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Sora Hinokage

Illustrator: Tsukasa Kiryu



Stuck in a Time Loop

When All Else Fails, Be a Villainess


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“Please kill me! For your future and for my brother!”
King of Werkst
Euclis Veldt
“I’m sorry.”
“I feel uneasy.”
The Immortal Moon Guardian
Dier Veldt
“Uneasy?”
Head of House Vixent, Guardians of Sun and Shadow
Selene Vixent


Head of House Weldon, Star Guardian
Etoile Weldon
"You got here faster than I anticipated, Dier."
"Selene..."
Head of House Cielo, Air Guardian
Lawrence Cielo
Head of House Frusch, Forest Guardian
Mystria Frusch
Head of House Boden, Earth Guardian
Gordov Boden
Head of House Wasser, Water Guardian
Alexei Wasser


“So that’s why you have to die, Dier.”
“You can’t kill me, Selene. I’m immortal, remember?”
“You know, don’t you?”
“Yes. I know everything.”
“Can you tell me what happened to the guardians after that?”
“No.”
“Why not?”
“Because there’s no point in telling you.”
“Yes, there is. Maybe the reason you chose this path has to do with something you saw from the past.”
“It doesn’t have anything to do with that. None of that matters anymore.”
"Selene..."

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Prologue: Beyond the Loop

Every life has an end.

And it's *because* there's an end that people do everything in their power to live. They pray for happiness and good fortune while working hard to obtain that happiness.

No one wishes for a life filled with nothing but pain. Instead, they wish for nothing but happiness, and that they'll meet someone they're destined to be with who can share in those happy, blessed days along with them.

But unfortunately, life isn't that sweet. There are many more times in life when things don't go well than when they do, and when difficulties overwhelm a person's everyday life.

Even still, we forge on and keep living for the future.

And that's because we know that we can never get back all the seconds and minutes that have already passed. Although we are allowed to look back on those days, we can never return to them.

We can't go back in time, so reflecting upon our actions and thus getting to redo them is a dream that can never come true.

And so we live every second to its fullest so we have no regrets. So that when the time comes to look back on our pasts, we can do so proudly and fondly, saying they were the best days of our lives.

That is the natural test given to humans—a beacon that guides them towards obtaining true happiness.

♦ ♦ ♦

When I would wake up in the morning feeling slightly depressed and anxious, my first thought was always wondering when it is, where I am, and what iteration of myself I've woken up to be.

I did so again today. I balled my hands into fists, opened them, moved my legs, rose from my bed, and walked over to the mirror. My familiar face stared back at me.

I had no scratches or wounds. My own anxious expression looked back at me in the mirror, and for the first time, I felt relief.

Calm down. I made it to tomorrow. I mean, today.

“Now, let’s start our day,” I told myself, and I pulled back the curtains.

The weather was fine today, the sunbeams warm and comforting.

I stood there and bathed in the sunlight until my eyes adjusted and every cell in my body woke up. Only then did I feel fully awake. I yawned and stretched as far as I could and then looked in the mirror again. My previously gloomy expression was gone without a trace. Now I sensed a glimmer of hope in my reflection’s countenance.

“Not a bad morning,” I murmured to myself. I clapped my hands to call in the maid. Although I looked quite young to be the mistress of this manor, I was in fact the head of House Vixent. Every servant in this house worked for me and me only.

At my signal, a maid immediately came to my room. “Good morning, Mistress.”

“Would you help me change?”

“Of course. I’ve prepared today’s outfit for you already.”

“Thanks.”

Before, I had only changed alone. After all, I had the blood of my commoner mother running through my veins, and Father had distanced himself from me. Now, I could almost look back fondly on those days when I had been treated as nothing but a blight upon the family tree.

At the beginning of my tenth time loop, I had decided I would live my life freely and therefore parted ways with my weak self. On top of that, I’d released the supernatural power of Shadow that I’d kept hidden in every previous lifetime. I had stolen my father’s position as head of house, proactively broken things off with my fiancé, and set out to find my own happiness so that I could be freed from the time loops.

Many things had happened in a short time. I met people, parted ways with them, fought, and overcame. The reason I stood here today was because I’d fought and prevailed in order to hold this future in my own hands.

I knew I’d live today to the best of my abilities in order to secure tomorrow as well. I wouldn’t let anyone or anything stand in my way, whether it be a guardian or a primordial beast resurrected from the annals of time.

“How is this, Mistress?”

“It’s fine, thank you. Could you get breakfast ready?”

“Yes, of course.”

Now that I was dressed, the maid dipped into a polite bow and excused herself from the room. I waited a few moments and then headed down to the dining room myself so I could eat breakfast. There was already someone seated at the table when I entered the room.

“Good morning, Sister!”

“Morning, Soleil.”

Soleil Vixent was my younger sister, and now my only living relative. For a time, we had been emotionally estranged to the point where it would’ve felt awkward to call each other sister, but ever since the incident with my stepmother, we felt much more like sisters than we had before.

Her face brightened happily with a smile the moment she saw me. “You’re going to eat breakfast, aren’t you? May I eat with you?”

“You’re the one who was already sitting at the table, Soleil. I can wait if you’d like.”

“No, I want to eat with you!” she said.

“Well then, I suppose we can eat together.”

“All right!”

Once I had decided to live for myself and had faced off against my father, I’d never been able to truly hate my sister. Even in my previous time loops, no matter how badly I’d been treated, she was the only one who’d regarded me as family. Her smile was always so bright…bright enough that it made me want to turn my back on it.

“What are you going to do today, Sister?”

“I’ve been summoned to the palace, so I’ll be going there,” I said. “I have some plans after that too, so I don’t think I’ll be back until evening.”

“I see. You’ve got a busy day…”

“Indeed.”

My sister looked disappointed and slightly depressed. I supposed she’d wanted to spend time with me today. On top of that, she seemed to be worried about me.

“Please don’t push yourself, Sister. You’ve been working nonstop lately.”

“Well, I can’t help it. I’ve got a mountain of things to do around here.” After all, I’d vowed to find a way of escaping my time loops. And for that purpose, I had gradually siphoned

powers from the other guardians until I'd finally been able to make the stone slab in the castle transform.

After that, the ancient primordial beasts had been revived. I had to defeat them in order to gain the king's memories so I could learn the truth of the past. Some questions had been resolved, but others had only grown deeper. In the end, the more I learned, the more mysteries there were.

What were these supernatural powers? The primordial beasts? What was this world, for that matter?

I felt like we were coming closer—albeit little by little—to finding the answers regarding the meaning of the powers inside of us and the origins of the land in which we lived.

And that was precisely why I couldn't stop now.

"Let me know if there's anything at all I can help with!" Soleil chirped.

"Thanks. I'll do that."

I appreciated the thought, but there wasn't really much Soleil could help with now. It still hadn't been very long since she'd awakened to her powers as guardian of the sun. She'd only just learned how to handle her powers, and she didn't have much combat experience either.

We were now dealing with monsters who had been revived from ancient times. With the exception of when her mother Shioria had been possessed by one of the monsters and had cooperated with us, it was just too dangerous for her right now. Perhaps my reticence at wanting to shield her from danger was one of those rare times when my sisterly instincts kicked in.

Plus, unfortunately for my sister, I already had someone to help me. Someone who, in fact, might've been the only person I could truly rely on to have my back in this world.

♦ ♦ ♦

After breakfast, I went to my study. The curtains were drawn and it was dim inside the room. Only a sliver of sunlight entered through a gap in the fabric, and I could tell that he was standing positioned to avoid it.

Upon entering the study, I promptly walked over to the window and slowly pulled back the curtains. I heard him retreat the moment bright light filled the room.

"Hey. Are you trying to harass me?"

“Ha ha. Of course not,” I replied.

“Yet you’re laughing. Sometimes you’re a real bully, you know that?” He let out an exasperated sigh and turned towards me once again. “Morning, Selene.”

“Good morning, Dier. It’s a beautiful day outside, isn’t it? Good for you.”

“Are you serious right now?”

“I’m joking. In your eyes, this weather is positively rotten.”

“You can say that again. Can’t you close the curtains a bit more?”

“All right, fine.” I pulled the curtains halfway closed.

Dier Veldt—the immortal first prince who had been forgotten by all the land. Just like me, he was one of the six guardians who possessed supernatural powers. He was also the only person who knew I was stuck in a time loop. It was a bit complicated, but the two of us were working towards the same goals.

We didn’t call each other friends, though; we were merely accomplices who used each other as the means to an end—our mutual goal. Or at least, that was how it all started. I wasn’t truly sure what he thought about it all now.

We had fought against our enemies back-to-back, and there were many times when I had put my trust in him and let him take care of things completely on his own. Too many things had arisen from our cooperative relationship with each other.

I never trusted anyone but myself. I’d been betrayed too many times and had been forced to die sad, painful deaths over and over again as a result. But he was the first person whom I thought, maybe, it would be okay to trust.

“Have you been here this whole time?” I asked.

“More or less. Since this is your study, no one ever really comes in here. And no one thinks it odd that the curtains are drawn all the time either.”

“What a naughty servant you are, using my room for your own purposes.”

“I can’t help it,” he replied. “I can’t be exposed to sunlight, and only you and Euclis know about that. Plus, I’m your ‘servant’ in name only.”

“That’s true. You are technically a prince, after all.”

“That’s ancient history.”

The moment Dier had awakened to his powers as the Moon guardian, his existence had simultaneously been erased from

the memories of everyone in the whole world except for his brother. Not only that, but there were no longer any records of him ever having been the prince. It was almost like Dier Veldt had never existed in the first place.

Even I had never heard of him before I met him and heard his story directly. The only one who remembered him at all was the young king of the land, Euclis Veldt.

"I'm going to the castle after this. Do you have any messages for Euclis?"

"Hmm. Just tell him he better not be thinking of dying," Dier said.

"I already told him that before, though."

"We have to keep telling him that. He's way too kind for his own good—so kind he'd think about sacrificing his life to save you or me. That's why I'm worried about him."

Euclis had asked me twice now to kill him. He thought his existence was bringing Dier unhappiness, as the king's existence was what was binding the guardians. Because of that, he'd decided he was solely responsible and had tried to end his own life. He was much younger than either of us, and such thoughts were not appropriate for such a young child.

Even I was afraid of death, and that was because I knew the fear all too well from having experienced it over and over again. And yet he wanted to end his own life. That made him strong, but very dangerous at the same time. As his older brother, Dier was worried sick about him.

"All right. I'll tell him."

"Thanks. And Selene, if he mentions doing anything rash..."

"I know, I know. I'll stop him and lecture him not to think about such things."

"Thanks," Dier smiled. He looked a bit calmer now, which made me feel relieved too.

"I should be going, then. I don't think I'll be home until the evening."

"Okay. Be careful. There are still two monsters left, and we don't know where they could be hiding."

"I know. You be careful too. Should anything happen while I'm gone, take care of the mansion and Soleil," I said.

"Leave it to me."

Soleil's safety was guaranteed as long as Dier was here. I trusted his might more than that of thousands of soldiers, and

that was why I could set my mind at ease when I left.

I was particularly busy today; I had much to do and many people to speak with. Honestly, the thought of having to converse with so many people made me feel a bit glum, but there was nothing I could do about it.

"That's part of being head of house," I reminded myself as I used Shadow to teleport to the royal castle.

♦ ♦ ♦

I walked alone down a corridor inside the palace. I had business with Euclis, the king. I made my way towards the room where he was waiting. Suddenly, the door opened with a click and I came face-to-face with a man.

The moment we made eye contact, an awkward expression came over both our faces.

"Morning, Selene."

"Talk about perfect timing," I said. "Did you know I was coming, Etoile?"

I wondered if he'd tried to scurry away from the room to avoid seeing me, but unfortunately, he was a moment too late. So despite what I had just said, his timing was actually bad for both of us.

Etoile Weldon was my ex-fiancé. I'd broken off our relationship at the beginning of my tenth time loop. At this point, we were virtually complete strangers. He was technically engaged to Soleil right now, but it was just an arrangement between the two families. There was no love there, and it was just an engagement for political reasons. Ours had been the same, and that was why I'd had no hesitation in letting him go. In fact, it'd felt like I'd been freed.

Etoile's supernatural power of Astromancy allowed him to see the futures of everyone except for me. With all those factors combined, it was very awkward whenever the two of us met.

"His Majesty is waiting for you," he told me. "I'm sure this goes without saying, but don't be rude to him."

"It does go without saying. But a job well done as his guard, nonetheless."

"Excuse me," he said after a short pause, and then he turned and left. I could tell just by watching him walk away that he was exhausted. Ever since the primordial beasts had been revived, he

had been tasked with protecting Euclis from harm.

He alternated shifts with Gordov and Alexei, but since his power to see the future was so useful, he was always on guard in order to prevent anything unexpected from happening. Perhaps that was why he seemed so much more tired than usual.

"There's no sense in worrying about him now," I told myself. Our relationship had ended long ago. There had never been any love, or even compassion, between us in the first place.

Now that I had peace of mind, I did think about Etoile from time to time. But no part of me wanted to rekindle things or even become friends with him.

I knocked on the door.

"Come in," called a slightly high-pitched boy's voice from inside the room.

I opened the door.

Euclis sat there with a gentle smile on his face and his bright, beautiful hair shining in the light. "I'm so pleased you came, Selene."

"Thank you for having me."

He rose to his feet and walked over to me. "Sorry for summoning you here so suddenly. There was just something I really needed to talk to you about again."

"I sincerely hope you're not going to tell me that you want to die again."

He laughed faintly. "I won't say that anymore. My brother just got angry with me about it."

"That's true. He's scary when he's mad."

"I know. But that just goes to show how much he worries about me. And I know he's in the most pain out of anyone."

"You two certainly worry about each other like brothers," I said. Each one always put the other first. They were both in pain. No, they were both fighting against a constant ache inside of them that was difficult to put into words. It didn't matter who was in the most pain in the end.

Each of them deeply cared for the other and wished for the other's happiness, putting themselves second. That made them true brothers. They were both so good-natured and sweet that it was almost infuriating at times.

"The reason I had you come here today was to apologize once more, and also to thank you."

"You don't have to do that. I saved you for my own sake too,

you know."

The king had begged me to kill him before, saying that it was all his fault. But if I had done as he'd said, I probably wouldn't be here anymore. I would've been killed by a monster who was no longer immortal, who was both kind and scary.

Euclis smiled gently at me. "You're a kind person, Selene. I knew you'd say that."

"I'm not kind."

"You *are*. It would've been easier for you if you'd just killed me."

"At that moment, perhaps. But I was too afraid of what would happen next."

"I don't think my brother would've taken his anger out on you, Selene," Euclis said with a smile. He sounded so sure of himself.

"Why do you think that?"

"Because he's kind."

"Yes," I said. "Too kind."

"So are you. I know how kind both of you are, and that's why there must have been a reason."

"I suppose so." I didn't know how things would turn out. I knew it was pointless to talk about the what-ifs. But, of course, we were free to think about them. If I had listened to Euclis, would his brother have turned his anger on me and tried to kill me?

Would he have directed true malice at me? When my thoughts reached that point, I just had to laugh. It truly was pointless to think about this.

I'd already made my decision. I would not kill Euclis—instead, I'd look for another way.

"Even if the same thing happened again, I wouldn't kill you, Euclis."

"I know. Because you're kind," he said again.

"No. It's because I'm not certain that killing you would erase our supernatural powers. That's just a theory on your part. It's possible I would do something that could never be taken back."

"Sure, we'll go with that," he said with a mischievous chuckle. I had to wonder why the king was so sure I was a good person.

And why was I pushing back against it so much? Maybe I was just embarrassed to have someone think of me that way.

"Are we done? If so, I'll go ahead and leave."

"Where are you going?" he asked.

“I’m going to participate in the meeting with Gordov and the others. We need to decide our next move.”

“I see. Unfortunately, I have other plans, so I won’t be able to attend. Please give the others my regards,” Euclis said.

“Of course.”

The king was very busy. I’m sure his life would have been a lot easier if he could just focus on one thing.

I turned my back to him and was about to leave the room when I remembered something, stopping me in my tracks.

“Selene?”

“I forgot to give you a message,” I said.

“A message?”

“Yes. ‘You’d better not be thinking of dying.’”

“Ah…! Is that…?”

I turned around and flashed him a mischievous smile. “From our kind monster who cares for you so much. You should do what he says, or he might eat you up.”

“You’re right,” Euclis said with a chuckle.

I thought that smile on his face was the happiest, most relaxed one I’d seen so far today. Satisfied, I left the room.

♦ ♦ ♦

I hurried to a conference room elsewhere in the palace. When I arrived, the three men who had been waiting there turned and stared at me at once. And, of course, there was one in particular who noticed me before the others.

He immediately began to address me. “You’re late. Such a naughty girl for making someone like me wait for you, Lady Vixent.”

“Hm? I’m not late at all.”

Alexei Wasser—the guardian of water and an incredibly irritating man who had proposed to me. I’d even formally turned him down after a duel, but he just would not give it up.

“I was eager to see you as quickly as possible,” he said.

“That’s funny. I can’t wait to get seeing you over with as quickly as possible,” I quipped back.

“Aw, don’t be like that. Even *my* feelings would be hurt after such a rejection.”

“Ha ha. Please, Alexei. I know you’re not so mentally weak that you’d get your feelings hurt over something so trivial!”

If that were the case, he would've been utterly brokenhearted after our duel, and he certainly wouldn't have been able to keep up this bravado in front of me anymore.

He looked at me and smirked. "You know me well. Think our minds are in harmony?"

"Don't be ridiculous. If you're just here to play games with me, I'm going home."

"Well, we can't have that, Selene Vixent," said Gordov, interrupting our jabs. "We need to hear your opinion at today's meeting."

"I know that, Sir Boden."

I had only been joking, but Gordov Boden, the guardian of earth, had taken me seriously. He was the strongest of all the guardians physically, possessing both the sharpest blade and a defense as impenetrable as an ironclad wall. If not for Dier, it would've been impossible for me to siphon off some of his power in order to unlock the stone slab.

Gordov and I had been in conflict with each other in the past due to the incident with Shioria, so it still felt a bit awkward seeing him again. I thought surely Gordov would feel the same, but he never showed it in meetings such as this. Ever the professional, he didn't let his personal feelings interfere with business...unlike the incredibly sloppy man beside him.

"Hey, can we hurry up and get this over with already or what?" The sloppy man in question was the guardian of air, Lawrence Cielo. He was a free spirit who hated formal meetings like these. His whole body was oozing with the desire to just go home. "You don't really need me here anyway, right? Can I go now?"

"Of course you can't," Gordov said with a deep sigh. "Your abilities are the most suited for searching for and detecting the resurrected primordial beasts, and don't you forget it."

"Ugh... You're overestimating my abilities. I can't find the beasts when we have zero clues!"

"That's why we're here to exchange information," Gordov pointed out.

He was right; that was the purpose of our meeting today. The six beasts had originally been subdued by the first king and his guardians. Those beasts were Seraph, Victor, Harist, Rafai, Rufus, and Agia. Out of all those, only two remained.

Gordov spread documents detailing the knights' research on the table. "We're after the beasts Rafai and Rufus. The knights

have been investigating, but so far, we haven't found any useful information."

"The knights have been mobilized all over the world. The beasts must be good at hiding if they haven't even gotten any clues," Alexei said.

"What if they haven't been revived yet? Maybe the four we defeated were all there were, and now we're done!" Lawrence suggested hopefully.

"That's impossible," I said. "The four that appeared before us said they had all revived at the same time, so it would make the most sense if that was the same case for the other two as well."

"Selene Vixent is right. Stop wasting our time with nonsense just because you want to slack off," Gordov said, scolding Lawrence.

"Ugh... I'm sorry." As usual, Lawrence couldn't get away with anything in front of Gordov. I wondered when the clear hierarchy between them had been established. I was curious, so I decided I'd ask Lawrence about it when I had some free time. I was certain he'd answer me if I threatened him a bit.

"I-I suddenly feel like I'm in danger..." he stuttered.

"It's just your imagination," I said.

His sharp perception was troublesome. *It must be part of his abilities as guardian of the air.*

Gordov cleared his throat to put an end to that conversation. He then directed our attention back to the documents before beginning his explanation. "We'll be continuing our search. However, since we haven't found them yet, it's highly unlikely an organization like the Daybreak Droplets is at work here."

"Right, they were very conspicuous. Was their purpose to overthrow the government?" Alexei asked.

"Yes. The beasts that we defeated so far seemed to be hostile towards the kingdom. Or, more precisely, towards us—the guardians. And the previous one was an assassin targeting His Majesty. So, if the remaining two are doing the same thing, they will be after our lives and that of His Majesty," Gordov concluded.

"Good point. The beasts hate the guardians. And they know that if they kill us, they'll be able to run as wild as they please," I said.

"What a pain. If we don't hurry up and do something quickly, I won't be able to go back to my travels," Lawrence said.

"The guardians exist to protect the king. Except in the case of

an emergency, none of the guardians should be traveling very far from the king's side in the first place." Gordov then directed a stern glare towards Lawrence, who quickly averted his gaze and put a dumb look on his face.

Gordov heaved another deep sigh. "At any rate, we know what they're after. The fact that we still haven't found them means we should be considering the possibility that they're closer than we've thought, like in the case of Shioria Vixent."

"Does that mean those beasts have been around us for a long time? That doesn't make me feel very good..." Alexei said.

"Why don't we just detain anyone who seems suspicious? That'd be the fastest method, wouldn't it?" suggested Lawrence.

"What a coincidence. I share your opinion," I said.

"We can't do anything too hostile. They haven't left behind any traces so far. It's possible they might be laying a trap for us," Gordov pointed out.

"So then what should we do? Investigate every person in the castle? Or even the whole capital? That's ridiculous. And it'll only make the people more anxious," Alexei said.

Gordov pondered this and then made a suggestion that we wait and continue our current efforts. We'd already implemented measures to deal with the current circumstances in case something happened. We were protecting the king, who was the most likely person to be targeted, and we were all standing by, ready to fight at any moment.

Meanwhile, the knights would continue to conduct interviews with people and investigate various locations. In other words, without more clues, there was nothing else we could do at the moment. All we could do was wait for the beasts to reveal themselves.

It was extremely frustrating, but we had no other choice.

"I'll continue to investigate using my own methods. Is that all right with you?" I asked.

"That's fine, as long as you share any useful information you come across," Gordov said.

"Of course."

I'd agreed, but honestly, I had no intention of doing so. I couldn't let any of them find the beasts before me; *I* had to be the one who found them first. I was using Shadow several times a day across the capital to search for any suspicious movements. It took a lot out of me, but it was the most efficient method. It

was just unfortunate that I'd come up empty so far.

"Just where are you hiding...?"

♦ ♦ ♦

I was originally supposed to go home after the meeting ended, but instead, I stepped foot into the world's largest forest.

"It's been a while since I was here last."

The guardian of the forests, Mystria Frusch, lived here. This was a special place protected by her powers and she managed these lands. All the animals living here were connected to her consciousness.

Just like last time, a pack of wolves guided me through the forest.

"You're very good guard dogs," I told them as the manor came into view. I couldn't detect anyone inside the building. No servants came to greet me either, and Mystria herself was nowhere to be seen. This was no surprise to me since I already knew her secret—there was no reason for her to go out of her way to greet me. I continued following the wolves and eventually reached her side.

Only a small number of people in the Frusch family even knew about this place—the place where the *real* Mystria Frusch lay sleeping.

"So we meet again, Lady Vixent."

"Don't you think it's rude to invite someone over and not greet them at the door?" I asked.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I intended to, but I'm not feeling very well today."

"I see. Well then, I can't blame you for it."

Her real body was asleep. She was an old woman, already one hundred and forty years old, and had lived seven times as long as I had. This was the Frusch family's biggest secret.

There was no one else whom she could pass on her powers to, so she used her own power to extend her life. Even now, she was playing the role of the new head of house. But still...

"It looks like you're reaching your limit," I remarked.

"Yes. Little by little, I can feel it. My death is approaching," she said.

She could extend her lifespan to a certain point by using her supernatural powers, but she still couldn't stop the aging

process completely. Even now, her body was slowly heading towards its end.

I'd come here today so that if something happened to her, I could hear her final wishes.

"What about that engagement you mentioned earlier?" I asked.

"It's going well. I just heard a few days ago that the other woman is pregnant."

"I see. Good for you."

"Indeed, and that's why I can't die yet," Mystria told me. "I have to cling to this life long enough for the child to get old enough to express their own will. I need to keep my promise to you too, after all."

"I'm not a part of the promise. That was a promise you made on your own."

"That's true," she said and smiled sadly.

I had the ability to absorb the supernatural powers of others, and it was possible for me to pass on those powers as well. That meant I could use that ability to transfer powers to a new life. She'd asked me to do so for her, but I'd refused and had told her she was being selfish. The most important thing here wasn't to keep her powers alive. Instead, the other person needed to be willing to receive them. I wasn't going to just unilaterally bestow powers and responsibility on someone without confirming their consent, no matter how much she asked me to help her.

"I wish you luck to keep on living. Otherwise, you can't keep your promise."

"Yes... Heh."

"Why are you laughing?" I asked.

"It's strange. You're the only one who tells me to keep on living."

"That's not true. I'm sure everyone else in your house would be in trouble if you died."

Mystria Frusch's doll shook its head.

"They gave up on me a long time ago. That's why the only things left in this mansion are the dolls I made."

"How heartless of them."

"I can't blame them," she said. "Who could look at me in this state and tell me to keep on living?"

"I suppose I can understand that. No one wants to see an elderly person suffer. I don't mind, though, of course," I

admitted.

"Ha ha. See? That's why I'm grateful to you. Because of that, I feel more of a will to live than I had when I was younger. I've never tried this hard before to keep on going."

Mystria's doll gently touched her main body's sleeping face and smiled tenderly. Although she was wrinkled and so feeble she couldn't even open her eyes, this woman was alive. And was trying to stay alive too.

No matter what the reason was, she'd lived for 140 years. I had to respect that.

"Good for you," I said.

Being attached to your life wasn't a bad thing—it was nothing to be ashamed of. And if someone thought it *was* frivolous, then they'd be taking their own life for granted. They'd surely change their tune after experiencing death and coming to the end of their life. They would learn that life and death were given equally.

"Once the child is born, I'd love for you to meet them."

"I'll pass on that."

"Why?" she asked. "Do you not like children?"

"It's not that. But I think that the child would cry if they saw me."

After all, I possessed the power of Shadow. Shadows were born beneath the light and were dark, thick, and frightening. Many children were afraid of the dark, and to put it simply, I was the personification of their fears. So, I thought it would be better if I didn't meet the child, lest they tremble with fear.

Mystria smiled. "That's surprising. I thought you wouldn't care about that either."

I didn't answer.

"I'm sure you'll be fine," she said, continuing. "Children are innocent, you know. Sometimes, they're better judges of character than adults. I'm certain they'll pick up on your kindness."

"Heh. Well, if that's true, then the child will become a very optimistic person."

"Ha ha. Perhaps they will."

Being called kind so many times in one day was a little too much for me to handle. It was getting to be quite embarrassing. I turned around and tried to leave as quickly as possible.

"Come visit me again. You're the only one I can talk with

freely, after all," Mystria said.

"If I feel like it."

"I see. Well, I'll be looking forward to it. Let me know if there's anything I can do for you."

"I will."

I would need her power in order to defeat the remaining primordial beasts, once I found them. I might have been hesitant to put such a strain on that feeble body earlier, but I no longer felt that way.

At the very least, I wanted to settle the matter of the primordial beasts once and for all so she could focus on living. Otherwise, I might've ended up being too considerate of her, and I didn't have time for that.

♦ ♦ ♦

"Phew, finally done."

