoughts as others. And that was why those conflicts arose.

People fought amongst themselves. Psychologically, they desired peace, yet paradoxically believed war was necessary to obtain peace.

Then, a turning point came to the world.

No—not exactly a turning point. It would be more apt to call it a tragedy.

An entire kingdom was destroyed in a single night. It was caused neither through losing a war to another kingdom nor an internal political collapse—they were attacked by some unknown creature.

The creature was strange. It wasn't an animal, or an insect, or a human. It was some kind of new creature. Due to its cruel and violent nature, the people called it a monster.

That's right; for the first time, monsters had appeared in this world.

No one knew how or why the monsters suddenly appeared. But before they could really come to terms with what had happened, they faced a decision. Would they continue fighting amongst themselves, or would they band together, and unite to deal with the threats of the monster?

They quickly came to a conclusion.

The kingdoms immediately issued a cease-fire and stood together to fight the monster.

Now that they had a common enemy, those who once fought each other came together as allies. Ironically, thanks to this new battle, the long-enduring war had finally come to an end. That was how great of a threat the monster had posed.

But now they took on the monsters together.

Seraph, Victor, Harist, Rafai, Rufus, Agia.

They were the original six monsters, and one by one, they destroyed kingdoms. Although the humans outnumbered them, they were too weak to defeat them.

The people, once faced with the reality that their new enemy was overwhelmingly stronger than them, were disheartened. And so they then made a wish within their hearts.

Please, give humanity a light of hope for the future.

Please let someone who can defeat the evil monsters appear.

And their wishes came to fruition.

Many kingdoms were destroyed, until there was only one remaining in history. And in that lone kingdom, a prince was born, one with a special power.

He could see the future, crush the earth, mold water, manipulate the atmosphere, use the blessings of the forest to heal, and wield the brilliance of the sun.

That power, which was certainly supernatural, was the very hope that the people had been praying for.

Through the prince, who had then become the king, humanity was able to gain enough power and energy to fight against the beasts. However, the king alone wasn't enough. In destroying the other kingdoms, the six monsters grew even more powerful.

Therefore, in order to protect himself and his people, the king created new supernatural beings with his powers: six supernatural beings, to oppose the six monsters.

Under the king, the guardians engaged in deadly battles with the primordial monsters and after four years, the monsters were finally subjugated.

The guardians became heroes who had saved the human race. Since all the other kingdoms had been destroyed, the king of the one remaining kingdom became the ruler of everyone on earth.

And the six guardians remained by his side. From that moment on, they became the king's guardians.

♦ ♦ ♦

Back to the present. Only a few seconds had passed.

I stood there, processing the information that had been pushed into my mind. The bright light disappeared and we all stared absently at the stone slab.

Crkkk, craaaaak!

It took several moments for us to realize that the slab was cracking.

“Selene!” Dier screamed my name. At the same time, the slab made a tremendous noise and shattered into pieces, remnants of it piling up on the floor.

If Dier had been one second too late, I would’ve been buried beneath those heavy pieces of rock. He’d grabbed my arm and pulled me to safety.

“Phew, that was a close one.”

“Thanks for saving me.”

“You’re welcome. Unusual for you to actually thank someone for once.”

“Can you let me go now?” I asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

I felt a little embarrassed. I stepped away from Dier and looked down at the remnants of the shattered stone slab.

“That vision...” I said.
“Did you see it too?” Dier asked.

“Wait, you saw it too, Dier?”

“Yeah. It was a record of when the guardians were born. Or rather, a memory.”

Apparently I wasn’t the only one who had seen the vision. I thought it was because I touched the slab, but it seemed like everyone who was bathed in the light saw the memory. So that meant *he* saw it too.

“You saw it too, didn’t you?” I asked Euclis.

“Y-Yes.”

“Are you all right?” Dier asked.

“Yes. It happened suddenly, so I was just startled.” Euclis answered Dier’s concern with a smile. He seemed bewildered. And that was only natural, after having information forced into your brain like that.

Dier and I talked through what we saw.

“So that was the memory of when the guardians were created.”

“Yes. The monsters were born first, and the king and the guardians were born to fight them.”

“I suppose the king was born from the people’s wishes.”

“That’s what it sounded like. And that’s what it felt like too.”

It felt like someone was telling us a story by showing us those memories. I wasn’t sure who. Maybe it was a memory left behind from that first king.

The now destroyed slab had one solitary king standing in the middle of it. Perhaps he was the one who had created the slab in the first place.

“We know the important things now, though,” Dier said. “The king created the guardians. And at the very least, the supernatural powers originated from the king himself.”

“That’s right. Moon and Shadow must’ve come later,” I remarked.

Though it felt like the memory was incomplete.

What happened after the monsters were defeated and humanity was saved? Was there peace, or more wars?

It said humanity was saved, so I assumed that all conflict had ceased.

I thought back upon the story of the moon guardian that Euclis told me a while ago. The moon guardian was one of a pair of twins belonging to the king.

So if the memory we just saw was correct, that means that afterwards, the king and the moon guardian fought over the right to rule the kingdom.

“I wonder why they didn’t mention the shadow guardian, though?” Dier asked.

“I agree. If our powers blossomed all on the same day, then wouldn’t the shadow guardian have been created the same day as the moon guardian?” I

replied.

“Maybe. I wish we could watch the ending.”

“Doesn’t seem like that’s possible.” I bent down to touch a piece of the broken slab. Nothing happened, of course. There was no bright light and no sense of my powers were being absorbed.

It didn’t seem like we’d get any further information from this slab.

However, we’d received plenty of clues about the guardians, along with names that I was focused on.

“What should we do now?” Dier mused.

“Well, we have clues. Don’t you remember the other name that Shioria called herself?”

“The other name...oh!” It took a few moments, but then Dier’s eyes widened.

Shioria said there was a monster inside of her. And when I asked what its name was, it told me a name that was included in the memory I just saw.

It was the name of one of the six original monsters.

Seraph, Victor, Harist, Rafai, Rufus, and...

“Agia,” I said. “That’s the name the monster gave me.”

“I remember. Do you really think that’s one of the original monsters, though?” Dier asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe they just coincidentally share the same name. But I definitely think it’s possible that they *are* the same.”

A human which had changed into a monster. I’d never heard of such a phenomenon. I was faced with that same question as before, though—what exactly *was* a monster? Where did monsters come from?

It was probably a headache for researchers focusing on the topic, but to me it was a light of hope. An unprecedented case...a memory of fighting one of the original beasts.

I had to think that it wasn’t a coincidence.

Dier's profile was filled with expectation.

"Not only that, but if there's a connection between Shioria and the primordial monster..."

"Then that creature's the closest thing we have to figuring out what things were really like back then, the true nature of monsters, and what our supernatural powers actually are. We can try to ask her directly."

Of course, she might not know.

The primordial monsters were defeated by the king and the six guardians. If there were no memories left of such a thing, we might not get any further information besides the memory we just saw.

But if that thing inside Shioria was one of the original monsters, then it had either survived until the present day or had been revived somehow.

Either way, it had long surpassed a human's lifespan. So it was very possible that it knew many things we did not. In fact, I'd bet on it.

The stone slab was destroyed and no further information could be gleaned from it. All we'd discovered was the existence of the six primordial monsters, and what happened the day the king created the guardians.

All of the supernatural powers we had today seemed to originate from that first king. We needed some new information to move things forward. The more we learned about the supernatural powers, the higher the possibility that we might be able to unravel the mystery behind my time loops and Dier's immortality.

It felt like we had taken a very long detour to get closer to our goals and I was feeling excited about it.

"We need to capture Shioria and ask her about all this," I said.

"Are you sure?" Dier asked me.

"What? Don't tell me you're getting cold feet now."

"That's not it. It's just...she's your and Soleil's mother." Dier gave me a concerned look. He was always so innocent.

I smiled faintly. “That’s exactly why we need to do this.”

“Selene...”

“This is a family problem,” I told him, “so we should deal with it as a family.”

That’s what I wanted to do. Otherwise, I felt like I wouldn’t be able to move forward.

After I made that decision, I suppressed the burning urgency to do something right away and took some deep breaths. Then I turned towards Euclis.

“Euclis, have you discovered anything about Shioria?”

He didn’t answer. He seemed to be spacing out. He wasn’t responding to my question, just staring blankly at the remains of the stone slab. This time Dier spoke to him.

“Euclis?”

“What? Ah, what is it, Brother?”

“Selene was asking you a question.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was thinking about something.” He gave me an innocent smile. I asked what he was thinking about and he frowned a bit, then said he was worried about what to do with the slab.

“Just leave it there,” I said. “We’re the only ones who can come in here, right?”

“That’s true. I definitely wouldn’t let anyone else in.”

“I don’t blame you for worrying, though. It’s not like we tried to break it.”

“That’s right...I’ll try not worry about it,” Euclis said with a smile. I wondered if he really felt reassured or not.

For some reason I just felt like he had something else on his mind. I was curious, but I decided not to ask.

Instead, I repeated the question I asked before. “I want to know what’s going on with Shioria.”

“Yes. We haven’t discovered any valuable information about Shioria

Vixent...and the monster Agia. I have knights searching all over the capital for them," Euclis said.

"If you can't find her, then try looking outside of the capital," Dier offered in reply. "She's either the left the kingdom or is in hiding."

"I'd be willing to bet that she's just hiding, actually," I said. "She's after us guardians. I'd find it hard to believe she'd leave the capital when we're all here."

Shioria must still be in hiding, waiting for the time when she could catch the guardians off guard. That was my hunch, anyway. And Dier happened to agree with me.

"Worst case scenario, we should be prepared for the other monsters to be alive too," Dier said. "If she's one in the same as a primordial monster, it's possible the others have reived as well."

"That's true," I said. "But I don't think we need to worry about that right away."

"Why not?" Dier asked.

"Because Shioria alone was trying to trap us by herself."

If the other monsters had been revived, then she would've worked together with them to attack us. And the only reasons I could think of for why she hadn't done that was that she was the only one who had revived so far, or that the monsters themselves had different goals.

Either way, she currently wasn't at a place where she'd be able to work together with them.

"So she's working alone?" Euclis asked.

"Yes. It seemed like Shioria can summon the monster," I said, "so I'm not sure you could call that working alone."

"I can take care of a monster like that alone," Dier said.

"That would be very helpful. So you'll protect us?" I asked him.

"Leave it to me. But first..."

It seemed like Dier and I had the same idea about things: before we could fight Shioria, we had to find her.

“If she is still in the capital and the knights can’t find her, she must be well-hidden,” Euclis pointed out.

“Well, remember that hole?” Dier mentioned.

I was very curious about the hole that had opened up in the ground when she summoned the monster.

She had also used it to escape, so if there was some kind of other dimension in there, I doubted we would be able to find her. But if she just used the hole to teleport to somewhere else, then there should be a limit to where she could go.

Otherwise, it would be possible to summon an unlimited number of monsters from the very start. Alternatively, she could’ve just trapped us in that different dimension and starved us to death. Since she didn’t do either of those things, there must be restrictions on what can be put in the hole and taken out. Just like Shadow, the hole probably wasn’t meant to store things for long, and it probably also didn’t allow for unlimited travel.

So if all my guesses were right, then...

“I have an idea,” I said.

“Do you know where she is?” Dier asked.

“No, but I know how to find her.”

“Are you going to enlighten me?”

I pointed my right hand towards my feet and expanded the shadow there.

“Shadow?”

“This shadow is a part of me. If she’s in a place the shadow has touched before, I should be able to sense her. I can’t hear anything she says, but I should be able to see her.”

“So you’ll use Shadow to look for her? Not a bad idea, but don’t you think it’s reckless? The capital’s big. I know that if you use Shadow you can search in places you can’t usually see, but don’t you think she’ll catch on right away?”

Shadows could only be created behind the light. Because of that, unnaturally formed shadows are easy to spot. Those who know about Shadow would associate such a thing with me right away. Shioria was aware of my powers, so it would basically just be like I was walking around looking for her.

I knew what Dier was trying to say. There was only one way to solve the problem, in that case.

“I’ll spread my shadow all over the capital, all at once.”

“Wha—”

“If I do that, she won’t have time to escape. Shadow will block her hole and she won’t be able to go in and out. If I can trap her inside the shadow, then we can settle things.”

“That’s way too reckless! Like I said, the capital’s huge!” Dier repeated.

I knew that. I knew just how big the capital was.

Even though I had supernatural powers, that didn’t mean my powers were limitless. There was a limit to the powers, just like only being able to run until one was out of breath.

Even with powerful supernatural abilities, I couldn’t go beyond the limit of what a human being was capable of.

I was fully aware of that.

“I can’t do it alone. That’s why I’m asking for your help.”

“I can only run around though.”

“I’m not asking you.”

Dier finally noticed I wasn’t looking at him, but at Euclis, the boy king...who possessed the powers of the king.

“That’s right, the king’s ability is...”

“I can boost the other guardians’ powers,” Euclis himself answered.

We fought the catastrophic monster before by relying on that power. And I needed to borrow his power this time as well.

“However, there’s a limit to my power too. Spreading my power throughout the capital...”

“I know. That’s why I need one other person.”

“Another person?” Euclis asked.

“What are you talking about?” said Dier.

“There’s another guardian who has the power to boost others’ strength.”

Everyone thought of the same person at once.

There was only one other guardian besides the king with that kind of power. It was the opposing power of Shadow...that of Sun, which belonged to my sister.

It was an old, private manor on the outskirts of the royal capital. Since it was the oldest kingdom in the world, there were naturally many unused buildings in its central city. And since there were so many of these abandoned buildings, no one paid much heed to them. Everyone assumed the buildings were empty, and they just became part of the background scenery.

All of those factors made this area the perfect hiding place.

“I’m glad I found a good spot. Except for the dust, I mean...” Shioria muttered to herself.

Although it was Shioria who was speaking, it was simultaneously the will of the monster Agia. Their two consciousnesses had merged and formed a new personality. The beings known as Shioria and Agia no longer existed.

“Ahh, this is so frustrating.”

Only pure negativity was left inside her: resentment of being robbed of her husband, whom she loved, and anger at the same husband for his betrayal.

Both were emotions she had suppressed and hidden deep inside of her heart. However, after the birth of her daughter Soleil, when the circumstances surrounding Selene’s birth went public and she no longer had to hide it, her hidden emotions exploded.

The negative emotions that had quietly swelled inside of her had attracted the will of the demon beast Agia. And that was how she became a vessel for Agia’s will and power. Even though her consciousness fused to Agia’s and her personality changed, her deep-rooted resentment didn’t go away.

She laughed quietly and stared at her own shadow.

“This time I swear I’ll kill you, Selene.”

“In that case, I wish you would’ve come to me to save me the trouble.”

A voice suddenly rang out.

The moment Shioria heard it, a pitch black shadow covered the entire floor of the room. A dark arm stretched out from the shadow and grabbed hold of Shioria, keeping her captive.

“Y-You...!” Shioria forcefully shook off the arm’s grasp and leapt on top of a chair that wasn’t covered by the shadow. She glared at the shadow as it roiled. “How...?”

Selene slowly appeared from the darkness.

In the cramped, run-down room, Shioria faced the daughter of the woman she hated.

“You did well in escaping me before. Your physical abilities must have grown considerably after becoming a monster.”

“How did you know where I was?”

Shioria had already escaped the knights who were searching for her three times. There was a different dimension where she kept the monsters, and she could create holes that were connected to that space. That dimension was filled with monsters. Those who possessed human bodies were unable to stay in it for too long. Even though she was half-human, half-monster, she could only be inside of it for a few minutes.

She made full use of that little time to escape the eyes of the knights who came to search for her. After she evaded them three times, the knights stopped pursuing this building.

Such a development was a relief; the knights would no longer come to her hiding place and would continue their search elsewhere.

