
The Ephemeral Scenes of
Setsuna's Journey
The Former 68th Hero and the Summer Feast
5
Rokusyou • Usuasagi
Illustration by sime


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After the feast…
Alto continued chattering away happily even after everyone left. After a light dinner, he went to his room to write in his diary and didn't come back down. Setsuna checked on him and came back to tell me Alto had fallen asleep.
Although it was a little earlier than usual, we decided to have a drink. Our conversation ranged from Alto to the dinner party today to the pranks we'd kept secret from him… Setsuna expressed his gratitude, and I just nodded. I could only hope his worries had been lifted now.
"Today was a very good day," I said. Setsuna paused, looked at me, then smiled and quietly nodded. We talked intermittently as we enjoyed our drinks, and the companionable silence stretched on.
Ragi
Setsuna



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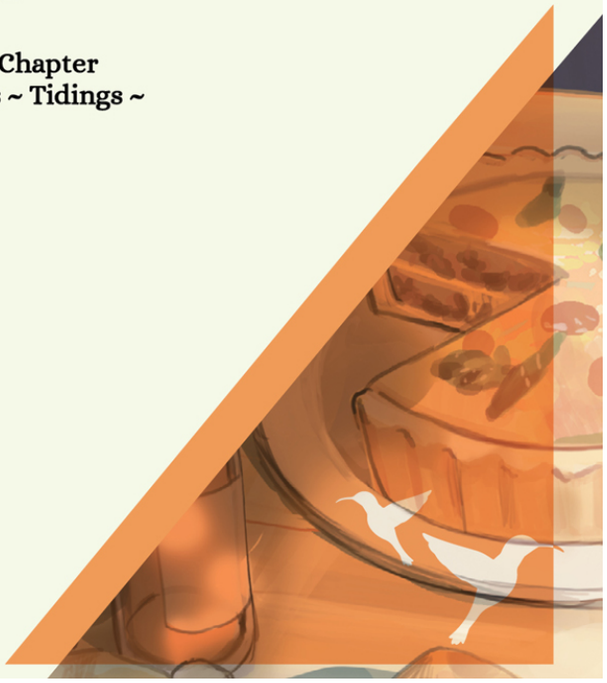
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NEW YORK



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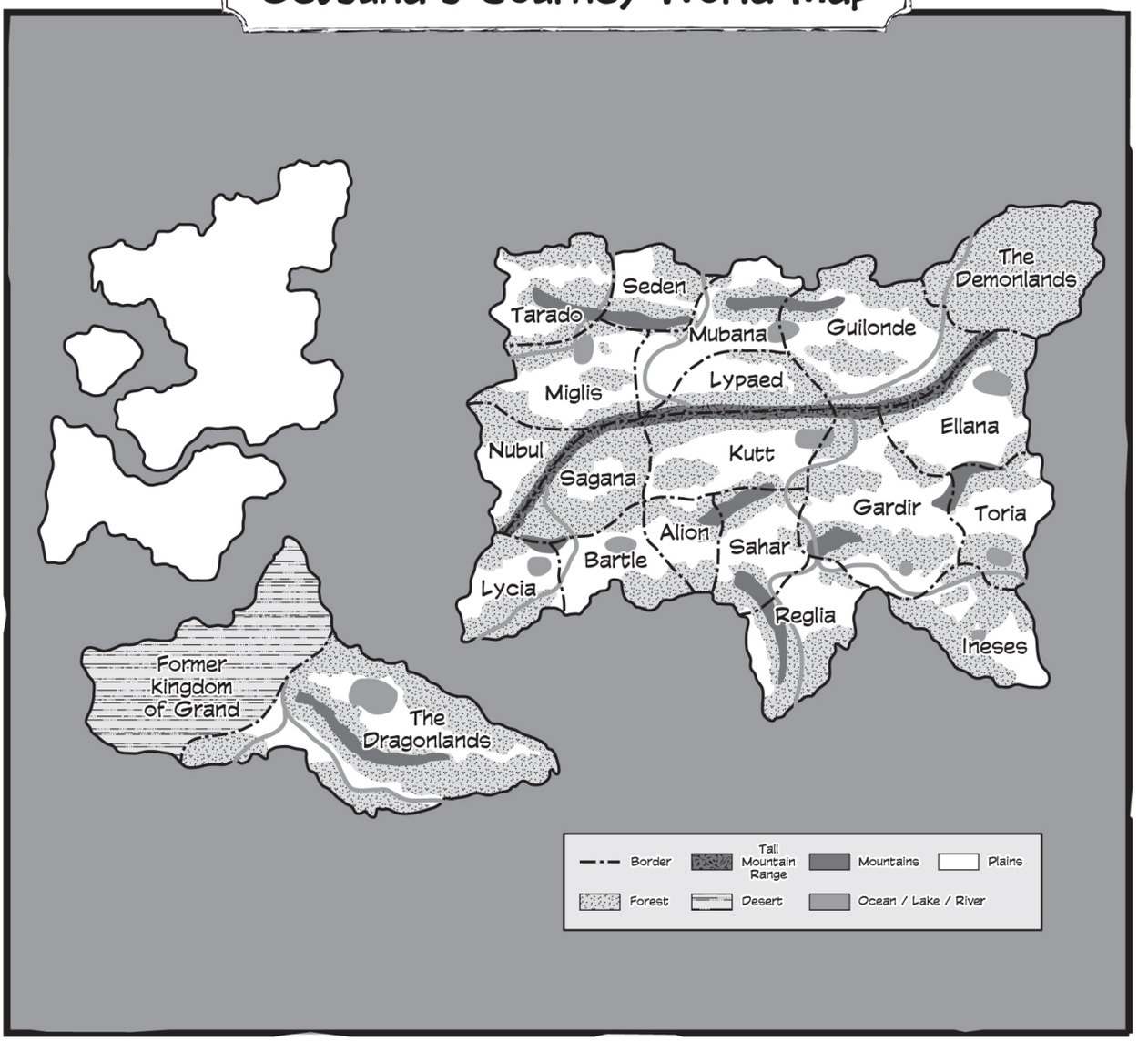
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Characters

Setsuna (Setsuna Sugimoto)
The protagonist and 68th summoned hero. Decided to travel and see the world after his friend urged him to live.

Alto
A young beastfolk boy and Setsuna's apprentice. He used to be a slave until Setsuna rescued him, and he has accepted his first adventuring quest in Lypaed.

Kyle (Kanade Tokito)
The 23rd summoned hero of Gardir who lived to be over two thousand five hundred years old. Since Setsuna was ill, he let him have his body and gave him a third chance at life.

Lypaed

Ragi
An elderly beastfolk man who loves pranks. He posted a quest at the guild asking for a live-in helper, which Alto accepted, leading to Alto and Setsuna moving in with him.

Cyrus
First knight of the prince of Lypaed. He solved the problems facing his kingdom with Setsuna's help, and now the two of them are good friends.

Norris
The owner of a flower shop. He posted a quest to help save his wife and protect their dream of running the shop, after which Setsuna ended up working for him.

Elly
Norris's wife. She was seriously injured but made a full recovery after Setsuna saved her.

Georges
The prince of Lypaed's second knight and Cyrus's friend. He was searching for a gift for his fiancée when he met Setsuna and discovered part of his secrets.

Sophia
Georges' fiancée.

The King

Named Linus, he became the current king of Lypaed after defeating his relatives.

The Queen

Named Lilia, she was born a commoner and has a bright and cheerful personality.

Eugene

The prince of Lypaed. Cyrus's best friend and master.

Keith

The prime minister of Lypaed and the king's younger brother. Good friends with Eugene and Cyrus.

Fred

The first knight of the prime minister of Lypaed.

Margaret

The queen of Lypaed's lady-in-waiting. She likes pranks.

Lalegul

The queen of Lypaed's maid.

The General

Named Dolph, he has been friends with the king since their school days.

Rombal

The first knight of the king of Lypaed.

Drum

The guildmaster of Lypaed's adventurers guild.

Gardir

The 69th Summoned Hero

Summoned to protect the world in place of Setsuna. Possesses sharp insight and critical thinking but isn't good at putting things into words.

Tylera

The fifth princess of Gardir. She's friends with the 69th hero and became the commander of the hero's knights in order to protect him.

Larutas

Deputy general for the hero's knights.

Ellana

Detraas

One of the Eight Imperial Knights who serve directly under the holy emperor.

Kelvy
An artificial life-form who provides guidance to the hero.

Others

Kyoka Sugimoto
Setsuna's younger sister, whom he parted from when he died.

Tuuli
Setsuna's wife. A dragonfolk woman he met in the cave near Kutt.

Kukka
Tuuli's companion. A spirit she, Alto, and Setsuna met near the cave by Kutt.

Revale
Tuuli's older brother. Lives in the cave that connects Kutt to Lypaed.

Prologue

In the dim light, I pour myself a drink.

This has become my normal routine to pass the time.

The rain I hear falling in the night always soaks into my heart.

The more I listen to that sound echoing in the silence of the night, the more it draws out something that has been buried deep inside me.

Memories…

Memories of my friend, with whom I traveled through this rapidly changing world.

Memories of my wife, who taught me the joy of loving and being loved.

Memories of my son, who looked up to me and vowed to be “strong like Daddy one day.”

Memories of the azure dew tree, which put down its roots to protect my homeland.

I think of that rainy night, when the water droplets bounced off the leaves of the azure dew tree. I caressed my son’s hair as he slept with a smile on his face. I can’t remember how that felt anymore, though.

My wife gave me a hug and then silently turned around. I could see her shoulders trembling slightly.

Beneath the azure dew tree, I brushed away my friend’s hand and abandoned my kingdom.

I've never regretted it. It was the right thing for me to do. It was necessary.

Still…I can't help but wish.

I know I shouldn't, but I can't help it.

I dream of setting foot in my homeland again, of talking to my friend again, of smiling with my wife again. I dream of caressing my son's hair one more time.

And I dream of my last moments, when I will depart for the Waterside surrounded by the people who care for me.

Even though I know some of these dreams will never come true, I wish that I could at least grasp a fragment of them.

But it seems like I'll just wither away all alone.

Filled with all those conflicting emotions, I distanced myself from others.