After I'd finished all of my errands, I finally arrived at home, though later than I'd expected. The sun had set long ago, and the round moon shone overhead.

I returned to my study at the manor, put my head down on the desk, and let myself relax.

"You tired?" a voice called out.

"What does it look like?"

"Figured. I just wanted to ask," Dier said with a teasing grin. He then cleaned up the stack of papers on my desk.

"Hey, I wasn't done with those yet."

"I finished them for you."

"You did?"

"Yeah," he said. "Should I not have done that?"

"It's fine..."

I was just a little surprised. I'd prepared myself for a long night of paperwork after getting home. I supposed it was his way of being kind to me...or maybe he just had a lot of time on his hands. Either way, that was one less source of anxiety for me.



“Thanks. I appreciate it,” I said.

He didn’t answer.

“What is it?”

“It’s nothing… I just didn’t expect you to come right out and thank me like that.”

“What kind of person do you think I am, anyway?”

“I know. I’m sorry. You’ve gotten a lot more open lately.”

“Hmm, maybe I’ll let you do all of my paperwork from now on, Dier.”

“Anything but that.”

I decided to tease him right back in return. He smiled with chagrin, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

I’d spoken with many people today and gone to many places, but dealing with others always wore my nerves down.

However…

“I never feel more relaxed than when I’m talking with you.”

“Seriously, what happened to you?” Dier asked me.

“Nothing. I’m just telling you how I feel.”

“Okay. Well, I feel the same way.”

“You’re a terrible liar. Anyway, don’t you feel more relaxed when you’re with your brother?”

“Not exactly,” he chuckled, finishing straightening up the documents. Since it was dark now, he walked over to the window and looked up at the moon. “When I’m with Euclis, I always feel pressure to be the dependable older brother. I’m always on edge because of that. But that’s not how I feel when I’m with you.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“No, I’m just saying we’ve both been through a lot. We share secrets. So it’s nice to be with someone who understands you on that level, who you can be yourself with,” he explained.

“That’s true.”

I was a little embarrassed to admit it, but he was right. We shared too many secrets. We couldn’t tell them to others, but we could talk about them together. Having that kind of relationship brought you closer to someone, and before long, I’d begun to feel comfortable with him.

“Hey, Selene. When this is all over, how about we travel?”

“Hm? Where’d that come from all of a sudden?” I asked. “Hanging out with Lawrence too much?”

“No, I just thought it would be nice,” he said. “I’ve been thinking about what we could do when we were finally free of all

these barriers.”

“Travel, huh…”

As the head of House Vixent, I was bound to this land. And Dier was bound to the position he’d lost and the power he’d obtained.

If we defeated the remaining primordial beasts and uncovered all the secrets regarding these powers, I might be freed from the time loops. And he might be freed from his curse of immortality too.

“Traveling sounds nice,” I admitted.

“Right? We could find somewhere we like and build a house there and just live a peaceful life, you know? …What?”

“Are you serious right now? That almost sounds like a proposal.” I’d meant that to sound teasing, but apparently, my face showed more surprise than I’d expected.

Dier seemed embarrassed. “That’s not what I meant. But I’d like it if we could continue our relationship in the future, just like this.”

“I’m not sure. Who knows what might happen.”

“That’s why I have high hopes.”

“Mh…”

What would the two of us be doing in the future?

If we were freed from our fates, and if we were still together…I was sure our relationship would be even better than it was now…

Chapter One: The King’s Bloodline

Both light and shadow inevitably exist in every human heart.

When the bright emotions of happiness are born, dark emotions are also brought to life and linger in the shadows—emotions like sorrow and suffering. This, unfortunately, is beyond anyone’s control.

Dealing with these emotions—simply *living*—is challenging enough.

“Shadow.”

I stood outside the mansion and closed my eyes, using my power to expand the shadows. Jet-black darkness spread in the blink of an eye, consuming the entire capital. I couldn’t joke about it anymore—it really was powerful enough to cause a coup.

I focused as much as I could, followed passersby, and uncovered the chaos and darkness lurking within them.

“Phew,” I sighed.

“How was it?” Dier asked.

“Nothing. I didn’t find anything.”

“Oh.”

I pulled back the shadow and saw Dier’s shoulders slump with disappointment. I had applied my power to basically cast a net over the capital to see if there were any suspicious people around—specifically, I was trying to see if anyone’s body had been possessed by one of the primordial beasts.

There were six beasts in all. Four had already been defeated, but we hadn’t found the remaining two as of yet. The knights had launched a full-scale hunt under the direction of Gordov, but a month had already passed since it’d begun.

“It doesn’t make sense. They were active just a while ago, but now there’s no sign of them?” Dier said.

“I guess they’re just being cautious. After all, their wills are connected, remember?”

The primordial beasts could sense each other’s locations even when they were apart, so they would have noticed that their four compatriots were gone now. Perhaps they were being cautious because they knew they were the only ones left.

But even if that was the case…

"At least we know both their objective and their target," I said.

"Yep. Us guardians and the king, Euclis."

"Correct. After all, he's the central figure to all of us."

They feared and despised the supernatural powers because it was the guardians who had destroyed them so many years ago. They had been revived after all of this time so they could destroy the modern-day supernatural guardians—the descendants of the originals.

However, it seemed like their resurrection had been incomplete. That was why none of them had ever charged into battle in a straightforward manner. Instead, they had changed their methods and done things like possessing our relatives, plotting assassinations, and forming organizations to get to us.

So where were the remaining monsters hiding, and how would they attack us?

Dier's face looked anxious, illuminated by the moonlight.

"You don't need to worry about Euclis," I told him. "He has Alexei and Gordov guarding him. Etoile is there too, and he can use his Astromancy to detect any threats."

"I know. I understand their power. And I trust them. But there's just…something…" He looked up at the moon meaningfully and muttered to himself for a moment. "I feel uneasy."

"Uneasy?"

"Yeah. Like something bad's gonna happen."

"Honestly…" I said. "You really are a worrier."

Dier was always so weak when it came to his brother. I understood his concerns, but Euclis wasn't as feeble as he imagined. Or perhaps that was *why* he was worried.

"He's not going to kill himself," I added.

"I know that now. But I'm still worried."

"Why don't you go and watch over him all night from somewhere nearby, then?"

"Because I'd have to leave here, and that'd mean I wouldn't be able to protect you."

"Protect me?" I asked, surprised. I had been on my way back inside the mansion, but I turned around in disbelief. "Why would you need to protect me?"

"Because I'm worried about you too."

"I don't understand you. There's no reason to worry about

me," I told him.

I was strong. At the very least, I had the power to fight him, and *he* was immortal. But most of all, I had the ability to repeat things—my time loops. And because of this ability, though it was more like a curse, I would die over and over again. Even if something dangerous befell me, and even if I died as a result, I would never completely perish. I'd just repeat the cycle.

He knew that, so I wondered how he could say something like he had with such a serious expression on his face.

"I know that you're strong and even if you die, you'll just start over again. But that's why I'm worried," he insisted.

"What do you mean?"

"It means you're even more reckless than Euclis. You're not afraid of death for a different reason than I am. But unlike me, you're *going* to die. You're not rejecting death like I am. You'll die and then come back."

"Yes, and I've done it many times," I said.

"I know the pain of death more than anyone else. But my senses are numb and I don't feel much pain anymore."

"That's convenient."

"Do you really think so?" he asked, smiling bitterly at me. He intended it to be sarcastic, but he seemed to feel apologetic that it had come off stronger than he'd thought it would.

Of course it wasn't convenient for him. It was a result of him suffering over and over again to the point where he no longer felt pain because he'd felt it for so long.

"In that sense, I'm still getting used to it."

"Well, you shouldn't have to," he said. "I don't want you to get used to suffering. I don't want you to get used to the feeling of death."

"Dier..."

"I understand. Who do you think you're talking to? I was born to die, after all."

When we'd first met, he had been searching for someone who could kill him. All humans were destined to die someday, but not him. Because of that, he'd been searching for a way to free himself from his immortal body and finally be allowed to die. But at the same time, he didn't want to cause any more trouble for his precious little brother.

"Now that I want to live a normal life, I don't want to die for a very long time," he said.

Two brothers who'd both wanted to die had found hope by reconnecting with each other. They probably didn't want to die now.

"I feel the same way. I'd rather die at the end when I'm all feeble."

"That's why I don't want you to do anything reckless."

I tried to reassure him. "Don't worry. I won't do anything *I think* is reckless."

"I don't trust you."

"Excuse me?"

"Listen, I've watched over you this whole time. Don't forget that I'm worried about you," he said.

It really never ceased to amaze me how good of a person Dier was. And there was also a part of me that felt a little happy about it. He was one of the few people who genuinely cared about me.

Since this loop had begun, he'd been closer to me than anyone else. We were comrades who fought back, side by side, in order to keep living. We were accomplices.

I went back inside the mansion, turning my back on the gentle monster who made my resolve—my promise that I wouldn't trust anyone or rely on anyone else again—waver more than anyone else.

♦ ♦ ♦

Thump, thump, thump!

Someone was knocking at my door.

I gave them permission to enter. "Come in."

"Excuse me."

It was one of the mansion's butlers. I sat in a chair facing my desk, hard at work, with Dier by my side.

"What is it?"

"Lord Etoile Weldon has sent you a message, Mistress."

I froze and stopped what I was doing. All sorts of emotions swirled inside me as I glanced over at the butler. "Continue."

"Yes. He has invited you to his manor this evening and asks that you come alone."

"This is awfully sudden. Did he say what it's regarding?"

The butler had a troubled look on his face. "I did ask, but he said he wouldn't tell anyone but you, Mistress."

I folded my hands in front of my chest and thought about

how I should respond. I'd had very few invitations from Etoile to go to his manor, even when we had been engaged. He was afraid of me. He didn't understand my powers and had pushed me away.

Once I'd awakened to the power of Shadow, I had become one of his fears. I was surprised he wanted to meet me alone now. I glanced over at Dier to silently ask what he thought, and he nodded.

"I see…" I glanced back over at the butler. "Very well. Let me know when it's time to go there."

"Yes, Mistress. Please excuse me."

He left the room, and Dier and I were alone again.

Dier seemed confused. "That sure was unexpected."

"I know. I wonder if he discovered something."

"That must be it."

Why else would he want to talk to me alone when we were all frantically searching for the primordial beasts? Perhaps he'd discovered something related to them, or to me. His supernatural power of Astromancy didn't work on me—something got in the way of him being able to see not only my future, but also future events in which I had a major part. Therefore, he didn't know anything about what was going on with me, or about my relationship with Dier and Euclis.

He prided himself on his status as a noble and his duties more than anyone else. He would never disrespect the king he was supposed to serve.

Etoile had never seen Euclis's future. I remembered that from a past loop, and I had been surprised when I found out about that. If you had the power to see the future, wouldn't that be the first thing you'd want to learn? Wouldn't you want to know what the king was thinking or what he was looking for?

Perhaps he couldn't see Euclis's future either. After all, he *was* the origin of all the supernatural powers, and the guardians existed to protect him.

If a crisis were to be approaching the king, surely he'd be able to see it. But just as a child may misunderstand the feelings of his parents, perhaps his visions of the future might not be understood by the king. Only Etoile knew that.

Honestly, I wasn't that interested. If he could see my future, I wouldn't be able to use him, after all.

"Anyway, I should get going."

“I’ll go halfway there with you,” Dier offered. “I can go out after sunset.”

“No. You stay here.”

“You’re really going to go alone?”

“I’m not at liberty to say no to his request. Besides, whatever he wants, he doesn’t have the power to hurt me,” I told him.

Etoile’s ability was merely to see the future, not to change it, and he had no combat powers either. That was why he’d been afraid of me after I awakened to my own.

“Well, you can use Shadow to escape if there’s an emergency.”

“You’re right. And if something happens here while I’m gone, I want you to deal with it in my place.”

“You mean with Soleil? I’ll take care of it.”

“I’m counting on you.”

All of a sudden, Dier laughed. “Heh.”

“What?”

“Nothing. You really *have* become more open lately.”

I glared silently at him.

“It’s not a bad feeling, having you count on me,” he added. “I’ll work hard to meet your expectations.”

“You do that. You need to make up for it too, since you’re useless during the day.”

“Oh, now you’re suddenly being all strict? Well, that’s typical of you, I guess,” he said with a mischievous grin.

I looked down at the documents on the table and resumed my work. “You’ve become childish.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. You’re like a little boy playing a prank on me.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. I think I’m just comfortable with you now. I can be myself more when we’re together.”

He didn’t get in the way as I finished up my documents. Once I was done, he straightened them up for me, checked to make sure I hadn’t missed anything, and put them away. He certainly didn’t seem like someone who used to be a prince.

“I wonder why?” he then said.

“I don’t know.”

“Are you mad? I didn’t mean to tease you.”

“I’m not mad. I’m always like this,” I said.

“When we first met, yeah. But lately, you’ve been smiling more.”

I didn’t answer that. I hadn’t realized that my attitude and

expressions had changed. Come to think of it, I *did* have more reasons to smile since we'd met. And now, it was far easier to smile naturally than to smile to intimidate others.

♦ ♦ ♦

I went to visit the Weldon manor at the appointed time and looked up at the building.

"It's been a long time," I murmured to myself.

I had honestly never thought I'd set foot here again. After all, this was my ex-fiancé's house. We were now back to being perfect strangers, never to be involved in each other's lives again. I had no right to be here, or at least that was the way things were supposed to be.

I let out a sigh—I was already feeling depressed. I knew this wouldn't be a very fun conversation. After I heaved another sigh, I went up to the door.

A servant greeted me at the door and led me inside. As I walked past the other servants, they all bowed their heads politely to me. I wondered if they were feeling a mixture of complex emotions seeing me again as well.

"Lord Etoile is waiting for you in here."

"Thank you."

The servant led me in front of a room and then left, as if to say I was on my own from now on. Those instructions must've come from Etoile himself, which meant the topic at hand must be quite serious.

"Etoile? It's me," I said.

"Come in."

I opened the door and went inside. We made eye contact immediately, but only for a brief second before he looked away.

"I'm grateful you came," he said.

"Are you? It doesn't look like you're very happy that I'm here."

"That's not true."

Nothing but lies.

His entire being oozed with the sentiment that he didn't even want to see my face. Was it unconscious on his part, or was he purposely directing that attitude towards me? I couldn't tell, but either way, it didn't matter. I didn't want to stay here any longer than I had to.

"Tell me what you want," I said. "Why have you called me

here?”

He didn’t answer, and I found myself growing more and more irritated by his hesitation. He was the one who’d summoned me here to discuss something, alone, so I wondered why in the world he’d hesitate now.

“Hurry up and tell me. If you’re not going to talk, then I’m going home,” I threatened.

After a long pause, he spoke. “I discovered the location of a primordial beast.”

I had seriously been on the verge of turning around and going home, but his words stopped me in my tracks.

“What?!” I narrowed my eyes. “Is this true?”

He nodded and continued. “Yes. Just one of the remaining two, but I’ve figured out its general location.”

“I don’t understand. Am I the only one you’re telling?”

All the guardians had been meeting and sharing information with each other, while the kingdom’s knights were pulling out all the stops to search for the primordial beasts. The other guardians already knew about the beasts, so why would he hide this information from them? Why only tell me? It didn’t make sense.

“Yes,” he said. “I’ll tell the others, but first, I want you to help me with something.”

“Help you with what? You’re asking me specifically for help?”

“Correct.”

“This doesn’t make sense. Does it have to do with the primordial beast?”

“It does. This one is different from the others who have shown themselves to us so far,” he said.

“Different how?”

“There’s not just one vessel.”

“What?!” I couldn’t believe my ears.

Etoile continued and told me that he had discovered Rufus’s location—one of the two remaining primordial beasts. He had used his supernatural power to foresee what would happen in our kingdom, in the capital, and near the royal castle. As a result, he had come upon the beast.

“Rufus can split his soul into several different parts,” he explained. “He uses those soul pieces to possess multiple humans he deems compatible and then controls them while they’re still alive.”

“So he doesn’t completely take them over,” I said.

“No, this one is different from the others.”

The other four primordial beasts that we had defeated had either used dead bodies or had possessed a living human, completely taking over their mind and body to control them. In the case of the former, they had done this by pouring their souls into empty bodies—empty because those hosts were already dead. As for living humans, the primordial beasts had merged their souls with the living vessels, eventually completely taking over their wills and physical bodies.

Rufus was different, however. It seemed like he was purely just possessing people—not merging his souls with them or using dead bodies.

“So how is he controlling them, then?”

“People who have a certain amount of negative emotions inside them are compatible with his method of possession. Rufus amplifies those negative emotions so he can take advantage of them.”

According to Etoile, Rufus possessed people who felt strong anger, resentment, or envy towards others. He then would magnify those feelings in order to make people act on them.

For example, suppose there was a person who held a grudge against someone else, but they could rationally think about it and suppress their anger towards that person. However, if Rufus possessed that angry person, he would interfere so they couldn’t hold back.

“I don’t think those who are possessed realize they’re being manipulated. They’re acting upon their own initiatives, but in reality, Rufus is backing them up.”

“I see. That makes sense as to why he was so hard to find.”

This meant that Rufus had infiltrated deeper into our lives than any of the other beasts had. We might not have ever discovered him if not for the guardian of the stars.

I was beginning to see the answer on the horizon here. “So that means he’s possessing someone very close to us,” I said.

“Yes.”

“And could you see that person’s death, looking into the future?”

Etoile looked at me without a word. I took his nonresponse to mean that I was correct. At the very least, I knew that it wasn’t me, or someone immediately around me.

“It’s His Majesty,” he said.

“What?! No!” I cried out.

“His Majesty is going to die. The person Rufus is possessing is…”

I was left speechless by the name Etoile revealed. On one hand, I had expected it, but it was entirely unexpected at the same time. When it came down to it, though, there was no one else who could kill Euclis but that same person.

“So your request is that I guard Euclis?”

“Yes,” he told me. “I want to settle this matter as quickly as we can before anyone else finds out. Otherwise, the monarchy will suffer a serious blow.”

“I see… But are you sure? You can’t see my future, right?”

“Even taking that into consideration, your abilities are appropriate for this job.”

“I can’t do it alone. I can’t defeat it like I did before, you know,” I said.

“I have a plan. We’ll use the power of the guardian of the sun, or perhaps that of the forest, to drive Rufus out of the host’s body without killing the person.”

I see. That must’ve been why I was the only one he contacted—after all, the guardian of the sun was none other than my younger sister, Soleil. And the guardian of the forests was secretive—she usually didn’t show herself in public.

Looking back on it now, I wondered if the reason she didn’t actively try to get involved with people was because she was afraid Etoile could use his powers to discover her secret. By reducing the number of opportunities for their paths to cross, she could reduce the chances of him finding her out. She probably understood that Astromancy wasn’t all-powerful.

So, in a way, I was the closest person to her. At the very least, I was the only one she’d shared her secrets with. Etoile had summoned me here because he knew that I had some level of interaction with her.

“Fine, I’ll do it for you,” I said.

“I’d appreciate that.”

“I’m only doing it because I have to. But in exchange, can I let you take care of the rest?”

“Yes. I already know the locations of the other parts of Rufus’s soul. I’m going to let everyone know about them after this and have them move immediately to get rid of them.”

“I understand.” Since he’d said his piece, I turned around. “I’m leaving now.”

“All right.”

He didn’t try to stop me. Apparently, wanting to get away from each other as soon as possible was a shared sentiment.

He didn’t show it outwardly, but I was certain that deep inside, Etoile was afraid of me. He couldn’t see my future, and he knew that I didn’t think highly of him. For someone who could foresee most things, not knowing what might happen to him in my presence was probably extremely frightening.

The power to see the future was very mighty—he had the ability to see the happiness and misfortunes of all before anyone else could. But, in a sense, that power also robbed him of most of the joys of life. In that regard, I truly pitied him.

Because just like the rest of us, he had never asked for this power.

♦ ♦ ♦

“Is it true?”

“It seems that way,” I said.

The moment I got home, I told Dier what had happened. Etoile had said not to tell anyone else, of course, but I knew I needed to tell Dier. He was involved more than anyone else.

“You don’t seem terribly surprised. I thought you’d be more upset.”

“I *am* surprised. But the fact that you’re so calm means that he’s still fine, right?”

Ahh, I see. He must trust me a lot.

“I’m going to guard Euclis as planned,” I said.

“That’s good. I’ll feel better knowing you’ll be there.”

“I see.”

“There’s a way to save him, right?” Dier asked.

“Yes. I’ve informed Mystria Frusch, the guardian of the forests, already. She seems willing to help.”

“Okay.” He let out a sigh of relief, and it was clear that it wasn’t directed just towards the matter regarding Euclis. I knew that under normal circumstances, he would want to be the one to rush to his brother’s side to guard him.

“I’m sorry that I’m the one who was asked to do this,” I said.

“What are you talking about? I feel better *because* it’s you. I’d

rather it be you than anyone else."

"If you say so."

"Aren't you worried, though?" Dier asked.

"Me? About what?" I stared at him blankly, and he shook his head with exasperation. "What?"

"About your sister."

"Not particularly, no."

"You're a heartless sibling," he said.

"I've always been so. Even still, there's no reason for me to worry." I pointed at Dier. "You protect her, and then there will be no reason to worry at all."

"That's true."

"It certainly is."

After all, Dier Veldt was the strongest man in the world, and there was no safer place than by his side. I didn't think there was anything more reassuring than knowing he was keeping an eye on her.

"Seems like you trust me a lot more than you used to," he said.

"Trust is built upon achievements. And you've demonstrated many of them. That's all."

"I see. Sounds like something you'd say."

"Don't let it get to your head. One mistake and you could lose all the trust you've built up so far."

"I know that. Let's just both do what we need to."

"All right."

I would protect Euclis, and Dier would protect Soleil. Our roles had been decided upon, but we still had time before we needed to do anything. Three days passed while we made preparations, and then we put our plan into action.

♦ ♦ ♦

"If you'll excuse me, Your Majesty, I have a meeting to attend."

"Sure. Thanks for everything. Give everyone my regards."

"I will. Goodbye, then."

Gordov excused himself from guarding Euclis. Ever since we had discovered the existence of the primordial beasts, one of the guardians had always been by the king's side. It'd been a long time since he'd been in a room alone, even though there were people just outside.

“It’s a little lonely,” Euclis said out loud, even though there was no one there to listen.

He savored that feeling of loneliness, one that he hadn’t felt in some time, but all of a sudden, the door opened without anyone knocking first.

There was only one person who would enter the king’s study without permission.

“I’m coming in, Euclis.”

“All right, Sister.”

Guinevere was Euclis’s older sister. Since they were members of the same family, some irreverence was allowed. But more important than that, Euclis wasn’t the type to chide her over such a thing to begin with.

Since Euclis was still young, his sister was the one who handled the majority of his official duties.

She set a mountain of paperwork on his desk. “I’ve finished checking these papers. I’ll set them here, so take a look at them, just in case.”

“All right. Thank you,” he said.

“By the way, where is your bodyguard?” She looked around the room and noticed only Euclis was there.

“Gordov had to go to a meeting.”

“I see. That’s awfully careless of him. What if one of the beasts was nearby?” she asked.

“Everyone has other jobs to do besides protect me. I feel bad that they’re taking so much time out of their schedules to spend on me, anyway.”

“That’s part of their job, Euclis. You need to hold your head higher. You’re the king. You’re the only one who has the right to wield such power,” she reminded him.

“That’s true. I guess I just need to work harder.”

“Why?”

“What…?”

Euclis suddenly noticed something. His sister’s eyes looked different from normal. They were bloodshot, and she looked like a demon held captive to anger and hatred.

She screamed. “I’m not myself!”

Suddenly, she pulled a knife from her pocket. The woman brandished it overhead and tried to stab Euclis. However, the blade sliced through the air and stabbed the chair he had been sitting in instead.

“I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t interfere, Selene Vixent!” she yelled.

“Selene?”

“That was a close one. You’re going a little overboard for sibling rivalry, don’t you think?” I said.

I’d been lurking in the shadows this whole time, watching and suppressing my presence, because I had anticipated this would happen.

“Selene! What’s going on?!” Euclis asked.

“I don’t have time to explain everything right now, so I’ll keep it simple.”

“O-okay! But please, tell me!” Euclis seemed confused, but he listened intently. I expected nothing less from the boy who’d ascended to the throne at the age of twelve. He knew how to adapt to critical situations even better than Dier or me.

“The primordial beast Rufus has possessed your sister Guinevere,” I told him.

“What? It has?!”

“Yes. And it was trying to kill you just now through her.”

“Huh? My sister…?”

Euclis’s gaze was filled with sadness as he stared at his sister.

Guinevere, however, pulled the knife out of the chair and glared at me. “The guardian of shadow, Selene Vixent.”

“I believe this is the first time we’ve ever spoken, Guinevere Veldt.”

“What are you doing here?” she asked. “This is the king’s study in the royal castle. Outsiders are not allowed in here.”

“It was an emergency, so I had no choice. Besides, I already received permission from a member of the royal family.”

“What an obvious lie.”

“I’m not lying. Right, Euclis?” I said, looking over at him. He hadn’t been told a thing about this because I needed him to act as bait. I was sure he was quite shaken to learn that his sister had been possessed by one of the beasts.

Since I’d predicted as much, I hadn’t gotten his permission beforehand.

“My brother knew about this?”

“Yes,” I said. “And he let me take care of it.”

“Oh…” Euclis looked relieved and lowered his gaze.

Guinevere threw her knife towards the king, but I used Shadow to flick it away. It clattered to the floor, then the room

went silent again.

"I told you not to interfere."

"Well, I can't do that. I'm here *expressly* to interfere with you," I said.

"I see. So it was Euclis again."

"Sister?"

Guinevere then glared at Euclis. "You're always the one who gets chosen. I'm a princess, you know! So why? Why can't it be me? Even though I'm better than you!"

"Ah, I see. So that's the negative feeling it used..." I commented.

"Used? What are you talking about, Selene? Is my sister...?"

"The primordial beast Rufus can separate his soul into parts and possess multiple people. But unlike the others, he doesn't merge with them. He merely feeds on and amplifies his hosts' negative emotions."

Saying that Rufus manipulated them wasn't quite true. Right now, he was encouraging Guinevere—these negative emotions had always resided deep within her. She felt inferior to her younger brother and was angry that although she was a royal too, superiority was decided by the presence of supernatural powers.

That's just the way it was. Born as a woman into the royal family, she had resigned herself to the fact, pushing down the responsibility to fulfill her role as a princess.

"Her ability to control her emotions has been stolen by Rufus," I told Euclis.

"So he hasn't completely possessed her, then?"

"That's right. There's still a way to save her."

"I see." Euclis looked thoroughly relieved.

I was surprised and voiced a doubt that I had. "You don't have any opinion on that, though?"

"What?"

"You understand now, right? She's not being manipulated. She's just acting honestly upon her own feelings."

Guinevere aimed the knife at her brother again. She was really trying to kill him.

She wasn't being manipulated. In other words, deep in her heart, she really *did* want to kill her little brother. She had suppressed the urge with her rational mind, but even once he'd learned she had that anger inside of her, Euclis didn't seem to

think anything of it.

"Aren't you afraid? Or sad?" I asked.

"I *am* sad," Euclis said quietly, revealing his feelings about his sister.

But Guinevere interrupted him—she ran over to the knife, picked it up, and tried to attack him again.

"Shadow! Seize her."

"Grr... You...!"

"Settle down."

I easily restrained the flailing woman. The primordial beast Rufus's ability to divide his souls to possess many was powerful, but it had a big disadvantage. Although he could possess his hosts, he couldn't completely control them. And by cutting his soul into pieces, he weakened his powers.