“You’re very naive. You’re already looking at the answer.”

“You used Shadow?”

“Yes. I am the guardian of shadows, after all.”

The way Selene smirked at Shioria seemed eerie. She guessed that by using her supernatural powers, Selene was able to spread out Shadow to the point where it could see everything in its surroundings. But surely that method was only slightly more effective than the methods the knights employed?

After all, there was a limit to how large Selene could expand her shadow.

“Did you find it by chance? You must be lucky, Selene.”

“Of course it wasn’t chance. I didn’t know you would be here. I’ve never been to this building before. How could I find you where even the knights couldn’t?”

“Then how *did* you find me? Don’t tell me you expanded your shadow over the entire capi—”

“That’s right.”

Shioria was shocked by this. She stared at Selene, both eyes wide. She had meant it only as a joke, but then Selene confirmed it. If she had indeed expanded her shadow throughout the entire capital, then that was proof of just how overwhelmingly powerful her ability was.

But certainly that couldn’t be true; she couldn’t be *that* powerful. Shioria refused to believe her.

“You’re lying. That’s impossible. Even if you used your powers standing next to the king, they wouldn’t even be boosted that much.”

“Oh, so you know about that? However, the fact that you still haven’t noticed means you’re quite foolish.”

Shioria didn’t answer.

“You still don’t get it, do you? Even though it’s your own daughter?”

Shioria gasped with surprise. And then another figure emerged from the shadows. Two women faced off against her now.

“I finally found you... Mother.”

“Soleil...”

♦ ♦ ♦

Eight hours earlier...

“I’ll do it!” That was Soleil’s enthusiastic reply after I explained the situation. Honestly, I was surprised at how readily she agreed.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes...you need my power...the protection of the sun, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Shioria was hiding somewhere in the capital. Though knights searched day and night they couldn’t find her. Not only that, but she might be using unusual methods to hide. Or she was hiding in a place that would be difficult to find her.

Either way, I knew we would get no results if we left things in the hands of the knights.

My ability had the power to search the surrounding areas of everywhere my shadow had been previously connected. I could use that power to search all over the capital in an instant.

But in order to do that, Euclis’s royal power wouldn’t be enough. I needed the only power capable of boosting another; that of the sun.

And that’s why I went to Soleil and asked for her help.

“You understand that once we find Shioria there will be a fight, don’t you? And once that happens, I’m going to have to kill that monster inside of her.”

“Yes, I know...”

I’d said that to test her mettle, but she answered me with a steady gaze. Her eyes stared powerfully back at me, as if to tell me she was ready. However, I could see that she was trembling slightly.

“I only need your help until we find her. After that, I can take care of the rest. As head of the Vixent family, I should be the one to solve our problems.”

“No...I want to fight alongside you this time!”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“You can really fight against your mother?”

“Yes. Remember what you said before? We Vixents should take care of Vixent family problems.” She was clenching her hands into fists, perhaps to stop them from trembling. I could tell she was determined this time. “I won’t let you do this alone. She’s my mother, after all.”

“I see.”

If my sweet, kind sister was going that far, then I wouldn't argue with her.

"Just make sure not to stand in my way," I warned.

"I won't! You protected me last time, but this time I'll protect you, Sister!"

"I'm counting on you."

♦♦♦

Soleil and Shioria faced off. They stared at each other so coldly and quietly it was hard to imagine that they were mother and daughter by blood.

"I see. So that's how it is. You're cooperating with Selene, Soleil?"

"Yes. I've enhanced Sister's powers with my own."

"I see. The king's power plus that of the sun. I suppose if you combined the two, you would be able to expand Shadow very quickly. I let my guard down. I never expected you two to be cooperating with each other. You're not even real sisters."

Shioria smirked creepily as she taunted us. I saw Soleil jerk a bit in response, so I took a step forward protectively.

"True. I also don't consider you my mother, though."

"What a coincidence. I never thought of you as my daughter." Shioria focused her energy on me.

A tense mood hung in the air as silence continued for several moments. I spread my shadow across the room, ready to strike at any moment. No matter how she decided to move, I would be ready to deal with her.

Shioria smiled, as if belittling that self-confidence. "You're too focused on me."

"What?!"

Suddenly, the building began to collapse. And obviously it wasn't from natural reasons. The octopus monster had suddenly emerged and used one of its tentacles to mow down the structure. The moment I sensed it happening, I

immediately moved Soleil and myself into the shadows to avoid the damage caused by the building's collapse.

Once we emerged, we once again faced Shioria, who had summoned the octopus monster from the black hole once again, just like before.

"Oh, so you opened the hole outside?"

"Yes. Surprised?"

"I am. I didn't know you could use it outside of your field of vision."

She had used her ability from within an enclosed structure, directing it to a place she couldn't see outside. Shioria's powers resembled Shadow's, in that she could move things in and out. But it was also clearly different. While I could use Shadow to temporarily move from one place to another, I could not store or freely take out objects from within.

Once my shadow consumed something, it would be lost within the bottomless darkness forever. Even I was not able to stay inside the shadows for long. Worst case scenario was that I would lose sight of the exit.

"This power's quite convenient..."

"It seems that way. But there's one thing I don't understand."

"Oh? What is it?"

I slowly pointed towards the wriggling octopus tentacles behind her.

"Why are its legs coming out of there?"

"That's an odd question."

"You're the one who's odd. Why is one of your own body parts coming out of the hole?"

"Selene...! You know...?" Her grinning face drooped, turning grim.

On the contrary, I smiled. "What are you so scared of? It's not like you told me yourself that you're the monster Agia."

That was the name of one of the primordial monsters.

They were the reason why the king had created the guardians, so that they

could slay the beasts. One of them was Agia, a monster that looked like a giant octopus.

I'd already seen what happened.

The broken stone slab had showed me the memories from the past, and among them was Agia.

"Since you're exposing a part of your body in such a way, does that mean that the hole is connected to your own body? Or are you summoning your true self through some kind of special method?"

"You seem to be aware of my true identity."

"That's what I'm saying, yes. You are one of the primordial monsters, Agia. You were destroyed long ago, so would you mind telling me what you're doing in modern times?"

"Ha ha. You're an interesting child," Shioria laughed. As she spoke, she controlled the octopus legs to attack Soleil and me. Two of the legs can hurtling down towards our heads.

I used my shadow to create a dome over us, while Soleil used the power of the sun to create another shadow, which resulted in a double-layer protective barrier.

"I'm a little curious. How did you know about me? If you tell me that, I don't mind answering you."

"No. I have no reason to negotiate with you. Tell me or else."

"What a brazen child you are. I really, really hate you."

Sheer malice was directed towards me. I could feel Soleil's fear. It was clear that Shioria completely intended upon killing me.

That made it easier for me to fight. Once I knew that the person in front of me was nothing but a monster, once I could recognize them as an enemy, I'd be able to attack without hesitation.

"Shadow. Pierce her."

I created a shadow by my feet that had countless sharp thorns at the end of

it, then used that to attack Shioria. Shioria created a wall using the octopus tentacles to take the brunt of my attack.

Some kind of purple liquid began to seep out of the injured octopus leg. It was disgusting; the color of a monster's blood.

"It's fine if you have no intention of answering me. I'll keep hurting you until you can't move and force you to talk that way."

"Oh, good idea. I'll leave you to it."

The octopus's legs undulated, smashing the thorn shadows that were stuck in it. Its blood melted into the ground and the wound instantly regenerated. Its blood was poisonous, and the octopus legs were endowed with a high regenerative ability. But I didn't think Shioria, who was its main body, was the same.

If she could be regenerated in the same way the octopus leg could, she wouldn't have gone out of her way to defend herself.

"Hey Selene. What happened to the others?" Shioria looked around.

"They're not here," I said with a small smile.

"Oh? You intend on taking me on, just the two of you?"

"Yes, that's right, Mother."

"Ha ha. You're such a bad liar."

Shioria didn't believe us, but it was the truth.

There were only a limited number of people in the kingdom who knew of this matter. Alexei and Gordov were serving as the king's bodyguards.

If Shioria's goal was targeting the guardians, then it was only natural that she'd be after Euclis at some point. And we had no idea what effect losing the king might have on the other guardians. Therefore, we decided that the highest priority right now was to protect Euclis. Along with Alexei and Gordov, Dier had also stayed behind to protect Euclis.

"The other man with the supernatural power isn't here either. That's a shame. I was really looking forward to see what kind of powers he had."

She was talking about Dier.

Even she, a primordial monster, had no memory of the Moon Guardian?

If that was the case, I wasn't sure I could get anymore information out of her than I'd already gleaned from the slab.

I let out a small sigh. Shioria noticed and smiled at me. "What's with the disappointment? That should be me. I can't believe the two of you think you're enough to stop me. It's shocking." I could tell she was angry.

Although her smile never faded, she quietly stared at us with a gaze that was a mixture of anger and murderous intent.

"You'll regret it."

"That's my line. Don't think the same thing will happen again." I turned my gaze to Soleil for a moment. She understood the look in my eyes and nodded.

I lifted my right hand over Shioria and manipulated the shadows around her to generate countless jet-black blades and thorns. The points of the blades all pointed towards her, attacking her simultaneously.

"It's no use! Such an attack won't—"

Similar to the first attack, Shioria tried to defend with octopus legs. But this time,the shadow blades easily penetrated her defense and reached her main body. She ducked and narrowly evaded a direct attack. From a wound on her cheek red blood dripped down.

I smiled and taunted her. "That's a surprise. I figured your blood was purple too."

She stared at me.

"You still don't understand?" I asked.

"I understand that your first attack wasn't using your full power." Shioria seemed to have finally realized that. I purposefully weakened my first attack to throw her off so my second attack could hit her with full power.

My body was currently strengthened by the Sun guardian's protection, which in turn boosted my shadow power exponentially and also made it much faster.

It was as if in response to the brilliance of the sun, my own shadows became darker.

I'd intended to settle the fight with the second attack, but of course nothing could ever be that easy. Shioria's physical abilities were also boosted thanks to her combining with the monster. She had reacted with a speed impossible for a mere human.

"Next time I'll do it faster."

"That sounds dangerous. How about I kill Soleil first?"

Shioria created a hole in the ground and called several different types of monsters forth from it. She wanted to divide Soleil and I by outnumbering us.

If Soleil died, I would lose my protection.

"Not a bad decision. However.." It seemed Soleil's own mother didn't seem to recognize her determination.

"Flames of Sun!" The tiny sun appeared above Soleil's head again. The sun burned and shot off several balls of flame, subduing the summoned monsters in an instant.

Shioria's eyes widened in shock. Rather than being surprised by the power of the sun, it seemed she was more surprised that Soleil had attacked her without hesitation.

"Soleil..."

"Mother. I'm not here to protect you. I'm here to fight you!" Soleil declared, making her intentions known with her powerful words.

Hearing that, Shioria's usual creepy smile appeared on her face and she asked, "That's so sad. But are you really capable of killing me, Soleil?"

Soleil bit her lip.

"You can't, can you? Because you're too kind. Even though you know I'm a monster, you'll always hesitate. Your determination will waver."

"Even so, I will still fight." Soleil squeezed her trembling hand tightly.

Shioria really didn't understand her own daughter. Soleil, who was so sweet

and kind, was standing here by her own free will. I had no idea the amount of courage and determination that took.

Shioria might be her mother, but she couldn't even see that in her own daughter.

"How funny," I said aloud.

"That's you, Selene. You look like you're having a grand old time now that you're the head of house Vixent. Good for you. Had you not awakened to the power of Shadow, you would've had a poor, pitiful existence for your entire life."

"Would I have? Maybe I would've had a comfortable life. I would've been able to get away from the likes of you."

"Those hateful eyes look just like hers." I could sense a quiet anger in Shioria. Apparently, she had met my mother. "Your appearance, your voice, your fearless demeanor towards your superiors...you're just like her."

And apparently, she thought I was just like my mother. Honestly, that made me curious. I'd never seen my mother's face, so I had no idea what she had been like. Part of me wanted to ask Shioria more about my mother. But unfortunately there was no time for that.

"You're disgusting and I despise you...and that's why you're going to disappear."

Shioria controlled the octopus legs all at once, thrashing them around until the ground cracked and the surrounding buildings were destroyed.it

I was grateful that this area was full of ruins and no one lived here. Even though it was late and far from the city, at some point people would begin to notice the commotion. And the more spectators there were, the harder it would be to fight. So I needed to settle things before that happened.

Shioria was completely on guard now after that second attack. It would be much more difficult to hit her now. Soleil was still protecting both of us with the power of the sun.

"Are you ready, Soleil?"

“Yes!”

“We’ll settle it with the next attack.”

Soleil opened up a hole in the barrier and only I jumped out. I dodged the rampaging, wriggling octopus legs and headed straight for Shioria. If I spread Shadow, I could attack her from a distance. But the more I spread it, the less strength and power it had.

The only way to kill Shioria was to close the distance as much as possible and unleash a blow at maximum power.

“I won’t let you come near!” she cried.

The octopus’s legs swiped and scraped across the ground in a sweeping motion. I dove into the shadows to dodge her attack, then teleported into the shadow behind Shioria.

“I know where you are!” However, she predicted where I would go. The octopus legs attacked me all at once the moment I jumped out.

“Sister!”

“Good for you. You dodged at the last possible moment.”

“Haa... Phew...” I stuck my head out from the shadows next to a pile of rubble some distance away from Shioria. I narrowly managed to evade her direct attack, but unfortunately didn’t escape without damage. An octopus leg had grazed my forehead. Blood poured down from the wound onto my cheeks.

“I know that when you’re inside the shadows, you can no longer manipulate them,” she told me.

I didn’t answer.

“And the reason you tried to come so close is because the more you spread out your shadow, the weaker you become. Am I right?”

“Who knows?” I said.

She had discovered the trick to my powers in just a few moments of battle. Although the supernatural powers were very strong, there were rules. The shadow I manipulated had substance, and she saw through it. I’d been planning

on spreading my shadow at her feet and dragging her inside since the beginning of the battle, but she blocked me with the octopus legs in front of her.

The more we showed her our abilities, the more she got used to them, and the easier it was for her to respond.

“Now I can see the depths of you.”
“Don’t underestimate me.”

Shioria seemed to think the battle was over. I put both of my hands up. It was true that my power would weaken the more it spread, but right now I had the sun’s protection. I created a shadow that spread across the entire capital for a moment and then had it condense over this specific area.

“All shadows! Tighten and pierce!”

It was possible for me to attack from all directions while still maintaining enough power to reach Shioria. The shadow spread to the rubble of the collapsed building, the remaining walls, and even the air as it shot shadow blades at Shioria from all directions.

She wasn’t able to evade in time. She used half of the octopus legs to protect herself while the other half shot down the shadow blades.

A cloud of dust rose up from the exchange.

“Haa...” I breathed.

“That wasn’t bad.”

Once the dust cleared, I saw Shioria still standing there. The octopus legs she had used to defend herself were chopped off and bleeding profusely. However, although Shioria was wounded, she was not fatally injured. She must have been using the other octopus legs to repel the blades that could have been fatal, and then defended against the rest herself.

“That attack surprised me. But I doubt you can do that many times, can you?”

“Phew..”

“You must be very tired. You should really try to take it easy.”

The severed octopus legs began to regenerate. Shioria was right. I couldn’t do

another large-scale attack like that. I'd already manipulated the shadow to spread across the entire royal capital twice already. The fatigue had accumulated and my breathing was rapid and shallow. However, my last attack had made her realize something.

She knew that if I tried hard enough, I would be able to manipulate the shadows enough to kill her. She was smiling, but at the same time wondering how many times I could attack her.

She was thinking about me, and only me.

She wasn't even seeing the whole picture—I wasn't fighting alone.