Nobody knows I've changed my name and that I'm living here in secrecy.

I have no close friends in this kingdom, which is why I chose to depart for the Waterside from here.

My only companions are acceptance and solitude.

And yet in the midst of that rain, I was visited by a young man with violet eyes and a beastfolk child whose eyes gleamed with the same color.



Chapter One
Prairie Gentian ~ Good Conversation ~



◇ Part One: Setsuna

More than a month had passed since Alto and I began living in Lypaed. In a few days, the fourth month of Salkis would end, and we would be entering the first month of the autumn season, Manakis.

When we first came to this town, I had intended to take it easy and find some small jobs to both recover from the exhaustion of our hectic journey and to replenish our dwindling funds.

However, I'd actually ended up working at Norris's flower shop and investigating some ruins. Alto had accepted a job to assist Ragi, and both of us had moved in with him. It wasn't exactly relaxing, but my life had felt quite fulfilled this past month.

This was particularly because life at Ragi's house was lively yet peaceful. Thinking about our inevitable good-byes to him was too painful, so I tried not to dwell on it.

Today, I was waiting for Norris outside the Adventurers Guild. We needed to report the completion of the task he'd posted; the requirements for completing it were either for Norris's wife, Elly, to recover from her injuries, or to find someone to help out at the flower shop. I needed Norris to verify that I had completed the task, which was why I'd asked him to come and meet me here.

Honestly, it felt a little bittersweet because I'd truly enjoyed this job.

"Have you been waiting long?" he asked as he walked up.

I shook my head in response to his apologetic tone. "No, I just got here myself. Good morning, Norris."

"Morning. Shall we head straight to the guildmaster?"

"Sure, but the guild seems busier than usual, so it might be a while before he'll be able to see us. Is that all right?"

Inside the guild, I noticed quite a few people gazing at the bulletin board.

"That's fine. I expected it to be crowded," Norris answered.

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. Lots of quests to slay gillydods get posted in the lead-up to the Founding Festival. It's always like this around this time of year."

"Why is that?" I asked.

Gillydods were monsters found in the forests surrounding Lypaed, but I didn't know what they had to do with the Founding Festival.

Norris chuckled with amusement and told me, "Gillydod materials are used in the upcoming festival preparations. People put lanterns out to illuminate the area around their home, which lights the path leading up to the castle. And if you attach gillydod skin to the back of the lanterns, they'll reflect more light and make them shine brighter."

I searched my internal database and discovered that the undersides of gillydod skins are smooth and white, which would reflect light well. They were mainly used by people who worked at night, and they were fixed to the ground with stakes to reflect lantern light more clearly in areas where the workers needed to see.

"That means that during the Founding Festival, you can walk around town without carrying a light with you," Norris said.

"Do you make lanterns with gillydod materials, too?"

"Of course, for both the shop and my home."

"I bet the town really glows at night," I mused. "It must look especially beautiful from a high vantage point, right?"

The festival was an event held to show gratitude toward the royal family, and I looked over at Norris, wondering if he knew what I meant. He smiled knowingly and said, "Once, when I was a kid, I climbed up onto a rooftop to look down at the town. Seeing the whole place bathed in the lantern light was really beautiful."

"……"

"This is only a guess, but since the castle is the highest point, I bet you can see the entire city from up there. It must look even more beautiful than what I saw back then on that roof," Norris added.

"So there's more than one way to show gratitude, other than with gerulito flowers," I said.

"Yeah. The lantern lights are beautiful, so not only do they show gratitude but they also serve as a source of comfort for the townspeople."

I could tell from the smile on Norris's face that the people of Lypaed truly looked forward to the Founding Festival.

The reception desk seemed busy, so we passed the time chatting while we waited. Surprisingly, our turn came quicker than we expected.

“Hey there. If you’re here with Norris does that mean you’re done with the quest?” asked Drum, the guildmaster.

Norris and I both nodded, and I told him I’d completed it.

“Seems business is doing well. Rumor has it you handled a noble’s wedding and sold enchanted roses. I heard they were quite something. I’d love to hear more about it,” Drum said. His gaze felt a little different from usual, so I decided to play dumb.

“One thing I know that you probably don’t, Drum, is that the sorcerer who enchanted the roses already left the kingdom.”

He seemed disappointed and asked Norris for more details, but the florist answered with the response he’d prepared. “The man seemed interested in flowers and asked to see my garden. He stayed for two days and enchanted the roses as a token of his gratitude.”

“What was the sorcerer’s name?”

“He said he was called Basti.”

Basti was a common name on the Sibling continent. I couldn’t quite read Drum’s expression, so I couldn’t tell if he was skeptical of the alias or the story as a whole, but I had to consider the possibility that he might suspect I could use Time magic.

“Oh yeah? That was a real stroke of luck for you, Norris.” After congratulating him, Drum turned to me. “So you’re just here to report back today? Because if you’re looking for work, I have some available quests.”

“No, I have a meeting with another client soon, so I need to prioritize that. I haven’t decided whether I’ll accept their quest yet, though,” I told him.

“That reminds me, you mentioned you’d gotten an offer for a troublesome personal request, didn’t you?” Drum asked.

“Yes. That’s why I’m not thinking about any other quests right now.”

“Right. Well, come by and see me once the Founding Festival is over. There’s a limit to how long I can hold well-paying tasks for ya.”

I'd agreed to take Norris's quest on the condition that the guildmaster set aside a few high-paying jobs for me, but keeping those jobs on hold for too long would inconvenience the clients. I remembered Drum explaining that after a certain period of time, he'd start offering jobs to other adventurers.

"Okay, I understand. Thank you."

Now that his conversation with me was over, Drum turned his gaze to Norris.

"This means the support you were receiving from the guild will end. Do you have any other problems?"

"No, everything is fine. Also, Drum?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for introducing me to Setsuna. Because of you, I didn't have to give up my shop." Norris gave the guildmaster an incredibly deep bow.

"I'm glad to hear it. But I didn't do much. You should thank Setsuna instead."

"True. Thanks, Setsuna."

"You've already thanked me enough and given me ample payment."

With that, our report was finished, and Norris and I said our good-byes to Drum and left the guild.

A short time after leaving, Norris apologized to me. I'd asked him to keep it a secret that I could use Time magic, so he'd come up with an excuse for Drum's questions, but it felt like he hadn't been convincing enough.

Sorcerers who could use Time magic were rare, and those on the Sibling continent were all well-known. There were even some who were black ranks at the Adventurers Guild.

Given their reputation, it was only natural that the guild would want sorcerers who could use Time magic to join as adventurers. That was why, regardless of how well Norris played his part, I was sure they would investigate.

However, the important thing wasn't whether his acting had been convincing, but whether or not he'd continue to keep quiet, and I trusted Norris to keep my secret. I told him as much, then changed the subject.

After that, we talked about Alto and Ragi, and my plans to buy some gerulito flowers soon. As we chatted, Norris suddenly brought up a new topic, as if he'd just remembered something.

"By the way, are you and Ragi already preparing for Wilkis?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Manakis is right after the Founding Festival, and the people of Lypaed finish getting ready for winter before Manakis is over. The snow here is quite heavy, so you need to make sure you're properly prepared."

"…I see." I didn't want to dwell on any future plans, so I changed the subject again.

"Oh right, Norris. I have a favor to ask."

"What is it?"

"Could you sell me a single Laglut rose?"

"Sure," Norris said, looking pleased. "Just one, though?"

"Yes. I want one that hasn't bloomed yet from the flower bucket, and I'd like to use Time magic on it behind your shop. Is that all right with you?"

"Of course."

"Great. I'll buy it along with the gerulito flowers."

"Hmm. Do you need them both on the same day? If not, I can prepare them separately. Please don't hesitate to ask."

His intuition was sharp, as expected of an expert florist. He'd likely guessed where the rose was headed, which was why he'd made that considerate offer. I decided to take him up on it.

"I'd appreciate that. I'll need them on Manakis 1."

"All right," Norris said. "Then please come to my house that day instead of the shop."

"Hmm? But isn't that a weekend? I'd feel bad bothering you on your day off."

"This is you we're talking about, Setsuna. You could never bother me. I want to repay your kindness."

I nodded humbly.

"All right, then. I'll be waiting for you on the first."

Once we'd made that arrangement, I went back home, where Alto and Ragi were waiting for me.

◇ Part Two: Ragi

As soon as Setsuna disappeared from view, Alto's tail, which had been wagging energetically, suddenly stopped. He'd enjoyed last night's dinner outside so much that he'd lost some of his usual self-restraint, and he was probably finding it hard to be away from Setsuna.

"Alto, if you want to go with him, you can." He looked so forlorn that I couldn't help but offer.

But Alto shook his head and said, "My job is to be here with you, Gramps." Loneliness flickered across his eyes.

"You really like Setsuna, don't you?"

"Yes!" he answered immediately.

"What do you like about Setsuna?" I was curious about how Alto saw his master, so I dug a little deeper. Though, I expected his answer would be *"Everything!"*

Yet Alto pondered the question seriously, letting out a thoughtful hum.

I thought he'd answer straight away…

I patiently waited for Alto's response since he seemed so earnest, although I felt a bit perplexed.

"He's strict, but kind. And he treats everyone the same."

"He does?"

"Yeah."

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"How can I explain…?" Alto muttered, but then his eyes suddenly filled with sadness. "Come to think of it, you didn't like Master at first, either, did you, Gramps? You looked at him the same way other beastfolk who dislike him did."

Alto was right. I thought I'd hidden it well, but children were sensitive to how the people they cared about were treated. It pricked my conscience a bit.

"…"

"It isn't just you, Gramps. The humans who hate me looked at me the same way."

"…"

"Traveling with Master made it a little better, but when we got to Kutt, it was Master who people looked at strangely."

I was speechless. I knew all too well what those looks meant, having doubted the pair's relationship before myself. There was no doubt those people had been filled with malice toward Setsuna. Now I was filled with a much stronger sense of guilt.

"…"

The expression on Alto's face as he spoke to me was far from the innocent look he usually had around Setsuna. It wasn't the kind of expression a young boy should have to make.

"But Master is different."

"He is?"

Alto nodded and said calmly, "He's the same with humans and beastfolk." He paused for a moment, then continued thoughtfully. "Because both humans and beastfolk hate him."