He didn't have the might to fight against the supernatural guardians on his own as the other primordial beasts had. The biggest reason he hadn't shown himself was because there was no way for him to kill us other than to deceive us and attack that way.

And yet I had been the one who had thwarted him.

Now that his identity had been revealed, it was all over. The knife was no more of a threat than a toy to us guardians. Rufus had already lost.

"I never once thought that I was the right person to be king."

"Euclis..."

"It's true!" Guinevere shrieked, cutting him off. "Because *I'm* more suited to be the ruler than you are! Isn't that right?!"

"Yes, you are right, Sister," Euclis said with a smile. He wasn't trying to provoke her or disparage her. His smile was genuine, without a trace of falsehood.

Rufus's power was causing Guinevere's emotions to run wild, yet even despite all that, Euclis's feelings seemed to get through to her. She looked stunned.

"It just so happened I was born a boy, and by that same stroke of luck, was endowed with supernatural powers. If not for the law that the bearer of the powers become king, I think everyone would've chosen you as this kingdom's ruler, Sister. Or..."

As Euclis trailed off, I knew he was picturing Dier's face. But when it came down to it, there were others besides himself who were just more suitable for the job. Even at his young age, Euclis was aware of his shortcomings but still had to sit on that throne.

I thought it was an amazing feat to recognize such a thing at only twelve years of age. And honestly, I thought that made Euclis more than suited to be the king—setting aside any advantages or disadvantages, of course.

"So, it's only natural you'd be angry, Sister. I have many shortcomings, I've caused everyone a lot of trouble, and I always have to rely on other people's support, including yours." Euclis then approached his sister and placed his hand over hers, which still gripped the knife. "Sister, thank you so much for working so hard for your pathetic little brother. I'm so happy I have you."

"Eu…clis…"

"Even if you hate me, I'll always love you. And that won't ever change."

His warmth must've gotten through to Guinevere—her angry expression softened. Tears began to fall from her bloodshot eyes.

"I'm sorry, Euclis. I…"

I sighed. "Honestly, I'm not sure I've ever met a more generous person."

I then placed a paper talisman on Guinevere's forehead, and a great crackling noise like electricity suddenly rang out. Black mist flowed out of Guinevere's body.

Ruuuuuuuuumble…

"Selene! What was that?!" Euclis yelled.

"Rufus's true form."

It seemed that the guardian of the forest's power was working properly after all.

♦ ♦ ♦

Immediately after having heard Etoile's request, I went straight to Mystria Frusch's manor instead of going home. Despite my coming unannounced and at night, she let me pass and had her wolves show me in once again.

"I know the situation. What would you like me to do?" she asked.

"I've heard that the supernatural power of the forests allows you to infuse your power into someone else's body."

"Yes, that's right. I can heal others or deal pain to monsters."

"I want to use that power to drive Rufus out of the body he is possessing. Is that possible?" I asked.

He was different from the other beasts since he wasn't completely possessing his target. So, if we could drive Rufus out, we should be able to save those he had possessed.

To be honest, I wondered if I really needed to go that far for someone I'd never even met before, but she *was* a member of the royal family, so I couldn't just let her get hurt.

Plus, it would make Euclis sad—and I figured Dier would get mad at me too.

"I'm looking for a way that would keep any harm to a minimum," I added.

"In that case, it would be faster to use your younger sister's power of Sun," Mystria suggested. "Her power would be able to do that."

"Yes, I know that."

The power of Sun had the ability to boost other people's powers, and it could pour its supernatural energy into others too. That power was the natural enemy of the primordial beasts, and it would probably be effective against Rufus, who was possessing people.

"I can't have Soleil help, though. She's not good at lying."

"Hard to believe she's related to you, then."

"I agree." I could lie all the time with no problem. However, Soleil was too kind and therefore not suited to be part of a plan where she would have to use deception. So, I would have Euclis act as bait and then explain everything at the end.

"All right. I can prepare a special talisman for you that's imbued with my power," Mystria said.

"Thank you. Could I have at least ten of them?"

"He's split himself into that many parts?" she asked.

"He's a troublesome opponent." Now that I was finished here, I turned my back to leave, but...

"Lady Vixent."

"What is it?"

"Where do you think the last beast is?"

"I don't know. Probably somewhere closer than we expect."

Just like this time.

♦ ♦ ♦

The black smoke swirled until it formed the shape of a person's face.

“Damn it! How did that piece of paper drive me out?!” it yelled.

“You must be Rufus.”

“Tch. You’re the Shadow who defeated Agia and the rest. Curses, I let down my guard! But unfortunately for you, I split my soul into many pieces, so there are more of me! This isn’t the end!”

“Actually, it is.”

“What?!” Rufus’s smoky face changed expressions.

I smirked confidently. “Surely you can feel your other soul fragments disappearing one by one?”

“That’s impossible! How, so suddenly…?”

“My ex-fiancé is quite formidable.”

“The power of the guardian of the stars?!” Rufus yelled. “Damn it! You got me so easily!”

The fact that Etoile had located even one fragment of Rufus’s soul had been his downfall. Etoile wouldn’t have realized Rufus was possessing multiple people otherwise. But once we had figured out who one person was, all Etoile had to do was use his power of Astromancy on that person to find the other nine fragments of Rufus’s soul.

Astromancy wasn’t all-powerful. There were limits to using it to see future events in the sense of time, branching points, scope, and other conditions.

Etoile had really gone out on a limb for this one, and I’d have to praise him for it later. He was probably resting at his manor right about now.

“It’s all over. You’re a terrible beast who does nothing but prey on people’s weaknesses.” I then stabbed Rufus’s smoke with Shadow.

“Argh… It’s not…over…”

“It is. You’re going to disappear right now.”

“I’ll…tell you the whereabouts of my last compatriot… Rafai…”

“What?!”

Rufus’s roiling smoke then changed form, as if to point a finger at something. It went past me and was directed right at the face of the kind young boy who was so worried about his sister.

“Rafai’s right there,” Rufus said.

“What?!”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “That can’t possibly—”

And with the worst timing ever, all of Rufus’s soul pieces were

destroyed at that very moment. Its main fragment was probably the one that had possessed Guinevere.

But now that I had defeated it, memories poured into me—memories of the past I had wanted to know.

But what I wanted to know most of all was…the reality that lay before me.

Chapter Two: Goodbye

The six guardians carried out their plan to assassinate the guardian of the moon. The assassination itself ultimately failed, but the matter was still settled because the Moon guardian wanted to die.

The king cherished his older brother over all else, and similarly, the older brother cherished his younger brother over all else. They were irreplaceable to one another.

The guardian of the moon believed that his existence was the source of all the strife and thought if he only brought trouble to the king whom he respected so much, then perhaps he was better off not being alive.

Therefore, his earnest wish was granted and his life was extinguished.

To the king, losing his brother was like losing half of his own body. He not only grieved—he was angry.

It was impossible that such a cruel fate had awaited him. Things shouldn't have turned out like this. And even if the guardians had wished the Moon guardian dead, they would never admit it.

Even the younger sister was killed. No—the sisters killed each other.

Go back in time.

That was what the king had wished for.

Emotions surged into the king, and the vessel of his power became fully charged and manifested. The king's supernatural powers were the manifestation of his strong wishes.

And so the world went back in time, to a world before the Moon and Shadow guardians had died. The king's emotions were so intense that they even influenced the world itself.

The world had been rewound, with the little brother—the king—being the only person who knew the tragic future that lay ahead. If time kept flowing smoothly, tragedy would strike once again.

So the king decided to tell his brother everything.

He told him about the essence of the power that resided within him, and even about his power to rewind time. He told him that in the future, the guardians would come into conflict, and the guardians of moon and shadow would lose their lives.

Although it was a far-fetched story, the king was very persuasive. But most of all, the powers that existed in the world were supernatural and couldn't be explained away by logic. The guardian of the moon decided to believe his brother's frantic explanation.

"Let's run away together, Brother." The king grabbed onto his brother's shirt and didn't let go.

"Where?" the older brother asked the younger.

"Anywhere. If we stay here, you'll be killed. And then both of us will be unhappy."

"If we run away, will we be happy?"

"Anywhere else will be better than here."

As long as the king was the king, and as long as the Moon guardian was the Moon guardian, this terrible chain of events could never be stopped.

So he thought that casting aside his duties and fleeing the kingdom might make it possible for them to both live full, peaceful lives.

The king tried to convince his older brother, the Moon guardian, of this.

However, his older brother shook his head. "Running away is pointless."

"Why?"

"You should know why. The powers are already inside of us. We're not human. We're burdened with responsibilities and expectations."

"Well..."

"Even if we run away, fate will catch up to us."

After hearing his younger brother's story about the future, the Moon guardian realized that no matter where they ran, as long as they were in this world and had powers, they would never be happy.

That was because the source of the king's powers was the wishes of the people. And as long as the people kept wishing, he and his brother would be held at the mercy of those wishes.

"So then we'll never..."

Were they just jesters who existed to make the people's dreams come true?

The king wept. He wondered if the people even knew that he shed tears, that he was in pain. If they knew, would their wishes change?

No, that was impossible. Because people put their own happiness first.

In that case, would the king and his brother spend the rest of their lives being crushed by the weight of other people's wishes? No, that couldn't be.

"There is a way. A way that we can break the curse… A way for you to be happy," the Moon guardian said.

"I can be happy?"

"Yes, you can."

The Moon guardian had realized something.

From his brother's story, he'd learned that his future self's wish had come true. Because his body was immortal, he could not die except by his own will.

Also, only supernatural powers could end other supernatural powers. In other words, he also had that power. That meant that just like the king, he had the power to grant wishes as well.

Of all the guardians, only the Moon and Shadow guardians were born from the king's own wishes. That was why there was a more tangible link between them and the king as opposed to the other six. Therefore, the Moon and Shadow guardians had the potential to tap into the king's powers, while the other six guardians did not.

By manifesting that power, the future Moon guardian had seized his end. He had made his own wish come true.

If that was the case, what if he intently wished for something right now? And what if he could make it come to pass through the king's power?

"Leave it to me. You deserve to be happy."

The Moon guardian had already decided upon his wish. He had already made up his mind. He made the decision to abandon everything in order to obtain a future and happiness for his brother.

And so…

The guardian of the moon became a monster.

A true, literal monster. He abandoned his humanity and became no more than a beast.

The king didn’t understand why his brother had changed. But reality pressed upon him faster than he had the ability to understand it.

The guardian of the moon had become an enemy of humanity and an object of the people’s fear.

The guardians, along with many people, believed that the Moon guardian should be defeated. People’s hearts became united through this common goal, and their trivial power struggle was temporarily put on hold.

Only then did the king gradually begin to understand what his older brother had wished for, and why he had become a monster.

“He did it for me...?”

The guardians led the charge to take out the now-monstrous guardian of the moon. No matter how much the king wished otherwise, the people’s desires were aligned with those of the guardians.

But the guardians lost the battle.

They were merely humans with supernatural powers. They didn’t stand a chance against the guardian of the moon, one who had obtained overwhelming strength.

He killed all of them, one by one.

Eventually, the six guardians were all dead. The only remaining guardian was the king’s younger sister, the guardian of shadow, who shared his same fate.

“Brother, why did you become a monster?”

He didn’t answer.

“You’ve become a monster, so why am I the only one you spared?”

“Because there’s something I can only ask of you,” he said.

The Moon guardian thought he’d lost his reason after he’d become a monster, but his heart and will were unchanged. He hadn’t completely turned into a beast.

He had become a monster through his own will and killed the guardians.

And he had done it because he knew that they would one day cause pain for his brother, the king. He’d thought that killing them would be a way to prevent everyone from getting caught up in senseless power struggles.

And now that his goal had been realized, he moved on to his next wish.

“I want you to kill me,” he said, pleading with his younger sister, the guardian of shadow.

She didn’t show a hint of surprise. She just listened calmly to her older brother’s words.

“No one can kill me. But you’re the only exception. You have the same power to grant wishes inside of you that I do. But unlike the king, you can only do it once.”

“A wish?” she asked. “So you want me to use that power to…”

“Yes, to kill me. The only way to kill my immortal body is through that wish.”

“Did you plan on being destroyed from the very beginning? Did you plan to become the villain in order to make me and the king heroes?”

The Moon guardian didn’t answer. His silence *was* his answer.

He’d eradicated all the guardians who had become drunk on their powers. Once the Shadow guardian got rid of him through her wish, his *real* wish would come true.

He had wished for his brother’s happiness. And he wanted to save his little sister, the Shadow guardian, who also suffered.

Once the Shadow guardian realized this, the tears she’d been suppressing for so long overflowed.

“Now, hurry up and kill me. If you spend too long talking to a monster, you may become a monster yourself.”

“I wouldn’t mind.”

The Shadow guardian then decided on her wish and consumed the guardian of the moon with her shadow. However, she consumed herself as well.

“Brother… I’m tired too.”

“I see.”

The Shadow guardian wished to disappear right along with her older brother. She was exhausted. The pointless power struggles, the gazes of fear and pity… They were all too much for her.

“No one…ever loved me.”

“No one loved me either.”

They held each other. There was a shared bond between the two people who had experienced loneliness, who’d realized they didn’t fit into the world, and yet had still believed there was hope.

They weren’t just brother and sister—they were able to remember that they were truly siblings, and they shared their

loneliness with each other.

And so the monster that was the guardian of the moon disappeared in accordance with the Shadow guardian's wish.

He was consumed by her supernatural power, and as such, his existence disappeared from the world.

That was the scenario he had envisioned—his true wish.

He knew his kind little brother would be devastated if he learned that he had died for his sake, for his happiness. He was afraid that he would try to come after him and end his own life. If he did, his wish wouldn't come true.

Therefore, the guardian of the moon also wished that his younger brother would never have to feel alone. That wish erased all traces of his existence from the world, as if he had never existed in the first place.

However, it was difficult for one person's wish to so greatly influence the world. That was why he needed the power of another person's wish too.

The Shadow guardian's wish was linked to the Moon guardian's wish.

They had hoped that by dying together, the Moon guardian's wish would come true. That was how one person's wish could become the wish of two people, bringing about such a change in the world that some might call it a miracle.

Because their wish had come true after all.

♦ ♦ ♦

Memories of the past flowed into me.

And I understood at last.

"I see... So that's what happened."

At that moment, I finally realized why I was stuck in a time loop. I placed a hand over my heart and focused on the power that lay dormant inside of me.

I had made a wish just like the previous Shadow guardian—just like the previous Moon guardian too.

I don't want to die like this.

From the moment I had met my first death, I had rejected it from the bottom of my heart. I'd wished for anything but my life

to end in tragedy.

Unlike the other six guardians, the guardian of the moon and I were born from the king's wishes.

Because of that, we had the same power of the king to grant wishes, though greatly diminished, and we could only use it once.

The Moon guardian from the past had discovered that power. At first, he had rejected his immortality. Then he'd turned everyone against him and had chosen to become a monster.

"The Shadow guardian was encouraged by the Moon guardian's wish to die alongside him."

I clenched the hand that was over my heart tightly into a fist.

I'd solved the mystery of the loops and had gained the power I'd desired this whole time.

The same could probably be said for Dier. In his case, his existence had been wiped clean from the world, just like the previous Moon guardian had wished.

Ironically, the two Moon guardians had wished for the same thing. I couldn't help but think that it was fate.

"I wonder if the Moon guardian in the past was a kind person too."

He couldn't stop thinking about others, to an exasperating degree.

Dier definitely thought that his presence was the source of Euclis's pain. And not just figuratively—he truly thought so.

A strong wish could become reality according to the wishes that lay within the king. Dier hadn't known that when he'd made his own heartfelt wish.

If all I do is cause trouble for Euclis, I should just disappear.

And with the help of the former Shadow guardian, he'd made his wish come true with his own power. That was how he had erased his existence from the world before.

And that was why no one in modern times knew about the Moon guardian either. The only reason the royal family knew at all was either because the wish had been imperfect, or...

No, there's something else I have to think about now.

And that was what the primordial beast Rufus had said just before his death.

"Rafai's right there!"

He'd pointed to the boy king, Euclis Veldt.

“Euclis…”

“There’s a beast inside of me…?”

Euclis began to tremble and sweat as he stared down at his own two hands.

When a primordial beast was defeated, the information that was sent out included the feelings of the former king. However, the only person privy to that information was Euclis.

I wanted to ask him about it, but it was clear that this was not the time. He was very confused. I’d never seen him sweat so much.

“There must be some mistake. It’s more likely that Rufus lied in order to confuse us,” I said.

Euclis didn’t answer.

“The battle against Rufus is done now. We should go meet with the other guardians again.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Euclis.”

I turned to leave the room, but Euclis reached out and grabbed my arm. I could feel how violently he was trembling.



“Selene, please kill me right here and now.”

“This is the third time you’ve asked me that.”

“This time is different. If you don’t, this kingdom—no, the entire world could be destroyed!” he cried out.

“What are you talking about? Don’t tell me you’re believing Rufus’s lies.”

He didn’t answer. He seemed very confused.

I couldn’t blame him. His older sister had just been possessed by Rufus and confronted him with the jealousy and anger towards him that she’d hidden deep in her heart. Even if he had maintained his composure on the surface at the time, inwardly, he had to have been very hurt. Although he was the king, he was still just a young boy.

“Calm down and think. Just take a deep breath.”

“No. It’s not a guess. I’m certain of it.”

“You’re certain of it?” I repeated.

He nodded. His limbs were still trembling and his expression was tense. “What Rufus said was true.”

“But how can you know that? You’re still—”

You’re still you.

When Agia had possessed my stepmother, Shioria, their two consciousnesses had been melded together. Agia had controlled her body by using the negative emotions that were deep inside her.

Not only had she been egged on, like Rufus had done to Guinevere, but more than half of the control she’d had over her body had been taken over by Agia.

Euclis was alive. If there was a beast inside of him, why hadn’t it come out yet? There had been plenty of prime opportunities. But most of all, if it truly had invaded the body of the king, someone who had supernatural powers, their battle would’ve already ended in victory.

At the very least, in every conversation I’d had with Euclis lately, it had *sounded* like I was talking to him. It was hard for me to believe a beast could have been speaking to me, even now.

“Is the reason you think that because of memories you obtained after I defeated Rufus?”

“That’s part of it,” he said. “The king has the power to grant wishes. And I…wished.”

“For what?”

“Well, I’ve been wishing for a very long time to be dead.”

Euclis was very much like Dier. Both brothers put the other's happiness before their own. They both wished to be erased from the world for the sake of each other.

If that wish came true, then his body…

"You mean you think you attracted the beast to you?" I asked.

"Yes. There's a beast hidden inside of me. I became sure of it just now. There's a presence inside of me that *isn't* me," Euclis declared as he placed a hand over his chest.

I still didn't understand.

"Then who are you right now? Rafai? It doesn't look like it to me."

"I am me. I'm definitely speaking to you of my own volition right now. But…argh…!"

All of a sudden, he doubled over in pain midsentence.

"Euclis?!"

He let go of me and grabbed at his chest with both hands, his body swaying violently from side to side. In the meantime, a strange presence began to emanate from his body.

"No… It's true…?"

"Yes… It's inside of me… Finally!"

I gasped.

Euclis's face had changed.

His gentle, boyish face was no more; his eyes turned red, and their shape turned up sharply. It was like I had witnessed him transform into an entirely different person. It sent a shiver racing through my body.

"Finally… Finally, the restraints were loosened! That despicable human king!"

"Are you…Rafai?"

"That's right, eighth guardian!"

Euclis was right—the last primordial beast Rafai had been hiding inside of him. This was the worst-case scenario…but there was one thing I just didn't understand.

If he was showing himself now, how had Euclis managed to keep control up until this point?

"It's amazing… I can even see his memories! I never expected that those disgusting people had killed each other!"

I just stared at him silently.

"Oh, don't glare at me, Shadow guardian. Just go ahead and—*Kill me!*"

Part of what he'd said just now hadn't sounded like Rafai.

“Euclis! Was that you just now?!” I called for him.

Euclis’s body pressed a hand against his left temple and staggered from right to left as if in pain.

“That…little brat…”

“Hurry up and kill me, Selene!”

“It *is* you, Euclis… You’re still…”

Alive. He hadn’t been taken over completely. Euclis’s will, his soul, and his physical body were battling with Rafai for ownership.

That meant there was only one option left. I still had the paper talismans from Mystria. I waited until Rafai was disoriented again and then slapped the talisman on his forehead.

“I expel you, Rafai!”

“Gr…graaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!” His body let out a pained scream.

If the circumstances were the same as when Rufus had possessed Guinevere, the two hadn’t completely fused yet. I thought I should be able to expel Rafai with the talisman.

“Now…”

“Graaaaah—Just joking.”

“What?!”

The pained look disappeared from Rafai’s face, and he tore the talisman off his forehead and crumpled it up. “It’ll take a lot more than this to expel me. Don’t you understand? I’m not like Rufus. My soul has already fused with the boy’s.”

“You’re lying,” I said. “If that’s true, then why does Euclis’s will remain? If you’re fused, you would’ve absorbed him already!”

“I’ll admit I wasn’t expecting that. The moment I entered the king’s body, I was certain of victory, but it’s more cramped in here than I imagined. The king’s power and will were binding me.”

Euclis then addressed me. “Selene, up until now, my will was unconsciously binding Rafai. But now…”

Rafai pushed aside Euclis’s pained will again and smirked. “But now, he has reached his limit! Maybe because he saw those memories? Or because he had a realization after Rufus pointed it out? He can’t completely suppress me anymore!”

“Euclis!”

“Please… Selene…” Euclis was struggling to bear the torment. He was trying to protect himself from being invaded by Rafai,

and his consciousness being completely stolen away.

“Give it up, boy king! I know you hate this world too. That’s why you summoned me!” yelled Rafai.

He was talking with the other being inside of himself.

“May…be. I was weak before. But now…I’m…not.”

Rafai didn’t answer that.

Euclis bore the pain and was doing his best to smile. “There’s…hope in this world. My brother smiles at me… And I know everything will be…okay…as long as he…has Selene by his…side.”

“You think it’s okay to entrust this woman with his life? She’s the one who killed the former Moon guardian—who killed your brother!”

“That’s…exactly why…”

“Huh?”

“Don’t you understand? Just as I thought…beasts aren’t humans. You saw the emotions and memories of the former king, so how can you say that?” Euclis laughed as he struggled through the pain. Half of his body’s face was twisted with irritation and doubt.

“How can you laugh in this situation? You’re almost finished! You, and this world!” Rafai shot back.

“No, the world won’t end. The only thing that will end…is me…and you!”

“This brat still resists me! Stop dragging this out! It’s pointless! Resisting will only increase your pain! Just let it go!”

“Selene!!!” Euclis screamed. He directed an intent gaze towards me, making me stand straight up. “There’s a limit…to how much…I can suppress him… So please!”

“Euclis, you…” I began.

“Please! I know I’m asking something horrible of you, and I don’t care if you hate me over it! But you’re the only one I can ask! Otherwise, I’ll only make both you and my brother unhappy!”

“Stop interfering!”

Rafai opened a hole behind him that connected to another dimension. Just like Agia had done before, he summoned his own limbs in an incomplete resurrected state.

A jet-black wing appeared from the hole behind him. It was part of Rafai’s body—most likely his beast form.

However, the only thing he’d been able to completely develop

was that hole. It could bring no more than that one wing forth, and just as he tried to open up another hole, Euclis's will interfered.

"Please hurry!"

"I won't let you do that!"

Rafai flapped the black wing, scattering feathers about. He freely manipulated the feathers and tried to kill me with them. I quickly created a shadow barrier to block them, but his attacks were relentless.

"I'll kill you right in front of him!" Rafai yelled. "Then his heart will be completely broken!"

"Selene!"

As I fought, my mind raced. I tried to figure out a way to save Euclis, but I couldn't think of anything. Their souls had already fused. The fact that the talisman hadn't worked was proof of that. And since we were now in the same situation as when I'd fought Agia and the rest, there was no way to separate them.

There really was no other way to save him but to kill him. The answer was right in front of my face. But even so, I was frantically trying to come up with another way.

"There has to be something!" I cried.

"There's not! Give it up and die!"

"Please kill me! For your future, and for my brother!"

"Dier..." I froze when I saw his face flash through my mind.

"Selene!"

"Die! I'm going to rip out your guts!"

"I'm sorry..." But who was I apologizing to? Euclis? Or Dier?

I didn't know the answer to that question. But what I *did* know was the reality of the situation before me.

Blood dripped onto the floor. A hole gaped open in a stomach.

I felt like I had a gaping hole in my own heart now.

"Thank...you."

I couldn't answer...because I'd just run Euclis through with my shadow.

In doing so, I broke Rafai's core, and the final memory came flooding into me.

♦ ♦ ♦

The world had become peaceful.

All threats had subsided with the deaths of the monstrous

Moon guardian and the last surviving guardian, Shadow.

But no one knew the truth. According to their wishes, the existence of the Moon guardian had been erased from people's memories and wiped from every record.

All that was left was the revised legend that the seven guardians had sacrificed themselves to save the world from the beasts.

Since the Moon guardian's existence had been erased, the world's perception had been changed. History had been altered without anyone noticing at all.

No—there was one person who noticed.

"Brother... Sister..."

Yes, the sad king was the only survivor, and therefore the only one who remembered the truth of how his brother disappeared and his sister perished in battle.

The only person the modified world the two of them desired didn't affect was the king, because of his supernatural powers. That was the greatest misfortune they could not have foreseen. So in the end, their wishes had not come true.

The loss of his siblings left the king alone and grieving. But his people expected much from him and lauded him as a hero. To the king, their feelings were trivial, and he didn't care about them.

He tried to use his wish to turn back time again and save the two of them, but it did not come true.

"Why can't I turn back time?"

If only he could turn back the clock, he could save them. But now, the situation was very different. Now, the guardian of the moon had rewritten history as if he had never existed from the beginning.

The world didn't think that he had died, but that he had never existed in the first place. Therefore, the king was unable to rewind time for someone who simply did not exist. That was because the king's supernatural ability was powered by the wishes of the *people*. Since the people no longer remembered the guardian of the moon, his wish was rejected.

His bad luck only continued as something unexpected happened.

Soon afterwards, six new guardians were born. No—they had been there from the beginning. In place of the vanished guardian of the moon—or rather, it was as if his existence had

been swapped out—others from the deceased guardians' lineages inherited the supernatural abilities of the guardians.

It appeared that history had been revised even further.

The existence of the king and the six guardians were two sides of the same coin. They were connected by an invisible causality; even if one of them died, they would be revived as long as they were not completely destroyed.

People wished for a world where they were protected by the supernatural powers. As long as those powers existed, they would not disappear from this world. And this meant this tragedy would repeat itself over and over again.

And it did, for hundreds and thousands of years.

It was like this fate of ours was a curse.

♦ ♦ ♦

"Did you…see it?"

"Yes. I did."

"So it was just as I thought. This ending…is the best one."

Euclis smiled brightly as blood gushed from his mouth and the wound in his stomach. He lay his head in my lap while I knelt on the floor. He could barely move.

"You'll die."

"Yes. I…know that. I don't…feel any more pain, though."

"I see."

"You…and my brother…experienced this over and over again…didn't you?"

"Yes."

There was a hole in the king's stomach. It was a fatal wound, and he was beyond saving. No matter whose powers we used, there was less than a minute left of his life.

And he was right—I'd experienced this same thing many times before. I was more well-acquainted with what one felt and thought at the moment of death than he could ever know.

"Don't you have regrets?" I asked.

"Yes. A lot."

"I suppose you would. I wouldn't be at peace with a death like this either."

That was why I had unconsciously rejected death and subconsciously wished to repeat my life. Because of my undignified deaths, I had cursed myself with the time loop.