Shioria didn't even pay attention to the shadow that stretched out behind me, even though it was right in front of her.

"Now, Soleil."

"Yes...!"

Soleil passed through the shadows and appeared behind Shioria, who turned around in shock.

Soleil aimed her fists and punched Shioria with all her might.

"I'm sorry...Mother!"

"Nngh!"

Soleil's fists contained the glow of the sun. Shioria was knocked backwards by the blow, her body engulfed in the sun's flames.

"Arrrgggggggggggggggggggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Shioria screamed and began flailing desperately, trying to extinguish the flames. At the same time, the octopus she controlled burst into flames.

So I was right—those octopus legs *were* a part of her—no, a part of Agia.

Shioria was the main body, and the octopus legs she controlled were connected to her. The hole which led to the other dimension existed as an extension of her body.

"Ngh... Soleil...You..."

“Mother...”

Shioria’s hatred for Soleil was fully exposed as she tried to attack her own daughter by manipulating the flaming octopus legs.

Her anger was tenacious, but she’d already forgotten. She could only see what lay in front of her, like a newborn baby.

She’d forgotten her worst enemy.

“*I’m* the one who’s capable of killing you.”

“Wha—”

Soleil was kind. So of course she couldn’t kill her own mother. Shioria was right about just that one thing. But she’d surrendered herself to her anger. If she hadn’t done that—if she hadn’t taken her attention off of me, she might have been able to dodge my attack.

“It’s over, Mother.”

“Se...lene...”

My shadow blades pierced Shioria’s heart.

Crack!

My shadow shattered something inside of her, along with her heart.

♦ ♦ ♦

Peace came to the world.

The primordial beasts were defeated by the king and the guardians, and the humans united into one kingdom and prospered. Many people were born and everyone found happiness.

However, that’s only how it appeared on the surface.

Now that the six guardians had defeated their common enemy, their status and abilities went to their head, and they began to fight each other for power. Some wanted to become the next king, while others sought to gain power over the other guardians by currying favor with the king.

That puzzled the king. The monsters were gone and the world was peaceful, so why was everyone still fighting?

As if responding to the king's concerns, monsters appeared again. They weren't huge and powerful like the primordial beasts, but they resembled carnivorous animals and were still quite strong.

From that day on, monsters came to exist in this world.

Fear once again gripped the people, and the guardians reunited once again to fight.

They fought in the name of the king and established an order of the knights to fight against these monsters, even creating a system that allowed those who didn't have supernatural powers to fight the monsters.

Time passed and generations changed.

The king took the guardian of the sun at the time as his wife, and she quickly became with child. She gave birth to twin brothers. A year later, she was pregnant again. This time she gave birth to twins again—this time sisters.

Although there were minor factional disputes, the kingdom was stable. The king felt blessed by his children and happily spent his days with his wife.

There was something else that filled him with relief. The guardians, who were once hungry with the power they gained from their supernatural powers, would become mere humans once their powers dried up and the next generation came about.

So even if their conflicts continued, they would have to resolve them with human power.

And once that happened, everyone would learn that the supernatural powers could not be used for domination. This kingdom was a kingdom for humans.

However, the king's wish did not come true.

On second thought, it wasn't the king's wish at all—the people who lived there were the ones who wished for it.

But the guardians must have thought, *If these monsters never go away, I want someone else to have the power to fight them.*

And in this way, the supernatural powers were passed down from parent to child.

♦ ♦ ♦

Memories from the past ran through my brain, just like before. It must have happened in just a few seconds. I was dazed for a moment, but then came back to my senses.

Soleil rushed over to Shioria, who collapsed after her heart was destroyed in front of her.

“Mother!”

“Ngh... Sol..eil..?”

“Moth—”

Soleil went to approach her mother, but stopped at the last minute. Reason must have stopped her, making her remember that the person in front of her was not Shioria, but the monster Agia.

“It’s okay, the monster is dead.”

“Sister?”

Just now, I had the feeling that something else had been crushed along with her heart. Perhaps it was Agia’s soul. I guessed that was the core of the monster.

The primordial beast Agia had been destroyed. I didn’t sense the monster’s power from Shioria as she lay on the ground. In fact, the person lying here was...

“That’s your mother, Soleil.”

“Ahh....Mother...Mother!”

Soleil must have been suppressing her emotions this whole time, but now she wept like a child as she knelt by her mother.

Shioria was bleeding from her mouth and holding her pierced heart with her

right hand. Of course, that did nothing to heal her wounds.

Shioria would die along with the monster Agia. Just like our father, our supernatural powers were not capable of healing other people's wounds.

"Soleil, I'm sorry..."

"Mother?"

"It's because...I was weak...I put you through so much...pain..."

Soleil began to cry harder. Shioria slowly reached a hand out towards her. Even though it seemed painful for her to move, she put a smile on her face.

Although Shioria was the same person as before, her smile didn't seem creepy anymore. That must have been the monster's smile showing through, and this was her real one.

"Selene...I'm sorry...for the trouble I caused..."

"I'm sure you are, Mother."

"You'll still...call me Mother...despite everything?"

"There's no point in changing the way I address you now. But answer me this."

My feelings would depend upon her answer to my next question.

"Which were you before? A monster? Or..."

"I was...both. I was me...and the monster...both...were mixed together..."

"I see."

That answered that question. The monster had taken over her body and fused its consciousness to hers. Her statements were a mixture of her will and the will of the monster. Her many contradictory actions and remarks were also most likely the result of opposing wills.

If that were true, that would explain why Shioria didn't kill us when she could've easily had the chance, and why she chose such roundabout methods.

"It really is you, isn't it, Mother?"

"Selene..."

Whatever the form, it was true that she had been another mother for me, whether I liked it or not. It was what it was. And so that's why I called her mother.

"You're so kind...your clumsy kindness...is just like him."

"Who?"

"Ralde...Your father."

My clumsy kindness resembled my father's?

Before, I would've sarcastically denied it, but now that I was hearing it in the form of my stepmother's last words, I begrudgingly had to admit it was true.

Putting aside the question of whether or not I was kind, I knew that I had inherited my awkwardness from my father.

"Mother, why was Agia's will inside of you?"

"I don't know...One day I started hearing a voice."

"A voice?"

"Yes...I think it was Agia's voice. It whispered to me...and unfortunately, I answered it."

What she was saying sounded rather abstract and hard to understand. She didn't remember what the voice sounded like, or what it said. But she clearly remembered the day she started to hear it, which coincided with the day the circumstances around my birth were revealed.

"That day...I remember thinking I'd been betrayed."

"It was the truth, wasn't it?"

"It's normal for nobles to have mistresses... even though I knew that in my head, emotionally, I couldn't handle it. I was too weak."

"That's not true! It just goes to show how much you loved Father!" Soleil said through tears.

I didn't understand much about love, but I did know that it was something to be cherished.

“That’s right...I loved him...more than anyone. And that’s why I didn’t want to admit that someone else got close to his heart.” She reflected on her feelings and smiled tenderly as she recognized them. She said perhaps the monster Agia had taken advantage of her weakness and used her as a vessel.

“Do you know why the monster was revived after all this time?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t...”

“I see...”

Even the woman who had become fused with the monster didn’t know why it had been revived. Or maybe she just couldn’t think clearly anymore. The amount of blood pouring out of her had now formed a pool on the ground. It was a miracle she was even still conscious. Even though the monster was dead, I wondered if she still retained some of its vitality. However, she soon reached her limit.

“Ugh...nngh!”

“Mother!” Soleil cried.

“I’m sorry...I don’t have much time left...”

“No...! Mother, I...!”

Shioria weakly clasped Soleil’s hand as she wept.

“It’s all right...You’re a strong girl. I want you to think for yourself and live your life the way you want. I know you’ll make the right decisions.”

“Mother...”

“And if you’re ever unsure, just rely on your sister.”

“I will!”

“Don’t just make promises like that! Well, I’m sure it’s fine. I’ll listen to your last request.” I listened to Father’s, after all. There was no harm in hearing my stepmother’s last wishes too.

Shioria smiled at me hearing that. “Thank you, Selene...There’s one last thing I want to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“Your mother...is alive.”

“What?!”

What did she just say?

“I’m not...sure of the details. I thought...she was dead, too. But...she’s alive. Or perhaps...she’s come back...to life.”

“What do you mean, come back to life?”

I was filled with confusion. That was the last thing I expected to hear, and my brain couldn’t keep up.

“Just like...me...”

“Mother!”

Shioria passed away quietly with no further last words. Her eyes were still open, her pupils dilated. Her breathing had ceased. The moment a person dies was the most painful time in the world.

My mind was overloaded with this new information, but seeing Shioria in front of me made me regain my composure. The amount of blood flowing from her body spoke for itself. She held on for such a long time, knowing that thin thread of consciousness could break at any moment.

She did so to leave Soleil those last words.

“Thank you, Mother.”

I didn’t like Shioria. And I thought she hated me, but...

Both she and Father were so unfair. They made me think maybe they didn’t hate me at all, at the very end. Even though it was already too late now.

“Mother...”

“You can hate me for killing her.”

“I’d never hate you.” Soleil wiped her tears and gently closed Shioria’s eyes. “This is what I agreed to. It’s not just your responsibility.”

“I see.”

You’ve gotten stronger, Soleil.

We would bear the sins of killing our mother for the rest of our lives. Even though I wished I could take that burden all on myself right now.

Even though this is what she had chosen, the fact that she didn't kill her mother showed how not only kind she was, but how strong she was as well.

"Then we're accomplices."

"That's right. We're the same."

We were sisters.

Although our mothers were different, we were raised together. I'm sure if we tried, we could find any number of similarities between us. And that didn't bother me a bit. Right now, it made me think. *What could I do for Soleil, as her sister?*

I didn't have the answer right now.

But if she were ever in trouble, I hoped that I would be able to find the words to help her one day.

Chapter Five: Just a Monster

Each of the primordial monsters were connected in the depths of their consciousnesses. They observed each other's positions and information in real time. So even if a battle broke out far away, the details of that battle were transmitted directly to them.

A man and a woman sat in an old mansion. The man was sitting in a large, overstuffed chair like one a nobleman would sit in, and gazed out the broken window.

The woman sat on a dirty sofa and turned her gaze to the man. "Did you sense it?"

"Yes. Looks like Agia got hit."

"Seems so."

Within each of them resided the will of one of the primordial beasts, just like what happened with Shioria. And so they had both sensed Agia's death. Not only were they able to sense Agia's death, but they could remember the sights Agia experienced when she died.

"There was Sun...and a Shadow power. Shadow didn't exist in our time."

"Yes..."

"What is it?"

"Ha ha, nothing."

The man gave the woman a suspicious look when she smiled. The moonlight recast her smile, making it look more bewitching than eerie. The glow highlighted the hints of purple in her long, curly white hair.

Both her physical appearance and smile resembled Selene's.

"What a strange fate...Selene..."

♦ ♦ ♦



“And that’s what happened.”

The supernatural guardians and the king were all gathered in one room, sitting around a long table. I’d just finished explaining to them what had happened in the past few days.

Humans had turned into monsters. Well, to be exact, the mighty primordial monsters of long ago had now been revived in modern times in the bodies of humans.

One of them was my stepmother—Soleil’s biological mother.

“That surprises me, but I’m also surprised that the guardian of the sun has truly awakened to her powers,” Lawrence, the guardian of air, said as he glanced over at Soleil.

Soleil hadn’t participated in the previous meeting about fighting the catastrophe-level monster, but having since come into her powers, she was present for this meeting. She sat next to me nervously while Lawrence spoke.

She jolted in response and smiled shyly at him. “I’m sorry for being so quiet.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay! I was just surprised.”

Soleil seemed puzzled by Lawrence’s smile. He was still as easy-going as ever.

“But I’m glad you two sisters are getting along and have both awakened to your powers! I bet you two will get closer now, won’t you?”

“Lawrence, will you be quiet for a while?” Gordov asked.

“Ah, yes. Sorry.”

Lawrence’s ramblings were quickly silenced by Gordov’s deep voice. Unlike Lawrence, who clearly couldn’t read the room, Gordov genuinely seemed to be concerned about me and Soleil. Alexei was also quieter than usual.

Gordov looked at me and Soleil. “I’m sorry I left the previous fight to the two of you.”

“You don’t have to apologize. We fought because we wanted to.”

“I see. You’re very strong.”

“I’m not the only one.”

“Yes...so are you, Lady Soleil.” Gordov turned his gaze to Soleil and bowed slightly. “On behalf of the knights, I want to express my gratitude for your hand in this battle. And as a fellow guardian, let us continue to work hard for the sake of the kingdom and its people.”

“Yes! I’m young, but I’ll do my best.” Her smile was like the sun, and Gordov smiled as well. It had only been two days since she lost her mother. Even though I knew her emotional wounds hadn’t yet healed, she was making an effort to smile so as not to show her weakness to others. Only those with a strong heart could do that.

Gordov deeply bowed his head again to express his gratitude to Soleil—whose heart was stronger than she looked.

On the day of the battle, Gordov and Alexei had been assigned to serve as the guardians of King Euclis. We had feared that the monsters might try to attack the king if they were also after the supernatural guardians.

There were five other primordial monsters besides Agia. I was anxious that the rest of the monsters had revived, but so far nothing had happened.

However, it wasn’t a hunch. It was a conviction.

“I believe we should consider the possibility that the remaining primordial beasts have also been resurrected in the present day,” I said.

“I agree. I highly doubt just one was revived by complete coincidence. After all, it’s not just an ordinary monster. It’s a monster that possesses humans and uses them as their vessels,” Alexei quickly agreed with my statement.

Gordov nodded in agreement, and the others also showed positive reactions in their own ways.

Perhaps since they were supernatural guardians, they were also sensing it—the invisible fear that was approaching.

Gordov asked Etoile, “Lord Weldon, how did your Astromancy go today?”

“Unfortunately, I saw nothing.”

“I see.”

The ability of the Star guardian was to foresee the future through stargazing.

Etoile could see tragedies and misfortunes that would occur in advance.

It was an extremely powerful ability, but he could only see events happening around him. Distant futures diverged, making them uncertain, and the path could deviate from what he had seen.

There were other constraints as well, but he was able to see the coming of the catastrophe-level monster that had threatened to destroy the kingdom in advance.

The fact that he'd seen nothing this time meant that it wasn't something happening to him, the king, or the guardians around him.

Or perhaps it was something that was only going to happen to me. Since I was the sole exception to his ability, my presence never appeared in his visions of the future.

I noticed Etoile's gaze momentarily directed at me.

Maybe he really couldn't see the future because of me. If that was the case, then Shioria's last words...

I put those thoughts aside and asked Gordov, "Do the knights have any information?"

"Well, there's something curious about the names of the six primordial monsters you mentioned, Lady Selene."

"What is it?" I wanted as much information as possible now.

Everyone in the room focused their attention on Gordov, and after a brief pause, he answered. "The knights are currently pursuing several organizations that threaten the people of the kingdom. Among them, there's a band of thieves which have grown powerful in recent years called the 'Daybreak Droplets.' The names of their leader and vice-leader are...Victor and Seraph."

"Victor and Seraph..."

Both of those were names of the primordial monsters, too.

Gordov explained all the information they'd gathered so far on the Daybreak Droplets. They were a group of thieves who had been active in the outskirts of the capital for about twenty years. When they first formed, they were just one

of many bands of thieves and not a particular threat to anyone.

But in recent years, their power had grown. Their numbers had increased manyfold, and the scale of their thefts had grown from individual targets to entire organizations and towns.

They'd now become the top band of thieves in the kingdom, and it seemed that Gordov and the knights were wary of their behavior. And the fact that their leader and vice-leader had the same names as two of the primordial monsters...

"Isn't that just a coincidence?" Lawrence quipped to Gordov.

"It's possible," Gordov replied in a vague manner.