"…"

"I think humans hate me, but beastfolk don't."

He was right. To beastfolk, Alto was simply kin; there was no reason for them to hate him. However, their treatment toward humans whom they thought were enslaving beastfolk was incredibly harsh. It was just like how I'd originally treated Setsuna.

"But I know it's my fault they treat Master that way."

"Alto…"

"Even so, Master's kind to everyone. He helps both humans and beastfolk when they're in trouble. I…don't want to help humans."

Alto shifted his gaze to the ground. He pressed his lips together sadly and clenched his fists together as if he was trying to endure something.

"If it wasn't for me, people wouldn't hate Master like that," he continued. "Sometimes, I think it would be better if I wasn't around. But I love him, so I don't want to leave him."

"…"

Alto's words made my heart sink into darkness.

These weren't the sort of feelings a twelve-year-old boy should have to endure. At his age, beastfolk children should be running around at their parents' feet and still relying on them, not feeling as if their existence was harming someone they cared about.

He looked even more depressed than before. As I contemplated how to respond to Alto, he spoke up again before I could.

"Gramps, what do you think I can do for Master?"

He raised his eyes from the ground to me, a serious look on his face. My chest ached seeing his feelings for Setsuna.

“Right now, you should sleep well, play well, and eat well. And study hard.”

Alto pouted, looking dissatisfied by my answer. “That’s exactly what Master always tells me, but I want to do something more.”

It sounded like he was telling me not to treat him like a child, which put a wry smile on my face.

“Do you, now?”

The young boy stared at me intently, motionless as he waited for my answer. For a moment, I wondered if his neck might start to hurt from looking up at me for so long, which distracted me from my thoughts.

Even though he wasn’t doing it on purpose, seeing him like that did lighten my mood a bit. At the same time, though, I knew there must be some kind of advice I could give him.

Right, I can teach Alto what I always do, I thought. *That way, when Setsuna’s troubled, Alto might be able to help him feel better.*

“Alto, doesn’t your neck hurt?”

“My neck?”

“Yeah.”

“Gramps, stop worrying about my neck and think about what I can do for Master!”

Seeing Alto grumble angrily made me feel bad…but he was just so adorable, I couldn’t help but smile.

“Gramps! Stop smiling and really help me think!”

He scolded me again when he saw the expression on my face. I didn’t want to worsen his mood any further, so I went ahead and spoke.

“Hmm, let’s see… If we think about what you can do for Setsuna…”

“Yeah?”

“How about playing a prank on him?”

“…”

“Not a bad prank, of course. But one that’ll make him laugh.”

“Make Master laugh?”

Hmm, did that catch his interest?

“It doesn’t even have to be a prank. The point is to amuse Setsuna somehow.”

“Amuse him?”

“Yes. Laughter can wipe away even bad things that happen to us, you know.”

Alto seemed to realize something and said, “Yes, I understand…,” then sank deep in thought. I watched him quietly.

“Gramps, why do people play pranks?”

“Well, pranks are fun for the person playing them, too.”

“…”

He gave me a look like he wanted to say something, but I pretended not to notice and continued talking.

“If you want to amuse someone, you have to amuse yourself first.”

“You do?”

“Well, when Setsuna seems down, doesn’t that make you feel sad, too? If you try to make him laugh while you feel sad or lonely, it won’t work.”

Alto nodded emphatically.

“So to make someone else have fun, you need to have fun yourself. When you can do both of those things at the same time, that’s what makes a good prank.”

His expression was a mixture of understanding and confusion.

Maybe just one more push?

“Of course, it’s difficult to come up with pranks that both people will enjoy. It might be a little too challenging for a kid like you,” I said to provoke him, then let out an exaggerated sigh.

“That’s not true! I can think of pranks Master would enjoy!”

“Can you really?”

“Yes!”

“Then shall we start thinking about an idea right away?”

“Yeah!”

It had worked so well that, despite being the one to provoke him, I couldn’t help but worry a little about Alto’s future. However, when he said, “I have to finish my studies for today first, so can you wait for me, Gramps?” I felt my spirits lift and my concerns subside.

I recalled that Setsuna had recently expressed concern over how competitive Alto was and asked my advice for it. I’d told him it was perfectly normal behavior for a child, which Setsuna

seemed relieved to hear. Although I was smiling, I couldn’t help but sympathize with the young man’s worries.

Just as Setsuna cared deeply about Alto and thought of him every day, Alto did the same. I sincerely hoped that their relationship would remain that gentle and caring forever.

◇ Part Three: Setsuna

I noticed something was unusual the moment Ragi's house came into view. The lights were usually on, but now all the rooms were dark.

Did something happen to Ragi?

There weren't any signs of trouble yet, so I suppressed my anxiety and hurried toward the house. I could only detect Alto's presence inside, and although it was a relief to know he was safe, I was worried about Ragi. A cold sweat began to trickle down my back.

I quickly opened the front door, and some sort of solid mass suddenly came at me. It all happened so fast, but I knew it wasn't alive, so I reflexively drew my sword and sliced it in two. The pieces flew in different directions.

Before I could grasp what had happened, a piercing scream filled the room.

"Aaaaaaagh!"

"Alto?!"

I walked through the darkness toward Alto's presence and found him crying in a corner of the foyer.

"Waaaah!"

I could see him, but there was no sign of the master of the house, Ragi.

"Alto, what happened? Where's Ragi?"

He didn't respond, but I could tell that he was clutching something to his chest and sobbing uncontrollably. I was worried about his crying, but Ragi's absence worried me even more. Normally, he would be inside the living room relaxing, but I could see through the glass door that all the lights were off.

Suddenly, the worst-case scenario flashed through my mind, though I knew it was too early to jump to conclusions. I turned back toward Alto to ask again when my gaze met a pair of quiet eyes watching me.

"…"

"…"

A white wolf was watching me, its tail thumping against the carpet.

"…Ragi? What are you doing?" I was sure my face was tense.

“M-Master… You’re so mean…!” Alto managed to say through his sobs. Ragi turned back into his human form and glanced at what was in Alto’s arms.

“It was split perfectly in half…,” he commented softly. That only made Alto tremble and start crying even harder.

“Jackie!”

I finally realized that the thing I’d cut in half was Alto’s beloved stuffed animal. I was utterly baffled, but then Ragi explained what was going on. Apparently, they’d planned a prank to surprise me by dropping Jackie on me as soon as I opened the door.

Why would they play a prank like that?

Before I could fully process what was going on, Ragi continued his explanation.

“After we startled you with the stuffed animal, I was supposed to sneak behind you and scare you again by howling.”

Oh, I see. So that’s why I couldn’t sense Ragi’s presence—he was concealing it. I’d just assumed…

I tried to calm my thoughts before they went any further. Ragi’s skill at concealing his presence had surpassed my detection abilities. That was all there was to it.

While I was talking to Ragi, Alto cradled the head of his stuffed toy in his arms and went off to find Jackie’s body. He returned quickly, dragging it back to me.

“…”

Ragi gave a sympathetic look to Alto, but I hoped he wouldn’t cast me as the villain in this scenario…

“Master… Jackie is…”

“…”

“Jackie’s…”

“…”

Tears streamed down Alto’s face and onto Jackie’s head and body. I didn’t think it was very fair to blame me for this, since it was a direct result of their prank, but Alto was so distressed that I decided it would be too cruel to say that.

“Jackie…”

Alto kept his gaze fixed on me, apparently hoping I could fix the toy.

I looked at Jackie, who was now in Alto's arms, and thought it over for a moment.

It'd be easy to repair with magic, but just because it's easy doesn't mean it's the right thing to do.

I made eye contact with Alto and spoke in a serious tone.

"Alto, once something is broken, it can't go back to the way it was. That's why you need to be careful with your things."

His tears continued to fall as he protectively clutched Jackie even tighter, perhaps out of regret.

"I'm sorry, Jackie…," he said.

This is just too heartbreaking.

I took a needle and thread out from my bag.

"Here, give Jackie to me. I might not be able to get him back to how he looked before, but I can mend him."

Alto handed the stuffed bunny over and sat down next to me. He watched as I started to sew the head and body back together.

"Master, I want to do it," he insisted after a while. "It's my responsibility, so I'll fix Jackie."

I showed him how to hold the needle and handed Jackie back to him. He struggled with the unfamiliar task, but he worked silently and sewed with great effort, repeatedly pricking his fingers with the needle. Ragi watched over him with a soft smile on his face.

Since it was Alto's first attempt at sewing, the repair work was quite rough, and Jackie's head bent at an impossible angle. There was no way I could tell him this, but the stitches connecting Jackie's head to his body made the soft toy look far creepier than before.

After Alto finished sewing, he looked exhausted from concentrating so hard and promptly fell asleep.

I knew that Jackie's head would just fall off again if I left it as is, so I decided to sew more closely packed stitches over Alto's.

Ragi was watching me with interest and said, "You could've easily fixed that with magic, Setsuna. That's probably what Alto

was hoping for.” I wondered why he was saying that, since I knew he understood the message I’d been trying to teach Alto.

“I know, but it felt wrong to do that for some reason. I didn’t want him to think that broken things can always be fixed so easily.”



He nodded. “I see. You’re so serious, Setsuna.” He had a gentle gaze on his face, and I sensed a warmth that I had so often experienced since we’d moved here. Ragi reminded me so much of my grandfather. In an effort to hide my emotions, I looked at him and let out a slight complaint.

“It’s partly your fault that I ended up doing this sewing, isn’t it?”

“Well, I never expected things to turn out like this. Alto looked so sad.” Ragi gazed at the young boy as he slept, and his eyes wavered slightly.

I sighed lightly and stretched my shoulders. Sewing was making them stiffer than I’d expected.

“This probably turned into a good lesson for Alto. I’ll go easy on him regarding today’s prank, because of Jackie.”

Ragi chuckled at my words. “First pranks often end in failure.”

I frowned. “First” implied there would be more to come.

“I’d prefer that to be the last prank,” I said.

“Well, I don’t think Alto will try using Jackie for any other pranks.”

“I’m sure he won’t. And please tell him not to turn off the lights in the house. I was worried something might’ve happened to you.”