If he felt the same way, the king's powers inside of him might grant his wish. Maybe the time loops could help us start this reality over.

But, deep down, I knew he wouldn't wish for that.

"This…is the end for me."

"But why?"

"Because I know…that if I live…you and my brother would continue to be in pain."

"And you think you dying won't cause us pain?" I asked. "You underestimate Dier. A lot."

"I know. My brother is very kind. I know he'll be sad when I die."

"Of course he will."

Even though I hadn't known the brothers for very long, I could already feel the sadness of Euclis's death. Along with Dier, he was one of the only people who knew my secret.

Without even knowing it, both brothers had given me emotional support. I only realized it now, at the moment one of them was dying. And if I thought it was sad, there was no way the gentle monster Dier wouldn't think so too.

"I'm the one who killed you. He's going to kill me too."

"That's not true," he told me.

"How can you be so sure?"

"You know why, Selene."

"Maybe…"

Dier was too kind, and that was why he wouldn't be able to kill me. He would probably be angry, but his feelings wouldn't go further than that.

And that was why…

"This will hurt Dier deeply."

"It'll be okay," Euclis said. "He has you now. He's not alone anymore."

"But I can't do anything for him."

"Just be with him. That alone will save us."

"Euclis."

He weakly clasped my hand with his bloodied one. "Thank you. Because of you…I was able to talk to my brother again. I'd given up on it…but you made my dream come true."

"Was that really your dream?"

"Yes, and you made it a reality. And because of you, my brother wants to live and move forward with his life."

“I didn’t do anything.”

I really hadn’t done a single thing for Euclis or Dier. Sure, I’d ended up lending them a hand, but in the end, that too was just self-serving. In fact, I felt like *they* were the ones who had helped and encouraged *me*.

“That humble part of you is another reason why you’re so kind, Selene.”

“I’m not kind,” I insisted. “I’m a person who will do whatever it takes to be happy, that’s all. I even killed you because my life was in danger and I wanted to live.”

“You’re…a bad liar. You’re like my brother…in that way.”

I didn’t answer.

“Your tears…are proof of your kindness…”

Without me even realizing it, tears were flowing down my cheeks. I realized that wetness had to be tears because we were inside, where it couldn’t rain. When they reached my mouth, they tasted salty.

“I’m…so glad I got to meet you, Selene. You gave me happiness. This is just to repay you for that…”

He then used his last remaining strength to very, very gently and weakly squeeze my hand with both of his. He had a serene smile on his face without a trace of pain.

“Please be happy, Selene.”

“Euclis…”

“Don’t think of anyone else. Imagine your own happiness and live for that. That’s my last wish…that I can repay you with.”

“My own happiness?”

The happiness that I want.

I closed my eyes and envisioned the scene.

♦ ♦ ♦

A peaceful, everyday life without being strung along by supernatural powers and social status. A life of freedom. Like how someone had told me once that it might not be so bad to travel around the world.

The happy future I envisioned…

“In that future, I’m sure Brother will…”

“Euclis!” I cried out.

“Please… Please let my wish…come…true…”

The light then faded from Euclis’s eyes. I realized his life had

come to an end, but I clung to his limp hands without letting go.

"Yes... That's right, Euclis..."

He would never answer me again.

The boy that lay in my arms now was dead—just a body. There was no point in talking to him anymore.

What was dead was dead. And that was why we must live with no regrets.

"Thank you, Euclis. Because of you, I've made up my mind."

My power of Shadow could absorb other powers and steal them. The king's royal powers that resided in his body were no exception. I used my own to absorb them from his hands.

"I will take on your wishes, your will..."

The warmth was gone from his body. His body had truly become a lifeless shell, and his eyes blankly looked up at the ceiling.

"And your power."

I gently closed his eyes for him so that he could at least have a pretty ending. I didn't believe in life after death, but if there was one, I would want him to wait for me and watch over me from there.

I wiped away my tears, placed his body on the floor, and rose to my feet.

Then more memories flooded into me.

Not the memories of the primordial beasts, but the memories Euclis had seen—the things the previous king had wished for and felt.

I wondered if those memories had resided in his supernatural powers, and if by absorbing those powers with Shadow, the memories had flowed into me as well.

Thanks to them, I now understood everything.

"Yes. That has to be it," I told myself.

Euclis's wish, and the path to fulfilling my own wish, was crueler and lonelier than anything I'd ever experienced before.

But there was no other way. I had no other choice.

It wasn't just because that was what Euclis had wished for. It was because of the future I so strongly desired for myself.

"Selene! You were taking so long I was worried and— Huh?"

"Dier."

I turned around.

I saw my former accomplice.

“This is the end for us. Farewell.”
And then I told him goodbye.

Chapter Three: The End of the Road

Dier had rushed to the scene, and it only took him about two seconds to realize what had just happened. He was worried because I was taking so long to come back home. Or perhaps he was so anxious about his beloved little brother that he couldn't bear it anymore and had to come here himself.

And if that were true, the shock of it all had surely raced through his entire body, and his mind was probably blank right now.

"Euclis…"

His precious little brother's dead body lay at my feet in a pool of blood, unmoving. I knew he didn't have to touch him to know that it was nothing more than a lifeless shell now.

Euclis had died, and I was still alive.

Although he still might've been confused, two seconds was surely long enough to comprehend this scene. He had to have figured it out.

How had Euclis been killed? Something small like a knife wouldn't be enough to cause the gaping hole in his stomach.

The only thing big enough to cause a wound like that was the preternatural power of a beast.

But Dier didn't seem to understand. I had to tell him.

"I killed Euclis."

He looked at me in shock.

It hadn't been the knife from Guinevere, who also lay on the ground. It hadn't been Rufus, who had possessed her, nor Rafai, who had possessed Euclis.

The power that had ripped through Euclis's belly and ended his life…was mine.

Dier's eyes were wide. He was speechless. He just stared at me, unmoving, for several seconds, until he finally comprehended what I had said.

He looked at me with a terrified look on his face. "What do you mean? Why would you kill Euclis? Did he ask you to? Did he ask you to kill him?"

"No," I answered immediately, shaking my head. "I killed him because I wanted to."

“But…why?”

“Because it was necessary.”

“Necessary?” he asked.

“That’s right.”

Euclis, the future you hoped for will never come. The world isn’t as kind as you thought it was. Now that I’ve killed you, all I have waiting for me is regret and despair. But even still, I made up my mind to live my life as I please. And for that purpose, I’d do it again…

“The only way I could achieve my goal was to kill him,” I added.

I’d become the villainess if I had to.

I didn’t care who hated me or who shunned me. I was fully aware that going down this path meant becoming everyone’s enemy.

And with full awareness, I’d taken the first step down that road. There was no stopping now. I would not turn around and look back until I’d reached my own happiness, even if that meant I had to cross swords with him.

“Selene…!”

Dier was overcome with emotion, releasing an incredible amount of blood from his body. It surged into a wave, then came together to attack me like countless sharpened blades.

I expanded my shadow to cover the area, creating similar waves that came together in sharpened tips to offset Dier’s blood attack. Because that action obscured my vision in front of me for a moment, I lost sight of him.

The next thing I knew, Dier was by my side. He had transformed his blood into a sword and slashed at me. I immediately created a wall with Shadow and leaped backwards to avoid it.

“I have no intention of fighting you, Dier!” I yelled. “It’s meaningless.”

“Meaningless? So then there was a meaning behind you killing Euclis?!”

“Yes. I had to kill the boy king to steal his powers.”

“His powers…?”

“That’s right.” I now spoke and behaved in an exaggerated fashion, placing a hand on my chest. “His power is inside of me right now!” I declared.

“Argh… Selene, what do you want?!”

Dier kept attacking me. He’d given in to his anger, so his

attacks were repetitive. It made it easy for me to create walls with Shadow to block all of them and maintain my distance.

I effortlessly dodged his attacks while I answered his question. “I told you. I want to make my dreams come true.”

“And what are those? I thought your dream was to be freed from the time loops?”

“That’s true. But right now, that’s not all I dream of.”

“What else, then? What could you possibly want that would make you kill Euclis?”

“Everything. I want this whole world to be mine!”

“You sound like a child!” he yelled.

My jet-black shadow clashed with his crimson blood.

I put up a wall and moved into the next room to distance us from the still-unconscious Guinevere and Euclis’s still body. We continued our battle there.

“Euclis isn’t enough to get me what I want. I need the remaining six powers.”

“Six? You mean the powers of the six guardians?”

“Yes. So this is none of your business. I won’t kill you if you don’t get in my way.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Dier replied. “You really think you can kill me?”

“I do. And I won’t show mercy, not even to you, if you stand in my way.”

“Selene!”

Dier gripped his blood-sword and swung it down over my head. My shadow blades blocked it so it didn’t reach me, but now we were incredibly close and staring each other in the face.

Dier must’ve noticed something because his eyes opened wide and he gasped.

“You’re too naive, Dier.”

I deflected his blood-sword and pushed his body away with Shadow. The force knocked him back and sent him spiraling into the air. Ultimately, he landed on the ground, killing his momentum.

“Selene…”

There was nothing for me to say.

Euclis, just as you said… Dier is too kind.

I had killed his beloved brother, but he still had no true malice towards me. He was angry with me, but he wasn’t actually trying to kill me. If he were, his sword would’ve already pierced through

my chest.

At this point, I felt like I wouldn't even care if he killed me now and ended it right here.

"It's a shame that you can't kill me," I told him.

"Selene!"

I expanded Shadow to cover the entire room, and countless hands emerged from the shadow at Dier's feet to bind his body to the spot.

He was immortal. Even if I pulled him into the depths of my shadow, he would be able to crawl his way out due to his own power.

No one in the world could kill him as only his own wish could do that. However, he'd already used up that wish.

"It's true that not even I can kill you. But I *can* send you far away so that you can't interfere with me."

He groaned. "Ugh... It's pulling me in!"

"There's no use in resisting because I already know your physical strength. You can't shake off that shadow."

"Selene!"

Shadow bound his hands and was starting to pull him into the depths below him. But instead of imprisoning him there, I was going to send him as far away as possible.

His presence would interfere with my plans for the future. I needed to keep him far away until I was finished. He could stay there and hate me for all I cared.

"Goodbye, Dier."

"...lene..."

"The next time we meet, you'll..."

There was a dull splashing sound, like something dropping into a puddle, and Dier completely disappeared into the shadow. I sent him as far away from me as I could, so it would take him a long time to return.

Now, no one would interfere.

I took a deep breath that sounded more like a sigh and stared at the space beyond the broken wall.

"You two really are just alike, Euclis."

♦ ♦ ♦

Someone had murdered the young king, Euclis Veldt.

This shocking news would travel quickly through the castle,

the capital, and beyond. Or at least…one would think so.

However, another huge development happened at the same time—the birth of a new ruler.

The person who was chosen to be the monarch was…

"Your Majesty, you have one meeting scheduled today."

"Thanks. Go ahead and get things ready for it."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

I now sat on the throne that Euclis once occupied.

I'd become the new queen. Under normal circumstances, this would've been impossible. Not only was I not a member of the royal family, but I was the head of the Vixent family instead.

However, no one had any doubts about it at all and just accepted this abnormal occurrence.

"The king's power certainly is fearsome…"

That's right—this phenomenon had happened because I had stolen the power of the king from Euclis.

The people around me acted as if this was how it was supposed to be in the first place. They embraced me as the queen without any hint of discomfort at all.

Not a single person had mentioned that the previous king was dead. Or to put it more precisely—no one had even noticed.

Upon Euclis's death, I had completely taken his place.

That was why I thought the power was so fearsome. My wish had become a reality. And if this was all about manipulating the perception of reality, then I could manage it on my own.

"I can't believe you had this power and never used it. You're amazing, Euclis."

The king's power was the ability to do anything he wished. At the very least, he could control everything that happened in his surroundings.

Perhaps the reason Euclis hadn't used it was either because he didn't want to or he couldn't. Either way, it was hard to stay in your right mind with this power.

I developed a newfound respect for Euclis. He had become king at the young age of twelve, borne a power that was *too* powerful, had all the expectations of the people weighing on his shoulders, and hadn't become a tyrant. He had grown up pure.

I wanted him to forgive me for using the power he had protected for evil.

"Now…"

It was about time.

I cut my work short, rose from my chair, and left the room. I walked down the hallway and passed by servants and knights. They saw me as their queen, of course.

"Queen Selene."

"Guinevere."

Even Euclis's older sister was acting like I was her relative.

"Where are you going?" she asked me.

"I have an errand to run, so I need to go to the throne room. You don't need to come with me."

"Very well." Guinevere bowed her head and I walked past her. Yesterday, she'd been possessed by Rufus—who'd invaded her mind—and she'd tried to kill Euclis.

But when I'd stolen Euclis's power, it had tampered with her memories. She didn't remember being possessed by Rufus or trying to kill her younger brother; those things had been erased from her mind.

Now she should be able to return to her life as usual. Although she thought she was my sister, to me, she was nothing more than a virtual stranger who'd tried to kill her little brother.

"I'm sorry," I murmured towards Guinevere as I walked away.

I arrived at the throne room. This was the place where the queen held audiences with various people. It was needlessly large and lavishly decorated.

I could invite over a hundred people here to have a lively banquet, and there'd still be enough room left over for more. It was plenty big to battle against a rampaging monster too.

"This is the ideal place."

I stood in front of the throne and then turned to slowly sit down upon it. Never in my wildest dreams had I ever imagined I'd be doing this one day. I was sure everyone else had felt the same.

The king's power which I'd inherited worked on ordinary people who didn't possess their own powers. However, in the end, it was a phenomenon based on my own personal wishes.

So the people who *did* have powers would surely notice this disturbance in the world.

And they had.

Because in the next moment, they burst through the doors of the throne room without so much as a knock.

"Sister!"

"You've finally come, Soleil. And…"

“What is the meaning of this, Selene Vixent?!”

“Looks like the gang’s all here,” I said.

The six guardians all appeared in the throne room.

My sister, the guardian of the sun, Soleil Vixent, led the charge, followed by the captain of the knights and strongest guardian, Gordov Boden, the guardian of the earth.

“You never cease to amaze me, but this time you’ve really gone too far, Lady Vixent.”

“I don’t think I’ve gone too far at all,” I said.

That was Alexei Wasser, the guardian of water—and the man who had proposed to me.

“Why are you the queen now?”

“Who knows? Why don’t you use your powers of Astromancy to figure it out? Oh wait—you can’t.”

And there was Etoile Weldon, my ex-fiancé and the clairvoyant guardian of the stars.

“Where’s the former king?”

“There is no former king,” I told the next one. “I am, and always have been, this kingdom’s queen. Perhaps you’ve slept for so long that you’re still groggy?”

I spoke to Mystria Frusch, or rather her doll proxy, since the real Mystria was in bed. She was someone who had lived over 140 years and transcended generations.

“You’re part of the royal family? First I’ve heard of it!”

“Oh, you didn’t know? You should really crack open a book sometime.”

Then there was the guardian of air, Lawrence Cielo, an eccentric free spirit who loved to travel the world.

The only ones who had noticed this strange happening were the guardians, the ones who were born out of the people’s wishes to protect the king. They most likely came here to try to discover the truth.

I didn’t have to be clairvoyant like Etoile to know that they would show up here.

“Explain yourself, Selene Vixent.”

“As you can see, Sir Boden, I am the queen, Selene *Veldt*. The head of the Vixent family is Soleil, not me.”

“That can’t be true! You’re the head of our family and my sister!”

“Perhaps you dreamt that. Unfortunately, I am not your sister.”

Right now, the world perceived me as Selene Veldt, and I had been a member of the royal family all along. But the only people who knew otherwise were the six that stood before me, and another who was currently far away.

"Go ahead and take your leave," I told them. "This is the throne room, and the person before you is the queen."

"No. We know the ruler of this kingdom to be King Euclis. Selene Vixent, where have you hidden away our king? What did you do to him?!" Gordov yelled. His intense, sharp gaze was trained on me. Everyone else's eyes swung towards me at the same time in response.

I let out a little sigh. "Euclis is gone. I killed him," I declared.

"What?!" Gordov exclaimed.

"Sister..."

"You killed the king?"

"That's right, Alexei. Are you surprised?"

I plastered a nasty smirk on my face so I could shock them. I could play the part of the villain perfectly so that they would turn their ire against me.

It was easy to imagine what would happen next. Compassion must be discarded in battle. And in order for that to happen, I needed them to hate me.

Especially...

"Do you understand now, Soleil?"

"Sister..."

Hate me. Hate me more than you ever thought you could. I'm not the Selene you once knew. Selene Vixent died that day, along with the boy king.

That's right—I was now Selene Veldt, the greedy queen.

"Are we done now?" I asked. "Staying here any longer is rude. Now get out."

"Sister!"

Soleil tried to rush over to me, but Gordov stopped her. "Give it up."

"But, Sir Gordov!"

"She's no longer the Selene Vixent we remember."

Soleil fell silent at that.

"Selene Vixent," Gordov began. "I won't ask why you changed. But our king is King Euclis, and my sword is dedicated to him. Therefore..."

He then drew his sword and pointed it at me. The

overwhelming malice and intimidating power of the world's strongest knight was currently directed at me.

"I'm going to take revenge on my king's enemy here."

"You can't do it, Sir Boden," I warned.

"Then how about us?"

"Lawrence!"

Lawrence manipulated the air and jumped above me. "I don't really get it, but this means you're our enemy now, right?"

"Yes, but my perception of the situation is a bit different," I said.

The pressure from his wind hit me from above, but I created a curtain using Shadow to block the air from all directions.

"That's because I was never on your side in the first place," I added.

"Is that so? I thought we were actually friends," Lawrence said.

"You always were clueless, Lawrence. You can't even tell a villain from an ally."

"That's not true. I'm actually quite a good judge of character."

Wind and shadow pushed against each other. I could feel Lawrence holding back, perhaps out of consideration of his surroundings. I needed to teach him that naivete could cost him his life.

I expanded my shadow, and just as I was about to absorb Lawrence, Gordov intervened.

"Get back!" Gordov yelled.

"Huh? Oof!"

"That power...!"

My entire body suddenly felt heavy. The guardian of the earth had the power to manipulate gravity. While my movements were slowed, Gordov swung down his sword.

But at that moment, I slipped into Shadow and evaded him.

"What?!"

"Too bad for you, I've already seen you use your powers before."

I'd already experienced Gordov's gravity manipulation. When Dier and I had fought against him, we'd observed it up close and had discovered a way to counteract it.

We'd done that because I knew this day would come.

Gravity was powerful, but it couldn't reach inside of Shadow. My attack could still be launched from behind using the momentum from within the shadows.

I could tell he'd used up a considerable amount of strength with that attack. So now that I'd dodged it, it would take him a bit to recover...leaving him wide open.

If I could take care of the strongest of the six guardians right now, I'd get much closer to my dream.

"I won't let you do it, Lady Vixent."

"Alexei..."

A water barrier blocked me. My shadow blade was absorbed by the water and I couldn't reach around behind Gordov's back. The Water guardian Alexei's supernatural power was that he could freely manipulate the moisture in the atmosphere. If he blocked my attack for even a moment, that could give Gordov the time he needed to recover.

"Thanks for your help!" He then turned around and swung his sword.

But I was already inside the shadow and had teleported near the throne by then. Gordov's power of gravity manipulation expanded into a circle around him, but he avoided extending its range to the entire room. He must have considered the impact it would have on Soleil and Mystria, who were unable to fight.

"Is that really all you've got?"

"I expected that you'd be able to dodge my attack, Lady Vixent," Alexei said.

"Nice job. I didn't think you'd protect Gordov," I commented.

"I can't allow you to get those pretty hands dirty since you're my future bride."

"You still haven't given up on that?" I let out an exasperated sigh at the thought. "That's never gonna happen."

"Don't you know? When you want something, all you have to do is reach out and grab it."

Alexei then controlled the water around him and created a huge wave behind him. I created a wave of shadow behind me in response.

"I actually *did* know that, and that's why I'm here today."

"Oh, I see. So you're fighting against something too. Once this battle is over, will you tell me about it?" he asked.

"That's impossible because you can't beat me. You already lost to me once. Don't you remember?"

"I do remember. But right now, I'm not alone."

Lawrence was floating by the ceiling. Gordov was right in front of me with his sword drawn, staring me down. Mystria

couldn’t fight and I doubted Soleil could either. Etoile’s power of clairvoyance couldn’t reach me.

So the only ones who posed a true threat were the first three. It was three against one here. Under normal circumstances, I’d be at a disadvantage, but…

“It’s easier than fighting someone who’s immortal,” I said.

How many days would it take Dier to return?

I had to render the guardians powerless and steal their powers before he arrived. If I couldn’t do that, then I’d be in an even worse position than I was in now.

I couldn’t let my panic show on my face. I had to keep it a secret and push it down inside of me.

“It looks like we all have one thing left to do.”

“Selene Vixent,” Gordov said.

“I’m going to stop you,” Alexei said.

“Yeah, I don’t wanna die! So I’ve got no choice but to do my best,” Lawrence added with a shrug.

Water, Earth, and Air all attacked me at once. I spread the jet-black wings of my shadow out as far as possible to take them all on.

I’d known this was going to be a tough fight, but it was closer than I’d expected.

Gordov’s power in particular was only rivaled by Dier’s. Lawrence flitted around so freely that it was difficult to predict his movements. And Alexei’s water was so versatile I had no idea what form it would take next.

Even if I wanted to run away from here, they could render me powerless if I turned my back for even a second.

I couldn’t let down my guard at all. If I could get rid of even one of them, the situation would immediately tilt towards my favor.

Should I aim for the three who can’t fight first?

“I won’t let you!”

“Ugh…”

Gordov predicted my movements and got in the way of me approaching Mystria and the others. He was the most accustomed to combat out of all of them, so he could see right through me to my thoughts. He was the strongest knight in all the land and my biggest hindrance in this battle.

If I could kill Gordov, I could secure my victory.

“You hurt my feelings, Lady Vixent. Won’t you look my way

too?”

“Yeah! We’re here too, y’know!”

Water pressure from the right and wind pressure from the left. I was surrounded with nowhere to run. I had focused too much on Gordov and let my attention stray from the other two.

Gordov deserved most of my attention, of course, but the other two weren’t weaklings. They both had the power to kill me if they wanted to.

“It’s all over, Selene Vixent!”

I wouldn’t let it be over. I had to beat them here, no matter what. I couldn’t do another loop. I couldn’t let this tragedy repeat.

The only path I could choose was the one I was already on. The one towards my dreams.

“It’s not over... It’s only the beginning!”

“No, it’s done!” Gordov controlled gravity and fixed its range only on me. Even without the water pressure and air pressure, I wouldn’t have been able to move now.

It was down to the wire. Up until now, I would’ve just accepted death and waited for the next time loop. But now, I was too attached to my life to give it up.

If I died, the time loop awaited me. I could do it all over. Still, I wanted to cling to this first time, thinking it was special, wanting to protect it.

Whether it was that fixation that had interfered with Gordov’s sword or something else, I didn’t know—but I glimpsed a split second of hesitation on his part. But he didn’t give up and swung it down anyway.

“Sister!”

“What?!”

The sword sliced a body from chest to hip, causing blood to gush forth in its wake.

But it wasn’t my flesh that it had cut through. It was...

“Soleil...?”

“What?! Soleil Vixent, why?!”

Gordov was stunned, and I was speechless.

Soleil’s weakened body had taken the brunt of his attack. Before any of us had realized what was happening, she’d run my way and jumped in front of me the moment right before he swung his sword. She’d taken the blow for me. I saw it happen. She never hesitated for one moment when she threw her body

in front of mine as a shield.

“Argh…!”

I held Soleil in my arms as she collapsed, and expanded Shadow to throw Gordov backwards. That kept Lawrence and Alexei in check as well.

The entire throne room was silent in shock at the unexpected event that had just occurred.

Soleil had collapsed painfully in my arms.

“Why…? Why did you protect me?” I asked.

“Sister… Are you hurt…?”

“No, I’m not, Soleil. You are.”

The wound across her chest was deep. Her flesh had been gouged out, and judging by the amount of blood she’d lost, it was easy to tell that it was fatal. Even if it hadn’t been so bad, she’d already been a weak, sickly girl. One slash from Gordov’s sword could kill anyone.



Soleil herself must have known that, but she had still decided to jump out to protect me. Me, someone who'd become the enemy of the guardians. I had even said I was no longer her sister.

"Why?" I asked again.

"Because I…didn't want you…to die…"

"I don't understand…!"

"I…do…" Soleil trembled and weakly lifted up her right hand. She seemed to be only half-conscious, and could barely move her body.

I clasped her hand and she gently squeezed it in return.

"You're…a kind person…Sister."

I didn't know what to say.

"You wouldn't…hurt…someone…for no…good reason… Or for no…point at…all…"

"That's not true…"

I put on a smile, trying to show Soleil that I was a bad person.

"It's not true," I insisted again. "I've always been self-serving. Before, and even now. I show no mercy to anyone who gets in my way."

I'd stood by while my father died. And I'd practically killed both of my mothers. I always used my power to protect myself and myself alone. There was no way I could be a kind person. People should have hated me more because I was a bad person. And yet now Soleil was…

"Why are you smiling, Soleil?"

"Because…I'm glad…I was born as…your sister."

"Soleil…"

"I…always caused trouble for you, but… I hope I have at least helped you…in the end…"

The warmth I felt from her hand was slowly fading away. Her complexion worsened, and the light in her eyes grew weaker.

She was going to die soon. And unlike me or Dier, she wouldn't get another chance. Once she died here, that would truly be the end of her life.

And yet she was smiling.

"Did I help you…Sister?"

"Of course not. You've always done nothing but cause trouble for me."

"Oh…"

It was true.

If only she'd hated me from the beginning. If only she'd acted like a complete stranger to me.

Then, it wouldn't hurt my heart so much. Then, I wouldn't have hesitated one bit, or regretted the fact that she had been killed, or that I'd become her enemy.

"I'm sorry…all I did was…cause trouble for you…in the end…" she said slowly.

I didn't answer.

"But…if I had a second chance…"

Her eyes looked vacant, and it seemed like her body no longer felt the pain. She did her best to smile at me once more. A smile that was as bright and warm as the sunshine was directed right at me.

"I hope…that I'd be born…as your sister…again…"

"Soleil!"

With that, the strength completely left her hand and her eyes went still and unblinking. She was no longer breathing. Her heart had stopped beating.

And that was how Soleil Vixent, my last remaining family member, left this world.

She died with a smile on her face, doing nothing but adoring me…and not hating me one bit, not even at the very end.

"Thank you…" I whispered softly and only to her, one last time.

I laid her body on the ground and gently closed her eyes for her. I folded her arms over her chest to hide her wound.

Then, I stood up and faced the remaining guardians.

There was a strange awkwardness in the room. Even though this was the perfect opportunity for them, Gordov and the others didn't attack. Their emotions for my sister must've been getting in the way.

"Now I'm one person closer to my goal."

"Selene Vixent…"

"Thank you, Gordov Boden. Because of you, I have one fewer person to kill."

"Argh!"

I resumed my attack with Shadow. Gordov activated his power over gravity, dulling my shadow's movements. It seemed like he was going to try to take this opportunity to attack me now.

"Alexei! Lawrence! Keep going!"

"All right."

"That's right! Our battle isn't over! If we don't stop her here,

we could be the next ones to die!”

“Precisely. So this time, don’t hold back,” I said.

I was the worst person in the world.

Soleil was dead, and part of me felt relieved about it.

I had killed Euclis, stolen his power, and vowed to use all means possible to fulfill my goals.

If it was necessary, I was prepared to kill anyone who got in my way without hesitation.