In fact, it was possible that they just had the same names. It didn't necessarily mean they were possessed like Shioria was.

However, no other information was available at this point.

"Where are the bandits right now?" I asked.

"They have multiple hideouts," Gordov replied. "We've carried out many operations before to try to eradicate them, but the two I mentioned before have so far not been caught."

"Is there another operation planned?"

"I'm raising the priority of it after this meeting. We'll carry it out in ten days at the very latest. We've found one hideout that seems promising."

"I'll participate in that operation as well."

Gordov raised his eyebrow. The others seemed surprised by my remarks as well—well, everyone except Euclis and Soleil.

"You're going to cooperate with the knights?"

"Yes, but I won't be part of the actual operation. I'm going to act on my own."

"That's fine, as long as you don't get in the way, but...why?"

"Isn't it obvious? If those two really are possessed by the primordial monsters, we need to know. We need to get rid of sparks before they catch fire."

Gordov and I made eye contact. I could tell that he doubted whether or not that was the only reason.

And of course it wasn't. When I crushed the core of the beast Agia, information from the past had flowed into my head. I wasn't exactly certain of it, but I thought that the primordial monsters had preserved some of their past memories. And if those memories were obtained by destroying their cores, I couldn't let the other guardians do it.

Also...

"The first one was a member of the Vixent family. Do I need a better reason to get involved?" I asked.

"I see...all right then, I'll let you know the details of the operation as soon as I'm able."

"Thank you, Sir Boden."

"No, I'm the one who'd like to say thank you. On behalf of the knights, I'm grateful to you for protecting the kingdom." Gordov bowed his head to me.

There was no reason for him to thank me, and honestly I didn't deserve to be thanked. It wasn't as if I had fought for the sake of the kingdom. I always fought solely for myself.

What happened with Shioria was a family matter. That was the only reason I got involved. And that was why I was getting involved now as well.

♦ ♦ ♦

After the meeting ended, I returned to the mansion. Dier was waiting for me in the study. He looked over at me and said, "Welcome back. How'd the meeting go?"

"Pretty much like the last one. The conversation revolved around Gordov. Some people didn't even talk."

I was referring to Mystria Frusch, the guardian of the forests. She hadn't said a single word during the meeting. I didn't think there was any particular

meaning to it; she just didn't have anything to offer to the discussion.

Anyway, she had a much bigger problem to deal with right now than some monster.

"What about Euclis?"

"Same as always. Gordov and Alexei are going to trade off guarding him for a while. And Etoile is staying by his side most of the time now."

The monsters hadn't achieved their goal yet. With that in mind we agreed we had to prioritize King Euclis's safety. That was how the plan for Gordov and Alexei—two of the most powerful guardians—and Etoile—who could see beforehand any possible tragedy that may befall the king—to take turns staying beside the king fell into place. Dier breathed a sigh of relief. "All right."

"Are you relieved?"

"A little bit."

I was sure that Euclis's safety was probably the most important thing for Dier. In fact, he probably wanted to stay by his brother's side to protect him himself, but he couldn't do that because of his position. But having two people who Dier knew were strong gave him peace of mind, and it was better for me too.

After all, I needed Dier to focus his attention on me.

"I'm going to the thieves' hideout in ten days."

"Hm? What? What's going on?"

"There might be people there possessed by the monsters. The knights are going to pull off an operation to get rid of them, and we're going to jump on the bandwagon."

"Um, can you tell me more details about this?" Dier stared blankly at me. I guess I got ahead of myself and went right to the conclusion. I took a deep breath and explained everything that happened at the meeting.

"I see..."

"Exactly. And you're going to help me, won't you?"

"I don't mind, but what about Soleil?"

“She’s going to stay home.”

Soleil said she wanted to go, but I just couldn’t bring her to a hideout full of bandits. Although her powers were strong, she herself was still weak. And this wasn’t like our battle with Shioria, where we knew who we were up against.

Also, Dier couldn’t fight at full force if Soleil was with him. If I had to choose between him or Soleil, I’d choose him without hesitation.

“I’ll gather as much information as I can until then.”

“All right, but...don’t you think you’re being a little too impatient, Selene?”

“Is that what it looks like?”

“Yes. You seem desperate.”

He hit me right where it hurts. It seemed like the more time we spent together, the better he was at that.

“I’m not desperate. I just have something I’m worried about.”

“You mean your mother?”

“Yes...”

I’d also told Dier about Shioria’s last words: my mother Nina, who I’d always been told had died after giving birth to me, was actually alive.

That alone should make me very happy, but something else Shioria had said nagged at me.

“She may have been revived...just like me.”

If Nina died, but then was resurrected...

Well, that would be impossible, even with supernatural powers. But that was only under normal circumstances. But suppose this had something to do with the primordial beasts?

“I want to confirm my suspicions as soon as possible. And if it’s true...then there’s only one thing I can do.”

“Selene...”

We would deal with *her* just like we dealt with Shioria. Family matters should

be resolved within the family. Especially if our enemy this time was my own mother.

Soleil had made up her mind and faced Shioria, and fought with all her might. I was her older sister, so I had to do the same.

Yes, if it comes to it, then I must end my mother with my own two hands.

“I’m not going to give that responsibility to anyone else.”

“All right. If that’s your decision, I won’t argue. But at least let me deal with the other one.”

“That’s what I intended to do.”

“Good. I’d like to ask Euclis his opinion on the matter, though.”

“That would be tough. We can’t ask for his help right now. Etoile’s always by his side, remember?”

Since Etoile could read the stars and was by the king’s side for his own protection, that put us at a disadvantage when it came to contacting Euclis.

If I made contact, it might affect the future Etoile saw. And if Dier approached, it might give Etoile too much information. I wasn’t sure if we could find a way for Euclis to naturally leave Etoile’s side and go to that room in the basement of the castle without a plausible explanation.

At least for the time being, it wasn’t wise for Euclis to go off on his own.

“I guess that can’t be helped.”

“You look sad about it.”

“We’ve only just recently gotten to talk to each other again. I’m just worried about something happening to him when I’m not there.”

“I know. In that case, let’s hurry up and finish this. There are five monsters remaining. We can defeat all of those who have been revived.”

“Stop making it sound so easy. It took all of the original guardians to work together in order to defeat these things.”

“I know that. But something I discovered after I defeated Agia was that their resurrection is incomplete.”

I'd seen Agia's strength myself, so I knew what the first guardians had gone up against. On top of that, I fought against modern-day Agia, who was using Shioria as its vessel. That's why I could clearly feel the difference in their power. I had a feeling that Agia's resurrection had been incomplete. It had only manifested part of its original form, and it was weak enough that I was able to defeat it with the help of Soleil.

I assume the reason why they relied on humans was because they lost their physical bodies and couldn't manifest their former powers, but they were slowly regaining it over time. According to Shioria, she made contact with Agia more than ten years ago. So Agia had walked among us for a long period of time.

The reason it didn't kill me, Soleil, or my father sooner was because it hadn't grown strong enough.

Once it finally recovered enough to fight, it intended to use tricks to exhaust the other guardians, and once they were all weakened enough, kill them. Assuming that the goal of the primordial beasts was to destroy us guardians, and they were reviving inside of humans like Agia did...then I was almost certain the remaining monsters weren't at full strength, either.

"And that's why you seem so impatient?"

"That's right. If they revive completely, we'll be unable to handle them. They'll be even stronger than the catastrophe-level monster we fought before. And we should prepare ourselves for casualties."

"I don't wanna think about that."

♦ ♦ ♦

Time passed quickly after that.

The royal knights had formed a line outside the walls surrounding the capital. A total of seven thousand of them were gathered, all facing in the same direction.

"All forces! Advance while maintaining formation!"

The knights all moved in unison under the command of the captain of the knights, Gordov Boden. They were headed towards the foot of a volcano near the capital. There remained a town that, about ten years ago, had been abandoned after a volcanic eruption made the area inhabitable.

The operation to take out the troublesome bandits was about to begin.

“That’s a lot of knights,” I commented.

“I heard there are around five thousand bandits, so isn’t this a reasonable amount?” Dier said.

“I’m not sure about that.”

“Well I think so. Besides, it’s less than when we took on the catastrophic-level monster, right?”

“That’s true.”

Their goal this time around was to take out the bandits. Only a few people in the kingdom were aware of the primordial beasts. That was to avoid unnecessary panic since we didn’t have all the facts. Most of the knights who were participating in this battle were also unaware of the true circumstances.

The commanders of each unit had been told, and Gordov had instructed them to take their men and flee if something went wrong.

We were only accompanying the knights and not a part of their operation, so we had the right to act freely.

“Let them deal with the bandits and we’ll look for the leaders.”

“All right. That’s more convenient for both of us anyway.” Dier glanced towards Gordov, who was walking at the front of the formation. “I want to find them before he does.”

“I agree.”

If Gordov found the leaders first, he would try to crush the bandits’ heads without hesitation, especially if they really were monsters.

And if it was the same as what happened with Agia, whoever defeats them could see their memories. Dier and I had to settle this before Gordov beat us to

it, no matter what.

“Let’s do this,” I said.

“We got this,” Dier replied.

♦♦♦

Dier and I advanced with the knights. We arrived at our destination in half a day, and received a report from the unit who preceded us. Apparently the information they had received was correct, and the bandits were confirmed to be in the city.

With the threat of the volcanic eruption, no one dared to go near the ruins of the city, so it would certainly be a perfect place for bandits to hide.

According to Gordov’s instructions, the knights split into four directions and advanced. The city was built around the volcano. Gordov used his supernatural power as the signal to have the knights march into the city all at once, creating a massive rock that fell upon the city.

“What was that?!”

“Go now!”

“Aaaahhhhhh!”

“Knights?! Enemy attack! Tell the boss!”

In an instant, the battle began, descending into a chaotic melee. Thieves who had been hiding also revealed themselves, clashing swords with the knights.

Meanwhile, news of the raid on the hideout quickly reached the ears of the leaders of the thieves.

“It’s bad, boss!” A thief said.

“The knights found us?” One of the leaders of the thieves asked. “What’s going on?”

“We’re completely surrounded! What should we do?”

“Don’t panic. Concentrate our forces in one direction. If we can create an

opening somewhere, we can use it to escape. We'll join you soon."

"I-I understand!"

The lower-level thieves ran off. Watching their departure, the leader let out a deep sigh.

"Geez, what a hassle," one of the leaders said.

"Well, we have no other choice," the other leader replied. "We need to retreat quickly and find the next hideout."

"True. As long as we survive, we're fine. We can replenish our numbers as much as we want."

"That's right. Maybe we should just escape on our own?"

"That's an option. Moreover, with so many knight orders in motion, it'll be easier to infiltrate the capital."

"And what business could you have in the capital?"

The two turned their gazes toward the direction the voice came from.

There was no one there. Only the voice of an unfamiliar woman could be heard. All that could be seen was an eerie shadow, spreading.

"Shadow...tch, so it's come."

The two remained vigilant, their attention fixed on the spreading shadow. It seemed both of them had noticed that I, the shadow guardian, had appeared.

Slowly, I emerged from within the shadows and stood before the two of them.

One was a large, muscular man exuding a rugged appearance and a rough demeanor. It felt like facing a massive beast.

And the woman beside him...

"So your ability is Shadow...I can't believe you came alone. Quite the fearless woman."

"Unfortunately for you, I'm not alone."

"What?"

I thought again. I had resolved to sacrifice everything else for my goals. I had even prepared for the fact that no one would side with me.

However, at this moment, I wasn't alone. I had a meddlesome, kind-hearted monster who was always by my side.

I don't trust easily. We were just accomplices. It was merely a partnership of convenience, a relationship born out of shared goals. Yet now, I found myself trusting him.

I couldn't help but laugh. Perhaps my own naivete wasn't so bad after all.

"I'll leave it to you, Dier."

"You got it."

Dier leapt energetically from behind me and charged straight toward the large man. He punched the man, sending him flying outside the building.

"Argh! You...!" the man cried out.

"I'm the one you're fighting against," Dier said. "Selene, can I leave her to you?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Got it. Don't lose."

"You either."

Dier smiled slightly, rapidly closing in on the man who'd gone flying. He grabbed him by the collar and vanished from my sight.

To avoid interfering with each other's battles, Dier and I had decided beforehand to fight our respective battles at a distance from each other.

Now, it was only a matter of trusting that each of us would emerge victorious.

I faced off against the other woman. She was probably the second in command of the thieves' gang.

"I would say nice to meet you, but this isn't the first time, is it?" I asked her.

"Ha ha. I'm surprised. To think we could reunite so quickly. Is it fate, I wonder?"

I knew in an instant. Her appearance, her demeanor, everything about her revealed the truth. She was exactly who I had suspected her to be...I hadn't seen her face before, and didn't even know her name until recently. Yet, I knew.

She was my...

"You've gotten big, Selene."

"Mother...is that who you are?"

"Yes. Do you remember?"

"Don't be ridiculous. We've never met before."

Why did I feel this way? It was my first time meeting my mother. There was no reason for me to hold any grudge against her, yet for some reason, I was irritated.

I had thought I might feel a bit happy, or relieved...

"What a scary look on your face. We finally have a chance to meet like this. Let's have a nice long talk."

"Don't misunderstand. I'm here to fight."

"Fight? I'm your mother."

"I know who you are. You're the beast called Seraph."

As soon as I said her name, her previously soft and serene expression underwent a complete transformation. Before, she looked strong and dignified, but now the expression on her face was fitting for someone who commanded thieves.

My mother—Seraph—smiled.

"So you know."

"Obviously. That's why I'm here. To defeat you."

"I see. That's a shame."

"But before I defeat you, answer me this. When did you become a beast?" I asked, readying myself to attack at any moment.

"The day I died," she answered.

“So then you *were* resurrected!”

“Yes, is that hard to believe? I don’t blame you. No one thinks I’m alive right now. I’m sure *he*...thinks I’ve been long dead, too. How’s Ralde doing, by the way?”

“He’s dead.”

“Oh, is that so? What a shame.” Despite her words, her expression showed no sign of regret. Rather than feigning emotion, it seemed like she genuinely didn’t care.

My frustration gradually intensified.

“Serves him right. He took you away from me. And because of that, I died all alone.”

“What are you talking about? I heard my mother died during childbirth.”

“That’s not true. I died a year later. After you were taken by the Vixent family, I was abandoned. I was already frail, but I got sick and died soon after.” She spoke calmly. There was no sign of falsehood. If it was true, then she must have died with a lot of resentment.

Perhaps that resentment was what summoned Seraph? What she said sounded similar to Shioria’s case, who summoned Agia due to her growing negative feelings towards my father and me.

“Tell me, Selene. What is that power? I don’t know of the power of Shadow.”

“Oh? Then you don’t have to know.”

“That’s not fair. I answered your question.”

“I don’t care. Like I said, I came here to fight you.” I manipulated the shadows around me and surrounded her with them. I launched a preemptive strike to release my frustration that had grown just from me talking to her.

“Shadow—”

“It’s not good to be impatient.”

Suddenly, she disappeared. My shadows didn’t react, and all sign of her had disappeared. Despite that, her voice rang softly in my ears.

“You should see it too...that wonderful dream.”

“What...?”

♦♦♦

“It’s morning...”

“Ugh...”

Someone was calling me and I slowly opened my heavy eyelids. The curtains were thrown back and the morning sunlight shone right into my eyes.

“Too bright...”

“Because it’s morning! Good morning, Sister!”

“Good morning, Soleil...”

After my sister woke me up, I got out of bed. I saw the familiar ceiling, the familiar room, and my cheerful younger sister Soleil beaming at me.

“It’s time for breakfast! Please hurry up and change.”

“Yes, I will.”

Soleil left the room first. Now alone, I began to change my clothes as usual. An outfit had been laid out for me, so I picked it up, but suddenly I froze.