Ragi nodded apologetically and then said with a smile, “Ah, I’m sorry about that. I promise we won’t do it again.”

“I’m just glad nothing serious happened.”

As I continued sewing Jackie back up, I briefly told Ragi about my day. He listened attentively as he enjoyed a drink, then filled me in on what had happened while I was gone, and we chatted amiably. Moments like these were so relaxing for me. It felt as if I truly was talking with my own grandfather.

I’m glad Ragi is okay, I thought, but a vague, indescribable weight settled on my heart. I shook my head to push those thoughts out of my mind, not wanting to think about that for now.

◇ Part Four: Georges

It had been two days now since I'd successfully pulled off the twelve-day marriage proposal ceremony.

The sight of the roses blooming in front of me and my fiancée, Sophia, had been indescribably beautiful. I'd never forget the sight of it, and Sophia seemed overjoyed by it as well.

I owed Setsuna and Norris a huge debt of gratitude. I had no regrets, even if I might have to pay a price for it at some point in the future—a price that involved being questioned by the king.

Today was my first day back at work after my break. I walked through the castle and tried to stay composed as my fellow knights congratulated me. If the king summoned me, I had no choice but to comply. I expected to be called as soon as my arrival was reported to the castle, so I had no time to relax.

Still…my heart feels heavy.

Time sorcerers were powerful but incredibly rare. Rumor had it that there were fewer than five on the entire Sibling continent. So if there had been one in Lypaed, it was only natural that the king would want to look into it and add such a sorcerer to his ranks.

Setsuna hated the idea of working for the royal court and hoped that I would keep his talents a secret. I'd agreed to this and, after the engagement ceremony, pretended that the sorcerer had already left the kingdom in order to maintain the ruse.

Although it was painful, I had lied to Sophia, my family, and my friends. Yet even so, hiding the truth from the king seemed incredibly burdensome. And since I'd sworn my allegiance to Eugene, if he was to ever question me about it, my position as his knight would make it difficult for me to continue concealing the truth.

Setsuna had said he didn't mind if I told the king, but revealing his name would mean exposing his secret.

I promised him. I promised not to tell anyone that he can use Time magic…

I arrived at the knight's waiting room, lost in such thoughts, and clenched my hands into fists with a sigh. Since it was the night shift and already past nine PM, the room was quieter than during the day. Normally, this silence would calm me, but right

now, it only heightened my sense of uncertainty as to what might lie in store for me in the future.

Next, I'll meet up with Prince Eugene and Cyrus and head to the reception room.

I told myself to focus, and I regained my composure before moving from the waiting room to the reception room. Just as I reached the door, Lord Keith and his first and third knights appeared.

Keith noticed me and paused. He told his third knight, Yarmuth, "You can go now." Yarmuth bowed and congratulated me on my engagement, then left for the waiting room.

After he departed, I exchanged a few words with Lord Keith, before hearing some footsteps hurrying toward me from behind.

"How dare you cover me in petals like that?!"

I turned around to see Cyrus sticking his fist out toward me, and I caught it just in time.

"I thought it looked good on you."

Although his words weren't exactly friendly, his smile indicated he wasn't upset.

"Don't leave me behind, Cyrus!"

Prince Eugene caught up and shot a disapproving glance toward Cyrus as he scolded him. Leaving one's lord behind was a faux pas for a knight, so Prince Eugene was right to reprimand him.

Cyrus looked somewhat embarrassed as he straightened up and apologized to Eugene. Once I saw Eugene smile, though, I realized he'd only been joking. I honestly envied their camaraderie a little.

"So what's the reason for covering me in petals like that?" Cyrus asked.

"I want to know that, too. Even now, whenever I think about how surprised Cyrus was, it makes me laugh!" Prince Eugene's shoulders shook with laughter. Lord Keith also chuckled before clearing his throat, while Cyrus had an annoyed look on his face.

"I was just admiring the petals floating in the air, when all of a sudden, I found myself buried in them! You'd be shocked, too!"

"Ha-ha-ha."

"Stop laughing, Georges!"

"I wasn't the mastermind behind it, though," I told him. "It's not like I knew it would turn out like that. It's just funny to think

about it now.”

“So then who was the one behind it? It wasn’t Lady Sophia, was it?”

“No, it was Setsuna.”

I had wanted to embrace Sophia during the ceremony without everyone seeing, so I’d asked Setsuna to do something to help us. And since Setsuna was so close with Cyrus, he must not have hesitated to throw petals at him.

Thanks to that, everyone’s attention had been diverted away from us. I was grateful to Setsuna for executing it so elegantly without disrupting the mood.

“So it was him…”

Cyrus was annoyed, but he didn’t seem surprised that Setsuna had been involved. Instead, Lord Keith was the one who was shocked, and Prince Eugene accepted it with a nod.

“So why did you and Setsuna look so chummy anyway?” Cyrus asked.

“I didn’t think we looked chummy.”

“Then where did you meet Setsuna? I didn’t think you two had interacted much at all.”

“It was the day you suggested I go on patrol.”

“Dammit. I knew I should’ve gone with you,” Cyrus muttered regretfully. Hearing that, Prince Eugene gave a wry chuckle.

“Well, it wouldn’t have been ideal for both the first and second knights to be out on patrol. Besides, didn’t you go fishing with him?” I asked Cyrus.

“How is that relevant?! So where did you meet him?”

“A flower shop.”

“Huh? Even if he was there buying flowers, you’re not the type to strike up a conversation.”

“He was working there,” I said.

“…”

Everyone’s eyes widened in surprise at my revelation. It made sense; I’d also been shocked to see Setsuna working there.

“He was working at a flower shop? For some reason, I feel like that suits him better than being an adventurer… But why was he doing that?”

I briefly explained the situation as I’d heard it from Setsuna and Norris, and how they’d offered to help when I mentioned I

was struggling with the marriage proposal.

"Dammit, I should've gone, too! Then I could've teased him."

Although Cyrus said that, there was a part of him that seemed concerned that Setsuna was having trouble. After all, he was the main reason why Setsuna and Alto had come to Lypaed.

"You speak so calmly about it, Georges, so it really seems like you had a wonderful time," Lord Keith commented.

"Yes. I might not be smiling now if I hadn't met them," I said.

Prince Eugene and the others appeared to sense something from my response and nodded in understanding, but they chose not to comment any further.

"By the way, Georges. Who came up with that idea for the proposal?" Prince Eugene asked, either out of curiosity or to change the subject.

"…"

Fred looked at me with interest and grinned as our eyes met. I was suddenly overcome by the urge to punch him.

"It was Setsuna's idea. He told me about the symbolism of the twelve roses."

"I see. So was it your idea to bring the 'eternal' part up on the twelfth day?"

I hadn't expected that question and stumbled over my words. For a moment, the word *eternal* evoked the idea of "time," which led me to think about Time magic. I wasn't sure if that had been Prince Eugene's intention or not, but either way, I felt a chill run down my spine.

Even though I knew they were waiting for me to continue, the words just wouldn't come.

"…"

Cyrus burst into laughter when I hesitated, and I glared at him.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing, it's just… What's up with that look on your face?"

"…"

I couldn't tell what kind of face I was making, but it must have been pretty bad if Cyrus was laughing like that.

"When you make a face like that, it's basically the same as answering the question, right? Oof, my stomach hurts… I think I might die from laughing!"

Cyrus's relentless laughter only increased my frustration, and I stomped hard on his foot, trying to let it out.

"Ow! Hey, what do you think you're doing?" Cyrus moved to retaliate, but Lord Keith stopped him.

"Cyrus, you brought that upon yourself. And, Eugene, you shouldn't ask such things."

Lord Keith had stopped Cyrus and chided Prince Eugene. Cyrus rubbed his foot and backed down.

"Yeah, but who wouldn't be curious after such a perfect marriage proposal? Lady Sophia will remember it for the rest of her life," Prince Eugene responded without a trace of remorse. Fred continued to smirk behind Lord Keith as he watched me.

I'll have to punch Fred later to make sure he forgets this…

Just as I made up my mind about that, Cyrus called out to me, having recovered from the pain. I turned my face toward him, but at that moment, a soldier opened the door to the waiting room.

He hesitated briefly upon seeing us talking in the hallway but quickly knelt before Prince Eugene and spoke.

"I have a message from the king. May I deliver it here?"

"You may," replied Prince Eugene, and the soldier conveyed the king's message.

"Prince Eugene, the king requests you bring Sir Georges to the throne room."

I realized that the situation was unfolding just as I'd anticipated.

I guess I have no choice but to tell the king the truth. Still… I began to feel conflicted, while Prince Eugene quickly responded to the soldier.

"Eugene, we haven't finished the handover yet, so I should probably come along as well," said Cyrus.

"It'll be late by the time we return, but thanks for guarding me a little while longer."

"It can't be helped. Let's go, then. Keith and Fred, what will you do?"

"I assume I will be summoned as well," responded Keith, "so we'll accompany you to the throne room. If the king doesn't need me, I'll just get back to work."

With that, Cyrus lightly patted me on the back. I nodded and followed behind Prince Eugene and the others, listening to their idle conversation.

"There's no need to be so tense," Prince Eugene reassured me.

It dawned on me then that everyone must have known the king would summon me. The fact that no one had been surprised when it happened was proof enough of that. That must've been why they'd all done everything they could to try and ensure I wouldn't be excessively nervous in front of the king.

However, Prince Eugene and the others seemed to think that if I was facing the king, I wouldn't hesitate to speak about the sorcerer who could use Time magic.

…I'm sorry.

I felt my resolve to remain silent only grow stronger at this point.

Even if I told them Setsuna's secret, I was sure my relationship with him and Alto wouldn't change. However, my pride as a knight wouldn't allow me to do that.

I felt someone's gaze on me and turned to see Cyrus watching me. When I made eye contact with him, he shook his head as if to say there was nothing wrong, then turned to look back in front of him. After that, he didn't look at me again.

I realized no one was talking anymore. It was possible—no, *more* than possible—that my tension had affected everyone. Even Lord Keith, who'd been chatting with Prince Eugene just moments ago, had fallen silent and stared ahead as if lost in thought.

When I informed the knights guarding the throne room that I'd been summoned, the doors immediately opened. Inside, ministers lined the aisle, and the general was positioned close to the king.