But my only reservation had been whether or not I could kill Soleil. Every time I had tried, I’d ended up hesitating. She’d been the only one who had never shunned me and had never abandoned me. She had always treated me like her sister. Apparently, my heart hadn’t completely turned to ice, and I was still capable of emotion.

In a battle of life and death, one moment of hesitation could lead to defeat. I was up against Gordov and the others right now, but if I showed any hesitation towards her...

But now that she was dead, all of my reservations were gone. They’d been whisked away with her by that last smile she gave me. Now, I had no more need to pause, no more uneasiness.

I would do anything possible to achieve my goals. To make my dreams come true.

“I’m going to kill you all, right here.”

“That’s...!”

“What’s going on? Her shadow is more powerful now?”

“And faster too! Waaaah!”

There was a visible change in my offense and defense. I pushed aside the power of gravity, pierced through the water, and drowned out the wind as I spread my shadow and restrained all three of them.

“How has her power gotten stronger?!”

“I’m glad you noticed it so quickly, but it’s still too late for you,” I told them.

“What’s going on here, Lady Vixent?!”

“I want to know too!”

“You should try being more serious,” I said.

This was no time for small talk. Were they trying to distract me so they could slip out of their restraints? Either way, it wouldn’t work. I had stolen Soleil’s supernatural power of Sun. Her power had the ability to boost other powers, and I could even direct it towards myself.

The stronger the light is, the deeper and darker Shadow becomes. And now that I had the power of Sun, I was using it to boost Shadow to its fullest potential.

Its range, speed, strength, and intensity had all grown exponentially.

"You lose."

"Argh…"

"It's no use. Now, no one can stop me!"

My shadow squeezed them all. They tried to protect themselves with their powers, but they wouldn't last long. It was all over. If I could kill them now, all that would be left were the two who were unable to fight.

"I want you to hate me when you die."

I had no grudges against these men, but I couldn't hesitate for the sake of my dream. Just as I was about to say goodbye, the ceiling of the throne room shattered.

"What?!"

Droplets of water fell from the sky—but no, it wasn't rain. Instead, it was a shower of blood.

"It can't be…"

"Everyone, get down!"

The blood droplets became spears that rained down upon the throne room. They pierced my shadow and helped release the three men.

Now that they were free, the newcomer landed in front of Gordov.

"You're…"

"Please get back."

"You got here faster than I anticipated, Dier."

"Selene…"

The two of us looked at each other. Dier had saved Gordov and the others. He'd skillfully targeted my shadow, being careful not to injure them in the process.

To think that he was able to pierce my shadow while it was being boosted by the power of Sun… I'd known that Dier was powerful, but he was truly in a league of his own. That was why I'd tried to avoid fighting him and had sent him far away from the castle.

"I'm surprised you're back so soon."

"I wanted to return as quickly as possible," he said.

"But how did you do it? I moved you out of the kingdom."

"I ran here, of course. It wasn't that far. I went at full speed

and got here in less than a day."

"Ridiculous. I can't believe you're human."

"Did you forget?" he asked me. "I'm a monster."

I'd underestimated his physical abilities. He must've used his power to manipulate blood to boost his physical strength, increasing his speed to its maximum. Dier was immortal. He wasn't fatigued, and even without sleep or food, he wouldn't die. Even if he strained his muscles to the extent that would make a human collapse, it wouldn't faze him.

Once again, I was surprised by his supernatural body.

Dier was faster than I'd expected. Perhaps being able to stop him for even half a day was a great accomplishment.

"It looks like you're queen now. You certainly rose through the ranks quickly."

"So you've heard?"

"Yes. I was surprised, but I thought it might be possible if you had Euclis's powers."

"That's right. His powers are very special."

Just as I thought, it hadn't worked on Dier either.

Everyone else looked shocked at Dier's sudden appearance. And it was no wonder—he had the power to control blood, after all. Only Lawrence knew about it. Well, that wasn't completely accurate—there was one other person he'd faced off with before here as well.

"That power... Are you that man from that time?" Gordov asked Dier from behind him. It was evident that he still saw Dier as an enemy.

"What's going on here?"

"I'm sure there's a lot of questions, but this isn't the time or the place. I can explain everything later. For now..." Dier put aside Gordov's malice and aimed his blood-sword towards me. "I need to stop her."

"Fine. You can explain later."

"There's a lot I want to know too. I thought you were just her bodyguard? I have a lot of questions to ask about the true nature of your relationship!" Alexei yelled.

"There's really no accounting for taste! Even I'm creeped out that you still haven't given up on marrying her!" Lawrence said.

Thanks to Dier's appearance, they were all able to escape from their restraints and regain their stances. Now it was four against one. Or perhaps worse—Dier definitely counted as more

than one.

Now that he'd shown up, my chances of winning were practically zero. However, I did have a chance if I took the two who couldn't fight hostage. But Dier and Gordov would definitely be able to see through that plan too. Even now, Gordov had his sword drawn and was casually stepping in between me, Mystria, and Etoile.

It was the worst possible situation for me...or maybe it wasn't.

"It took you long enough," I said.

"Those footsteps?!" Gordov was the first to notice them.

Obviously, people in the castle would notice such a commotion too. That's right—the footsteps belonged to none other than the men Gordov led.

Knights streamed into the throne room.

"Are you all right, Your Majesty?!"

"You...!"

"Captain! What's going on?!"

"It's not just Captain Gordov... Lord Alexei, Lord Etoile...and even Lord Lawrence are here too!"

The knights looked around at the faces in the room. Then, they noticed Soleil's body behind me.

"They were trying to stage a coup," I said. "Soleil fought against them to protect me and died in the process."

"Wha—?! That can't be...!"

"Captain... You tried to kill Her Majesty?"

"Don't let her fool you! She's not the true monarch of this kingdom! Remember! Remember that our king is King Euclis!" Gordov shouted, saying the name of the true king...that only the guardians remembered.

But shouting Euclis's name in this situation...

"It won't work. They don't remember Euclis," Dier said.

"What are you talking about?! Our ruler is Queen Selene!" a knight yelled. "Captain... No! Gordov Boden, you've turned against us!"

"No! Argh..."

"Give it up," Dier told him. "It's too late."

Gordov clenched the hilt of his sword. Dier was right—no matter what he might try to say, it would be pointless.

One by one, the knights drew their swords, turning against the guardians.

That was the moment those same guardians, the people who

were supposed to protect the monarch, instead became enemies who had rebelled against the kingdom.

“Seize them!” I yelled.

“Everyone, huddle together!” Dier screamed. He used his power over blood to create four barriers. The blood traveled up to the ceiling, connecting to the hole he’d come in through.

“They’re leaving! Run!”

“I won’t let you escape.”

I launched a shadow that followed the path of the blood. But Dier had predicted I’d do that, and made another wall of blood to keep me out.

“Lawrence!” he shouted.

“Yeah, yeah, I got it.”

Lawrence used his power to make all of them float in the air, and the guardians flew right out of the castle.

“So heavy…”

“Just hang in there. Gordov, make us lighter using your gravitational manipulation.”

“All right.”

Gordov lightened the burden of the wind pressure and blood barriers.

I looked up in admiration at how quickly they had all banded together.

“Dier…”

“Selene…”

If he was able to get far enough away and escape into the sky, I wouldn’t be able to pursue them with my shadow.

Both sides gave up the fight, and Dier and I stared at each other until he and the others disappeared from sight.

And that was how I became queen and the guardians became the enemies of the people.

Chapter Four: Overcome and Proceed

The guardians have become enemies of humanity.

Word spread like wildfire through the capital.

“What’s going on? Why did the guardians attack the queen?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“Facing off against the guardians is basically the same as fighting against monsters!”

“What’s going to happen now? Don’t tell me they’re going to turn against the people too?”

“This is scary…”

The rumors only fanned the people’s anxiety.

Many people knew about the guardians’ powers and abilities. That was because up until now, they were the ones who had maintained peace for the people. They’d been the people’s swords to fight for them and their shields to protect them.

The powers that were supposed to exist to protect the people’s peace in the king’s name were now being used against them.

Just the mere thought of it was terrifying and would make the people live in fear. However, unbeknownst to them, that was exactly what Selene had wanted when she had become the queen.

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Lawrence guided the rebels to a small manor deep inside a forest far, far away from the capital. The house was a separate residence once owned by a noble, but now that that noble had fallen from grace, it was abandoned and empty.

“I don’t think she’ll find us here, so we should be safe!” Lawrence said.

However, Dier had a conflicted look on his face as he sat there silently. He knew that in the face of Selene’s abilities, nowhere was actually safe. She had the power to travel anywhere.

The only reason she hadn’t yet was because Dier and the others were all gathered together. Even though she had now obtained the power of Sun, it would still be very difficult for her

to take on all the guardians and Dier at once.

Their best line of defense right now was to continue moving together as a group, but they couldn't keep that up forever. Selene was in control of the knights now, and if their battle were to evolve into a full-out war, the sparks wouldn't just be contained to the castle—it would spread throughout the whole world.

"Selene, you..." Dier murmured.

"Will you tell us what's going on yet or what?" Gordov piped up.

The two of them had met before; one could even say they were enemies because they'd seriously crossed swords at one time. However, even though Gordov's malice towards him had eased considerably since Dier saved them, he still regarded him with a look of suspicion.

"Who are you? And why did you save us?" Gordov demanded.

Dier said nothing.

"Answer me. And depending on your answer..." Gordov reached for his sword. He couldn't decide whether Dier was a friend or a foe, and that was why he needed to know the answer so badly.

Dier let out a sigh. "I guess if we've come this far, it's pointless to keep hiding it." He sat down in a nearby chair. He wanted to make sure all the remaining guardians heard him loud and clear. "It's a long story. You can take a seat if you want."

The guardians all found places to sit down, but they still maintained a certain distance from him. It was clear that, so far, they had no intention of including him in their group.

Then, Dier slowly began his story. "My name is Dier Veldt. I was once the first prince of this kingdom."

He started to tell them about his childhood and the secrets hidden around it. He explained how things had gotten to this point, and why he had cooperated with Selene. He told them the biggest problem she had faced, how they'd fought, and how they had saved lives together.

The guardians all listened quietly. Everything he was saying was a shock to them, and they all sat with their mouths agape as they listened. Unable to hide their surprise, they watched him wide-eyed.

And it was no wonder. What Dier told them wasn't just simple secrets shared between him and Selene, but secrets that had

been hidden from the entire *world*—the true story about the king and his guardians.

"I can't believe it... Is this true?"

"It's true, Etoile Weldon. You were once engaged to Selene. Didn't you have some doubts about the sudden change in her behavior?"

"Ah! That's...!"

"She's stuck in a time loop," Dier said simply. "She's experienced death many, many times. That's why this time, she decided to break off the engagement herself."

Etoile reflected back on the night of that party. Dier was right; Selene had changed drastically, and suddenly too. And since Etoile had no knowledge of the time loops, he couldn't understand why she'd changed so much. If, for some reason, she'd been given this curse-like power to repeat time, then there were some things that helped it all make sense.

"The reason we worked together was because we were both resisting this strange, irrational force. I'd been erased from the memories of everyone in the world, and she couldn't stop dying. We cooperated with each other to try to end our mutual hells," Dier explained.

"And that's why you fought against me?"

"That's right, Gordov Boden. At the time, it was necessary for Selene to absorb the guardians' powers."

"Isn't that the same thing she's trying to do right now?" Alexei asked.

Dier shook his head. "No, it's a bit different."

Alexei frowned. "Would you mind explaining it, then?"

"Back then, she just had to absorb a tiny bit of your powers. But now, the situation has changed. She intends on killing each and every one of you."

"I can tell that she's serious now. I could feel her intense hostility against me, but I don't know why," Alexei said.

"Unfortunately, I don't know either."

"You don't?" Alexei asked.

"She said that in order to make her dream come true, she needed the supernatural power of the guardians. But I don't understand this dream she's talking about. I don't know what she wants to happen right now," Dier admitted.

"World domination, maybe? Perhaps she wants all the power in the world so she can remake it as she pleases?" Alexei

suggested.

Mystria, who had been quiet all this time, finally spoke up. “Is that even possible?”

“I think it is,” Dier said. “At the very least, we know that she’s now in possession of Euclis’s—meaning the king’s powers. And the king’s power is one that makes wishes come true.”

“I don’t understand that part. If she has the power to make wishes come true, why not just make whatever her dream is come true right now?”

“Maybe she needs time to prepare. The king’s powers aren’t omnipotent. Perhaps it requires some kind of collateral, and that’s why she’s seeking our powers,” Gordov said.

The guardians all pondered Gordov’s suggestion. Some nodded their heads silently, while others looked at the ceiling or outside. They all had their own reactions to it.

Etoile spoke up first, breaking the silence. “In any case, we can’t just sit here doing nothing.”

“That’s right. We need to take the kingdom back from Selene Vixent. And we need to prepare for that immediately,” Gordov said.

“I know. But unfortunately, my power cannot extend to her. However, I *can* see the future situation of the capital city itself,” Etoile said.

“What do you see?” Gordov asked.

Etoile closed his eyes. His power of Astromancy had given him special eyes that could see the future. He could see more than the future of people or animals—he could see fixed areas or locations as well.

Since Selene’s presence interfered with his power, he could not see her future or the future of the palace itself. However, once he expanded his range, it was possible for him to glimpse the future of the surrounding areas, although the accuracy of it was decreased.

He opened his eyes. “In one week’s time, things will be very hectic at the capital. Perhaps a large battle is about to take place there.”

“A week… We need to be ready before then. I have a few ideas about people who might be willing to cooperate with us, but we won’t have enough time if we attack without a strategy.”

“I’ll read the future. I can see anyone that isn’t involved with her.”

“All right, that’ll help. We need as much time as we can get.”

Etoile and Gordov made eye contact and nodded. Gordov rose to his feet and looked over at Dier.

Dier looked up at him.

“Dier Veldt. No—Your Majesty.”

“What?!”

Gordov knelt down in front of Dier. “Please forgive my ignorance. Even though I didn’t know the truth at the time, I was very rude to you as a knight.”

“It’s not a big deal. You don’t have to apologize.”

“Thank you. I realize this may be selfish, but please lend us your power, Your Majesty.”

“Are you sure?” Dier asked.

Recognizing him as the king meant the guardians believed his story. Even Dier thought the whole thing was so absurd that it was hard to believe. But since Dier had experienced it and had seen the memories from the past, that was the only reason it felt real to him.

He thought it was nearly impossible for anyone to believe the story from just hearing it. Up until the last second before he opened his mouth, he hadn’t been sure if he should tell them or not.

But Gordov recognized Dier as the king, and he was perhaps the most stubborn guardian of them all.

“I’m well aware that my story sounds absurd,” Dier said.

“Many unbelievable things have happened. But most of all, you know the name of our king, Euclis. That’s more than enough to make me believe you,” Gordov answered.

“I see…” Dier looked down. He silently repeated Euclis’s name inside of his heart. “Gordov Boden, thank you for everything you did to protect my brother this whole time.”

“I was only doing my job as a knight. And as a knight, I feel that I have to take responsibility for everything that’s happened.”

“No, it’s nobody’s fault. If it’s anybody’s fault, it would be mine,” Dier said. He looked off into the distance, thinking about his late brother and Selene, who was now his enemy. “I knew the two of them better than anyone. It was entirely possible that things could’ve led to this, but I… I just didn’t realize it in time.”

Everyone looked at him silently.

“But it’s not over yet. Let’s stop Selene!”

“All right!” Gordov’s straightforward reply echoed throughout

the room. He stood up and looked around at the remaining guardians. “Everyone, we must work together. We need to stop Selene Vixent and take this kingdom back into our hands!”

♦ ♦ ♦

I let out a sigh.

The throne room had been completely destroyed and there was a gaping hole in the ceiling. Night had fallen, and I could clearly see the moon through the gap.

“The moon just keeps following me, doesn’t it…?”

I was supposed to have stolen the remaining guardians’ powers here tonight. As soon as I had succeeded in gaining Soleil’s power, I’d had a chance to win. It would’ve all been over had Dier not made it in time.

“Well, no matter. Now I can continue my preparations.”

I needed more power than just my own in order to make my dream come true. I had to gather the powers from the other guardians, and also borrow the power of the people.

Perhaps it was a good thing that they had escaped. Thanks to that, they had set themselves up as the enemies of the people.

“How ironic… Once, I was on their side.”

The existence of the Shadow guardian was abhorred by the people and was seen as an ill omen. And now that I had learned about the past and knew the reason, I couldn’t say I blamed them.

All of the guardians, including me and the king, were victims who’d been held at the mercy of their wishes. And since I knew that, I also knew that I could make no mistakes.

I couldn’t afford to stand still.

“Shall we go, then?”

I left the throne room alone. I had a feeling they would try to move together to take me out. They had Gordov and Dier. Just the two of them together posed quite a threat, but now that I was the queen, I had the power to mobilize the knights.

I also had the power to exercise other supernatural powers besides that of Shadow. They didn’t have to look into the future to see that they would lose. Therefore, I had a hunch that they were trying to gather as much military force as possible right now.

Even though they were now enemies of the people, they were

still the guardians who had supported this kingdom up until now. The achievements and trust they'd built up with the citizens certainly couldn't be erased overnight.

Surely there would be those who'd be willing to take their side, and it was unclear as to just how long the knights would agree to obey my orders.

Etoile's supernatural powers would not allow him to see my future. However, he could see the future of anything *not* involving me, so he could therefore make a good guess at what I was up to.

"I'll give them plenty of time, then."

I left the castle.

The more time I gave them to gather a military force, the more effectively I could use my own time. It would be difficult even for me to take them all on at once. And especially Dier. Now that he had joined them, the difficulty of completely stealing their powers had risen exponentially.

However, I knew that they weren't invulnerable.

One had a secret they couldn't tell anyone else. Another was in love with me. One of them hated being confined... It was unlikely that they would all seamlessly join together to defeat me.

However, at the end of the day, that was just my hypothesis.

This was a crisis situation for them, and that could very well lead to them working together against me. And since they had Dier, they had a chance of winning.

That was why I decided to start with the opponents who were the easiest to defeat and pick them off one by one.

♦ ♦ ♦

First, I headed to the woods. Deep in the vast forest, there sat a manor that, under normal circumstances, was impossible to reach. It was where the guardian of the forests, Mystria Frusch, resided.

She had a huge secret she couldn't tell anyone else. The reason she couldn't tell her secret was because she was a guardian. Dier knew about it, but Gordov and the others did not. They didn't know her true form or the worries she'd kept a secret.

But since I'd been to this forest before, I was able to use

Shadow to return to it.

“Her doppelgänger’s range of action is limited. Even if she wants to cooperate, she can only do so after exposing her secret. Plus…”

She had no reason to be hostile towards me because her wish was…

“I knew you’d come here!”

Suddenly, a refreshing breeze blew past me.

The forest was protected by Mystria’s powers, and because of that, there was normally almost no wind. Feeling the wind here for the first time ever stirred a bit of emotion inside of me.

“What a fortunate miscalculation.” I looked up.

“Evening! Long time no see, huh?”

There was a man there, sitting on a branch in a row of large, eerie trees. He sat there as if he’d always been there, just like the day we’d first met.

“Lawrence… What’s this? Why have you come out here on your own?”

“Ha ha. Well, I’m the wind! I’m always free!”

Lawrence Cielo, guardian of air, was a free-spirited eccentric who hated being confined more than anything else and wanted to live life as he pleased. Considering his personality, I thought there was about a fifty-fifty chance of him cooperating with Gordov and the others. Perhaps the only reason he’d want to help them was because he didn’t want to die.

He also could’ve chosen to just run away on his own. I actually thought that possibility was more likely than anything. However, since I remembered his shadow, I could still find him no matter where he ran.

“Perhaps too free. I feel a bit sorry for Sir Boden,” I said.

“Ha ha. I’m always like this. I never change! All I see is a future full of freedom!” He stood up on the branch and leaped down in front of me. Since he could control the air, it was an elegant landing, like a flower petal floating to the ground in the breeze.

I didn’t detect any malice coming from him right now. However, he remained an impassive man.

“You’re the new queen, though. So, what about you?”

“What about me?” I asked.

“I want to know why you’re fighting. What kind of future do you want for the world?”

“And what would you do with that information? It’s not like it

would change your destiny.” After all, I’d already made up my mind. No matter who it was, no matter what they wanted, my course of action would remain the same.

He had shown up in front of me, so there was only one thing that awaited him.

“You’re going to die.”

“Right,” he said. “I know you’re going to kill me.”

“Then why did you come here alone if you knew that?”

I’d already expanded Shadow to confirm that no one else was in the vicinity. Lawrence was truly here by himself, and I knew this wasn’t part of any kind of plan. Perhaps he would’ve had a chance before, but there was no way he could beat me now. Lawrence knew that too. He was well aware of his fate.

“I just came here to see what you want. That’s all.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “That knowledge is pointless.”

“It’s not pointless. At the very least, it would change the meaning of my death.”

“How?”

He then made the atmosphere around us swirl, preparing for battle.

“Because I think I’ll understand it once I discover your true intentions.”

“All right, then. I’m looking forward to it.”

Nothing he had said changed the fact that we were still going to fight. It seemed like that was what he wanted too. But I still couldn’t detect any hostility from him. It didn’t appear like he seriously intended to kill me. I couldn’t understand it. What was he thinking? Even as I stood there, facing off against him, I had no clue what he was thinking.

Honestly, *I* was the one who wanted to discover *his* true intentions.

“If you think you’ll understand by fighting, then by all means, let’s fight. But I don’t have much time.”

“I know. That’s why I’m here.”

“I’m not going to thank you.”

“There’s no need to thank me. I’m doing this all for myself,” he said.

A wave of air pressure collided with Shadow. We already understood each other’s powers well. The range of his ability to control the atmosphere far exceeded my shadow’s range. Being in control of the atmosphere, a force that aided every living thing

in the world, was almost the same as having the whole world on your side.

However, I had the power of Sun.

“Ha ha! You’re definitely stronger than the last time I saw you! Is that because of your little sister’s power?”

“Yes. It’s all thanks to Soleil.”

“It’s a shame about your sister. Old man Gordov didn’t mean to do it, you know. Don’t hold it against him.”

“I had no intention of doing so,” I said.

“Really?”

“Of course not. After all, Soleil had to die one way or another.”

I had the upper hand when it came to this battle between air pressure and shadow. Lawrence flew up into the sky where there were no shadows. While he flitted around there, he created a blade of wind and launched it at me. I bent Shadow like a whip to repel it.

“So you *were* serious about killing your own sister?”

“That’s right.”

“You know, that’s what surprises me the most. You’re not just pretending to be a villainess. And here I’d thought you and your sister had grown closer lately.”

“Must’ve just been your imagination.”

He laughed again. “Hah! You’re a terrible liar! I saw it with my own eyes. I could tell that you loved her a lot.”

The wind blew all around me. This wasn’t even an attack—why was it making me feel so uncomfortable? It felt like with each word carried by the wind, my heart was being exposed, little by little.

“You’re not a bad person. You didn’t kill me the first time we met. That’s when I knew you weren’t bad.”

“I was just acting like that,” I told him.

“All right, let’s say that you were. But now, you’ve killed the king, you didn’t even shed a tear after your sister was killed, and you’re our enemy. Why would you go to such lengths?”

“I told you before. To make my dream come true.”

“But what dream? What kind of future do you want?”

“Freedom.”

My shadow finally caught Lawrence’s legs as he tried to run away. The moment he stopped moving, countless shadowy hands restrained him firmly.

“You’re finished.”

“Heh, it seems that way. Freedom, huh?”

He stopped manipulating the atmosphere, perhaps because he was giving up. He surrendered himself to my shadow and completely relaxed his whole body.

“What would the world be like then?”

“We’d be freed from our destiny.”

“Destiny?” he asked.

“Yes. We wouldn’t have to live at the mercy of our supernatural powers. Everyone would be free to choose their own futures as they pleased. That’s how the world would be.”

“Hmm… Not bad.” Lawrence smiled. It was as refreshing as a spring breeze—a truly free-spirited smile.

But there was no resignation or regret in his smile. All I could feel were positive feelings, like a faint happiness.



Confused, I tipped my head to the side. “How can you smile in a situation like this?”

“Because I’m happy.”

“Happy that I’m going to kill you?”

“Well, not exactly. I’m glad that I’m going to be set free.”

Lawrence looked up at the sky. The trees were too thick to see the stars, but he manipulated the air to part their branches. As the leaves fell around us, the moon was faintly visible through the gap in the trees overhead.

“I always hated it, you know. People had all these expectations of me because of my powers. They always wanted something from me. It made me feel so restricted.”

“Is that why you were always traveling?” I asked.

“Yes. I went here and there because I wanted freedom. At first, I thought that if I ran away from here, I’d be able to live freely. But then, I discovered very quickly that no matter where you go, you can’t run from your destiny.”

It wasn’t his fault he was born that way. He hadn’t asked for his powers. It seemed like he had suffered because of them too. From the outside looking in, he was a free-spirited eccentric with supernatural powers who did as he pleased. However, he might’ve been the one who had pondered the existence of the supernatural guardians the most.

“The powers aren’t necessary in the world you want, right?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I agree with you. I think that’s for the best. You know, I’ve been searching for a long time, wondering if there was a world like that out there somewhere. But now? I’ve found that possibility, and it’s right here.” Lawrence then stared at me. His wasn’t the face of someone who was looking at their potential murderer. I could simply see expectation in his eyes. “The ideal I’ve been seeking for so long is right in front of me now. I have no regrets.”

“Even if you die?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “Being alive hasn’t brought us an ideal world so far, right? If we don’t do something different, we’ll just suffer until the end, won’t we?”

“That’s right. Our destiny will continue on. That’s why I…”

I’m going to destroy destiny itself.

I was going to destroy everything the king and the guardians

had inherited from long ago. Then my dream would come true.

"I'm tired. I didn't really like traveling all that much."

"Really?" I asked. "That's surprising."

"Isn't it? In reality, I like to take things easy. I'd rather just laze around and relax all day at home."

"I would've been happy doing that too."

"Ha ha! I can't picture you being lazy."

"I suppose it is tough," I said.

We smiled at each other. And then, at the same time, those smiles vanished from our faces.

"Goodbye, Lawrence Cielo. I'm going to take your life, and your powers with it."

"I know. Goodbye, Selene Vixent. You're such a kind person that I know this decision was very hard on you. But I think it was the right one."

"I see. Well, thank you."

"No, thank you," he said. "I hope that your dream comes true...and I pray that..."

A gentle breeze blows your way.

He'd had a smile on his face until the very end. He had been a man who remained inscrutable until the end, a man who'd struggled to live a free life. Perhaps if I'd met him before Dier, he would've become my accomplice instead.

I chuckled as I found myself thinking about something that seemed as fanciful as a daydream.

Lawrence's final breeze was warm but somehow painful, pushing against my back and encouraging me to move forward.

♦ ♦ ♦

This was the domain of the Forest guardian. It was difficult to successfully reach her manor without her help. The trees and the animals would confuse any invaders. However, the fact that I was able to arrive there without difficulty could only mean one thing—the guardian herself was welcoming me to her doorstep.

"I had a feeling," I muttered.

I stepped foot into the mansion where Mystria Frusch secretly slumbered. It wasn't because I remembered the way there. I had been guided there.

No one welcomed me when I came in. I detected no human presence, and I didn't even see any of her dolls. I walked deeper into the manor on my own until I reached the room where she lay asleep.

"Welcome. I've been waiting for you."

A young woman smiled as she stood beside the bed where Mystria Frusch slept. She looked very much like her, however I knew that she was only a doppelgänger—a doll who had the will of the Forest guardian inside of her.

"I just saw Lawrence," I told her.

"Oh! He was here too?"

"You didn't know?"