“Hm?”

Something felt strange.

It wasn’t my clothes, or that I was still sleepy...but I just felt like something was *different*. But I was sure this was my bedroom. And the clothes I picked up belonged to me, and I’d worn them many times.

I looked in the mirror and only saw my familiar face. There wasn’t anything particularly different that I could detect.

“Maybe it’s just my imagination...”

Soleil was waiting for me. I changed my clothes and left in a hurry. The corridor of the mansion looked the same as always. There didn’t seem to be any

sense of incongruity here.

I walked into the dining room where everyone was waiting, thinking it was just my imagination.

“Ah, Sister!”

“You’re late, Selene. I thought you overslept again.”

“I’m sorry, Father.”

Father shook his head. My two mothers sat on either side of him.

“Selene’s never been a morning person.”

“I suppose she takes after me in that regard.”

“Maybe. Go on and sit down.” Father gestured towards my seat. Next to him was Soleil’s mother, Shioria, and on the other side was my mother, Nina.

Soleil sat next to me, full of smiles.

It was just a regular, everyday family breakfast. I was about to take a seat, but...

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

“Sister?

Everyone stared at me.

A great sense of discomfort raced through my body. Part of me thought that this peaceful, everyday sight was...wrong somehow.

“Hurry up and sit down, Selene,” Father said.

“I don’t want to.”

“Hm? What did you just say?”

“I said, I don’t want to!” I shouted. My inner feelings had come out. The words felt so fitting, like they truly represented how I felt.

That’s right. This was wrong.

My family and my life at the mansion was never so cheerful and calm. No matter what anyone said, I knew better than anyone how I’d lived.

This was a dream. Someone was showing this to me. A faint, warm dream I might have wished for once. But now, no matter how desperately I struggled, it was a dream that would never become real.

This place no longer suited me.

I cast a shadow from my feet, as if painting over the bright and calm illusion in jet black.

“Selene!”

“Sister!”

“I’m sorry. But I’m not weak enough to drown in sweet dreams.”

I understood reality all too well. And that’s why I didn’t believe in such fantasies.

♦ ♦ ♦

Seraph slowly approached me as I stared at the blank ceiling.

“Are you having a nice dream?” she asked. “You could live in those dreams forever, if you’d like.”

“I refuse.”

I transformed the shadows at my feet into sharp thorns and lashed out at the approaching Seraph. She jumped away in an instant, but blood trickled down both her thighs.

“Showing dreams to others...is that your ability?”

“You’ve already escaped?!”

“Don’t underestimate me. I don’t dream. All I see is what’s in front of me.”

“That’s surprising. But didn’t you have a lovely dream?” Seraph smiled gently. I looked at her in astonishment.

“That’s ridiculous. You think that’s what makes me happy? How pathetic.”

“What?”

“That’s enough. You don’t have to pretend to be my mother.”

Seraph looked surprised and glared at me sharply. But the dream she just showed me gave me confidence. She possessed my mother’s body and her memories. But she was *not* my mother. Unlike with Shioria, it didn’t seem like my mother and Seraph’s consciousness had fused. In fact, the consciousness seemed to be Seraph alone. It was just a hunch, because I had no clear evidence.

With that in mind, I asked her some questions. “Did you use my mother’s dead body as your vessel? You watched the memories that remained inside of her and pretended to be my mother to make me let my guard down, didn’t you?”

I faced Seraph. I’d felt this strange sense of irritation ever since I met her. And now I finally realized the source of it. It was because she had used my mother’s body and pretended to be her. And I had instinctively hated it.

She didn’t know a thing, but had pretended to be my mother. It made me furious. On top of that, she showed me such a ridiculous dream. That brought my anger to its peak. I no longer thought the person in front of me was my mother—not even in the slightest.

“It certainly was a wonderful dream. Because thanks to that, I can kill you now without regret.”

“That’s not a very nice thing to say to your mother.”

“I won’t deny that.”

There were misunderstandings I wasn’t happy about—the fact that they’d left her for dead, for one. Still, deep down, I must have had some kind of affection for her. I never knew my mother’s face, never even knew her name, and I didn’t ponder the fact that she died, leaving me behind. Saying I was preoccupied with myself was just an excuse.

I avoided thinking about it: what kind of person my mother was, what kind of life she led, and how she brought me into this world.

In the end, I grew up without knowing the feelings of both my parents.

I had nothing to give her in return. I didn't even have the *chance* to give her anything. That was why I had to kill her myself.

There was no way I, her daughter, should allow this demonic beast to take over my mother's face, body, and words, and allow it to do bad things.

"Shadow—"

I spread my shadow widely around me, surrounding me and Seraph. In response, Seraph created two rifts connecting to the same otherworldly dimensions that Agia had used, summoning gigantic moth-like creatures with wings.

As the wings fluttered, they scattered rainbow-colored powder, shrouding the surroundings in an illusion called "dreams."

In contrast, my shadow transformed into countless blades and swords, slashing and tearing apart her wings.

"I'll kill you."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yes. This is my first and final act of filial piety."

♦ ♦ ♦

Before Selene and Seraph started fighting...

Dier grabbed Victor by the collar and moved him away from Selene.

"Tch! Let go, you son of a bitch!" Victor flailed wildly, shaking off Dier's grip and rolling away to put distance between them. They were behind the building where Selene and Seraph were fighting. There were no signs of the other thieves; only the faint clashing of metal could be heard in the distance.

Dier surveyed his surroundings and once he realized there was no one else here but them, conjured a bloodsword in his right hand.

Victor narrowed his eyes. "That power...is it supernatural?"

"Isn't it obvious? Or did it look like a magic trick?"

“I see...so you’re another guardian we don’t know about.” Victor let out a sigh.

Dier pondered this and asked, “Are you sure you guys are the primordial beasts?”

“Primordial? Is that what you’re calling us?”

“Answer me. Are you the first monsters?”

Victor smirked in response. At that moment, Dier was certain that all six of the beasts had been resurrected.

“So you don’t know this ability?”

“I already told you that. Why didn’t anyone tell me about all these annoying new guardians that’ve popped up?”

“Hm, I see.”

That just led to a new question in Dier’s mind: what if the monsters had been subjugated by the first guardians and lay dormant until the present day? If Victor was telling the truth, then they wouldn’t know about the guardians of the moon and shadow. They hadn’t existed during the era of the first guardians. And why did defeating them grant Selene their memories?

The memories Selene saw were after the battles with the primordial monsters were over. And they had been, in fact, subjugated. So how would they know the story after that?

Dier narrowed his eyes and asked Victor. “Do you really not know?”

“You’re rather persistent, aren’t you? What does it matter if I know it or not if we’re going to fight?”

“That’s true.”

No matter what Victor said, it wasn’t going to affect Dier’s decision to kill him. But why did they have memories about things they hadn’t experienced?

Even if he didn’t understand that, it would be fine as long as he could defeat the monster and see its memories. Once Dier came to that conclusion, he aimed his sword towards Victor.

“Sorry to ask so many questions. Let’s talk while we fight now.”

“Ha. You’re pretty cocky for a kid.”

Victor smiled and smacked his hands together in front of his chest. Immediately after that, two large rifts opened up behind him, just like Agia had done. Two gigantic arms appeared from the rifts. They were gray and muscular, and each hand held a double-edged sword.

“I’ll cut you to pieces.”

As Victor swung his arm, one of the powerful arms behind him moved in sync. The massive arms seemed to be linked to his own arms.

He lifted his great sword and swung it down toward Dier.

Dier enlarged his blood sword, intercepting Victor’s attack head-on. However, Victor’s destructive force was greater.

Dier’s sword was shattered, and he instinctively jumped sideways to dodge.

He regained his posture after rolling away. Then he reconstructed the shattered blood sword and flexed it like a whip, attacking Victor from the side.

His timing wasn’t bad, but Victor thrust the opposite sword into the ground, using it as a shield to block Dier’s attack.

“Tch, you’re surprisingly quick,” Dier said.

“You’re not bad yourself. I was thinking of cutting you in two with a single swing...not bad. At least this won’t be a boring fight.”

Victor grinned and launched a series of attacks with the great sword.

Realizing that he’d lose if he took the hits, Dier evaded Victor’s attacks by hopping around. Despite Victor’s attacks being faster than expected, they couldn’t keep up with Dier’s true speed.

“You’re fast!”

“And you’re slow.” Dier ran behind Victor and reached maximum speed. He drew his bloodsword and slashed his completely defenseless back.

“Guess I have no choice but to make more.”

“Huh?”

Dier had tried to attack Victor, but instead was attacked himself and slightly injured. His right arm was torn off and blown away. He immediately rolled over and put distance between himself and Victor. Then he saw exactly what had attacked him from the rift.

“The arms...”

The number of giant arms that Victor manipulated had increased to four, all wielding the double-edged swords. It had been one of the new arms that had cut off Dier’s arm.

“That black hole...Agia used it too. Is it a shared ability?”

“It’s an outlier. This is more of a by-product than an ability.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You can see it, right? These four arms...are a part of my original body.”

Their resurrection is incomplete.

They’d achieved only a limited revival by using human bodies as vessels. In this incomplete revival, they lacked the power to fully manifest their original physical forms.

Because of this, they’d devised a method of fighting by materializing only specific parts.

“So, it’s a by-product?”

Both Selene and Dier had considered the possibility that their resurrection was incomplete. For that reason, Victor’s words made sense to him. But at the same time, he quietly marveled at the fact that despite being incomplete, they possessed combat abilities this complex.

“It seems you’ve seen enough for now. It wasn’t bad, but it’s not enough to kill me,” Victor said.

“Ha! You think you’ve already won?” Dier slowly showed a cross-section of his severed right arm. He was bleeding heavily and had suffered an injury so serious that under normal circumstances, it would kill someone.

But instead he stood there calmly.

“It’ll take a lot more than cutting off one of my arms to kill me.”

“Regeneration?”

And it was only natural, because Dier Veldt, the forgotten crown prince, was the moon guardian. He had the ability to manipulate blood, and had infinite vitality that instantly healed any injury or illness. His body was immortal and wouldn’t die no matter how many times he was cut.

“In fact, you *can’t* kill me.”

“What kind of power is that? That ridiculous regenerative ability...are you one of us primordial beasts...?”

“Ha ha. Well, I’m not *human*. So I guess you could say I’m a monster.”

“Well then, you’re one of us. Why don’t you join us then?”

“I’ll pass.” Dier’s answer was immediate. He didn’t even consider it for a second. Victor seemed a bit taken aback by this.

“But doesn’t it worry you?”

“Of course. I’m a monster, but...unlike you guys, my heart is still human.”

“Well, there’s no doubt about that.” Victor smiled fearlessly. His body, like Selene’s mother, Nina, was that of a man who had died. So his human personality had already disappeared. The body of the man Victor was completely dominated by the monsters will.

“You’re peculiar. This side is *much* more fun. We can do whatever we want.”

“Sorry. But I like where I am now.” Dier smiled.

The only things that came to mind were his kind little brother who never forgot him, and his accomplice who was clumsy and honest. Although she could be ruthless, she couldn’t hide the kindness in her heart.

When he met her, he no longer wanted to die. And he realized that actually, he had never really wanted to die in the first place. He wanted to live and die normally with everyone. And because that was what he wanted, he was able to continue to live as a human being and not a monster.

“I see. Then it can’t be helped. I’ll have to defeat you, Monster,” Victor said.

“That’s my line.”

Victor’s four swords attacked at once. Dier caused a wave of blood to deflect their trajectory and dodged them.

“You’re good at this! But if you keep dodging, there must be a limit to your recovery power. If your arms weren’t enough, I’ll cut off all your limbs and scatter them around!”

“Only wish that could kill me too.” The reason Dier was avoiding his attacks wasn’t because he wanted to, but because of the side-effect of his supernatural power. His body physically rejected death.

Not only did his body regenerate, but it also moved on its own to evade potentially fatal attacks. So he didn’t even need to think about evasion. If he left it to his reflexes, he could concentrate only on attacking. And that allowed him to think about other things during the battle.

“Why are you guys revived now?” Dier asked.

“Why do you care?”

“If I don’t know why you were revived, I won’t know how to completely destroy you.”

“Ha! Completely destroy? That’s not even possible!”

Victor’s greatsword gouged into the ground and destroyed surrounding structures with a shock wave. The two of them faced each other from afar.

“You humans don’t understand why we were born, do you?”

Dier didn’t answer.

“I’ll tell you before I kill you. I’ll tell you who created us.”

Not why, but who?

Dier frowned. He stood still and concentrated on Victor’s movements. Victor slowly moved his arms and pointed...at Dier.

“Are you pointing at me?”

“That’s right. The reason why we were created was because of you humans.”

Dier gasped.

“Are you surprised?” Victor asked. “Well, I don’t blame you. You guardians are fighting to protect humans from monsters. But in reality, it was humans who gave birth to monsters. We are the embodiment of humanity’s negativity.”

“Negativity?”

Anger, sadness, envy, resentment, pity. Many emotions people had were the result of negative influences. People resolved these emotions by offsetting them with their behavior, the things they say, and finding happiness elsewhere. But they’re never really gone. They’re stored deep in the heart until it swells so much it reaches its limit, and then overflows. The overflowing negative emotions take on power and a will of their own.

Monsters were born out of people’s bad feelings.

“Humans fear us! But even that fear is nourishment for us! What do you think? Are you disappointed?”

Victor launched an attack on Dier, swinging his sword down onto his left shoulder. Dier stood there stunned in a pool of blood as the large blade tore from his shoulder to his waist.

“Is it over now?”

“I told you, it’s not enough,” Dier replied. In an instant, he grabbed Victor’s greatsword and shattered it with his bare hands. Broken fragments of the blade scattered, and a metallic noise resounded.

Dier’s slashed body healed in no time. “I was surprised, but that’s it.”

Human emotions could create even magical beasts. He was shocked at this fact, and various thoughts passed through his mind. He interpreted them all in his own way.

Humans held invisible power within them, just like the power he possessed. If that power worked negatively, it could cause harm, like that of the monsters.

They were frightened by the beings that they themselves created, and their fears had created new fears. It was certainly ironic, but that didn’t change Dier’s

new purpose.

He no longer wanted to die.

He wanted to live. Just living and dying normally would be enough. And he wouldn't let anyone stand in the way of that, no matter who they were.

Having reached this conclusion, he let out a bitter laugh. "It's like her way of thinking has rubbed off on me."

She'd show no mercy to achieve her goal. That's what she always said. He had pursued the same path by her side, although both of them had different goals. But now, they were the same.

"Thank you for the valuable information. I'll have to tell Selene later. Knowing her, she'll just say 'I see' and that'll be it, though."

"Why are you acting like you've won?" Victor held up three swords behind him with a displeased look on his face. "Don't get carried away just because you broke one."

"I'm not. I've already won this battle."

"How?"

"Because you can't kill me."

Victor didn't notice that Dier had already spread the river of blood on the ground to encircle him. No matter how swift his movements, the arms he manipulated were just too big to maneuver them around the countless blades that approached.

"Penetrate."

"What...?"

Impossible.

Countless blades tore through Victor's body, piercing straight through him.. Even if the arms he manifested were colossal, his physical form was still that of a human.

"If you wanted to kill me, you should have at least achieved complete resurrection before picking a fight."

“Damn it...”

The confrontation between Dier and Victor was nearing its end.

Almost simultaneously, the battle between Selene and Seraph was also drawing to a close.

Inside the crumbling building, the sound of heavy breathing rang out. She was bleeding, panting, and had no strength left to wipe the sweat from her face.

“Haa, haa...”

“You’ve had enough?”

I’d cornered Seraph.

Upon inhaling the dust scattered by her wings, Seraph had the ability to induce hallucinations in her chosen targets.