Prince Eugene and Lord Keith moved to their usual places in the throne room. However, I was instructed to remain in place until everyone was properly positioned before I approached the throne.

I walked to stand before the thrones in which the king and queen sat, then I knelt and waited in that position until the king

spoke.

“Georges, I trust you understand why you’ve been summoned?”

“I do.”

“Then let me ask you: The magic used in the roses you gave your fiancée was Time magic, was it not?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Then you must know the name and whereabouts of the sorcerer who performed the magic.”

“I am terribly sorry, but I cannot disclose that information. I made a promise to the sorcerer.”

As the king stared at me, the excuse I’d prepared in advance scattered like mist in the air, and the atmosphere grew tense.

“I understand your position. However, for the sake of our kingdom, it is impossible for us to overlook the existence of a sorcerer who can use Time magic.”

“…”

“Having them serve Lypaed would be ideal, but we must prevent them from aligning with Guilonde at all costs. We may even have to consider imprisonment if necessary.”

I understood where the king was coming from. With Setsuna’s immense power, the thought that he might side with the empire was nothing short of a serious threat. Still, I couldn’t erase the memory of Setsuna enjoying being able to cast Time magic freely.

“I am very sorry, but even so, I cannot reveal that information.”

By this point, the mood in the room was positively arctic. Eugene must have been pale with worry, but I couldn’t bring myself to look at him.

“What will you do if your master Eugene requests this information from you? Would you reveal the name then?”

“…”

I heard Prince Eugene’s breath catch in his throat, and the thing I’d suppressed inside me began to struggle again.

“Georges,” the prince said. “Let me ask you as well. The sorcerer—”

But before he could finish his sentence, a voice rang out sounding both exasperated and slightly proud.

“Georges, the sorcerer was Setsuna, wasn’t it?”

Startled, I turned to look at Cyrus. Everyone else turned to him as well.

"…"

The fact that my head had swung so quickly in his direction seemed to confirm Cyrus's statement, even though a definitive answer hadn't come from my lips.

"Your Majesty, may I have permission to speak with Georges?" Cyrus asked, kneeling and bowing his head.

"Rise. You may."

Cyrus stood up, took a step forward, and pulled out a piece of paper from his breast pocket to show to me.

"This is a message from that damn sorcerer who covered me in flower petals at the engagement ceremony."

The king didn't interrupt, since he had been made aware of the incident at the ceremony.

Cyrus read aloud from the paper, never taking his eyes off me. "'Cyrus, if Georges is ever in trouble, please help him. From Setsuna.' He probably used magic to slip this into my pocket when he covered me in the petals. At first, I didn't understand what he meant by this, so I was going to ask you about it. But now I guess I don't have to."

Oh, so that's what it was…

I remembered that Cyrus had tried to talk to me when the soldiers came to get me.

"He must've figured this would happen. He knew you wouldn't reveal his name, so he left a message for me to help you if you were ever in trouble. Sorry it took me so long to figure it out."

Setsuna's message warmed my heart. It seemed like he was always saving me. Cyrus didn't say anything else and stepped back to his original position.

Both his and Setsuna's thoughtfulness filled me with gratitude as I waited for the king to speak.

"…I see. Very well, this matter is settled. You may leave."

A murmur spread throughout the throne room. The ministers began to object to the king, but he didn't respond to any of them.

"Setsuna is the bard Sena, who saved my life," he said simply, causing the murmuring to grow louder. Only a few people knew that Setsuna had stayed at the castle under a pseudonym. "And judging by his actions, I know that he would never serve Guilonde."

Setsuna had saved the kingdom yet declined any substantial reward, making it clear that he didn't want to get himself too deeply involved with the royal court. At the very least, everyone present understood that.

"Therefore, there's no need for further investigation into this matter. That is all," the king declared, and no one dared to oppose him.

◇ Part Five: The Queen

The words of my dear friends flickered through my mind.

“With Linus ruling over it, the kingdom will surely be great.”

The people of Lypaed loved their country.

“Support Linus until the very end, Lilia.”

Even when things didn’t go as planned, I kept trying my best.

“Don’t cry, Lilia. It’s the pain of being reborn.”

I never wanted to know that pain.

“Smile. Smile, Lilia. Today is the day Linus achieves a great victory.”

I couldn’t smile. Not in front of my dying friend.

“I want you to see the happy faces of the people in my place.”

There were so many things I wanted to tell you. So many…

I’d seen many of my friends off to the Waterside. And the sorrow from those times would never heal inside me. I would never forget their final words.

The Founding Festival was also a time to commemorate those friends who had departed. A time to honor their last wishes.

I was determined not to let the history of our nation fade—a history we’d painfully struggled through to get to where we were now. I vowed to continue to pass on the events of that fateful day so that we wouldn’t become rulers who caused our people to suffer, and so our descendants wouldn’t tread down that same sorrow-filled path.

Of course, I understood that the king and Eugene were behind on their work due to the recent events. Even so, this year, there were fewer worries than the last, and I firmly believed we should hold the Founding Festival.

It wasn’t just some selfish desire of mine; the entire kingdom yearned for it. I hoped the king would recognize that. That was my only wish.

Thinking that today would finally be that day, I opened the door.

◇ Part Six: Lilia

Driven by my promise to Setsuna, I'd been trying for the past few days to get the king, Eugene, the general, and the ministers to listen, but their responses hadn't been favorable. Worse still, they had begun distancing themselves from me.

Even now, as we moved to the audience chamber, the king was silent and didn't look at me. The reason was obvious; he was waiting for me to stop continually wanting to talk with him.

However, being kept at a distance like this made me realize something. Both the king and Eugene seemed to be suffering physically from overwork.

The king seemed to be having a hard time breathing, although he was unaware of it. Eugene had dark circles under his eyes from a lack of sleep and often stared blankly into space. I feared something irreversible might happen if I didn't force them to get some rest soon.

I recalled what the king's mentor had told me once:

"Hmm, Linus's fatal flaw is that once he has a goal, he just keeps rushing toward it without stopping."

I truly believed that the two of them needed a break, and that participating in the Founding Festival would do just that, since it put a hold on all government duties.

There would be some officials who had obligations, of course, such as public appearances, but otherwise, it would be a forced period of rest. It was the perfect opportunity for the king and Eugene to recuperate.

The king stood to dismiss the meeting and move on to his next task.

"May I please have your attention, everyone?" I called out, raising my voice. This was a last-ditch effort on my part, since all my attempts at reaching them individually had failed and everyone was currently gathered here. Yet the reaction around me was one of annoyance, that I was simply harping on about the same thing, and the king had an impassive look on his face as he turned to me.

"Queen Lilia, if this is about the Founding Festival, there's no need to discuss it any further. A decision has already been made."

“Please just hear me out.”

“That’s enough,” the king refused bluntly.

“Just go out with Margaret and leave us be like you did last year,” Eugene chimed in.

And with that, the two of them left the throne room with their knights, not even looking back.

“…”

My heart ached, but I couldn’t give up now. I addressed the general and ministers who remained—friends of both the king and mine since our early days.

I asked for help, but even they shook their heads with troubled expressions. I knew they cared for me, but they also believed that work should take priority over celebrating the Founding Festival.

“But the king looks unwell! This would be a good opportunity for him to rest,” I insisted.

“I agree that His Majesty is overexerting himself. However, if he skips the festival and focuses on his work, he can finish up sooner and take a break afterward.”

Perhaps the workload they still had ahead of them was more overwhelming than I’d imagined.

“…Dolph.” I called the general by his first name, which I hadn’t done in a long while. I also spoke the names of each of the ministers present. “Please take care of yourselves and make sure to drink your tea. Though, I know your children might not like it.”

The tea wasn’t particularly tasty, but it was essential for the overworked king and his men, and I told them as much. They nodded, although they had somewhat awkward expressions on their faces.

I excused myself and returned to my room after telling them I needed some time alone. Once there, I walked over to the window and sat down on the sofa there.

“I can’t get through to them…”

Tears fell unbidden down my face. My spirit was wavering, but I knew I’d be filled with regret if I gave up now.

“If nothing changes and still nobody will listen to you, then *I’ll accept your quest.”* Setsuna’s words were my only solace, but I knew it wasn’t over yet.

“It’s not too late to make a decision after I meet with Setsuna… Don’t worry, nothing is set in stone yet,” I reassured myself,

before beginning preparations for the next day.

The maid prepared some tea, and I offered it to Setsuna, who sat across from me. He drank it without hesitation, despite its pungent aroma.

"Many people don't like this tea, so I'm surprised to see you don't mind it."

"It's made with morilina leaves, isn't it? I used to drink it a long time ago."

"Oh, I'm surprised you knew it was morilina tea," I said. Eugene and the others just called it "that weird-tasting tea."

"I enjoy herbal teas, and morilina leaves have a distinctive fragrance."

We kept chatting about various herbal teas for a little while.

"I think I'll try making some myself again," he said.

"Would you like another cup?" I offered. I wondered if he was just being polite, but Setsuna nodded and passed his cup to the maid. Just that simple gesture brought tears to my eyes.

"…Are you all right?" he asked, looking at me with concern after noticing I was so still. "Is something wrong?"

In his gentle voice, he urged me to open up about everything that had happened since we last met, including all my worries.

"The king isn't well…" Talking about the king's health brought up the bad memory of when he'd been poisoned, which filled me with anxiety. I also mentioned Eugene's lack of sleep. Setsuna listened intently without interrupting.

It had been a long time since anyone had *truly* listened to me, and it made my heart feel a little lighter.

"Let's set aside your initial request for now and focus on solving the king's and Eugene's issues," he suggested.

"You think you can solve them?"

"I do. I can prepare a potent sleeping potion for Eugene. And as for the king, judging by his symptoms, he will need to receive treatment sooner rather than later. If he's unaware of his condition, however, getting him to rest and recuperate will be difficult."

"How do you know so much about it, Setsuna?" I asked.

He smiled sheepishly before revealing his secret. “Actually, I was the one who made the antidote for the king.”

“…”

“I asked Cyrus to keep it a secret. If Guilonde found out, our lives would be in danger.”

“Are you sure it’s all right to tell me?”

“Well, I have no choice. You need to know the whole story so that I can create medicine for the king.”