"No, I didn't. I didn't summon him here," she admitted. "That must mean he came here of his own free will."

Of course, I had already known that Lawrence hadn't come to the forest on someone else's orders. But perhaps since I'd just faced off against him, for some reason, I felt like talking with her a bit instead of killing her on the spot.

I had to laugh—what had gotten into me, here at the end?

"If you're here alone, that must mean..." Mystria trailed off there.

"Yes. I killed him."

"I see. Have you come to kill me too?"

"That was my intention, yes."

She smiled at me gently. Mystria did not fear death. I detected no malice towards me either, just like with Lawrence. However, her lack of animosity stemmed from a different reason.

I suddenly remembered the first time I'd been invited to this place, and I had a feeling Mystria was thinking about the same thing.

"I never expected I'd be granting your wish from back then in this manner," I said.

"Yes... Neither did I." A wistful smile crossed her face.

She had a secret she couldn't tell anyone, and it had to do with the old woman who lay sleeping beside her. Mystria Frusch was actually over 140 years old. She had been unable to pass on her supernatural powers and had continued living for generations. But the end of her life was drawing near.

She had begged me to use my power to absorb hers and give it to someone else. There was a child to be born soon, and she had asked me to let that child inherit her power under the guise

that it was her biological daughter.

"Your wish was for me to give the child your supernatural powers, and then for me to kill you."

"Yes, that's right. But…"

"Unfortunately, that wish won't come true," I said. "I'm stealing your powers for myself. And then I'll kill you."

I had no intention of giving her powers to someone else. I'd come here to steal them and take them for myself. I had a feeling that she would be the guardian most likely to cooperate with me out of all of them because she was so near death.

"That's fine," Mystria muttered with a weak smile. "I've been longing to be free from this power for so long."

"I'm sure you have."

"A hundred and forty years. I've lived far too long," she said, reaching out to touch her sleeping face. The woman's face was shriveled and wrinkled. Her eyes would most likely never open again, and her lips would not speak.

The average lifespan of a person was about eighty years, give or take, if you were lucky. And yet she had lived for 140 years. She'd spent 140 years growing old and decrepit.

Surely she'd experienced pain and suffering that I could never imagine. But she had no choice except to live on because she'd been born into the family of the forest guardians and inherited that power.

Her greatest misfortune was that she continued to live. She was born into this family, with this power. If she hadn't been, she would've been free long ago.

"And how were those 140 years, Mystria?"

"It felt like I was in jail for a long, long time."

"Jail…" I repeated.

"Yes. There's no more suitable word for how I am now." She looked at her sleeping face again and then looked around the room. I wondered how long she'd lain sleeping there. How many decades had passed since the last time she had spoken? Since she had transferred her consciousness to the doll doppelgänger?

Mystria'd spent much of that time alone until I'd shown up and learned the truth. Since she couldn't tell anyone her secret, every few decades, she would pretend to be the new head of house. Instead of feeling like being in jail, continuing those lies must've felt like…

"Hell," I said. "You've been in hell all this time. I certainly

wouldn’t have been able to bear it.”

“Maybe so. But from my perspective, you seem to be in a worse hell than I.”

“Really? It’s heaven, given to me by freedom!”

“You’re just putting on a brave face,” she told me. “Either way, this is the end. No one else is watching right now, you know.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Go on. Tell me how you really feel,” she pressed.

“That’s not fair.”

I wasn’t sure if it was because she had lived so long, but I felt a certain level of comfort talking with her. Her voice was calm like music, easing my nerves. Here, in this mansion surrounded by the vast forest, I felt a sense of security, like I was being protected. It wasn’t because she was using her powers. It was just the accepting aura she gave off.

Even still, I was going to remain resolute.

“This is how I really feel,” I said. “I came here to kill you. Nothing more, and nothing less.”

“Lady Vixent…”

“I am no longer a Vixent, remember? I am Selene Veldt now.”

“Right. Well then, my new queen. Will you kill me?” She smiled calmly and outstretched her arms. She didn’t show an inkling of fear or hesitation. Instead, she was welcoming her death.

“That’s the second time you’ve asked me that.”

“I thought I’d never say it again.”

“And I thought I’d never hear it again,” I said as I took a step forward. My time was limited, and I couldn’t waste any more of it chatting with her. No matter how reluctant I was to keep moving, I had no other choice. As I walked, I spoke to her. “The only wish of yours I can make come true is your wish to die.”

“I know.”

“And you’re fine with that?”

“Yes. That would be very fortunate.”

“Fortunate?” I asked. “For who?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

I stopped right in front of her. Even though I was now close enough to touch her, she wasn’t afraid.

Mystria just smiled at me. “It’s fortunate for those who are left behind.”

“I see.”

So it wasn’t fortunate for her. And yet she was still smiling. I

wanted to know why. What would make this woman, over a century older than me, happy? I wanted to find out. I wanted to see if my ideals would make her happy.

"Then what about your happiness?" I asked.

"Hee hee." She laughed at that. It sounded like she was both exasperated and had given up. "I abandoned that long ago."

"Abandoned it where?"

"Who knows? It was so long ago I've forgotten."

Her doll slowly knelt down beside the bed next to her sleeping form, as if to show how tired she was.

"What did I wish for long ago? I'm sure when I was young, there were many things I wanted to do. Every day was filled with hope. I think so, anyway."

"You think so…?"

"I can't remember," she admitted. "When you live as long as I have, you forget even the important things."

She had continued to live for the sake of her family's future—to keep the supernatural powers alive—and for that reason alone.

There was no happiness left for her anymore; only her sense of duty remained. She didn't even know when or where she'd left all the rest behind.

"That's why I can't answer you. I don't know where my happiness would be. If I had to guess…I'd say the only thing that would save me would be finally being released from this spell that binds me here." As she said that, she lay next to her sleeping self in bed. "I'm tired."

"I'm sure you are."

"You'll be even more tired than I am soon."

"I know that."

"Since it's the end, won't you tell me? What *is* your dream?"

She looked up at me as she lay in bed. Once again, I felt a calm and still feeling inside of my heart.



She wanted to know what I wanted in the end—what kind of world I sought, my true wish that I hadn't told anyone yet.

I shouldn't talk about it.

But since this was the end, I began to feel like perhaps it was okay to tell her. Strangely, I felt like doing so would be paying respect to my elders.

And, honestly, I was a little curious about what she would think of it.

"I…"

So I did.

Even though I knew I shouldn't, once I started talking, I couldn't stop. The feelings I had deep inside of me all came out in a sudden rush of emotion. The next thing I knew, I'd told her every single bit of it.

"So that's where you want the final destination to be?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And you'll do whatever evil deeds you must in order to make that happen?"

"I will. I'll use all means necessary, no matter who goes against me or who shuns me. Even…"

Even if not one person understands me, I'm going to believe in my dream.

"That must've been a tough decision."

"It wasn't, actually. I felt like it was my only choice," I said.

"You're lying. You could've chosen any number of alternatives."

"No, I couldn't. There weren't any. There was only one path I could go down…"

Even if there were other possible methods, other possible ways, I wouldn't have been able to choose one of them. Only this path would make my dream come true.

"Do you have any regrets?" she asked.

"Of course I do."

"It's not too late to stop, you know."

"Are you kidding? If so, that's not only naive. It's irritating."

I wouldn't stop. I'd killed Euclis. And even though I hadn't been directly responsible, I'd effectively killed Soleil as well. And only moments ago, I'd killed Lawrence. Now that all those people around me had died, there was no going back. There was no way I could stop now. There were no rest stops along this road.

Mystria had a sad expression on her face. “There is no happiness for you in the future you’re aiming for.”

I didn’t answer.

“Surely you know that better than anyone,” she added. “Because in that future, you’re…”

“I know. But that’s what I want.”

“You’re…”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I know that you couldn’t possibly understand. But there *is* happiness for me in the future I desire.”

If I could make my dream come true, then I would experience true happiness. She might not be able to understand it, and perhaps no one except me ever could. But I didn’t care. All that mattered was that I understood it. Because…

“My life belongs to no one but me. I won’t let anyone else make decisions about it for me. Go ahead and think that it sounds unhappy if that’s what you want.”

“Aha ha. You certainly are different.” Mystria laughed and looked at her own sleeping face. For the first time, I detected regret in her expression. “All I could do was obey my own destiny. Rather…I never even considered resisting it! But you…”

You are resisting your own destiny.

I’d experienced hopelessness so many times, overcome the pain of death, and now I was keeping my sights on that faint glimmer of hope that helped me trudge forward.

She continued speaking, looking at her sleeping self instead of me. “If I could go back in time, I would do what you did.”

“You could certainly imitate me, but I don’t recommend it,” I said.

“Of course you’d say that, in your position. But from my perspective…I admire the way you live your life.”

“You admire it?” No one had ever said such a thing to me before. I thought it was impossible for anyone to admire me. But that made me feel relieved and happy, perhaps because it was her who’d said it.

“Hey, Selene?”

“Yes?”

“If we had met somewhere else, under different circumstances—and I mean the real me, not the doll—I think we might’ve become good friends.”

“I think so too.”

If we’d lived ordinary lives and met under ordinary

circumstances without the interference of nobility, supernatural powers, status, authority, or even destiny—perhaps we would've become friends.

And then things wouldn't have had to end like this.

"I think this is it."

"Yes. I'm glad you were the last person I spoke to in the end," she said.

"Good night, Mystria Frusch."

"Good night, Selene. Once your dream comes true, let me know how it feels, okay?"

And with that, she fell asleep for the last time.

I didn't even have to touch her. Once she had truly given up on her life, the thread that had been stretched so tightly to keep her here finally broke. She'd been waiting for me to come here and kill her so that her life could end in my hands, and so that she could give me her powers.

"Now..."

Now I had the power of the guardian of the forests.

The forest surrounding the mansion began to rustle and stir. It must've sensed that the life force who resided in this domain—its mistress—was now dead. And it also noticed the birth of a new mistress.

I sensed the presence of many beings approaching from the forest. I immediately recognized that they were not human. I turned my back on the woman who had just entered her eternal slumber, walked through the empty mansion, and went out the front door.

The animals who resided in the forest were waiting for me.

"Are you angry?" I asked them. "Or..."

However, I didn't sense any irritation from them. Instead, I could tell through her powers that they were grateful. They'd wished for it too—that their mistress, who had suffered for so long, would finally be able to rest in peace.

I made my way through the crowd of animals. I would never step foot in this domain again.

"I want you to live as you please. All of you are now free."

I told them no new mistress had taken over this domain. Mystria had been the last one and had left it behind.

And with that, I left the forest. I didn't turn around once.

The wind had stilled long ago. Someday, this forest would just be a vast woodland with nothing else to it, just as it should be.

Chapter Five: Reunion and Farewell

A week had passed since the attack on the castle.

Gordov and the other guardians had gathered up an opposition force and were holed up in the mountains near the royal capital while they prepared to take back the kingdom Selene had stolen.

“We’ve gathered just short of six hundred people,” Etoile said.

“That’s more than enough. Every little bit helps boost our chances of victory more than if we were to fight alone,” Gordov said.

“It’ll be a tough fight, though. There’s no doubt about it.”

“I know.”

Gordov and Etoile had gathered in the center of camp for a strategy meeting. Gordov had carved a rock to create a makeshift table and had spread out a map of the capital and its surrounding areas upon it.

He pointed to a location on the map. “We’ll meet the royal army here.”

“Beyond that is a valley, isn’t it?” Etoile asked.

The spot Gordov indicated was a valley that was closer to the capital than their camp. He continued his explanation. “This valley is quite deep. If we pass through here, it’ll be a one-way passage. We’ll only be able to attack from the front.”

“I see. Since we wouldn’t have to worry about being attacked from above, that would limit her to one-directional attacks as well. The amount of people who could attack at any given time would be reduced by the area’s width too…”

“That’s right. We can make up for our difference in numbers as long as we stage a defensive fight here.”

“Still, our chances of winning are pretty slim.”

“I know,” Gordov admitted. “Since she has the knights in her corner, that alone would give her a force double our size. I doubt she’ll mobilize all of her troops, but we’re at an overwhelming disadvantage when it comes to numbers.”

Even by a conservative estimate, Selene’s advantage over them was probably more than ten-to-one. So no matter how many forces the guardians gathered, they wouldn’t be coming

close to her in number. And these individuals were a far cry from someone as skilled as Gordov.

However, the sun had already risen behind the two men.

“And that’s not all. Don’t forget that Selene has stolen the power of Sun from Soleil,” Etoile reminded him.

“The power of Sun…”

“Yes. It has the power to boost other people’s strength temporarily. If she uses that power, the average soldier’s power will grow considerably. And if that happens…”

They realized there was no way to reduce the difference in their military might. Normally, supernatural powers that existed to compensate for a numerical disadvantage like this were passed down to the strong. More than that, Selene’s own power of Shadow had a wide range. She could spread it throughout the entire capital, and now it had been further strengthened by other supernatural powers she had absorbed.

Right now, the guardians were like weak rabbits jumping into battle against a ferocious lion.

“This is our only available strategy, isn’t it?” Etoile asked.

“Yes. The only way we can win is by incapacitating Selene Vixent before the battle ends.”

“And the person who must do that is…”

“King Dier, I have no choice but to call on you.”

Etoile and Gordov both turned to look in the same direction. Dier walked towards them, the moonlight at his back.

“Stop calling me that. I’m not a member of the royal family anymore.”

“You are, and you are our king,” Gordov insisted.

“Hah… Fine. Do whatever you want.” Dier let out an exasperated sigh and stood between Etoile and Gordov while the two discussed their strategy to retake the capital.

“While you guys are attacking the main forces, I’ll approach Selene from behind and defeat her. Is that good?” Dier asked.

“Yes, it’s the only way we can win,” Gordov said.

“If we can neutralize her, Sir Boden will be able to take care of the remaining troops himself.”

Their strategy was simple. First, they would sortie with the royal army in the valley, with Gordov and Etoile leading the charge. The people didn’t know about Dier’s existence yet, so he would take this opportunity to ignore the main force and sneak around to the rear, where Selene would probably be

commanding the troops. There, he'd challenge her to one-on-one combat.

"My supernatural ability isn't suitable for stealth. However, King Dier's supernatural powers and physical abilities will enable him to scale the walls on the left and right."

"That's right," Dier said. "Even if I fall on the way, I can withstand it because I'm immortal."

Gordov nodded.

Etoile bowed his head with an apologetic expression on his face. "Our strategy relies entirely on you, King Dier. If only I could use my supernatural powers properly, we could have come up with a better strategy. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. I know that Selene's presence blocks your power of Astromancy."

"That's right."

"I've been wondering about this for a while... Why is her future the only one you can't see? You can see mine, right?"

"I don't know. I've been thinking about it, but I haven't been able to find an answer."

Etoile's supernatural power was only ineffective when it came to Selene. And since he could see Dier's future, it wasn't because of something to do with the king's power. After all, the most important thing right now was that he could see the king's future to the fullest extent the king would allow.

In other words, Selene Vixent was a special exception. Her being special had once worked to her disadvantage, and he'd pushed her to her death.

"I understand now why she distanced herself from me and broke off our engagement. I did the worst possible thing a human being could do to her," Etoile said.

"I'm not trying to stick up for her, but... Just remember that human beings are weak creatures."

"But she's..."

"Yes, she's strong. Probably the strongest person I know. And that's not just in terms of abilities, but in terms of will too. That's why, when I met her, I realized just how weak I was," Dier said, reflecting back on that time.

He could laugh at how different he was now from back then, back when all he could think about was dying. But after he'd witnessed her strong will to live, he'd also chosen that path. He wasn't running away from death. Instead, he wished to obtain

happiness by living, even if he had to struggle and suffer for it.

If he hadn't met Selene, he might've still been searching for someone to kill him under the moonlight. Imagining that separate future he thought would've been inevitable made him clench his hands into fists.

"We have to stop her, no matter what. And I'm the only person who can do it."

The other two supernatural guardians stared at Dier as he expressed his resolve.

"The operation will begin at dawn. I'm going to go check on our troops," Gordov said.

"All right. I'm going to check again if I can foresee even any tiny details of the upcoming battle. Even if I can't, I might be able to predict her movements based on her surroundings and the timing," Etoile said.

"I'll leave you to it. Don't push yourself too hard, but we're all going to have to test our limits if we want to have a future."

"That's true."

Gordov walked away from the two of them, leaving Dier and Etoile on their own. They both stared silently at the map for a while.

"May I ask you something?" Etoile asked, breaking the silence.

"What is it?"

He hesitated for a moment, then said, "Have you and Selene been together ever since she broke off our engagement?"

"Yes, we met right after that. Do you remember the party where Selene announced she was the new head of House Vixent? We met that night, and then we joined forces because of our mutual goals."

"Your goal was to die?" Etoile asked.

"Back then, yes. But once I learned that Euclis wanted to die for my sake, I realized that death wouldn't save anyone."

Both Dier and Euclis had wanted to sacrifice their life for the other's happiness. Selene had often laughed ruefully at that, saying that the brothers were much too similar.

"I wanted to live and be freed from these curse-like powers. To that end, Selene and I searched for information and secrets about the supernatural powers and then fought the primordial beasts. We even faced off against you all."

Etoile listened to him quietly as Dier continued.

"Euclis was still around then, and I was able to see him again

for the first time in a long while. I talked about all kinds of things with him…but now that's all over too."

"King Dier, do you hate Selene?" Etoile asked.

He knew it was a question that would put Dier on the spot, but he had to ask anyway. It wasn't out of curiosity, but to see if he should tell him a fact that only he knew.

Dier thought about it for a while and looked up at the sky. "I don't know," he said quietly.

"You don't know?"

"That's right."

Dier stared at the round moon shining in the sky. Since he couldn't look at the sun, this was the only light that could shine upon him. Only the moon lighting up the night sky could illuminate his future. In his mind, it overlapped with Euclis's existence. That boy's light had been erased by the shadows.

"She killed Euclis, and I'm angry with her about that. The thought of never seeing him again fills me with sadness, but…"

Etoile listened to Dier as the king closed his eyes. He was thinking about the days that had passed since he'd met Selene. They had been busy and never calm, but he wondered how he'd looked during those days.

"I don't know whether I hate her or not."

"King Dier, how do you feel…?"

About Selene.

The rest of Etoile's question died in his throat. He took a deep breath and then said, "King Dier. I need to tell you something about King Euclis's death."

"What?"

"I want you to decide what you're going to do after I tell you this story. The only people who know what happened, besides me, are the people who were there."

"Tell me."

♦ ♦ ♦

Three hours later.

There was only one hour left until dawn. When the eastern sky began to brighten slightly, a large army started to advance into the valley near the capital. It was the rebel coalition led by Gordov and the other guardians.

"Sir Boden! Soldiers are coming towards us from the royal

capital. There are about seven thousand of them!”

“That’s a little more than we expected,” he said. “Is only one unit advancing?”

“Yes, but just to be sure, we have lookouts set up on the left and right sides of the valley. So far, they haven’t confirmed sightings of any other troops advancing.”

Once Gordov heard the report, he looked to Etoile, who was by his side, and nodded. “It’s just as we expected.”

“Yes. She came to crush us head-on, just like we expected her to do.”

Selene had never commanded a large-scale army before. She’d only been queen for a short time, yet her ability as a commander exceeded Gordov’s. Not only that, but she had an overwhelming difference in military strength at her disposal. Gordov and his allies had thought they’d be more at an advantage to press forward with as many forces as they could rather than trying to devise a complex strategy.

“What about King Dier?” Gordov asked.

“He’s already begun his own plan of attack. And if the operation proceeds as planned, we should resolve this by sunrise,” Etoile said.

“So we’ll have to hold these forces, which outnumber us by over ten times, for at least an hour…”

Gordov looked up at the sky with a meaningful expression on his face. He surveyed his surroundings, but he could see nothing besides the walls of the canyon.

Etoile sensed he was looking for someone. “Sir Boden?”

“Lawrence never returned in the end, did he?”

“That’s right.”

Gordov and Etoile were the only guardians present, except for Dier. Soleil had passed away. However, back in the throne room, there had been five of them left in addition to Dier.

“He mentioned wanting to confirm something in his own way. Do you think he fled?” Etoile asked.

“It’s possible, given his personality. However, despite that, he’s always returned to the capital in times of crisis and lent us a hand, albeit grudgingly,” Gordov said. “I find it hard to believe he’d desert us in this situation.”

“In that case…”

They both imagined him fighting with Selene and being mercilessly killed. It was purely speculation, of course, but they

thought it was the most likely outcome. And sadly, they were correct.

"Lord Wasser and Mystria Frusch haven't shown up since then either."

"Mystria Frusch... She didn't want to cooperate with us from the beginning. That doesn't necessarily mean she was collaborating with Selene Vixent, but perhaps she's been harboring some kind of secret."

The guardians had vaguely sensed that Mystria was keeping something very important to herself. They didn't know as much as Selene had, of course, but they'd always felt that there had been something slightly off with her doll doppelgänger.

"Then what about Lord Wasser?"

"I don't know. I haven't been able to track him at all. He disappeared without a trace that day. We have no idea where he's been since then."

"Sir Boden, what if he...?"

The worst-case scenario, one that could shake up the entire battle, flashed through their minds.

Suddenly, an explosion echoed throughout the valley.

"Sir Boden! I can see the kingdom's soldiers!"

"All right. I'll head to the vanguard immediately to take command. I'll leave command of the rear to you, Etoile."

"All right. Take care."

"You too. I'll pray for your success."

Gordov headed for the front lines, while Etoile retreated to the rear guard.

Combat was already underway at the vanguard. As soon as Gordov arrived, he took charge and joined the fray. Several minutes into the fight, the side prevailing was...

"Don't push forward so recklessly! We have to hold our ground!"

"Damn it, I can't move!"

"I feel so heavy... Gordov's ability is more powerful than I expected!"

"Now's the time! Counterattack!"

"Arrrghh!"

Because of Gordov's gravity manipulation ability, the enemy's movements were considerably restrained. And as they had expected, the kingdom's knights had certainly been boosted by Sun's abilities. Had they not been, they probably would've been

incapacitated by Gordov's abilities immediately. The fact that they could still resist was a feat in and of itself.

However, since they were mostly immobilized, they could only focus on defending against their enemy's attacks. The kingdom's knights were gradually being pushed back.

But that wasn't all. Since they were fighting in this narrow valley, the kingdom's army struggled to advance, despite their large numbers.

"Damn it! Our own allies are blocking our path forward!"

"Move the bodies aside! Get the immobile ones out of the way!"

The bodies of their fallen allies and those who couldn't move were only acting as roadblocks, making it difficult for the kingdom's army to make progress.

This was exactly why Gordov had chosen this valley as the site of this battle.

"No matter how overwhelming the numbers, we have the terrain advantage. Don't hesitate! Advance!" he yelled.

"Yes, sir!"

"Damn it! If we continue like this, we'll just be reducing our own strength. I'd expect nothing less than a wonderful strategy like this from Gordov. But even still, our victory is guaranteed!"

"Argh!"

"Gah!"

No matter how much they'd narrowed down the invasion routes and gradually delayed the advance, they couldn't overcome the difference in military strength. As the battle dragged on, the soldiers became weary. The human body and mind weren't that strong, and on top of that, each soldier had their own individual strength, which varied greatly.

Even if five of the kingdom's soldiers perished, if one rebel fell in return, that still put things in the kingdom's favor. Selene's forces numbered over seven thousand strong, and the kingdom had reserves as well. If the battle started to tip unfavorably towards the rebels, they could consider further reinforcements.

Gordov knew that continuing such a battle would only result in a gradual defeat for him.

"Still!"

There was a chance of victory.

If Dier could neutralize Selene, the chain of command for the kingdom's army would weaken significantly. If the boosting

effect from her Sun abilities disappeared, it would be possible for Gordov to single-handedly dominate the battle.

That was why it was crucial for him to buy time until Dier could achieve his goal. They had to last one hour at the most, and their goal was to hold the front line at all costs.

Their plan fell apart.

"Looks like you're doing pretty well."

"Impossible!" yelled Gordov. "How are you here?!"

There she stood, looking down on the kingdom's army and the rebels. Rather, she was floating in the air.

"Selene Vixent!"

"How many times do I have to tell you that the name is Veldt now, Gordov Boden?"

Selene landed in front of him. She immediately expanded her shadow ability and impaled the rebels around her in an instant.

"Argh…"

"What's happening…?"

"I didn't expect the commander to come forward himself," she commented.

"I could say the same for you!"

Gordov then raised his sword, forcing the other rebels to step back.

What's going on? What is she doing here? Did she figure out our plan?

Thirty minutes had passed since the battle had started. And if everything had gone according to plan, Dier should've already reached Selene and started the fight. But for some reason, she was standing before Gordov right now. And she didn't look like she had just been engaged in battle either.

Selene smirked when she saw the look of bewilderment on Gordov's face. "Dier hasn't come."

"What?"

"Your intentions were quite obvious. You wanted to pit Dier against me, but unfortunately for you, it didn't work out."

"I knew it…"

Selene had sensed Gordov and the others' intentions. Gordov had known there was a chance of this happening, but he'd decided to leave everything to Dier anyway. Even if chaos ensued, he'd predicted that if Dier and Selene went up against each other, the situation would shift significantly in their favor.

However, Dier hadn't reached her at all.

Gordov was well aware of Dier's powers. He had combat abilities that were equal to or greater than his own, and since he was immortal, the only ones who could stop him were those who possessed supernatural powers.

Suddenly, he realized something. There was another man who wasn't here.

"No way..."

"He's such a curious man, don't you think? Despite everything, it seems his feelings for me still haven't changed."

♦ ♦ ♦

A few minutes before Gordov and Selene confronted each other...

Dier ran alone along the top of the canyon, cautiously attempting to surprise Selene from behind.

"Looks like there aren't any troops up here after all."

The land above was covered by a forest with a river flowing through it. He ran along the riverbank to muffle his footsteps and tried to stick to open areas where shadows couldn't form, thinking he'd be out of Selene's range.

He thought he could get behind her earlier than planned. However, he sensed something was amiss and stopped.

"That's strange."

Dier had memorized his route in advance using the map. He'd chosen to follow the riverbank, but for some reason, he'd come across a large lake.

"I know there wasn't a lake on the map. I'm sure of it..."

Suddenly, the water in the lake began to stir unnaturally. Ripples began to form and swirled into a whirlpool. Water pillars shot out from it, forming blades at the ends that attacked Dier.

He instinctively jumped up off the ground and distanced himself from the water. "Now I get it."

"I won't let you get to her."

Amidst the splashing water on the lake's surface stood a handsome man. He was the same one who had proposed to Selene before—the guardian of water.

"Alexei Wasser," said Dier.

"Is this our first face-to-face encounter? You're Miss Vixent's former partner, aren't you?"

♦ ♦ ♦

“Lord Wasser has joined your side?”

“Seems that way. I was quite surprised myself.”

Gordov said nothing in return.

“Well, it was unexpected for both of us, but it seems luck is on my side.”

It really had been an unexpected turn of events for me. I never would’ve imagined that Alexei would ally himself with me. But he was a man so peculiar that he’d cooperate with a woman who had taken over the kingdom and killed his king. He should’ve known by now that my heart wouldn’t be swayed because of something like this either.

I let out an exasperated sigh and turned towards Gordov. “I can’t see Etoile, so that must mean he’s in the rear.”

“And if he is?”

“Then it’s a wise decision.”

Etoile’s power wouldn’t work when I was nearby. He could only predict my location by deducing it from what was unseen in the future, at best. He had probably realized by now that I wasn’t fighting Dier and that Alexei was instead, but it would be too late.