I saw through her hallucinations in an instant and had summarily destroyed her wings, letting the flying dust escape outside with the power of Shadow. As a result, she had no choice but to take the full brunt of my attack.

The battle became so one-sided that it made me feel a little bad for her. All right, that’s a lie—I didn’t feel bad at all. Not even a bit.

In fact, I felt refreshed. Even though I had no memory of my mother, the fact that this monster was toying with her body made me furious. Perhaps I would have hesitated a bit more I had known my mother and her memory had been more deeply rooted in me. But now, I was glad that I’d never known her; I could face the primordial beast wearing my mother’s face without hesitation.

“Let’s finish this.”

“Not an ounce of mercy for your mother?”

“You talk too much. Stop irritating me.”

“Tch...” She clicked her tongue.

Immediately after that, I heard something being blown away with a roaring sound. Dust clouds swirled around Seraph, who was covered in wounds, then cleared to reveal a battered Victor lying on the ground.

“Victor, you...”

“Looks like you’re done for too, huh?”

“Yes.”

Of course, Dier showed up without a single scratch on his body. Yet his

clothes were in tatters, so I could tell he'd been attacked. He was as immortal as ever, so there was no point in worrying about him. But I was still was relieved.

"You done here too?" Dier asked.

"Yes," I replied.

Dier and I faced each other, and looked down at the two monsters in front of us.

"You're useless," Seraph told Victor. "I can't believe you lost."

"What about you?" Victor replied. "I had to go up against an immortal!"

"I don't want to hear your excuses. We were finally revived and now we have to start back from square one!"

"Shut up!"

We were both surprised to see them arguing like children. With a sigh, I made eye contact with Dier and nodded. I manipulated the shadows while he manipulated blood.

"Goodbye," I said." Don't ever appear in front of me again."

"You picked the wrong people to deal with," Dier added.

Shadow penetrated Seraph, while Dier's bloodsword stabbed through Victor.

And then, just like it had with Agia, I felt a piercing sensation run through me.



♦ ♦ ♦

Supernatural abilities were inherited through bloodlines.

They were passed down from parents to children, inherited across generations. However, an unexpected event occurred. The king and the sun guardian bore twins.

Both twins possessed supernatural abilities. However, the abilities they acquired were not those of the king and Sun.

The younger of the twin brothers inherited the king's ability, while the older brother manifested a seventh ability, distinct from the six known abilities.

Next, they had twin girls. Sun's ability awakened in the younger sister, while the older sister also awakened to a power entirely different from Sun's—one that manipulated shadows.

The emergence of the seventh and eighth abilities perplexed not only the king and his guardians, but also many influential figures.

Despite such confusion, the children continued to grow and eventually reached adulthood.

And then, they became embroiled in a power struggle.

The factional disputes among the guardians intensified, and those with supernatural abilities were divided into two major groups. One thought the twin brother who inherited the king's power was the one fit to be the king, while the other faction believed the twin brother who gained the power of immortality should take the throne.

It's unclear who first proposed the argument. But the conflict grew, leading to a split between the two forces, with each side arguing for their candidate.

At that time, there was no established rule that someone with the king's ability would become the monarch. Therefore, arguing that the most powerful should ascend to the throne was not entirely wrong.

But what did the individuals themselves want?

Did the younger brother with the king's power strongly wish to become king,

or did the older brother with the power of immortality desire it?

Only they knew their true intentions. As a result, they came into conflict behind the scenes.

The guardians were initially divided. However, as time passed, they began to shift their support towards the younger brother.

Perhaps they had realized just how immense and terrifying the supernatural power of Moon was. It was a power that rendered its possessor impervious to wounds or even diseases.

It was literally the power of immortality. Combined with the drawback of being unable to go out in the daylight, the powers of the moon were regarded as something aberrant even among the guardians—something to be feared.

They didn't understand the supernatural abilities yet, but among them Moon was too mysterious and frightening. What if it turned against them?

The guardians gradually began to wonder this: if this monster were to one day run rampant, would they be able to stop them?

Perhaps the guardian of the moon was, in fact, a new adversary, one akin to a real monster.

Was this just a selfish fantasy?

They had merely used the twin brothers to solidify their own power. Nevertheless, in the end, they came to see one of them as the enemy of humanity. And enemies must be eliminated. The conflict escalated, minor grudges grew into major disputes, and it ultimately led to internal strife.

However, hardly anyone sided with the guardian of the moon. Among all the guardians, the only one who stood by the guardian of the moon until the end was...the guardian of shadows.

She alone protected the guardian of the moon, the sole guardian all the others opposed. After all, they were in similar circumstances; they had acquired new abilities they were never supposed to have, and thus their destinies were warped.

With the majority of the guardians siding with the younger brother, the

outcome was almost certain.

The younger brother would ascend to the throne as the new king. Concurrently, their father, the former king, passed away.

The sudden news of his death shocked everyone. The former king was still young, not even in what could be called middle age. He had no visible injuries or illnesses.

The people mourned his unexpected death, and once again baseless speculations ran rampant. Among those were, *“What if the guardian of the moon killed the king?”*

But of course that could not be. Both of the brothers had loved their father from the bottom of their hearts. So the newly crowned king, the younger brother, vehemently denied such a thought.

Yet the angry voices of the people grew like a raging fire, grew to the point where it could not be extinguished.

Then a terrible tragedy occurred: Against the wishes of the young king, the guardians planned to assassinate the guardian of the moon.

♦ ♦ ♦

I’d never get used to that sensation. It felt like the images were being forced into my head, and honestly it made me sick. It was especially bad this time because of how disgusted I was at what I saw.

“What a terrible story.”

“Yeah...”

Perhaps because we’d been so close, or because we’d killed them at the same time, but Dier and I had shared the memories.

One look at his face and I could tell he felt the same way I did about it.

“It’s clear that our ancestors were complete fools.”

“Can’t deny that. Don’t even feel like it.”

They had glutted themselves on power, treated innocent people like they were monsters purely based on conjecture, and even planned an assassination...how could one not call this foolishness?

Setting aside my personal feelings, however, revealed that we had gained new information.

“Our powers originally resided in the children of the king and the guardian of the sun,” I said.

“It seems that way. Since they were children of individuals with supernatural abilities, their powers mixed and became something new...is that right?”

“I suppose.”

The reason for this was purely speculative, yet there parts of it that made sense. Moon and Shadow...both were names and powers related to the sun.

But why, then, was Moon born from the king’s supernatural ability? It had never been an ability related to the moon, which I’d always wondered about.

The answer lay in their bloodlines. Generations ago, the king and the guardian of the sun had come together, and as a result, their child—Moon—was born.

Moon was related to both of those supernatural abilities.

“Heh...”

“What is it?”

Suddenly, from beside me, Dier had laughed. We’d seen the same memories, and I couldn’t think of one amusing thing about any of them.

I stared at him and he gave me a kind expression.

“Nah, it’s just...yeah, it was a terrible story. But in the end, the only one who had the moon guardian’s back was Shadow.”

“It seems that way.”

“Don’t you think that resembles our situation a bit?” he asked, and I gasped.

Long ago, the guardian of the moon and the guardian of shadows joined forces to oppose the other supernatural guardians. It was a completely different story, because we didn’t consider them our enemies, but there were

definitely similarities.

“We saw the memories, but not the emotions behind them,” Dier said. “Despite that...I think that the guardian of the moon at the time was really grateful to Shadow.”

“It seems the shadow guardian at the time had strange tastes.”

“You mean that’s inherited too?”

“I don’t have strange tastes!”

“You sure about that?” Dier asked with a teasing grin.

Even though we’d just finished an intense battle, the banter between us was light. Gordov and the knights should still be engaged in battle outside.

“Let’s go. The battle will end once we show ‘em these guys,” Dier suggested.

“True.”

We looked at the unmoving corpses in front of us.

Unlike with Shioria, both of these primordial monsters had inhabited their human hosts right before they died. So the initial human personalities had never lingered inside the body.

Honestly, I had my hopes up a little about this, but…well, there was no use in thinking about it now.

“Are you okay?” I asked Dier.

“Are *you* okay?”

“I’m fine. As you can see, I have no injuries.”

“I’m not talking about physically.” Dier gave me a look of concern, then turned his gaze to the body in front of me.

“I’m fine.”

“Selene...”

“I prepared myself for this. Plus, it’s different from what happened with Soleil. The body that’s before us now was dead from the beginning.”

A monster took over the body of my dead mother and used it—that was all.

The corpse lying in front of me was not my mother. It was nothing but a monster, or even less. I defeated it and got the information I needed.

There was nothing to be upset about.

Plus...

“It’s all I can do to live in the present. I can’t look back to the past now.”

“I guess that’s true,” Dier agreed.

The past was the past, and it would always be there no matter what. So I surely wouldn’t forget it. But if I was bound by the past, I could never move forward.

That was something I learned after dying over and over again.

I would move forward.

And I wouldn’t look back.

Chapter Six: Siblings with a Death Wish

A suspicious figure concealed in a black robe raced through the royal capital at night. Leaping from building to building, his destination was the towering castle.

But he stopped short just before he reached his destination.

“Hey there, you look suspicious! You won’t get past me!”

Appearing before the figure was Lawrence Cielo, the guardian of air. Floating gently between two buildings, he blocked the path the man was about to leap through.

“There have been a lot of important people getting assassinated in the royal capital lately. Are you the one that did it?”

The man didn’t answer.

“Past me is the royal castle, so your mark...could it be someone from the royal family? Were you hired by someone? Ah, but the targets are too random for that...”

Lawrence smirked as the assassin turned his back on him and attempted to flee.

“Oh? You’re trying to run away. But you should just give up.”

The assassin tried to turn back along the path he had come from. But the moment he attempted to leap from one building to another, everything before him turned pitch black.

“Y’know, someone *much* scarier than me is waiting just over there.”

The man didn’t answer.

“And who could that be?” I asked.

“Ha ha ha. Who else is here besides us, Selene?”

I knocked down the fleeing assassin with my shadow, and he spun in mid-air before landing on the rooftop of a building. I had been waiting on the rooftop of

the opposite building, while Lawrence floated between the buildings.

We had him completely trapped. There was no way for him to escape anymore.

That is, if he were a *regular* opponent.

“Haa...guess I have no choice,” said a deep voice.

Immediately after, several rifts opened up around the assassin. It was the same power Agia and the other monsters had used: the power to summon their main bodies from a different dimension.

Seeing this, I became certain.

“I knew it was another vessel for a primordial monster. ”

“See, see? Didn’t I say so?” Lawrence exclaimed triumphantly.

“You can brag after we defeat him.”

“Don’t be so hard on me. I’m the type who thrives on compliments, y’know?”

While exchanging banter, countless skeletons emerged from the rifts.

These monsters were skeletal creatures resembling the bones of humans or animals. Each one individually wasn’t particularly powerful, but they could appear en masse. Sometimes they formed swarms large enough to engulf entire towns.

The assassin had summoned those same kind of skeletons, but these were pitch black.

“Wow, so many skeletons...” Lawrence grimaced.

“Don’t let your guard down.”

“It’s all right. I can just blow their bones away with my wind.”

“Lawrence! Above you!”

“Huh?”

Lawrence had let himself get too confident, and meanwhile, a horde of skeletons surged toward him all at once. The skeletons the assassin had summoned in front of him were just decoys; the real threat was the horde of

them descending from above him.

The swarm of skeletons fell down like an avalanche upon him, and Lawrence was overwhelmed and fell to the ground.

“Aaaaaahhh!”

“I *said* not to let down your guard!”

My focus turned to Lawrence for just a moment, but then the assassin disappeared from my vision. All I could see was the group of skeletons. I quickly checked my surroundings and activated Shadow with the widest range I could afford, but...

“We lost him.”

The assassin was nowhere to be found.

♦ ♦ ♦

The next day.

The guardians all came together for a meeting in which we notified them of last night’s failure.

“And that’s why he got away,” I said.

Everyone’s gazes focused on Lawrence.

“What? Like it’s my fault?” he asked.

“According to that report, who else’s fault could it be?” Gordov pointed out.

“Tch! Can’t you just be happy that I’m safe? The skeletons nearly crushed me to death, y’know!”

“And that was also because of your mistake.” Gordov turned his cold gaze towards Lawrence.

And because it was true, no one defended Lawrence. Lawrence thus went quiet and shrunk back like a remorseful cat.

“Well, at least we did get one valuable piece of information. That assassin is

definitely the fourth beast," I said with a sigh.

"It seems so. But an assassin using skeletons? It's quite an unusual combination," Alexei commented.

Lawrence, who was supposed to be reflecting on his actions, quickly recovered and refuted his opinion. "Really? I think it's a perfect match. He kills people and then controls their skeletons...perfect, isn't?"

"Lawrence! Think before you speak," Gordov reprimanded.

"Sorry about that." Lawrence once again looked remorseful. But it was clear the apology wasn't genuine, and that only irritated me more.

In the end it *was* Lawrence who provided the information about the assassin, so I supposed we should be grateful.

"Now, our current target is that assassin," Gordov said. "The noble's guards will be handled by our knight's order. Please stay vigilant, everyone."

"What about His Majesty's protection?" Etoile asked. "Should we continue to handle it ourselves?"

"That's my intention. Lord Weldon, please remain by His Majesty's side."

"Of course."

Etoile would stay close to Euclis because of his ability to tell the future. Gordov and Alexei would take turns guarding the king. With this plan, the risk of Euclis being assassinated would be significantly reduced.

Dier couldn't participate in these meetings, but I thought that he would be pleased that his brother would still retain his two bodyguards.

But just like before, since Etoile would have to stay by Euclis's side, it would be too difficult for us to go off and sneak in a conversation with him. Although I really wish we could at least talk once, since we had so much new information.

I glanced over at Euclis with that thought in my mind. And he looked back at me with perfect timing. It seemed like he was pleading with me somehow. He had a sad look in his eyes, like he wasn't feeling well.

"Your Majesty, is that all right with you?"

He didn’t answer.

“Your Majesty?”

“Ah, yes. That’s fine,” Euclis answered vaguely, seeming to have not even heard Gordov’s question.

And with that, the meeting was over. I decided to go back home to the mansion.

♦♦♦

“How’s Euclis doing?”

“Hm, honestly? He seemed like he was a little down.”

Once I got back to the mansion, I filled Dier in on what happened at the meeting. He wasn’t surprised with Lawrence’s behavior, but of course it was Euclis who he was most worried about.

And once I reported back with how Euclis appeared, he looked incredibly worried. He was very easy to read when it came to his little brother. I could tell that he wanted to immediately find out the reason behind Euclis’s sad expression. I could see it on his face that he wanted to meet with him, and talk as soon as possible.

The reason we had called the meeting was to talk about the assassin who had gotten away, but that didn’t seem like the most important thing right now.

“If you’re that worried about it, I’ll ask him the next time I see him.”

“Really? I’d really appreciate that. I’m not in the position to go talk to him any time I feel like it. It would only cause trouble, anyway.”

“I’m sure that’s frustrating for you.”

Dier was Euclis’s biological brother and technically a member of the royal family, but right now he wasn’t allowed to step one foot inside the castle.

Perhaps if we could get everyone in the world to regain their memories of him, it would improve this frustrating situation for him...

But in order to do that, we had to discover the truth behind the past.

“We have to find the assassin before anyone else does,” I said.

“Yeah. An assassin who attacks nobles at random. It’s just too dangerous to leave this alone. That’ll just make more victims. And if the knights begin to move on it in earnest, it’ll be harder for us to take action.”

“I know. So that’s why we need to find him before anyone else does.”

“Why don’t we use the same tactic as you did with Agia? He’s probably still hiding out somewhere in the capital, right?”