“That’s true… Does the king know?” I asked.

“Yes, he’s aware.”

“All right. Thank you, Setsuna.”

“You’re welcome. But please keep it a secret that I can craft antidotes for that poison, and make sure the lady behind you does as well.”

“Of course. Lalegul, please keep this to yourself.” I turned to make sure my maid understood, and she nodded firmly.

I then asked Setsuna if he could create some kind of medicine that would help the king recover without needing to rest. It seemed impossible, but I was hoping there might be something that could reduce the king’s burden. Setsuna just gave me a strained smile in response.

“Now, on to the main reason for our meeting today,” Setsuna said. “It seems as though you weren’t successful trying to persuade everyone, as we discussed last time.”

“Sadly not,” I replied apologetically.

“Which brings us back to your request for me to detain the king. You want time to talk to him when you won’t be interrupted by anyone, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right. Even an hour would suffice.”

“Just to make sure, are you okay if, even after speaking to him, the king still decides not to attend the Founding Festival? I don’t want to be complicit in coercing an answer out of him.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t want to do that, either.”

Setsuna let out a big sigh of relief. *How rude*, I thought. *Just who do you take me for?*

“So what exactly do you have in mind for this plan of yours?” he asked.

“The place where the king will likely be is surrounded by a barrier created by a magical tool. During that time, no other magical tools or spells will work on him. I want you to wait until that barrier is lifted so you can teleport us away, then kidnap and detain us,” I explained.

“But we won’t know when that will be, so that could prove difficult. You don’t mean I have to hide and watch the whole time, do you?”

“I’ve thought of a way around that. Meetings have started in the morning recently due to the pressing national issues, but there’s always a break at the same time. I want you to wait for that moment.”

“I see. I think I understand for the most part.”

“At first, I considered using a magical tool to carry out the plan, but the ones sold in stores are too weak, and Keith could easily disable them. He’s the best magic user in the castle, so creating a tool stronger than his abilities would be impossible for me. Besides, making such magical tools inside the castle could expose my plan.”

“And that’s why you turned to me.”

“Yes. You’re the only sorcerer I know whose abilities surpass Keith’s. Also, I can’t exactly go out and advertise for help, can I?” I joked.

“No, please don’t do that,” Setsuna replied, his face drawn.

“Anyway, that’s why I want you to come at the designated time and use your magic.”

“I could just give you a magical tool to use that should suffice,” he offered.

“Yes, but I’d prefer for you to be at the castle in case something unexpected happens.”

“Well, we can discuss the details afterward,” Setsuna said evasively. I understood his reluctance but let him continue. “Even if we succeed in confining the king, do you really think you can persuade him? To be honest, detaining a king is a pretty big deal, so I don’t want to accept this quest if it’s not going to work.”

“Oh, it’ll be fine,” I reassured him.

I explained my reasoning to Setsuna. The king had become overly focused on laying foundations for the future, but if my plan succeeded, it should remind him to pay attention to what the

citizens needed presently and change his mind—just like I'd been encouraged to do.

I truly believed that the king was simply too overwhelmed with the many issues he had on his plate at the moment, and that he'd become preoccupied with future concerns.

"The king is a kind man, but right now, he's too busy to listen to those around him," I said.

"Do you really think he'll agree to attend the Founding Festival?" Setsuna asked.

I nodded firmly and asked once more. "So will you accept my quest?"

"…"

Setsuna paused, deep in thought. I was worried that he might refuse, in which case, I was out of options. So I prayed silently as I waited for his response.

"I'm having trouble making up my mind," he said. "I apologize, but can I give you an answer the day after tomorrow?"

I asked why, but he said it was something personal and wouldn't elaborate. It seemed like he was struggling with something, but his request wasn't something I could easily agree to.

"I know the day before the festival is cutting it close, but I promise I won't let you down. I'll have the medicines for the king and Eugene ready by then as well."

I almost asked him to answer me right then and there, but I stopped myself. It was clear that Setsuna was dealing with his own issues. I was the one who was asking too much of him.

"So you'll be here the same time the day after tomorrow?" I asked, trying to sound upbeat.

He nodded kindly, and his behavior assured me that there was still hope in this situation.

◇ Part Seven: Setsuna

I could hear the sounds of Ragi and Alto training coming from outside the window. Alto had been spending more time training with Ragi lately than with me. Ragi was skilled in hand-to-hand combat and the unique fighting style of beastfolk, which was what he was teaching Alto.

I watched their training whenever I could. It was impossible for Alto to completely master Ragi's techniques yet, so I learned as much as I could from spectating in order to continue teaching Alto later.

But this morning, I couldn't focus, so I went to the kitchen early to make breakfast. I'd met with the queen the previous day, and she'd seemed quite down. In fact, she seemed so upset that even our casual conversation had brought tears to her eyes.

Honestly, considering the ample time she'd had since we made our promise, I hadn't expected her efforts to talk to them to fail, no matter how busy they were. Was the situation in Lypaed really that dire that they had to refuse her so stubbornly? Since I was an outsider, I honestly couldn't tell.

Still, it doesn't seem right to let the queen get so desperate and sad.

I felt a deep sympathy for her and wanted to fulfill her wish. And conveniently enough, I had the means to do so. Creating a magical tool to teleport the king, as well as a soundproof barrier for his detention, would be easy for me.

Yet I kept questioning whether this was really the right thing to do. I sympathized with the queen's situation, but I couldn't say that the king and Eugene were really in the wrong, either. Maybe the queen's usual behavior was the reason they hadn't taken her seriously.

She'd mentioned they hadn't listened to her but had not said a word of blame against them. Maybe no one was really at fault in this situation, and if that was true, then taking sides felt wrong.

I didn't want to openly confront Cyrus and the others. That was the least I could do as his friend, even if it meant I just supplied the queen with magical tools.

I promised I'd help fulfill her quest if her efforts failed, though.

I had to take responsibility for what I'd said. I stopped chopping the ingredients and took a deep breath.

And even if I make the magical tools and give them to the queen…

Imagining her carrying out her plan alone with no one on her side was an incredibly lonely thought. It reminded me of Cyrus and Norris when I first met them.

"I'm hungry!"

Alto's loud voice pulled me from my reveries as he burst into the room.

"Looks like we got back a little early, huh?" Ragi said, looking at the meal I was in the middle of making.

"Why don't you two have some tea while you wait?" I suggested. I handed them some herbal tea, which reminded me of the previous day.

I thought of the queen's face when I'd asked her to wait for my answer. Her eyes had been full of worry.

After breakfast, Ragi suggested we start preparing for the Founding Festival. He seemed worried about me but didn't voice it, and before long, he started chatting with Alto.

"What do we need to prepare?" Alto asked.

"Well, first, we need to buy gerulito flowers," Ragi said.

"Will we go to Norris and Elly's place, then?" Alto asked hopefully.

I nodded. "Yes, they said they have plenty of gerulito flowers, so we can go whenever we want."

"What else do we need?"

I talked about the gillydod hides that Norris had mentioned.

Ragi explained how we would light the path with lanterns. He said he'd actually never put lanterns up around the house for the Founding Festival before, so he'd been wanting to ask us what we wanted to do. Alto eagerly said he wanted to help.

"Should we go hunt for gillydods ourselves?" he asked.

"What?! Right now?"

"Ha-ha!"

Alto's unexpected suggestion had startled me, and Ragi laughed. We convinced Alto we would buy the hides instead of hunting for

them.

First, we bought the gillydod hides, which were sold so that all you had to do was stick them in the ground and they were ready to use. Then we took our time walking to Norris and Elly's shop, matching Alto's pace.

"Alto! Over here!" Elly's cheerful voice rang out as we approached the shop. She'd spotted us during a lull in customers and waved enthusiastically.

"Hi, Elly!" Alto greeted her.

"Hello, Alto. Are you here to buy gerulito flowers for the festival?"

"Yeah! I heard we need them."

"That's right! Everyone wears gerulito flowers during all three days of the festival," Elly explained.

"Ohhh."

Ragi and Alto had become close with Elly ever since they'd taken care of her while she'd been injured and unable to move on her own.

"Welcome to you, too, Ragi and Setsuna!"

We returned Elly's greeting, and Norris appeared from the back of the shop, having heard voices.

"Is something wrong, Elly?" he asked.

"No, Alto and the others are here!" she said.

"Oh, so they are! Welcome, Setsuna, Alto, and Ragi. Elly, I'll take over here. Why don't you invite them inside?"

"Sure. Come on in, everyone."

Elly led us to the back room and prompted us to sit down, so we did. She told us to wait for a little while, but sitting there, I couldn't help but feel strangely uneasy.

A few days ago, I was working here myself… It feels so surreal.

Right then, Elly returned, carrying a wooden box. She put it on the table, then sat down.

"Is something the matter?" she asked with concern, perhaps noticing how I was looking all around me.

"No, I was just thinking how odd it is that I was working here not too long ago."

She smiled happily. “You’re always welcome to come back and work, you know. Here are the gerulito flowers you asked for.”

She opened the box and revealed three beautifully bloomed gerulito flowers, each adorned with a different embroidered ribbon. Elly explained that since the days leading up to the festival were so busy for them, they sold the flowers after they’d already opened.

“I embroidered the ribbons to thank you for all your help. Will you accept them?” she asked.

“Are you sure we can have such lovely gifts?”

“Of course! That’s why I made them.”

“Oh, I know that flower. It’s a sealal!” Alto said, pointing to one of the ribbons.

“That’s right! Norris told me that was the very first flower you picked from the shop, which is why I chose it for yours.”

“I love this flower,” Alto said.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Thank you so much, Elly!”

“You’re very welcome. For Ragi, I chose a white lisianthus.”

Elly shyly handed a gerulito to the older man. The white lisianthus was the first flower Ragi had picked when he’d come here.

“This ribbon is so beautiful… Are you sure I can have this?”

“Yes, of course!”

“Then thank you very much…” Ragi carefully accepted the gerulito flower with a bow.

“And, Setsuna, this one is for you. Norris and I decided on a gerulito flower for the embroidery to express our gratitude and let you know how happy we are now, thanks to you.”

Gratitude and happiness—symbols of the gerulito flower.

“Thank you. I really appreciate it,” I said.