I looked around. Both armies had distanced themselves due to Gordov’s and my face-off. He was the strongest individual guardian, and I had now absorbed multiple guardians’ abilities. Our battle was beyond the realm where an ordinary human could intervene. He’d instructed his soldiers to retreat so they wouldn’t get involved. I’d told mine to stand by as well. Their presence would only be a hindrance if I were to fight Gordov.

“You said luck is on your side, didn’t you?” Gordov asked.

“I did.”

“Unfortunately, you’re wrong.” He then pointed his sword at me. “That’s because being able to fight you one-on-one like this means that if I can defeat you, then the tide of this battle will shift dramatically.”

“That’s true. *If* you can defeat me, that is.”

I expanded my shadows—not just the one at my feet, but on the left and right walls as well. Then I attacked Gordov from all directions with them. He activated a high-powered gravitational field around himself which slowed down my shadow attacks and altered their trajectories downwards.

“Being able to fight here is lucky for me too,” Gordov said.

I didn’t respond.

This space was surrounded by earth except for the open air above, which indeed made it the most favorable battlefield for the guardian of the earth. The abilities of the guardians were sometimes boosted depending on the terrain and environment. Other examples would be if Alexei were near water, if Lawrence were in a place with strong winds, or if Mystria were in a forest.

Essentially, the environment could enhance their abilities, and Gordov was no exception. The power of gravity I'd seen before when he had fought against Dier was now boosted.

"I intended to let King Dier take care of it, but I have no intention of losing. My earth power is superior in a battle here."

"Ha ha. *King* Dier, indeed."

"What's so funny?" he asked me.

"Found out his true identity, did you? Including what we were fighting against, and what we were pursuing."

"King Dier told us about it."

"I see."

I had already known that, so them having learned about it now didn't affect me. Our positions had changed, and we were currently enemies. It was no longer our little secret.

Perhaps it was because of my weakness and selfishness, but I felt a little sad about it.

"Selene Vixent, why did you kill King Euclis?"

"Why are you asking me that now?"

"Because you were close with King Dier, and I heard you had a friendly relationship with King Euclis as well. So why would you do such a thing?" he asked again.

"There's no point in telling you why. Because..."

I manipulated the shadow at Gordov's feet, releasing shadow blades towards him from below. He barely noticed them in time. He dodged, but he still ended up being slashed open from his thigh to his abdomen. Blood splattered everywhere.

"Argh..."

"You're still going to die here," I told him.

Just as I'd expected, there were areas his powers of gravity manipulation couldn't reach, which included the area immediately around him. That was because if he manipulated the gravity there, it would also affect him. That was why he limited his usage to a certain range away.

My shadow was already connected with Gordov's, and it crept along the ground. Even if he'd blocked attacks from all sides with

his gravity, I could still reach him if I aimed directly at his feet. So if that happened…

He would jump to get some distance from the ground. His power of gravity manipulation wasn't just about making things heavier—it could also make things lighter. He probably considered jumping up through the ravine.

"I won't let you escape," I said.

"Hm, guess that won't work."

I extended shadow hands out from the left and right banks to block his path as he leaped. He adjusted his posture midair and struck my shadow on the ground with his sword. He broke apart the earth upon landing so I couldn't attack him where he was with Shadow.

"You have quick reflexes, just as I thought."

He was levitating slightly above the ground. He shifted the position of his shadow and narrowed the direction of the attack, maintaining the gravitational pull around him to keep himself in a state of levitation.

I thought that performing two opposing actions like that must be taxing on his brain.

"You won't last long like that."

"I'm used to it now."

Gordov momentarily stopped levitating and kicked off the ground before flying back up again. He soared above me at an incredible speed, then descended rapidly and swung his sword.

I used my shadows to create a semicircle-shaped wall, but his sword pierced through my defense.

"A barrier like that is pointless," he said.

"I suppose so."

I jumped back to dodge him and his sword struck the ground instead, splitting it open. The impact was so tremendous that it changed the canyon's terrain. He really must've been used to doing it if he could immediately shift his weight from weightlessness to superhigh gravity to break through my shadow.

He was definitely strong. And his strength didn't just rely on abilities like Dier's or mine. He had a wealth of combat experience that must have elevated his combat intelligence. If I'd only had the ability of Shadow without the boost from Sun, I'd have been in trouble.

He was adapting well to my shadow attacks and finding

openings. The more we fought, the more he learned from my attacks.

“But too bad for you…”

Right after I said those words, countless cuts appeared on Gordov’s body. He fell to his knees, and I followed up with more attacks using shadow blades.

“It’s not over yet!” he cried out.

He activated his high gravity field again to stop my shadow attacks, kicked off the ground again, and leaped towards me. This time, he tried to attack from in front of me instead of from above, intending to remove the weight from his sword right at the moment of attack.

If that’s the case, I’ll just escape vertically.

I stayed where I was, at a spot where I could look down at Gordov.

“I knew it,” he said.

“You noticed? Or did you not want to believe it?”

“That’s…the ability of air?”

I floated in the air because I was manipulating the atmosphere surrounding me. Gordov narrowed his eyes once he realized this.

Actually, he had probably realized it the moment I had appeared in front of him, but he’d had doubts. He probably hadn’t wanted to believe it.

But now it was clear that I had the ability of air.

“You killed Lawrence.”

“Yes, I did.”

He silently clenched his fist. In his eyes, I saw anger, sadness, and maybe regret. And for some reason, he looked slightly relieved.

“I see. So he didn’t desert us after all.”

“That’s right.”

“Lawrence fought you and died, didn’t he?”

“He did,” I said. “He stood in front of me alone, knowing he couldn’t win.”

It was like he had entrusted his future and his own ideals to me.

“What did Lawrence say in the end?” Gordov asked.

“I have no intention of telling you that. It’s none of your business.”

“I see. Then I won’t ask you again, but I do want to ask you

about something else."

"And what's that?"

"If you killed Lawrence, then does that mean you did the same to Mystria Frusch?"

"Yes. I killed her."

I held my right hand over my left arm, healing the cuts I'd gotten from the battles I'd had so far. A gentle green light surrounded me, and my wounds instantly healed. This was the supernatural power of the guardian of the forests. It allowed me to borrow the forces of nature and use them to heal. If I were in the middle of the forest right now, I could have even regenerated destroyed organs.

"I know what you're after. You want to slip out of this valley and meet up with Dier, who's elsewhere."

"So what?"

"Doing that is meaningless, Gordov. It's all forest up there, and I have the power of the guardian of the forests now. The closer I get to the woods, the stronger my regenerative powers become."

In other words, even if I were to be injured, I could use the power of the plants and trees in the forest to heal myself. So even if he did meet up with Dier, it would be difficult to kill me.

"So if you want to kill me, this is your only chance," I told him.

"It seems that way."

"You don't have any chance of winning."

"It seems that way too."

In addition to my boosted Shadow attacks, I now had invisible wind blades and the recovery power of nature behind me. Even with Gordov's high combat experience—or perhaps *because* of it—he should've understood quicker than anyone that there were some walls that couldn't be broken by ingenuity alone.

He gripped his sword and pointed it at me.

"Are you just being stubborn now?" I asked.

"I chose to gather everyone together and fight. I'm not going to abandon the fight we've chosen just because of my own selfishness."

"I see. That's a very roundabout way of saying that you're being stubborn."

"Thanks."

He felt a responsibility to protect people. Perhaps this would be the final duty he'd perform as a knight.

“I became a knight so I could be a shield for the people. To be perfectly honest, I never cared about the supernatural powers,” he said as he began to swing his sword. He then came at me with all of his might, knowing he didn’t stand a chance.

I struck back with all my might as well.

“Knights exist to protect the people,” he said.

“They do,” I said.

“I heard that the supernatural powers exist to protect the king.”

“That’s correct as well.”

Gordov kept up his advance despite the wind blades cutting him all over. He must’ve been nearing the limits of his stamina, because he was losing control of his gravitational field.

The shadow blades approached him from all directions. His gravity field could not block them, so they pierced his limbs. He yanked out my shadow blades and kept moving forward while I continued my attack.

“But I have to tell you, I’ve always wondered if we really needed this power,” he said.

He didn’t stop no matter how much I injured him. I knew that he would keep trying as long as he was alive. It was like he was walking towards his own death.

And…

Finally, he halted. He was right in front of me, within reach, but his entire body was pierced by my shadows.

“And I thought…perhaps it was these powers that caused all the conflict in the first place.”

“What if that’s true?” I asked him.

“Selene…Vixent… Do you have hope for the future?”

“Yes.”

“Hope for you, or…?”

“Hope for humanity.”

“I see…” Gordov then closed his eyes, as if he’d finally been released. Like the heavy burden of his responsibility had finally been lifted from his shoulders.

“Good night, proud knight. The future you wish for will certainly come. So rest in peace.”

There was no response.

The honorable knight who had saved the people from their fears as their strongest guardian died on the battlefield, clutching his sword in his hands until the very end.

The battle ended when Gordov died.

The rebels he had gathered began to retreat once they saw him defeated. At first, I had to laugh at how gutless they were, but then I realized that wasn't why they were retreating.

"No, they're much too organized for this to be a simple retreat. Could it be…?"

Did they plan this from the beginning?

They had received orders beforehand to retreat once Gordov was defeated. Or perhaps they'd received them just now, from the rear.

"What shall we do, Queen Selene?"

"All troops, stay on standby," I said. "I'll take care of the rest."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

I slowly walked towards the fleeing enemy troops. Not to chase after them, but to get a glimpse of who was leading them. And just as I'd expected, one man stood there, not having run away.

"Your courage surprises me, Etoile."

"It's not courage. I'm a coward."

Etoile Weldon. He had gathered a force of rebel troops with Gordov and was now the last remaining guardian on the battlefield.

"Why didn't you run?" I asked him.

"Because you'd catch up to me anyway."

"So you've given up."

"No, I knew it would turn out like this from the beginning." He placed a hand on his chest and closed his eyes. "Yours was the only future I couldn't see, and that frightened me. Having you by my side when I couldn't see your future was terrifying. Because I was afraid that someday, you would steal everything from me, including my future."

"I know. That's why you killed me."

"Yes, King Dier told me about that. I can't blame you for hating me. What I did to you was despicable. All I did was take my own weaknesses out on you."

This was the first time I'd heard Etoile talk like this.

I'd only heard his true feelings one other time, and that was when he had killed me. That was when I had realized that he was frightened that he couldn't see my future.

"I was more of a coward than anyone else. That's why I never

watched my own death. But when you became my enemy, I looked at it for the first time. Then…”

“You couldn’t see it,” I said.

“Yes. It was all black.”

He couldn’t see the future when it involved me. In other words, the reason he couldn’t see his own death was because the person who would cause it was…

“You waited here, knowing I was going to kill you?”

“I suppose so.”

“You’re a cruel man. You indirectly knew this entire strategy would fail.”

He didn’t answer. Because that wasn’t all.

He’d seen before that Euclis’s sister Guinevere had been possessed by one of the primordial beasts. And if he had seen that, then perhaps…

“You know about Euclis, don’t you?”

I heard him breathe in sharply.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” I pressed.

He didn’t answer.

He must’ve known, then, that Euclis had also been taken over by a beast. He had known that and kept quiet about it.

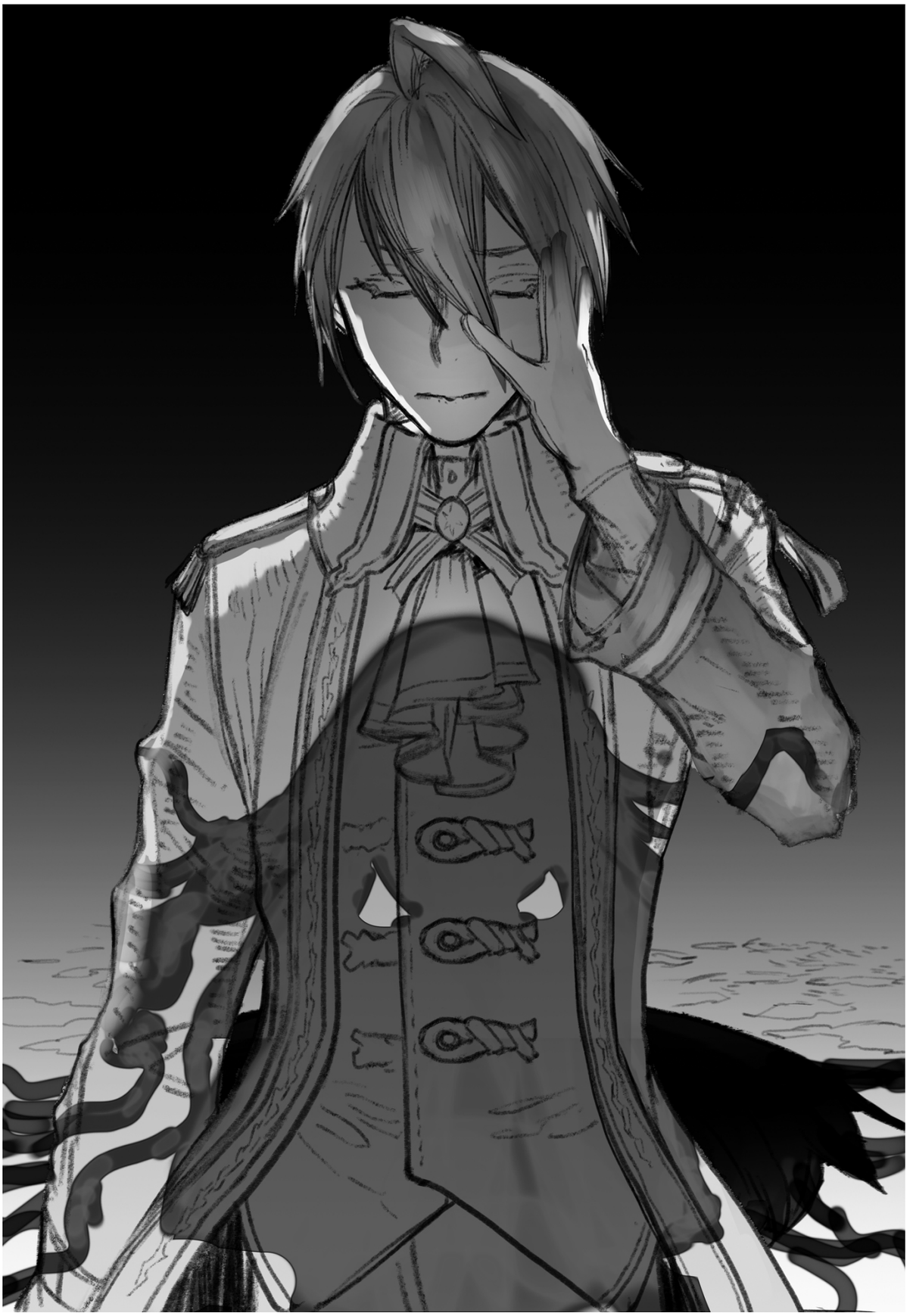
“You knew you couldn’t do anything about it, so you just left it for me to take care of?” I asked him.

“I was trying not to look into His Majesty’s future.”

“Because you didn’t want to take responsibility for it, right?”

“That’s right. Because I’m a coward. Knowing would force me to be involved, so I decided I might as well just let you take care of it. And the end result is as you see here.”

Etoile let out a sigh. His expression looked exasperated, but not at me. It was because of his own weakness.



“So, you killing me here would be a fitting end for me,” he added.

“It’s funny that you think of death as some sort of atonement.”

“I don’t. I just don’t want to be involved in the future anymore.”

“You really are a coward. But…”

My shadow reached out towards his chest. He didn’t run. Instead, he trembled in fear and closed his eyes, awaiting his fate.

“You were more human than any of us.”

♦ ♦ ♦

While the fierce battle between Selene and Gordov was taking place, another battle between Alexei and Dier raged above the valley. There was an overwhelming difference in power between the two men.

Dier was immortal, and at night, he could use his abilities without any difficulty. He was the strongest being in the world. In a simple fight, Alexei had zero chance of beating him. However, their offensive and defensive capabilities were evenly matched. It wouldn’t have been surprising if Dier were to easily beat him in terms of abilities, even though Alexei was at an advantage here, as they were fighting by the lake. But unfortunately, Alexei’s supernatural ability was the best match against Dier’s.

“Blood is water too! And since I can control water at will, all I have to do is mix it with the blood you’re controlling. Then your weapons become my weapons instead!”

“It seems that way.”

Dier was using physical techniques to counter Alexei, who was attacking him from all directions by using water from the lake, the river, and the moisture in the atmosphere. Dier’s ability to manipulate blood outside his body was severely hampered, and Alexei’s abilities were currently boosted as well. That’s what had brought the battle to a more evenly matched state.

“Why did you join her side?” Dier asked.

“That’s a foolish question. She’s my future fiancée, remember? Why wouldn’t I take her side?”

“Even though she’s a criminal who committed treason?”

“That has nothing to do with what she wants and what she wishes for herself,” Alexei said. “I’m there for her. And if I can be a part of her future, then that’s the future I want too!”

“That’s a terrible argument.”

Alexei still didn’t know Selene’s true goal. He hadn’t even asked her about it when he had told her that he would take her side. It wasn’t that he wasn’t interested—there just was no point in it. Her answer wouldn’t have changed his decision to join her side.

Dier was reminded that was the kind of man Alexei was. “You’re really exasperating,” he said.

“Right back at you. Why did you turn on her all of a sudden?”

“Isn’t that obvious? She killed Euclis.”

“She did. And yet you don’t hate her for it.”

Dier gasped. Alexei had seen right through to what was in his heart, and for a moment, he hesitated. That didn’t get past Alexei, however. He quickly captured Dier and trapped him inside a water bubble.

“Argh…”

“So you didn’t turn on her because of resentment, right? Then why are you on the other side?” asked Alexei. “What is she to you? I want to know.”

Dier didn’t answer him.

“I’m asking you now: What do you want to do to her?”

Dier broke through the water bubble in response to Alexei’s follow-up question. Blood spurted out of his body, temporarily pushing away the water Alexei was controlling so he could force his way out. Once he was free, Dier spluttered and coughed.

“I guess I can’t kill you yet,” Alexei mused.

“You can’t kill me at all. I’m immortal. The only one who could kill me…” Dier stared off into the distance, not at Alexei, but towards her. “…isn’t you, Alexei Wasser.”

“You’re making me jealous. But she already told me all that, you know.”

“What?!”

“When I suggested stopping you, she said I can’t kill you. No supernatural powers are capable of killing you, and the primordial beasts couldn’t kill you either. So that means you can’t lose.”

Dier just stared at him.

“It’s a beautiful kind of trust, isn’t it? That she can say that

now, even though you're enemies. Or no—maybe she can say it *because* you all are enemies now."

Alexei collected all the water from the lake, river, and atmosphere into one point. He then forcefully compressed it, forming a sword. He took hold of the water-sword, which had a sharp, dense blade.

"I have feelings for her. I adore her attitude, her way of life, her beliefs...everything about her," he said.

"I see," Dier said. He braced himself, taking his own blood and hardening it into a crimson blood-sword the same size as Alexei's. Dier pointed it at him.

"I know that you're special to her. You two have a connection deep enough to make me jealous," Alexei said.

"Maybe we do."

Dier and Selene had shared a secret, and she had been the first person to cooperate with him. No—they were accomplices. He had definitely felt a connection there.

Alexei continued. "This is the end. How do you feel? Were you two just comrades? Or were you something more?"

"I..." Dier began, and then revealed his true emotions.

When he was done, the two crossed swords, and both men stabbed the other in the heart.

"Ahh, what a disappointing role I had."

Dier silently stared at Alexei.

"To think I was cheering on my rival in love..."

The only one whose blood was spilled was Alexei.

Since Dier was immortal, the fight wasn't drawn out. The outcome of this match had been determined from the very beginning.

"I thought we were exact opposites..."

As Alexei fell, he lost control of his water-sword and it burst. Water gushed out like a fountain falling from the sky. The short rain shower created a lake, and a rainbow formed in the sky above that was just beginning to lighten.

"But you're clumsy, just like me..."



♦ ♦ ♦

“Oh! Alexei is dead…”

I felt Alexei’s powers flow into me. I’d expected this to happen, so I’d already connected to his shadow so I could absorb his powers once he died. It all had happened exactly as I’d predicted.

After I had absorbed Etoile’s powers of Astromancy, I was able to look into the future for the first time.

“Being able to see the future is a bit ironic.”

I turned my back on Etoile, whose body was now nothing but a lifeless shell, and waited.

I heard footsteps approaching. And then I saw him appear from the darkness, deep in the valley.

“I’ve missed you, Selene.”

“And I you, Dier.”

We’d met again.

And both of us knew that this would be the last time.

Chapter Six: My Ending, and Mine Alone

I'd always thought this day would come. Even today, I can vividly remember the first day I'd found her, spoken with her, and the first time our supernatural powers had clashed.

And ever since then, I'd had this vague premonition.

"Selene."

"Dier."

A premonition that one day, we would face each other as enemies.

We'd gotten to know each other, confessed our secrets, and thought we shared a common destiny. We had continued on the same path towards the same goal, slowly learning more about each other on the way. We had called each other accomplices, but it wasn't that formal an arrangement. Personally, I'd always considered us more like-minded friends.

And the more I got to know what kind of person she was, the more I thought my premonition was just my imagination.

But just when I had been about to forget about it, I remembered. I kept telling myself that it couldn't be possible, but sometimes my very soul made me recall it, and I had that foreboding feeling again that we'd become enemies and take each other's lives.

When we had defeated the primordial beasts, we had been able to see memories from the past.

The king and then the six guardians had been born first, and the guardians of the moon and shadow had come along afterwards. They'd fought, and then the guardians of the moon and shadow had both died. I didn't know what happened after that, but surely...

"You know, don't you?" I asked.

"Yes. I know everything."

"Can you tell me what happened to the guardians after that?"

She hesitated slightly. "No," she said with a smile.

I frowned. "Why not?"

"Because there's no point in telling you."

"Yes, there is. Maybe the reason you chose this path has to do with something you saw from the past."

“It doesn’t have anything to do with that,” she said. “None of that matters anymore.”

Selene’s shadow at her feet grew. I let my blood seep out of my body in response and let it spread out on the ground, expanding my territory.

“Their past and this world don’t matter. All I need to do is achieve my dream.”

“Selene…”

Her shadow and my blood both gradually expanded, meeting in the middle.

“So that’s why you’re going to have to die, Dier.”

“You can’t kill me, Selene. I’m immortal, remember?”

The moment our powers made contact, the battle began. My blood gushed out like a fountain now and attacked her. Meanwhile, she expanded her shadow to its maximum range and counterattacked. Shadow blades and blood-swords slashed at each other.

The battle intensified and we ran along the walls of the ravine as we fought. We then ended up back at the top of the valley. We ran through forests, leaped over rivers, and fought near the lake. We didn’t speak. Our supernatural powers just clashed. I could feel our wills in our attacks. This wasn’t about who was superior or inferior.

We moved as we fought, and before I knew it, we’d arrived at a very nostalgic location.

“This is…”

“We’re outside where that party was that night.”

“Yes, I remember. This is where you and I first met,” I said.

“Indeed. Where you suddenly attacked me.”

“That’s right.”

At that time, all I had thought about was dying.

Once I had become immortal and my existence had been wiped from the memory of everyone in the world, I hadn’t wanted to become a burden to Euclis. I’d searched for someone who could kill me.

But now I understood that the reason I had wanted to die hadn’t been because of Euclis. It had been because of me.

“I was just running away,” I said. “I wanted to run away from my destiny, and from my curse. I wanted to die. And I made excuses, saying it was for Euclis’s sake.”

She looked at me but said nothing.

“Pathetic, huh? Trying to push my reason for wanting to die off on my little brother.”

“You’re not the only one who did that. You two were very alike.”

I chuckled. “We were.”

Back when I had wanted to die for Euclis, he had also been seeking death. He’d asked Selene to kill him. I’d tried to break the curse that had tormented me by sacrificing my life. Just like Selene said, he and I had been very much alike. That made me a bit happy, but at the same time, it made me anxious.

After I’d spoken to Euclis for the first time in a very long while, we had opened up to each other about our feelings. And it was only then that I’d realized that I actually had wanted to live.

“I didn’t want to die. I wanted to live a normal life, and die a normal death.”

“Everyone does,” she said.

“Even you, Selene?”

“Hmm. I wonder.”

Now that we were done reminiscing, our powers lunged for each other again, like we had just remembered something or were looking for something we’d lost. We kept moving as we fought.

I wasn’t focusing too much on it, but it felt like we were being drawn to the Vixent manor.

“We’re home,” I said.

“We are,” she said. “But there’s no one here.”

“Wait, did you…?” I trailed off.

“I didn’t kill them, no. I sent them away so they wouldn’t interfere.”

“I see,” I said, letting out a sigh of relief.

It was dark, but the sun would come up soon. There wasn’t a single light on inside the house, and there was no one around. She was telling the truth; there didn’t seem to be anyone here. We could fight as much as we wanted. But…

“It feels like I lived here for years,” I said.

“I feel like you were always there too.”

“But the actual time I spent here was so short I can easily remember it all.”

“That’s true. And it was all very recent.”

Ever since Selene and I had become accomplices, I had lived at the mansion under the guise of being her bodyguard. And

since she'd become the head of House Vixent, I had also helped her with her official duties. Part of that was because I had no other place to stay and I had to avoid the sunlight.

But even so, having a place to go home to had been incredibly comforting.

And now that safe space had become a battlefield.

Each time our supernatural powers met, holes were ripped in the garden and the walls crumbled. I wasn't doing it on purpose, but it seemed like she was after destruction. It was almost like she was trying to wipe away all the memories of the past so she wouldn't be swayed by them.

Once again, we found ourselves near the castle. No one was there either. It was easy to fight inside it now that it was empty and we didn't have to worry about anyone else.

Maybe...

"Did you expect this to happen?"

"What do you think? I just like being alone," she said.

"Stop lying." I already knew that she was prone to being lonely. She didn't like being by herself at all. She'd had to spend a very long time in solitude because she couldn't trust anyone.

If she liked being alone, she wouldn't have interacted with me and Euclis. She would've continued ignoring her half sister. Even though she had acted like she was a cruel person, she had kindness in her heart.

I'd watched over her more closely than anyone, so I knew about the tender parts of herself that she'd hidden away inside. And that was why I had to ask.

"Why did you kill Euclis?"

We were in the throne room now, where my brother had once sat on the throne as king.

Selene stood with her back to it. "Because it was necessary," she said coldly.

"What do you mean?"

"I had to do it. I needed his powers in order to realize my dream."

"And that's why you killed him?"

"Yes."

"You're a bad liar. You wouldn't kill Euclis for that reason."

Because I knew that, deep down, she was a kind person.

Euclis had begged her to kill him several times, and each time, it had made her angry. A kind person like that wouldn't choose

to kill him for selfish reasons.

Ever since it had happened, I had thought it made no sense. My confusion was greater than my anger or sadness.

“You can think whatever you want, but it’s pointless. I’ve always acted in my own best interests, so I can live the life I want,” she said.

“That’s a lie too.”

“You can believe me or not, it’s your choice. But that doesn’t change what I have to do here.”

“Selene…”

She then destroyed the throne.

I didn’t know why she had done that, but it was the signal that resumed our battle. The throne’s wreckage toppled to the ground, causing sparks that grew into flames. The carpet caught fire, and now the flames were growing even larger.

As our battle increased in intensity, the fire spread to the walls and the ceilings. Eventually, the entire throne room was engulfed in flames. There was nowhere to run, not that either of us had any intention to do so.

Neither of us paid any attention to the fire. We were solely focused on each other.

“You’re the only one left,” she said. “Once you’re gone, I can get what I want.”

“Not even you can kill me.”