Dier was referencing the strategy I had employed with Agia, when I spread out my shadow over the entire capital. It was true that if I used Shadow to search, I would be able to locate the assassin no matter where he was.

But to be honest, I wasn’t powerful enough by myself to use that strategy. I needed either the king by my side or the protection of the sun guardian, since either of them were able to boost the supernatural abilities of others.

“I can’t ask Euclis or Soleil for their help.”

“I think they’d both cooperate, though. Euclis for sure, and you know Soleil would agree to anything.”

“I suppose.”

I did think that Soleil would help if I asked her. Since the incident with Shioria our relationship was decent. And Soleil was always kind and cared for me. If I was in trouble, I had a feeling she’d offer to lend a hand. I thought it would work as long as I went to talk to her, and there was no problem at all...except for the way Dier was staring at me.

Like he was expecting something.

“Are you sure you don’t just want an excuse to go talk to Euclis right away?”

“That’s not it.”

“Then why did you avert your gaze for a split second just now?”

“Because it’s bright in here.”

“You’re in the shade.”

He was too stubborn to admit it, but it seemed like I was right.

He was very worried about Euclis. Of course I could understand, but at the same time I felt a bit exasperated. I let out a sigh.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?”

A servant called through the door. “Mistress, a messenger has come from the royal castle.”

“From the castle? Did you hear what they wanted?”

“Yes. His Majesty wants to speak with you.”

Dier and I exchanged glances. Euclis had summoned me.

“All right. Tell the messenger I’ll get ready at once.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

I heard the servant move away from the door. I turned towards Dier. “Well, that settles that. I’ll go right now.”

“Okay. I’ll stay here.”

The king had summoned me directly, so Dier knew that he couldn’t attend. Even though he knew there was no choice in the matter, he seemed very disappointed.

“I promise to ask him.”

“All right. If anything happens, come get me using Shadow right away. I’ll be ready for it.”

“Okay. You do that.”

Since I had been summoned by Euclis, I left the mansion for the castle. Outside, the skies were tinged orange by the setting sun, and it was gradually getting darker. This time of day was easiest for both Dier and I to move around...

If only it had been a bit later, he might've been able to accompany me. He said he was relieved that I was going to go ask Euclis what was bothering him, but I was sure it frustrated him to stay behind now.

It was Dier, after all, who wanted to see Euclis most.

I rode in the carriage with those thoughts running through my head until I finally reached the palace. A knight escorted me to the room where I would meet Euclis.

There were many knights stationed inside the castle. Take a few steps in any direction and you'd run into one. The castle was definitely on high alert, but that made sense; an assassin was more likely to show up at night.

Alexei was on guard duty during the day, while Gordov and his knights guarded the castle. That meant right about now, Gordov was somewhere in the castle as well.

I hadn't spoken with him much outside of our meetings. We had faced off against each other briefly during the incident with Agia, and ever since then I'd had the feeling that he'd been avoiding me.

I really wanted to sit down and have a proper talk with him—well, that's what friends would do, but unfortunately we didn't have that sort of relationship. In fact, I wasn't sure *what* we'd say to each other if we did sit down and talk, so I really wanted to avoid running into him while I was at the palace.

I followed the knight, sneakily checking my surroundings to make sure Gordov wasn't around. By a stroke of good luck, I didn't end up running into him.

However...

"Selene."

"Of course..."

Etoile was standing in the room instead. I'd completely forgotten that he also

stood guard by the king's side. I was so focused on trying to avoid Gordov that Etoile had utterly slipped my mind. In a way, he was someone I didn't want to see even more than Gordov—Etoile was my ex-fiancé, and Soleil's current one.

But his engagement to Soleil had been manufactured by my father in order to strengthen the Vixent family position. Since my ascension to head of house, however, the engagement had become void. After all, my father had passed away. and Shioria was gone too...but either way, dealing with him was troublesome.

"Are you going to join in on the conversation?" I asked.

"No, His Majesty has ordered me to wait in another room."

"I see. That's good."

If Etoile had been asked to stay in the room, I wouldn't be able to talk alone with Euclis. Plus, Astromancy wouldn't function correctly next to me. So it was better that Etoile not be around me.

"Selene."

"Yes?"

"I'm sure you already know this, but I can't guarantee the king's future just by being with him. There are knights nearby, and Sir Boden is here too. So if something drastic happens, you..."

"I have to protect His Majesty? You don't have to tell me that. I'm aware."

"I see..."

The silence continued for a few seconds.

I let out a sigh and walked past him.

"Selene, I..." Etoile started to say right before I was about to knock on the door.

I turned towards him, giving a look that said *If you've got something to say, make it short*. But instead he just hesitated.

"Ah, it's nothing. Please don't stay with the king for too long."

"I'll keep that in mind."

It was clear that he wanted to say something else, but what that could be, I had no idea. And I didn't care to know, either. Obviously it wasn't important enough for him to talk to me about in the first place.

Our relationship had ended a long time ago. There was no reason for us to speak to each other like we were close, and I had no desire to dredge up the past either. To me, he was just another one of the guardians, and nothing more.

I knocked on the door and received permission to enter. I had been escorted to the king's study. Euclis looked very regal as he sat at his desk.

I looked around and let out a deep breath when I confirmed it was just the two of us here. "I'm here, Euclis."

"Yes, I'm sorry for summoning you out of the blue." He politely apologized, then slowly rose from his seat to walk over to me. There was a sofa in the room for guests, so I walked towards it, but for some reason Euclis stood in front of me, preventing me from doing so.

"Selene...where's my brother?"

"He's waiting back at the mansion. Should I have brought him?"

"No! You're the one I want to speak with."

"I see. Well then, what is it? I have a question for you as well."

I had to ask him or Dier wouldn't be able to rest. But I would hear Euclis out first. He went to the trouble of summoning me to the castle, after all, and ordered Etoile out of the room so we could be alone. It must be something important.

Plus, he was looking strangely tense.

"Selene, there's something I need to ask you to do for me."

Or maybe that wasn't tension on his face, but a look of determination? He stared at me with a heavy, solemn look on his face. Then he said, quite plainly, "Will you kill me?"

"What?!"

It was the same thing he'd asked me when we first met. I couldn't believe my

ears. And it didn't seem like he was joking, either. Euclis's expression was deadly serious, just as he'd been the first time we met, at the night of the party.

I narrowed my eyes and asked him quietly, "What is the meaning of this?"

He didn't answer.

"Surely you aren't joking?"

"Of course not. I'm serious."

I was even more confused. Why would he ask me such a thing *now*?

"May I ask the reason?"

No answer.

"Euclis, what are you—" I raised my voice but then he interrupted me.

"It's all because of me." His voice sounded stressed, trembling as he spoke, and his face was full of sorrow.

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"You saw the memories, didn't you?"

"Yes, and I've seen more since then. I actually came here to talk to you about them."

"I already know about them." His voice was barely above a whisper.

He knows? Is he talking about the new memories Dier and I just saw?

I hadn't told him about them, and obviously Dier hadn't had a chance to speak with Euclis since then either. And since Euclis wasn't even present at the time we received these memories I wasn't even sure how he could have found out. All sorts of doubts swam through my mind.

"What do you mean?"

"When you and Brother defeated the monsters...memories flowed into my head too."

"They did?"

I thought only those who defeated the primordial monster would be able to view the memories that were released upon their death.

After all, Dier hadn't seen the memories from Agia. He didn't even know about the fight against the monsters until I told him.

I thought I had it figured out, but apparently there were exceptions to the rule.

It seemed that fragments of the memories kept within the primordial monsters had an effect on Euclis, wielder of the royal powers, as well. Perhaps that meant it had something to do with the origin of the king and the guardians, since the powers of the king and the guardians were connected by some invisible force. After all, the king's presence could boost the powers of the guardians.

I was surprised, but at the same time not, because in a way it made sense. But having things make sense didn't help me at all in understanding why he asked me what he did—more like the opposite.

He saw a glimpse of past memories and now he wanted to die again.

That I couldn't understand—I didn't remember anything from the memories that would make him come to that conclusion.

"I have a hard time believing that seeing the memories could have anything to do with your request."

"It does...were the memories all you two saw?"

I gave him a puzzled look. "Yes, memories from the past. Did you see something different?"

"Yes...what I saw wasn't exactly just memories. What I saw—no, what I *felt* was the king's heart."

"The king's heart...?"

He nodded.

"You felt it too, didn't you? When the memories flowed inside your head, it was like someone was talking to you, right?"

"Yes, I suppose that's true. It did feel that way."

Just as Euclis pointed out, the memories I received felt like someone reading a

book. An unfamiliar voice had resounded in my head as they relayed the story to me.

I wasn't just watching the memories from the past—it was more like I was directly experiencing what someone else had seen and felt.

And Euclis had the answer for why. "Those were the memories of the former king. Fragments of the record and memories he left behind."

"Memories of the past king...? That's awfully hard to believe." I wasn't sure I agreed with his opinion. It wasn't that I doubted the content of the memories. But if those were the king's memories, why were we able to see them when the primordial beasts' cores were destroyed? I conveyed those doubts to Euclis and he explained without hesitation.

"I think that's because of the way the powers were formed."

"What do you mean?"

"First of all, have you realized why the king was born?"

"I have a hunch, but I'm not sure. You know the answer though, don't you?"

He nodded. "Yes."

Then there was no point in me pondering. "Well, will you tell me?"

"People created the king," he answered.

I'd recently heard those same words from someone else.

"The king was born from the people's wishes."

That sounded like what Euclis was getting at. Perhaps since the person who told me was close to him, it felt like it was overlapping. Power was born from people's emotions and feelings. Almost like...

"Just like monsters."

"That's right."

"Wait, you knew?"

He nodded.

Dier knew why monsters were created because of his battle with Victor, and

he later shared that with me. Dier and Euclis were brothers and had a similar manner of communication, so that's why it felt like I was hearing the same thing twice.

I should have realized it was the same. It was said that people's negative emotions had created monsters. And so if the ones who created the king were...

"Because the people wished for someone to protect them?"

"That's right. At the time, the people were vulnerable to the threat of the monsters and they strongly wished for protection—for someone who could repel the beasts and who had the power to fight and protect them."

"So that wish..."

That wish had created the king's supernatural powers.

The circularity of it made me laugh. Humans made monsters, and in the same vein created the sole being that could defeat them—the king.

The whole thing was as if all of humanity was putting on some kind of hokey one-man show.

I was astonished, but the story wasn't over yet. That still didn't explain why Euclis wanted to die.

"All right, so I understand the circumstances around the king's origin. Then what?"

"After the king was born, so were the six guardians."

"Yes, I know that."

At that point neither the guardian of the moon nor the guardian of shadow existed. The original six supernatural guardians fought the monsters in the name of the king and achieved victory.

"Human emotions also gave birth to the guardians. The six guardians were born as a result of people seeking power that could fight against the monsters for the king."

Euclis spoke calmly and I listened.

Since the guardians were born from the people's desires, there was no reason

to doubt that the king was born from the same reason.

Euclis elaborated on this. “However, in the king’s case, the only thing that differs is that the guardians were born as a result of the people’s wishes *and* the king’s wishes becoming one.”

“Isn’t it the same thing? They were both created because of the wishes of the people.”

“No, because the king has the power to create guardians even if the people don’t ask for it. That’s the real superpower that dwells in us kings.”

The king’s supernatural power.

For a long time, it hadn’t been clear what exactly that power entailed.

The following was understood: The king could influence the supernatural ability of the guardians when in proximity to them. He could control and limit their abilities. He had the power to invite others into his dreams.

In the memories of the past—before the guardians were created—the king possessed the same powers as they had. At that time, they were all considered the king’s powers, and were proof of his ability to be king.

So the true form of the king’s supernatural powers was—

“The king’s supernatural power is to make his own dreams and wishes become reality.”

“Dreams and wishes become reality...?”

For example, let’s say one wished for good weather tomorrow. Then that’s what would happen. If one wished for someone they disliked to be unhappy, then they’ll be unhappy. Every day, wishes like that would become a reality.

If that was the true power of the king, then it was just too unreasonable and too powerful; at that point, the king could cease being just a king. He would be an all-powerful being…a god.

“Do you really have that kind of power?” I asked.

I couldn’t believe it, but Euclis explained.

“Of course, it’s not possible to make *all* my wishes come true. In order to

activate that part of my power, I have to have emotions strong enough to match the wish. And if I don't have those intense emotions, my ability won't activate."

So in other words, the small examples I thought of before like the weather and so forth wouldn't come true unless there was a strong emotion accompanying it.

The supernatural guardians were created out of the king's wishes because there was a limit to what he could do alone to stop the six primordial beasts. And if he died, he wouldn't be able to protect his people.

That was why he needed someone to fight with him—needed others who could protect *him*.

And the people wished for the same thing. They saw how difficult it was for the king to fight alone against the monsters, and thought perhaps that if there were people who could fight alongside him, it would reduce his burden. The fact that they knew they couldn't rise up and join him themselves reminded them of their own weakness.

Thus, the two wishes overlapped and led to the creation of the six supernatural guardians.

According to Euclis, if the wishes of the people hadn't joined with that of the king, the guardians may not have been born. Or if they had been, perhaps it wouldn't have been six of them, but fewer.

The king had the power to grant wishes, but was also the focus of the wishes of his people.

"That all happened because of a combination of the king's and the people's wishes. But everything after that was what the king himself wished for," Euclis continued. "You saw it yourself, Selene. You saw what happened in the world after the monsters were slain."

"Yes, I did. A terrible war was caused by a struggle for power."

The guardians, having defeated the primordial monsters—their common enemy—became obsessed with power and started vying for it. They did whatever it took to get closer to the throne, to become the next king.

The king, who witnessed this struggle closer than anyone else, must have harbored intensely complex emotions. And Euclis had been there to witness it all.

He thus began to speak, describing the king's sorrowful feelings from that time.

♦ ♦ ♦

The battle had ended.

The people's wishes had come true, and the world was now free from the fear of the monsters. So then why did conflict still persist?

The guardians, who had fought side by side, now used their abilities to showcase their power and eyed each other with suspicion.

Such a waste.

Surely, this was not what the people had hoped for.

It deeply saddened the king, and he contemplated a solution.

The king himself was not fixated on being the king. He was willing to relinquish his throne if there was someone else more suitable for the role and more dedicated to the people than himself.

However, as far as he could see, those vying for the throne were using their power for their own sake, and not for the people's. The king couldn't see any of them as deserving of the throne.

Something had to be done to stop their infighting. Otherwise, the guardians would eventually bring about a tragedy similar to the monsters.

The king called out to the guardians.

"We should not be fighting. Our abilities are not meant for the pursuit of power. We fought and emerged victorious to protect the people's peace. It would be meaningless for us to threaten the peaceful days we have finally secured."

But the king’s words did not reach them.

Those who had become drunk with power were already beyond the reach of the king’s words, or the people’s words, for that matter.

Fortunately or unfortunately, with the appearance of a new monster, the guardians’ conflicts were put on hold, and they once again devoted their strength to securing the people’s peace.

Yet, the king’s worries did not disappear.

Once the monsters were gone...once the world was at peace, they would eventually repeat the same mistakes. So wouldn’t it have been better if there were no abilities from the beginning?

Or maybe the world would have been better off if he hadn’t ever existed too.

The king then made a wish.

A wish for the abilities to disappear from the world...

And if his existence gave rise to conflict, then he didn’t mind disappearing either.

His feelings were genuine. But his wish did not come true; the people had not wished for such a thing.

What they wished for was their own peace. And they didn’t want to lose what they had now, where other people fought for peace instead of themselves.

The king’s wish and the people’s wishes diverged, and the strength of their feelings led to the latter taking precedence.

And so, the supernatural powers were passed down through generations. However, that didn’t mean *none* of the king’s wishes came true.

There was one wish, and only one, that had come true.