The milky-white gerulito flower was wrapped with a red ribbon that was embroidered with matching white gerulito flowers in bloom.

After saying good-bye to Norris and Elly, we went to a nearby restaurant for lunch, then headed home through the residential district.

As we were walking, a voice suddenly called out from a small town square.

“Hey, you three! The young men over there!”

I looked at Ragi, who laughed and said, “I believe you’re the only one who could be called a young man, Setsuna.”

That wasn’t why I’d looked at him, though—a fact I knew he was fully aware of, and that he was just teasing me.

“Should we go hear him out?” I replied seriously, deciding to ignore Ragi’s little joke. He nodded, looking slightly bored that I hadn’t played along.

We waited as the man who’d called out to us came running over.

“Hey, can you give us a hand?” he asked.

“With what?”

“We’re preparing for the Founding Festival, but we need some more help. If you’ve got the time, would you mind?”

I turned to Ragi and asked, “What do you want to do?”

“Well, we don’t have any plans after this, so why not?”

I was a bit surprised by Ragi’s response and looked at Alto, wondering what he thought, but he seemed wary of the stranger and remained silent.

As I pondered this, I glanced toward the town square, where around thirty adults were chatting happily as they worked on something. They were all older people, and since setting up the gillydod hides involved driving stakes into the ground, it would probably be tough for them to do.

Ah, that must be why they called out to us.

I honestly wanted to finish our own preparations quickly so I could focus on the queen’s quest, but when I saw how hesitant Alto was, I decided to help. I thought it would be a good experience for Alto to be part of a group activity.

As an adventurer, there may come a time when Alto would have to fight alongside other people against monsters. I wanted him to get used to cooperating with others so that he wouldn’t be overwhelmed or get in the way during such activities in the future.

Besides, preparing for the festival together would be a great memory for the three of us. I glanced over at Ragi, thinking he

probably had the same thought, and noticed he was looking at me with a happy smile on his face.

Maybe Ragi wasn't thinking of Alto when he accepted.

I pondered the meaning of Ragi's smile but couldn't quite figure it out.

"So will you guys help us out or not?" the man asked again. I realized it would be rude to keep him waiting any longer.

"We can help, but I've only been in Lypaed for a month, so I'm not really familiar with the festival and such. Is that going to be okay?"

"Oh really?! Well, the tasks are pretty simple, so I think you'll be fine. We're not bothering you, are we?" The man scratched his head apologetically as he looked at us.

"No, I'm happy to join in," I said.

"I'm fine with it, too," Ragi said.

"Me too…," added Alto hesitantly.

"Great, thanks! I really appreciate it!" The man didn't seem bothered by Alto's reticence but laughed and said, "You're a shy one, huh?"

It turned out the man was the son of the butcher whom Ragi always bought his meat from.

"I work in the back, so we haven't talked before, but you often come to our butcher's shop, don't you?" he asked.

We had introduced ourselves briefly, but he already knew Ragi and Alto in passing. Alto stayed silent, while Ragi nodded with a smile.

"I remember you two because Alto always buys the same meat-stuffed dish."

Alto looked at him wide-eyed. That had been his favorite food lately, so the mention of it caught his interest, and his ears perked up toward the man.

"I spent a lot of time perfecting that dish, so I'm happy you always choose it first. That's why I remember you." The man laughed loudly and said, "I'm going to be selling some herb sausages soon, so make sure you try them!" He didn't miss a chance to promote his new product.

That seemed to make Alto relax a bit, and he nodded and told the man he would.

We joined the group in the square. The women looked at us, then shot annoyed looks at the man.

“Did you really drag innocent people off the street to come help you?”

“I promise I explained everything before they agreed!”

“You’re sure?”

“Well, you brought quite a handsome group.”

“Don’t you work at the flower shop? Is it okay for you to be here? I heard it’s really busy there now.”

The women continued working as they chatted to us, making the atmosphere seem quite lively. Alto had never experienced such a bustling environment before, and he froze up, his eyes open wide.

The man who’d invited us rescued us from the circle of gossiping women and said, “You guys can start by helping out over there.” He showed us to where they were driving stakes into the ground.

A few people were quietly carving wood to make the stakes. They smiled sympathetically, said, “That was a disaster, huh?” and explained that the women were always like that whenever someone new joined. They offered Alto a stool, and he sighed with relief as he sat down.

We learned how to make the stakes and carved the wood in silence. Occasionally, we’d receive advice, praise, or were laughed at for carving away too much, and the work proceeded smoothly.

Apparently, attaching the gillydod hides to the stakes was the women’s job. We carried the finished stakes over to them, and they used thick needles and thread to skillfully sew the edges of the hides into cylinders. Then they slid the stakes through the hides, leaving a space to make sure they didn’t come out.

Alto didn’t chat much, but he would nod at advice, wag his tail a little when he was praised, and did his best to express himself.

The conversation drifted to topics like their children and grandchildren. When we were done making the stakes, we moved on to other tasks.

After that, we were asked to help set up the stakes that had the hides attached. We followed their instructions and drove the

stakes into the ground in front of houses and between them.

The arrangement wasn't perfectly spaced, but they were placed to appear as nice as possible. This attention to detail was a show of respect toward the royal family and ensured that the decorations looked pretty when viewed from the castle.

People openly asked questions, cooperated with one another, and helped one another without hesitation. This mutual reliance left a very strong impression on me.

The task of hammering the stakes into the ground was too strenuous for Alto, but he watched Ragi and me intently, looking as if he was thinking hard about something.

Once we finished the tasks, the people we'd been working with offered to come over and help with our own preparations.

We appreciated the offer, but Ragi declined and said, "We only have two left to set up, but thank you." He must've noticed that Alto was looking a little pale.

Once we got home, we unpacked the gifts we'd been given and took a break. After a while, Alto regained his energy and shared his impressions of the day's work.

He talked about how he'd been surprised by the number of people who spoke to him at first, and how no one had gotten angry when he couldn't answer their questions. He also mentioned how everyone had been smiling even when they moved on to different tasks.

Alto also said that when he'd seen the huge pile of branches, he hadn't thought we'd be able to turn them all into stakes by the end of the day. Yet somehow, working together as we chatted, we'd finished before we knew it, which he thought was amazing.

Alto's eyes shone as he eagerly shared that all with us.

I'd been worried since he seemed tired, but it sounded like he really valued these new discoveries he'd made. I genuinely felt happy that this experience had been so valuable for him.

After Alto talked for a while and fully recovered from his fatigue, his eyes lit up. He got up and gently tugged on Ragi's hand.

"Gramps, Master! Let's get our house ready, too!" he said excitedly.

Ragi laughed and stood up, and I followed them outside. But then…

“I wanna drive in the stakes!”

“…”

“…”

Ragi and I froze for a moment hearing Alto say that.

“I want to do what you and Gramps did, but no one there let me try…” He must have taken our silence as refusal, because he pleaded with us, his ears flat against his head.

I’d planned on telling him to wait until he was a bit older. The mallet was too heavy for Alto, and if he missed, it would be dangerous for us, since we’d be holding the stake. But Ragi looked seriously troubled.

“Ragi?” I asked, hoping he’d turn down Alto’s request.

But the older man couldn’t say no, and he offered to hold the stake while Alto swung the mallet.

I knew that things might turn out badly if they kept going this way, so I resigned myself to what was happening and gave Alto some advice.

“Alto, try lifting the mallet slowly.”

He excitedly grabbed the handle and tried to lift the mallet, but then wobbled under its weight.

“This is heavy, Master!” Exhausted, he let the mallet drop the ground with a *thud*, making the ground shake. “I don’t think I can do it.”

“I think you’re right. But you did a great job today, and I understand wanting to do the same thing as us.”

And Ragi probably wanted to keep working with Alto, too…

“So I’ll give you a special reward today,” I told him.

I used magic to summon my bag and enchanted a piece of candy from it before handing it to Alto. “If you lick this, it will more than double your usual strength, so you’ll be able to lift the mallet.”

Alto beamed as he popped the piece of candy in his mouth and lifted the mallet again, just as he had before.

“Wow, Master! Look! I’m not shaking at all!” he said, overjoyed that he was now able to maintain his balance.

“Okay then, Ragi. Take it away.”

“Thanks, Setsuna.”

“It’s nothing, really.” I knew how concerned Ragi had been, so it was only natural to do something like this.

I just wanted to help because they were struggling.

That thought ran through my head as I watched Alto happily swing the mallet with Ragi watching over him.

◇ Part Eight: Ragi

As I stared absentmindedly at the items on the table, I reflected on the events of the day.

I'd left my homeland of Sagana to become a mercenary and had settled in Lypaed as my final home. I'd lived in this kingdom for decades, but not once had I bought gerulito flowers or set up lanterns for the Founding Festival. The idea of preparing for it with the other townspeople had never even crossed my mind.

I shopped for things I needed and made small talk with the shopkeepers but didn't make any deep connections with them. My dislike for people had kept me isolated, and that had been how I'd lived my life day in and day out.

Meeting Alto and Setsuna had changed all that. Now there were gerulito flowers on the table, including one tied in a ribbon embroidered with white lisianthus flowers.

If I hadn't met the two of them, I never would have received a ribbon symbolizing gratitude. I never would have been smiled at in town or participated in conversations with the other townspeople. Without them, I probably wouldn't have even thought to enjoy the Foundation Festival. I wouldn't have cared if this was my last one.

I gently picked up the gerulito flower. It was fresh despite not being in a vase, thanks to Setsuna's Time magic. I was always amazed by how effortlessly he could cast spells.

The sorcerer I had traveled with used to manage his mana carefully every day, but Setsuna seemed to use it whenever he wanted, without a care in the world.

Honestly, sometimes, it felt like his use of magic was unusual, but I'd stopped trying to figure out why. It wasn't that it was an insignificant matter, but it had nothing to do with his true nature or his charm. At least, that's how I felt.

I heard Setsuna's footsteps coming down from the second floor, so I put the flower back on the table and began preparing the drinks. All I had to do was get the alcohol and snacks ready, so by the time he entered the room, I was already finished.

"Has Alto gone to bed?" I asked.

Alto had been sleepy after dinner, probably because today had been so different from his usual routine. He hadn't wanted to go up to his room alone, though, so he'd stayed with us until he finally started to nod off. Once Setsuna saw that, he'd taken him up to his room.