“Oh, but I can. I can kill you, even though you’re immortal.”

“Selene!”

I could feel her malice. She wasn’t holding back either. But why was she only using Shadow against me? She had already absorbed all six of the guardians’ powers. The power of Sun boosted her Shadow abilities too. But she was fighting the same way as she had when I first met her.

If she combined the powers of Water and Air, she would be able to execute more diverse and wide-ranged attacks. She could use water to interfere with my blood manipulation. And she already knew that she could limit my means of attack if she used the Earth guardian’s powers of gravitational manipulation.

She had wounds on her cheeks and limbs from our battle. She could’ve used the Forest guardian’s powers to heal herself in an instant.

Not only that, but she had the power to see the future using Astromancy. That would easily let her predict my actions so she’d

know how to attack me best.

If she had the means to kill me, even though I was immortal, couldn't she have used those supernatural powers to end this a long time ago?

Why...?

"Your movements are growing slower. Despite being immortal, I guess even you still get tired," Selene remarked.

"I could say the same for you."

Her Shadow power was clearly growing weaker. Was it fatigue from the drawn-out battle, or was her focus on something else?

I didn't know. Even though I'd watched over her more closely than anyone, I couldn't predict what was on her mind or what she was fighting for right now.

My doubts had dulled the blade I wielded. If I wasn't immortal, I would've died long ago.

She cut me open, and I felt blood gush out of me. I wanted to confirm how she really felt about this. I wanted to touch her, so I frantically reached out to her.

"Selene...what do you want?"

"I told you already, Dier."

She didn't try to take my extended hand. Instead, she shook me off and stabbed at me with her shadow blades.

"I want to make my dream come true."

"But what is your dream? And why?" I asked.

She pointed at my heart and smiled. "I'm going to kill you."

"What?"

Her next attack had the most intense hostility I'd ever felt.

My body rejected death, but that didn't mean I was *actually* immortal. Instead, my body rejected the notion of getting injured. That reflex caused me to involuntarily counterattack. Rejecting death also meant my body would block itself from events that would lead me to death.

My body moved on its own. Selene was trying to kill me, and I couldn't stop my body from trying to eliminate her.

My blood-sword pierced through her chest, and suddenly, her malice dissipated into thin air.

"And this..."

The shadow that had covered her also melted away, as if it had served its purpose. She completely relaxed her body and fell backwards with a smile on her face.

"...is the last piece."

“Selene!” I cried out, and quickly reached out to catch her.

And only then did it dawn on me that she had never intended to kill me in the first place.

Why hadn’t I realized that? I could have. Because now it was obvious that the only death she had wanted…was her own.

“But why, Selene?”

“You look terrible,” she said.

She collapsed in my arms, feeling limp. I knelt down as the flames raged around us and looked down at her. The woman in my arms wasn’t the evil queen who’d become everyone’s enemy. She was a woman who deep down inside was kind and had only pretended to be a villainess. A woman who was prone to loneliness.

“Don’t make that face…” she told me. “The people of this kingdom will be sad.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not the prince anymore.”

“Maybe not…but you will call yourself that from now on.”

“What? I can’t do that! Everyone’s forgotten me. Plus, I’m not human. A monster can’t call himself the king.”

“That…ends now too.” She slowly lifted up her arm and pointed to my heart. “You’re…about to go back…to being an ordinary human. Back to Dier Veldt.”

“Selene…don’t tell me that’s why you did all this?”

She smiled tenderly at me in a way I’d never seen her smile before. There was a slight sadness in it, but relief too.

It was a weak smile that didn’t suit her.

♦ ♦ ♦

I had killed Euclis. The king’s powers should’ve disappeared right then, but then I saw the memories of the past king that Euclis had seen too.

The king’s supernatural abilities and the guardians’ abilities were connected. Both were born from the people’s wishes, and neither would disappear so long as the people continued to wish for them.

If the king died, someone else would appear with the king’s powers. And if all the guardians perished, new guardians would be born to take their places.

The perception of the world would change, as if that was how it had been all along.

“In order to completely eliminate the supernatural powers, you must kill the guardians first. And once you absorb those powers, you have to kill the king.”

Euclis had chosen death for himself, entrusting the future to us.

He had wished for me, Dier, and those left behind to be happy. He’d tried to eliminate the supernatural powers from this world with his own death. But he had still been young—although he had seen the previous king’s memories, he hadn’t fully understood them.

“That was your mistake, Euclis…”

Even after you died, the king’s powers didn’t disappear. Someone else would inherit them and assume the title of monarch.

No one would realize what had actually happened besides Dier and me. The other guardians might’ve felt like something was off, but most people wouldn’t notice a thing. Having a new ruler would be trivial to them. As long as there was a monarch, and as long as the royal power remained there to protect and support them, they would find peace of mind.

“How selfish…”

They probably had no idea that their wishes were causing others to suffer. I gradually began to feel irritated with the people who lived blissfully unaware of any of this.

And if things kept going that way, Euclis’s resolve and sentiments would be all for nothing.

If a new king appeared, people would have expectations of him. The guardians might change as well. After all, they only existed to protect the king. The people’s wishes had become tangible because they wanted the king to protect them, and those wishes took the form of the six guardians.

But Dier and I were the exceptions. The rules did not apply to the guardian of the moon or the guardian of shadow. That was because we hadn’t been born from the people’s wishes. Instead, we came from the wishes of the king himself.

Euclis had wished for someone to kill him. That was why I, the Shadow guardian, had been born.

Members of the royal family had short lifespans. He had been afraid. He’d wished for his own death, but at the same time, the young king had feared it and therefore wished for eternal life. As a result, the immortal guardian of the moon—in other words, Dier—had been born.

We had obtained our powers through the king's wishes. Euclis's wishes.

"But what if there was a new king?"

What would happen to us?

It was just my theory, but I had thought that we would live with these powers forever. If the king, the one who had wished for those things, disappeared, then we would lose our connection.

Euclis's death would not free us from the bonds of our supernatural powers. Instead, it might keep us chained to them forever, like a curse.

And if that happened, his wish would not come true. Instead, both Dier and I would suffer, and his death would have been in vain.

"I won't let that happen."

That was why I'd stolen his power.

I did it so that I would become the queen and not some random outsider.

So that I could make his dream come true.

♦ ♦ ♦

"After gaining more power, I was convinced that I made the right decision."

Once I had usurped Euclis's royal power from him, I had access to all of the former king's memories that he'd seen. I had also learned the true essence of the king's power. That changed my theory into certainty.

Just as I'd expected, if Euclis's power had transferred to anyone else, we never would've been able to break this curse.

"I would've continued my time loops. You still would've been forgotten by everyone. Both of us would've lived forever, unable to die," I said.

"And that's why you took Euclis's power?"

"That's right."

"But why?" Dier asked. "If you stole his power, why didn't you choose a path that would only save yourself?"

I didn't answer.

He held my hand, and I squeezed it back. His face contorted as he looked down at me as if enduring tremendous pain. He looked like he was suffering.

“If the king’s ability has the power to grant wishes, then you could’ve used it to free yourself from the time loops. You would’ve been free, just like you wanted.”

“It’s not that simple,” I told him.

The king’s power wasn’t omnipotent. I couldn’t grant wishes with my will alone. If that were the case, Euclis would’ve wished for me and Dier to be freed from our curses a long time ago.

“It’s not just the king’s power that’s required. As long as the supernatural powers exist, we’d continue to be bound by our curse. Even if I were to free myself from the loops, we’d end up confined here by some other stroke of fate.”

But *because* the supernatural powers existed, we were at fate’s mercy. The situation was the same for the king, the guardians, and then Dier and me. Many, many people had been bound by this fate and had continued to suffer because of it.

And the source of all of it was the people’s wishes.

Long ago, the people had wished for peace, and although their wish had come true, it did so after a tremendous tragedy that had spanned generations and kept repeating to this day.

“That’s why I wanted to erase the powers from this world. I thought if I did that, no one would be manipulated by fate anymore. Not even you.”

“And that’s why you killed all the guardians?”

“Yes.”

I wished for the supernatural powers to be banished from this world.

But just because I wished for something didn’t mean it would come true. That was because the power to make the people’s wishes come true existed. So in order for *my* wish to come true, *everyone* had to be wishing for the same thing.

And that wish was: “We don’t need supernatural powers in this world.”

But in order to make the people believe that, I had to do something to make them reject the guardians’ supernatural powers.

“I had to turn the people against the supernatural guardians. They had viewed them and their powers almost like indestructible fortresses, yet I destroyed them. I made them see the guardians as threats to their daily lives. I thought if I did that, they would fear not the primordial beasts, but the supernatural powers instead.”

“You made the guardians enemies of the people in order to shift their wishes towards a world without supernatural powers,” Dier said.

“Yes, but more than that, I needed to erase the guardians themselves from this world.”

“In order to get rid of the king’s powers?”

“Right…” I said. “There were two conditions I needed to fulfill to make my wish come true.”

The first condition was that I needed to collect the six supernatural powers and destroy the guardians. The guardians had been born out of the people’s wishes to protect the king. If I killed the king, I would have to kill the guardians too.

The dream I wanted to make come true would completely transform the world. And such a huge wish would require a hefty price.

I needed the enormous energy of wishes from the people or else my wish couldn’t come true.

That’s why it was necessary to absorb the six supernatural powers from the guardians—as they had been born from the people’s wishes—and turn them into the power that would fuel my own wishes.

“My power and yours were exceptions. Euclis wished for it to be so.”

“I see. That’s why when you fought me, you didn’t use any other powers.”

“It’s not that I didn’t use them,” I said.

“You *couldn’t* use them,” he answered.

“That’s right.”

Once Alexei had died, I had absorbed all six powers, which fulfilled the first requirement of my plan. As my shadow consumed the supernatural powers, they began to fuse with the king’s supernatural powers within me.

The fusion had already begun by the time I fought Dier, so I was unable to activate any of the six supernatural powers individually during our battle. As we had clashed, I’d sensed that all six powers had been completely absorbed into the king’s power.

“I’ve fulfilled the first condition. All that’s left is…”

“What’s the other one? In order to make your wish come true… What do you need from the powers? Or from the world?”

“I need you, Dier.”

“What?”

The other condition to make my wish come true was to make my time loops end.

And in order to make that happen…

“I need to be killed by the person I trust the most,” I told him.

He gasped.

I had used my powers of Shadow to usurp Euclis’s power. The separate powers had merged into one form when I solidified my wish. As a result, the realization of the king’s wish and the completion of the time loops contained within the power of Shadow became one condition.

I wanted to break free from my time loops.

That was my wish too.

Everyone dies. The most precious thing to every human is their life. They can’t move forward without it.

Therefore, the final piece of the puzzle to make my wish come true was my own life. Ending the time loops meant ending my own life for good.

“I…was able to make my wish come true, like this…”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Dier…?”

He was angry. His arms trembled as he held me, and his eyes were brimming with tears. “You’re too selfish! Who wished for this? Because I certainly didn’t!”

“That’s true, you never would,” I said. “You’re too sweet to choose a path that wouldn’t save you.”

“If you know that, then why…?!”

“Because I have no other choice.”

“Selene!”

“This…is the only way to break…your curse.”

There was a path where only I would’ve been saved.

I could’ve used the king’s power to end my time loops and nothing else; that would’ve been a lot easier. With the supernatural power of Shadow combined with the royal power, it would’ve been simple to do that much on my own.

However, if I’d done that, I would’ve been the only one freed. Dier would have continued being immortal while having lost Euclis forever. He would have lost everyone while never being able to die, no matter how much he wanted to. He would continue living without ever aging.

Even if I died, his life would continue.

And since both Euclis and I would be gone at that point, every single person who still remembered him would be gone. Humanity could be destroyed entirely, but he still wouldn't be allowed to die.

He'd just keep on living a lonely, solitary life without ever withering away.

I couldn't think of any worse hell. Just imagining it gave me the chills. I certainly couldn't bear it. I would rue the fact that I'd ever been born.

Dier was too kind. After living for so long with a broken heart, he might've blamed all of it on Euclis, saying that it was all because he had wished for this.

I didn't want to see him blame his brother like that.

"You'd sacrifice your life for me?" he asked.

"It... It seems that way." I felt a bit pathetic for not being able to just come right out and say yes.

After coming this far, humanlike emotions such as embarrassment began to surface. I'd used every means possible in order to achieve my goal, embracing cruelty and taking many lives.

So the reason I felt embarrassed now was surely because I was in front of Dier. I found myself pathetic for feeling this way, but at the same time, it wasn't so bad. I let out a little chuckle.

"I don't understand. Why would you go to such lengths for me? You..."

"Dier..."

"Please tell me, Selene. Why would you do all this for someone like me, someone who's practically a stranger?" he asked intently, desperately holding back tears.

I still felt a little sheepish, but since this would likely be the end...I thought I might as well express my true feelings.

"Euclis told me something."

"What?"

"His dying words were that he wanted us to be happy."

Dier silently stared at me.

"It's funny, isn't it? All he could think of when his life was ending was me and you. And when he said that, I imagined it."

I had been able to see the dream I wanted.

I had envisioned myself achieving happiness in the distant, or perhaps even near future, and what that would look like. It'd felt strange, like I was a completely different person, to see myself

smiling so happily.

My own imagination had surprised me. I'd wondered if I could truly feel that way someday. However, what'd surprised me most wasn't the smile on my face.

It had been the person next to me.

"And you were there with me when I imagined that happiness," I said. "You were smiling with me."

"Me?"

"Yes. Surprised? I know it's ridiculous."

Because I had been prepared to live alone.

When I'd died for the ninth time at the end of my ninth time loop, I'd experienced nine lifetimes' worth of despair at that point. I had decided I wouldn't trust anyone because I thought if I trusted others, I would never be happy.

So I had vowed to trust no one but myself during my tenth time loop. I'd be honest with my own feelings. Live the way I pleased.

I had thought I had abandoned my naivete when I died my ninth death, but in the end, I suppose I couldn't. It had just lain hidden deep inside of me the whole time.

"It's your fault, Dier... It's because I met you."

"Selene..."

I had met Dier, and amidst all our experiences together, he had made me realize something when I saw someone else battling their fate and struggling with it.

Maybe his naivete had rubbed off on me. Whether it was mine that was hidden, or his that had transferred to me, he brought that naivete—no, that *kindness*—out of me, and before long, I was unable to hide it anymore.

That's right...it was all because we had met and spent time together.

"I enjoyed these past few months with you so much... It was like a dream," I said.

He listened to me quietly.

"There were many painful moments, but we had fun. My life became so much more enjoyable once I met you and Euclis and everyone else."

And it made me realize that I couldn't be happy without Dier. I needed him.

That was how big his presence had grown inside of me. And now that I had discovered that, there was no covering it up.

“Yeah… I had fun too…” he began.

“Really?”

“Yes, I did. From the bottom of my heart. I was so lonely and spent so long wishing for death, but you were the one who grabbed me and dragged me out of the darkness.”

He clasped my hand. His hands were cold as death, but I gradually started to feel warmth from them. He’d been an immortal aberration, but now, he was gradually becoming human.

I was so relieved.

My wish would come true. My struggles, my life…it’d all had meaning.

I wouldn’t be happy if I was the only one freed from my curse. I wouldn’t be happy unless Dier was happy.

I’d thought frantically about it, but unfortunately, I knew it would be difficult. I was certain that no matter how much I struggled, I wouldn’t be able to have the future I’d envisioned. So at the very least, I just wanted him to be happy, even if it meant sacrificing everything I had.

“I’m satisfied. If you kill me, I’ll be able to release you with my death.”

I heard his breath catch in his throat.

“So I want you to smile,” I said. “Because you’re free now.”

“Stop being ridiculous.” Tears that he’d held in this entire time now spilled from his eyes. Big, fat droplets of water traveled down his cheeks and dripped onto my face.

“Dier…”

“How can I be happy if you leave me here all alone?”

“Don’t worry. Once I die, everything will go back to how it should be. That was my wish.”

People’s memories of Dier, which they’d lost due to the powers, would return. The powers would be gone from the world, and Dier would be king. The world would be remade in that fashion, and people’s perceptions of reality would be rewritten. I had wished for all of that so that he wouldn’t be alone. He’d be surrounded by many people. He’d be adored, sought after, bathed in the bright sunlight, and lead a peaceful life.

“Eventually…I’ll disappear from your memory too.”

“What?!”

“Me…and Euclis too. You’ll forget all about it. But don’t worry.”

“Stop this, Selene!” Dier screamed.

The flames spread throughout the castle even more fiercely than before.

He shouted so loudly the flames surrounding us flickered briefly. “I won’t forget you! How could I?!”

“Dier…”

The ceiling began to collapse. The fire showed no signs of dying down and burned us with its heat. There wasn’t anyone else left in this castle. I knew the fire squad wouldn’t make it here in time either. It might’ve been possible to stop the fire with supernatural powers, but unfortunately, I’d consumed all of them. Still, I figured it would be possible for him to escape before the fire completely destroyed the castle.

“Hurry up…and go, Dier.”

“No.”

“If I die, you won’t be immortal anymore. So you could die here if you don’t escape.”

“I know.”

“Dier, you’ll die,” I stressed. “You’ll be burned to death.”

“I know. I’m going to die here with you.”

“But why?!”

Why won’t he run?

There wasn’t a hint of fear in his eyes. Even though his death was approaching, he refused to let go of me. He continued to hold me, gazing into my eyes.

“I knew,” he said.

“What?”

“I knew that you were fighting for some kind of big wish.”

“How?”

He gave me a rueful smile. “Etoile told me. He told me why you killed Euclis that day.”

“He did? I see…”

So Dier had known all along. He’d known that Euclis had been taken over by the primordial beast, and there had been no other way to save him except by killing him.

“He wanted to die for a long time, for my sake. And because of that, I had no doubt in my mind that he chose to give his own life.”

“Yes, but I still killed him,” I said. “I killed your little brother with my own hands.”

“And that’s why you had a look of such pain on your face

afterwards."

"What?"

My face?

"I've watched you for a long time now, so I know. Ever since you turned everyone against you, you've been in pain," he told me.

"I thought I was smiling."

"On the surface, sure. But it was easy to see through that. It was obvious to me that you were forcing it."

"I see..." I'd thought that I'd skillfully deceived everyone, but apparently, I was wrong.

"I wanted to stop you."

I listened to him quietly.

"I didn't know what you were wishing for, but I had a feeling you were doing so without regard for your own life and that you were prepared to cast it aside for your goals. I wanted to stop you. But it seems as though everything went according to your plan anyway."

"That's not true."

I knew that Dier hadn't come to kill me. That was why he'd had no choice but to use the defensive aspects of his supernatural ability. What he had done to me wasn't because he'd willed it to be so, but was because of the influence of the powers that resided in him like a curse.

I wanted him to hate me. I wanted him to shake his fist in anger at me, hating me for killing his brother.

"You're too sweet, Dier."

"And you're too stubborn, right until the very end."

"Stubborn?"

"It's true, isn't it? Once you make your mind up, there's no backing down. I wish you'd stop to consider the feelings of the people who got caught up in the aftermath of your stubbornness for once."

"Isn't it a bit too late for that?" I asked. "Just regret the fact you ever got involved with me in the first place."

"I can't do that," he said plainly, pulling me close to him. I was bleeding freely and could feel my body growing colder. He held me to him as if to bring back my warmth with his own. "I could never regret meeting you."

"Dier..."

"Even if you started your life over again, I'd come find you. If

you’re born in an entirely different place, if we forget each other, I’ll always find you, no matter how long I have to search.”

“You’re frightening.”

“Ha ha. It’s a bit late for you to have regrets now, huh?”

“I won’t.”

I felt weak. But I used the last remaining bit of power from Shadow to force myself to move.

And so I wrapped my arms around him, responding to his warmth.

“It’s only been a short time since I met you, but…it was the happiest time of my life,” I told him.

“I feel the same way.”

I had meant it. People showed their true nature at the moment of their deaths. And so my true feelings, along with the vulnerability I’d worked so hard to hide my entire life, enveloped him.

The flames had now taken complete command of the castle, burning up any possible escape routes. Dier would die here with me.

It seemed like my wish wouldn’t come true after all. Despite that, I felt extremely relieved and satisfied.

“It’s funny… I decided to live this life for myself, but at the very end, all I can think about is you.”

“It’s mutual.”

Dier was thinking about me at the end too. Strangely enough, we were burning up our lives in order to make the other’s wish come true. It was absolutely ridiculous. But I was happy.

“Hey, Dier…”

“What?”

“Don’t forget what you just said.”

“Which part?” he asked.

“No matter how far away we are, even if we forget each other… You said you’d always find me no matter what, right?”

“Yes. Always.”

“Good…”

I made another wish. I wished that if Dier and I were reincarnated, we would find each other.

I didn’t want happiness just for him or just for me.

I prayed that next time, the two of us would find true happiness together.

“Selene.”

I couldn’t respond to him anymore.

“Let’s go together. I won’t leave you alone.”

My vision grew dim, but I saw Dier’s face approaching mine. My senses were starting to fade, and I could no longer speak…but the last thing I felt was the sensation of his lips on mine.

I was satisfied.

This was where my story would end.



Epilogue: Wishes Come Together

I had a dream.

It took place a long, long time ago in the past, and many tragic things happened. Even though I was watching it as an outsider, it made me sad. I felt filled with pain. But at the same time, it was strangely nostalgic.

And then, I woke up.

“Nngh… Morning already? Guess I better get ready.”

I forgot about my dream as soon as I woke up. It bothered me, but I had to hurry up and get ready or else I’d be late for school, especially since there was someone outside waiting for me.

“Oh! Morning, Sis!”

“Morning.”

My sister had woken up before me and was sitting at the dining room table. Her face brightened into a smile as beautiful as the sun when she saw me.

“Mom, is breakfast ready yet?”

“It sure is. Go ahead and eat.”

“Okay. Where’s dad?” I asked.

“He left a long time ago. You overslept!”

I guess Dad had left early for work this morning. I vaguely remembered him having said he had an important meeting today…

I quickly finished eating my breakfast, changed into my school uniform, and finished getting ready.

“See ya later!”

“Hurry up, Sis! We’re gonna be late!”

“I know, I know!”

“I’ll just wait for you outside!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

My impatient worrywart of a sister rushed out the front door. I glanced at the clock and realized that I was only a bit later than usual. Since I usually tended to be a little early for school, I wouldn’t even really consider this late.

“And I don’t even like school that much…”

It was true; I wasn’t fond of studying. I’d rather do just about

anything instead of sitting at a desk all day. I'd rather even exercise outside. Well, maybe that was going a bit too far.

Honestly, I was kind of lazy and preferred to have free time on my hands instead of being busy all the time. I felt more at ease in the shadows than in the bright sunlight.

I was the complete opposite of my little sister. She always had a bright smile on her face, and she was popular at school too. I hurried a bit on her account so she wouldn't get fed up with me.

I went outside and the sun was already shining brightly overhead. I squinted my eyes as I closed the front door behind me.

"Morning. Overslept, huh?"

"Uh, no. I think you're just early. You're like a grandpa or something."

"That's rude! You know what they say. Early to sleep, early to rise!"

"Ooh, how wise. What are you now, a teacher?" I shot back.

This boy and I exchanged banter back and forth. Then, he flashed me an exasperated smile.

"Oh, stop bickering," his little brother said, entering the conversation. "You two know you're best friends."

"Excuse me? What about this exchange makes you think we're best friends?!" I exclaimed indignantly.

"Yeah! Maybe you need to get your eyes checked out."

"See? You two are just proving my point."

"Ugh..." We sighed in unison.

These two boys were brothers who lived next door, and we'd all been friends since childhood, for better or for worse.

The older brother and I were the same age, attended the same school, and were in the same class. The same went for his younger brother and my younger sister. In fact, we'd never been in different classes before.

At this point, we'd been together for so long that sometimes I began to wonder if it was some kind of curse...

"Well, we're going this way."

"Bye, Sis!"

"See ya."

"Watch out for cars."

"Okay!" our younger siblings called back and then waved before walking off.

The two of us watched them leave.

“Now *those* are best friends,” he said.

“No kidding. Completely different from us,” I replied.

And then we both started walking again at the exact same time. Today felt like any other day; there was nothing particularly special about it.

Maybe it was because we’d been together for as long as I could remember, but I just took his presence next to me for granted.

“I had a weird dream last night.”

“Again?” he asked. “Actually, I did too. I feel like it was a really intense dream, but when I woke up, I forgot everything.”

“Yeah, same. I felt the weirdest sense of nostalgia too.”

“Uh-huh. It was like something that happened to me a long time ago.”

We’d had this same conversation a bunch of times before. For some reason, every time I had a weird dream, he did too.

“What if we’re having the same dream?” he asked.

“That would suck. We have to be together every other moment of the day, could you not intrude on my dreams too?” I said haughtily.

“That’s my line! It’s not like I *want* to have the same dream as you!”

Our conversation lulled for a bit there, and we walked in silence for a while.

He was the first one to break it. “But…when I wake up in the morning after those dreams, I always have this urge to go see someone.”

I stopped in my tracks at that.

He noticed and turned around. “What?”

“Nothing…”

I’d never expected we’d even share that feeling. Because that was exactly how I felt when I woke up from those dreams too.

They made me want to see someone. And I’d have this restless feeling inside of my heart. But then, once I saw that “someone,” I felt instantly better.

Both of us stood there, staring at each other.

“It’s like…the day you moved in next door, I had a feeling this would happen.”

“Huh? What are you, my stalker?” I asked.

“I’m trying to be serious here!”

“Ha ha, sorry. I know. I had a feeling about that too.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.”

I had moved into my current house when I was five years old, and I’d seen him from my window. He’d been in his bedroom, looking out his own window at me. We’d both stared at each other for a second, then opened our windows and said hello.

“Maybe we made a promise.”

“A promise?”

“Yeah. Like…before we even met each other.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

We looked at each other, and suddenly it felt like something inside of my heart had been released. We both exchanged sheepish grins and turned back around.

“Let’s get going,” he said.

“Yeah. We don’t wanna be late.”

And then we started walking again. Today was a day like every other day, without anything particularly special about it. But we were together.

I secretly wished that it would always be like this.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. This is Sora Hinokage. First of all, I'd like to say thank you to everyone who picked up this book.

Selene was trapped in an endless time loop of death.

But on her tenth time loop, she decided to live for herself. This series detailed her struggles and how her connection with Prince Dier, her accomplice, grew deeper.

This volume was the culmination of that story. The mysteries presented thus far and the feelings hidden within Selene and Dier were finally revealed.

What did you think? I really hope you enjoyed it.

There were a lot of dark and sad moments throughout this story. Personally, I prefer slightly darker stories that touch on the deaths of loved ones rather than heartwarming tales.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with a peaceful life, but I believe that a person's true colors are shown more in their manner of death than their way of life, so I always want to depict a person's death in a beautiful way. It's not often that one gets the opportunity to write such stories, but thankfully, I was given the chance to write this one.

Many deaths occurred in the story, but I truly believe that each one had meaning. They were a way to connect to someone who was still alive.

I love these darker stories, of course, but I also like uplifting stories and those involving simple battles. If you're interested in those sorts of things, I hope you pick up my other books too.

I plan to publish at a pace of several books per month this year and next year, so if your wallet permits, I really hope you'll read them! I'm actually releasing eight books this month, including this one!

Finally, I'd like to express my deepest gratitude once again to everyone involved in publishing this novel. That includes Tsukasa Kiryu, who drew the wonderful illustrations, and my editor F-san, who patiently assisted me. Last but not least, thank you to the readers who read the web novel version, and to those of you who picked up this book.

I hope to see you all again in the afterword of a different

story!













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Stuck in a Time Loop: When All Else Fails, Be a Villainess Volume 3
by Sora Hinokage

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