That wish was the end of himself, the one who gave rise to conflict...this single wish of his came true, in that those who possessed the king’s abilities would live only short lives.

But the king at that time did not despair.

The guardians were beings created by the king’s wishes and power. If the king

were to disappear, it would also affect the abilities of the guardians.

They would either disappear altogether or weaken to some extent.

If only the abilities were to disappear, this meaningless conflict would come to an end.

But what if it didn't?

If he died, and the conflict continued even after the abilities were lost, what purpose would there be in sacrificing his life?

Such a question lingered within the king.

He wished for death if it meant the people's peace. However, buried beneath this wish for death, he concealed his true desire to live.

This contradiction gave birth to the guardian of the moon.

He didn't want to die. He wanted to live forever. But he knew that as long as he lived, conflict would not cease and the people would suffer.

With all this in mind, he wished for someone to kill him.

And it was this wish that gave birth to the shadow guardian.

He believed he should not exist. Yet, miserably, he tried to cling to life. Even though he believed he was prepared for death, deep within his heart his resolve wavered.

Moreover, the king was the focus of the people's wishes. There was no way they would wish for their king's death, and the king couldn't choose death of his own will.

He thought himself weak, so he wished for someone who could kill him. He wanted someone who, in his place, could stop the guardians from going down the wrong path.

And thus, two new supernatural powers were born.

They were not born from the wishes of the people. The king's own internal conflicts, driven by strong emotions, manifested these two powers: Moon and Shadow.

And in the present day...

A young king was born, burdened with the same struggle.

♦ ♦ ♦

Euclis spoke slowly. “I made a wish. I didn’t want to die...that’s why my brother became the guardian of the moon. And because I wished for someone to kill me, you became the guardian of shadow,” he continued, as if confessing his sins.

His eyes were moist. He looked so fragile—as if he would burst into tears at any moment.



“So, if I wasn’t here, neither of you would have to be sad. If you kill me, it will all end,” Euclis explained.

The king’s power and the guardians’ powers were closely related. The abilities of the moon and shadow were aberrant existences born directly from the king’s wishes. Therefore, the ones most strongly affected by the king’s presence were undoubtedly me and Dier.

If the king were to die, would our abilities also disappear? If the king disappeared, would that end this eternal nightmare, this endless time loop of my life?

“Euclis.”

“Please, Selene! The other guardians can’t kill me. Only your power can. That’s why...”

“I...” Before I could answer, an eerie presence suddenly appeared in the room.

Countless holes opened in the floor, and several skeletons emerged from them.

“That’s...” It was the ability of the monster-possessed assassin.

I quickly activated Shadow and destroyed the skeletons around me. But their numbers kept increasing, putting distance between Euclis and me.

No reinforcements were coming from outside. I could faintly hear some commotion in the corridor. Could it be that skeletons had been summoned within the entire royal castle?

If that were the case, the knights would be occupied with dealing with that situation while they waited for reinforcements.

“Nngh! Come over here, Euclis!”

I reached out my hand.

If I could just extend my own shadow to his feet, I could hide him with Shadow. I was almost there when something obstructed my shadow.

It was the king’s will.

The king could reject the powers of the other guardians. He chose to reject my assistance with his own will.

Amidst the skeletons that blocked my path, Euclis smiled faintly.

“I’m sorry. But this is for the best.”

“Euclis?”

“This way, I won’t trouble you either.”

In this dire situation, he smiled, and actually looked relieved. He must have been very hesitant to ask for me to kill him.

Among the guardians, only the shadow guardian could kill the king due to the unique circumstances of their birth. The other guardians would move to protect the king regardless of his will.

So that’s why he wished for me to do it.

Such intentions and relationships would be meaningless to a monster. The unexpected appearance of an assassin might have been the thing Euclis desired most.

An old man with one eye closed appeared before Euclis.

“Are you..one of the primordial monsters?” Euclis asked the old man.

“Indeed. I am Harist. O king of humans, I shall end your life.”

“Yes, please.”

When Euclis failed to resist, Harist briefly hesitated. But in a moment, he quickly prepared a knife with his right hand.

Euclis was genuinely prepared to die. He had already closed his eyes and made up his mind to face death.

If he died, my loop might come to an end. Given the high likelihood of a connection between my abilities and the loop, it seemed plausible that this might be the most reliable method to end my time loop.

So, all I needed to do was wait for the monster to kill Euclis.

Before I met *him,* I might have considered such a series of events a stroke of

good fortune; I could escape the loop and not even have to get my hands dirty.

“Shadowdance.”

“Selene!”

I used my shadow to sweep away the surrounding skeletons, allowing it to reach Euclis and Harist. If my shadow couldn’t reach Euclis, I could extend it as far as I could and move myself closer.

Even if my shadow couldn’t reach, my hands could, right?

I firmly grasped Euclis’s arm.

“I’m not going to let you just die.”

“But I was so close...” Harist said.

“Back off, monster...don’t you dare touch him.”

I generated countless shadow blades to keep Harist at bay, his bitterness palpable as he was forced to retreat.

“Why did you save me?” Euclis asked, his arm trembling slightly in my grasp. “Me dying is the best outcome. And then you can be happy, Selene...”

“I swear, both of you brothers are fools.”

“What?”

Why was death the first solution those two *always* jumped to first? Sacrificing their own lives for someone else might sound noble and admirable, but I considered it foolish.

Dying, in order to make someone else happy? Don’t make me laugh.

“Do you think there won’t be anyone to mourn you if you die?”

“Well...”

“Of course there are. Do you think *he* would be happy if you died for him? If you truly think so, then you’re not just foolish; you’re a complete idiot.”

“But...this is the only...” Euclis trailed off.

“You can find another way. We haven’t seen all of the past memories yet. If everything else fails, and there’s no other way, then so be it. But for now...it’s

okay to keep on living.”

Even I was a bit surprised by my words.

I had decided to live in order to break free from the time loop. I was willing to become a villain if necessary. I had made up my mind in this, and I wouldn’t hesitate to act in my own self-interest.

My father was as good as dead by my hands. I had killed both of my mothers.

I may have had my reservations, but I didn’t regret those choices. To think I would pass up this once-in-a-lifetime chance to break free from the loop...

I couldn’t help but laugh.

Maybe his worrisome personality had rubbed off on me, after spending so much time with him?

“My happiness is something I’ll find on my own. It’s not something for you to decide.”

“Selene...”

“And besides, you’re forgetting the most important thing.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s say I do as you want and just let you die here. He’d kill me the moment he found out.”

Just then, the window shattered.

I hadn’t summoned him with Shadow. He had sensed the commotion on his own and rushed here to protect his precious brother.

“Are you okay?! Euclis! Selene!” Dier cried out.

“Brother!” Euclis exclaimed.

“Look, your overprotective big brother has arrived.”

Dier breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of us being unharmed.

He immediately turned his gaze toward Harist.

“It’s you,” Dier said.

“You’re the one who defeated Victor,” Harist replied.

Dier glared at Harist.

Though by this point I had been with him for quite some time, this was the first time I had seen him this angry. He exuded a sort of malice that mere humans were incapable of. Even the monster, Harist, seemed intimidated.

“Prepare yourself, monster.”

“I will kill every last one of you!”

Dier and Harist clashed.

We watched as a seemingly immortal monster rampaged before us.

No matter how many wounds he sustained, Dier regenerated, attacking relentlessly without ever falling. The skeletons summoned by Harist were shattered one by one, and even the gigantic skeleton that constituted his main body was easily destroyed.

“See? If I had done as you wished, he would’ve tried to kill me just like this,” I said to Euclis.

Once the giant skeleton’s arm was destroyed Harist tried to escape. I used Shadow to cover the entire room to prevent him from getting away. There was nowhere for him to run. There was only one possible way out of this room—and that was to kill an immortal guardian who was now mad with rage. And of course, no one was capable of doing that.

“This is over.”

“Argh...”

Dier’s sword pierced through Harist’s heart in one swift movement, easily bringing an end to another one of the primordial monsters. Dier was easily the strongest being in the modern era, and once again I was grateful that he was on my side.

“I definitely wouldn’t want to make an enemy out of you,” I remarked.

There would be no point in finally freeing myself from the time loops only to have him angry with me and kill me instead.

Now that Harist was dead, the memories began to flow.

♦ ♦ ♦

A plan to assassinate the guardian of the moon was underway.

The guardians clashed with each other, and the only one to face them was the shadow guardian. She lost her life fighting against them to protect the guardian of the moon by herself.

Oddly enough, the one who delivered the finishing blow was the guardian of the sun.

The sisters fought each other to the death, and only one survived.

No matter how much regrets were had or tears were shed, that lost life would never return.

Before the sadness could fade, the moon guardian stood before them. He was angry because he'd lost the one person who stood by him. He wasn't angry that they had killed her, but at his own inadequacy that had let her die.

He went into a blind rampage, wielding his power of immortality without hesitation. And there was no way any human could win against an immortal aberration such as he, even if they *did* have powers.

The guardians were seriously injured.

But not a single one of them died. The guardian of the moon controlled his anger and came back to himself at the last minute, and then disappeared from their sight.

He headed towards his other half—his twin brother.

Was he going to the king for revenge?

No. He went to say goodbye.

He realized his existence was causing unnecessary conflict, so the moon guardian chose to die of his own accord. He wished for his own death from the bottom of his heart.

And so the moon lost its light, the only thing remaining a river of cold tears.

♦♦♦

“Euclis!”

“Brother...”

As soon as the memories stopped flowing, Dier ran over to Euclis, even though we’d just received valuable information about the demise of the moon guardian.

But the thing that Dier was most concerned about wasn’t himself, but the safety of his younger brother. I couldn’t help but be amazed at just how deeply Dier cared about Euclis.

Euclis, on the other hand, looked dazed as Dier grabbed him by the shoulders. “Are you all right? Are you injured?”

“Brother...”

“Hey, Euclis...how did the king feel when he lost the guardian of the moon?” I asked.

He was the only one who had the right to know how the king felt, after all. I didn’t have access to that information, but I was sure it had reached him. Why had the younger brother wept after losing his older twin?

Euclis thought for a moment and then began to weep as well. “I’m sorry!”

“H-Hey, where’d that come from?” Dier asked.

“I-I was about to make you go through the same thing the king went through...” Euclis replied.

“What in the world are you talking about? Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine. Because...I’m alive,” Euclis said with a smile.

His smile was tender and clear, as if all of his anxiety and worries had been wiped away.

Dier wasn’t sure why Euclis was crying, so he just stared blankly at him.

Though I was sure he'd be angry once he did discover the reason.

"Listen, Euclis. Death only comes once in a lifetime. That's normal."

"I know..."

Having an unending life and a time loop of nothing but dying wasn't something someone would experience in a normal lifetime.

Under normal circumstances, people only had one life and once it ran out, that was it. That was why everyone tried to live every second, every minute of life to its fullest.

It was foolish to wish for your own death.

Nothing could be gained by dying in that manner. Death was painful, lonely, and sad—and nothing more.

I knew that better than anyone.

"You must struggle to survive," I told Euclis. "That's what I've done."

"I know...I want to live too," he said.

"Ha! You and your brother certainly are alike."

Now none of us was so sad that they wished for death.

It would be difficult for me, Dier, or Euclis to live a normal life. At this rate, ordinary happiness seemed like a far off dream.

But that was why we *had* to live. We had to survive today, tomorrow, and the next day with the hope that there would be some kind of new changes on the horizon.

Epilogue: Endless Days

I slightly pulled back the curtains, opened the window, and looked outside. The sky was ridiculously blue today, the sunlight warm and comforting. At least, that's what a normal person would think.

But unfortunately, in this mansion lived a poor man who had made an enemy of the sun itself.

"I'm a poor man, huh?" Dier asked.

"I didn't even say anything yet," I replied.

"You don't have to. It's written all over your face. Are you threatening me, pulling back the curtain while I'm here?"

"That wasn't my intention. I just felt like looking outside."

I was in my study, hard at work with my responsibilities as head of house. Dier was next to me, helping.

So many things had happened the past few days and both of us had been extremely busy. Naturally, my responsibilities and work as the head of house had been put on the back burner.

We had fought against primordial monsters. I had to convince a suicidal Euclis to keep living...our past few days had been much busier than we'd expected, and as a result we were both exhausted.

"Selene."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Thanks for the whole thing with Euclis."

"All of a sudden? Where'd that come from?"

Dier was looking over some documents, but suddenly he stopped and looked over at me with a serious face.

"I didn't realize how worried he was over this situation. If you hadn't stopped him, he might be dead by now."

“Well, you can’t blame yourself,” I said. “Even I didn’t know about it until he told me himself. And the only reason he told me is because I’m the only one who can do anything about it.”

Above all, the reason he wanted to sacrifice himself was for the sake of his precious brother. Euclis begged me to do it because he knew that Dier would never be able to.

He asked me to kill him, and I’d flatly refused.

“Are you sure?” Dier asked.

“About what?”

“You heard him. He said that our abilities were created from the king’s wishes.”

“Yes, it seems that way.”

“And just as he said, they won’t go away as long as the king is alive. But if you killed the king, then our abilities would disappear along with him.”

“Ha ha. I can’t believe you’re saying this.” I had to laugh. *Kill the king?* It was something Dier could never do. He was much too kind to ever be capable of killing his brother.

Even if it *were* possible, he was going out of his way to ask me about something that wasn’t an option. I could see the conflict all over his face.

“But it’s true. I certainly could’ve resolved everything that way,” I agreed.

If the supernatural powers were the root cause of everything, and I could get rid of them if the king was gone, then that might’ve solved all of our problems. If we sorted through everything we knew right now for certain, that was the most likely possibility. My goal was to escape the time loops and live my life as I pleased...

And I had just rejected a possible solution to achieving that goal.

“But I’m glad I made that decision.”

“Why?”

“If I had killed Euclis, wouldn’t you have killed me?”

“I don’t think I can know that unless it happened.”

Dier seemed troubled as he looked away from me. The fact that he couldn’t give me a definitive answer *was* my answer. Even after having our powers stripped away, if he’d come at me with the intent to kill, I would’ve been unable to fight him off.

That kind of future emerged as a possibility. I would have escaped the time loops, but then I would’ve been killed. I certainly couldn’t call that a happy ending.

“I want to live. I don’t want to die or be killed. That’s why I couldn’t choose that option.”

“I see...” Dier muttered, looking somewhat relieved.

“And what would happen to the rest of the monsters if we lost our powers now?”

“Ah, that’s right. There are still some left.”

“Exactly. And we haven’t seen all of the memories, either. There are still some lingering mysteries.”

Our supernatural powers were born from the king’s wishes. But I still didn’t know why I was stuck in a time loop. That was one thing I knew that Euclis hadn’t wished for.

Did it have something to do with the supernatural powers or was it something else entirely? Had someone’s wish made it a reality? I needed to see the rest of the past to understand it.

“We need to discover more of the unknown. Once we’ve seen everything and understand it thoroughly, then we can decide what to do.”

“And if the only way *is* to kill the king?”

“Then we’ll discuss it if that time comes.”

I looked through the gap in the curtains out the window.



“And then we’ll just have to find another way.”

And even if the only way *was* to kill the king, I wouldn’t do it. Because I already knew that there wouldn’t be a bright future awaiting me on the other side of that decision.

“I don’t want you to kill me,” I said.

“Then this might take a while,” Dier said.

“I don’t care...I’ll just keep living.”

My wish hadn’t changed at all from when I first made it: I wanted to end these time loops and live my life as I pleased. But ending the loops wasn’t enough for me. I wanted to fight so I could live, and be happy.

I felt like I was getting closer and closer to it.

No matter what difficulties stood in my way, I would overcome them, no matter what. Even if that meant I had to go up against the natural laws of the world.

I would live, holding my wishes close to my heart.