Since Alto hadn't come back down, it seemed Setsuna had stayed with him until he fell asleep. Although Alto had said he had fun today, it was clear that group activities were still somewhat tiring for him.

"Yeah. Sorry I took so long."

There was a shadow over Setsuna's expression. I'd noticed it there since the previous day, but it had abated while we were out. Once we'd finished our own preparations for the Founding Festival at home, the shadow had reappeared, though I couldn't pinpoint what had triggered it.

Setsuna seemed deeply troubled, though he wouldn't show it on the surface. His self-restraint was remarkable for someone so young. Perhaps I could see through his facade because we were so similar.

I hadn't asked him about it, but I was sure Setsuna must be lonely. His mannerisms while he spoke and the way he looked around reminded me of myself, and those subtle gestures revealed a slight trace of his emotions.

If I pointed it out, though, he would probably just hide it better. That wouldn't help him at all, so I just kept silent.

Seeing Setsuna more melancholy than usual, I'd suggested helping with the festival preparations for a change of pace. Initially, he'd thought my suggestion was for Alto's sake, but when he realized that might not be the case after all, he actually showed an expression appropriate for his age for once.

"He fell asleep while listening to the story," Setsuna said.

"Was it the duckling story again tonight?"

Alto often talked about Setsuna's stories, and I'd heard some of them while we relaxed together. They were all new to me. Alto particularly loved the duckling story and never got tired of asking for it.

"Good guess." Setsuna smiled and sat down across from me. By now, sharing drinks like this at night had become part of our

routine. We poured our own drinks this time, though, instead of serving each other.

We started chatting about Alto while we sipped our drinks, as usual. Once the alcohol warmed us up, I decided to ask him about what had been bothering him these last few days.

"So what's been troubling you since yesterday?"

"…"

Setsuna looked a little surprised by the sudden shift in topic, then gave me a weary smile. He let out a deep sigh and said, "Actually…"

Truthfully, I hadn't expected him to be so open with me, and I couldn't help but stare. Setsuna gave me a sheepish grin, took a sip of his drink, then lowered his gaze slightly.

"I was thinking about trying to rely on those close to me, like they do." I knew he was referring to the people we'd worked with today. They handled what they could on their own, and they relied on others when they needed, too. He seemed to have really taken that to heart.

"You don't mind if I talk to you about it?" Setsuna asked.

"Of course not. I'm the one who asked, after all."

"It's about a request I received. I'm not sure how to handle it. Completing the task itself isn't all that difficult—the real problem lies elsewhere."

"What do you mean?"

Setsuna paused and chose his words carefully before continuing. "Well, there's an issue between the client and a member of their family. It hasn't healed with time, and if anything, it's only gotten worse. Neither side is entirely at fault, which makes it difficult to fix the problem."

"So what happens if you agree to the request?"

"They might come together and make up, or it might not go well."

"In that case, would refusing the request be an option?"

"I don't want to refuse. I promised them I would take it."

"I'm not sure I understand the problem, then. You want to be impartial and not take the request, but at the same time, you're bound by your promise to the client and think you have to do it. Is that right?"

“Pretty much…,” he muttered. He didn’t sound anything like the Setsuna I knew.

“Is there something else troubling you?”

“Well, I’m not sure you could say it’s really troubling me, but the client’s family is connected to a friend of mine, so accepting the request might put us on opposite sides. Since I feel so conflicted about it, I don’t know whether I should take the job.” He took a deep sigh and drained his glass as if swallowing his bitter thoughts.

Setsuna came across as a rational, logical man, but living together over this past month, I’d also discovered he was quite emotional. That was why I couldn’t understand what he was struggling with.

When he’d agreed to the request, the client must have been at their wit’s end, and Setsuna hadn’t been able to ignore them any longer. It was too late now to worry about being impartial.

The issue of how to deal with his friend complicated the matter further. Setsuna disliked conflict, so he undoubtedly avoided disputes that didn’t have a clear-cut sense of right or wrong. He wasn’t used to this kind of friction with his friends.

When I was young, all I did was clash with others…

Seeing this youthful side of Setsuna, which he usually kept hidden, made me reflect on my own experiences to see if I could help him.

Back when the kingdom of Sagana didn’t exist, each beastfolk clan had defended their own territory. With two close friends by my side, I fought tirelessly against humans who came to kill the beastfolk.

One day, we were driving humans out of our territory as usual when one of my friends was badly injured, and we were forced to flee for our lives while protecting him.

“Leave me and run!” he kept repeating while we hid. But I couldn’t do it. There was no way I was able to abandon a dear friend.

With the humans approaching, I decided to fight right up until the very end. My friends both felt the same way, so we prepared to make our stand there and fight to the death. We offered our

final prayers to the sun deity, Saadia. However, our prayers were interrupted by a voice from above.

“Luck is something you seize for yourself. Praying to the gods is a waste of time.”

Startled by such blasphemous words, we looked up to see a human in a tree. We hadn’t sensed his presence until he spoke, and though we were confused, we readied ourselves for battle.

“If you give me some food, I’ll help you,” he said, grinning with amusement.

Hostility welled up inside me hearing his arrogant offer. It was clearly a lie; humans always deceived us and took everything before killing us all.

“Decide quickly. This is a crossroads for you.”

The man held out his hand. Despite the protests of me and my friend, our injured companion gave him some food. This marked our first encounter with the man who would eventually play a crucial role in the founding of Sagana.

Even after surviving that danger, we continued to interact with the man. I thought there was no way we could put our faith in a shady human like that, but my injured friend trusted him.

Our conflicts with the other humans persisted, but my friend’s faith in the man never wavered, which only led to arguments between us. Yet even so, it didn’t greatly impact our daily lives.

One day, the man said, “Fighting alone is foolish. You should all unite and fight as one to build a nation.”

This suggestion divided my two friends and led to intense debate.

“If we don’t do something, the beastfolk won’t have a future!” one friend cried, and his anguished words pierced my heart.

“Don’t tell me you’re falling for that human’s trick. It’s probably a trap to catch us all at once!” the other said, and I couldn’t help but sympathize with his doubts.

After hours of arguing, they left the decision up to me.

“I’m not sure if it’ll help, but will you listen to my story?”

Setsuna gave me a troubled smile and said, “I’m sorry for making you worry.” Only he would apologize at a time like this.

“Do you know when Sagana was founded?”

“Yes, I read it in a book.”

“Then do you know that a human had a hand in its founding?”

Setsuna’s eyes widened slightly. It was a story known only among beastfolk and had never been recorded in any history books. After asking him to keep it secret, I relayed the memory from earlier.

“I felt the future of the beastfolk depended on my decision. And in fact, it did. I was faced with an incredibly important decision.”

It was obvious what choice I’d made in the end.

“Still, I didn’t worry about it much,” I told him.

“Really?” Setsuna asked with surprise. I couldn’t help but give him a sheepish smile.

“In those days, it was common in Sagana for children even younger than Alto to train to escape from humans. That was our everyday life.”

“Don’t look back. Don’t listen to the voices around you. Just run as fast as you can.” The adults had repeated that over and over, and the children had run with all their might.

Without my realizing it, intensity had filled my voice.

“Ragi…,” Setsuna said in a worried tone, and his concern melted away my anger.

“I realized we might leave nothing for our children. That they might face a future of running until they died. I couldn’t let that happen, so I made up my mind.”

“…”

“Founding the nation was a grueling path. Those who valued our independence vehemently opposed the idea, and many of them were among the strongest beastfolk. However, most of them were killed in internal conflicts, and their families and clans held us, the founders, responsible. So while I can’t say our choice was absolutely the right one, I felt a sense of peace when I saw some young beastfolk playing as I left Sagana.”

“…”

“Setsuna, if either option will leave behind resentments, then perhaps you should ally with the weaker side.”

“The weaker side…?”

“And if I might add one more thing, the founding of Sagana wouldn’t have been possible without the cooperation of my friends.”

“Did the friend who wasn’t injured help, too?”

“At first, we were at odds and didn’t speak, but I convinced him by swearing I’d protect the beastfolk of Sagana for the rest of my life. He agreed and helped to found the nation.”

“…”

“Of course, people have different viewpoints. They might break promises, make mistakes, or change their positions. But even then, friendships allow us to come together. That’s what friends are for.”

“…”

Setsuna was quiet, most likely trying to gather his thoughts. It seemed it would take him some time to do so. Hoping that he would find an answer he was satisfied with, I got up and retired to my bedroom.

◇ Part Nine: Setsuna

After finishing my usual training, I had breakfast with Ragi and Alto before returning to my room to make the medicine for the king and Eugene. Ragi and Alto were transporting the things from Alto's room to another one so they could start removing the old wallpaper.

I began to mix the medicines, chuckling softly as I listened to their occasional chatter from the hallway. The ingredients for the king's tonic were particularly delicate and required precise measurements, while Eugene's tonic, on the other hand, was simpler to prepare.

By late morning, I finished making the medicines without any issues. After eating lunch, which Ragi had prepared, I left the house.

"Take care, Master!"

"Be safe, Setsuna."

"I'll be back soon."

Ragi gave me a nod. The look in his eyes filled me with encouragement, and I nodded back in return. I waved to Alto, then headed to the meeting place.

Although I arrived a bit early, the queen was already there waiting. After I greeted her, Margaret placed some tea and slightly misshapen baked goods in front of me.

"Her Majesty made those pastries."

"The queen made these?"

Now I know why they're unusually shaped—they're handmade.

The queen smiled shyly as I glanced over at her.

"During the Founding Festival, I step out onto the balcony a number of times each day to greet the citizens. As a token of gratitude for their celebration, I throw these handmade pastries from the balcony."

"Do you bake them all yourself, Your Majesty?"

"That would be impossible, so the castle cooks make most of them. We place a few pastries in small cloth bags, however, and it's considered lucky to find a misshapen one."

"Ah, a sign of your popularity."

"Hee-hee."

The people knew that the misshapen ones were the queen's.

"The Founding Festival starts tomorrow, so I wanted to share some with you, Setsuna. And here's a treat for you to take home to Alto." She placed a small cloth bag on the table and pushed it toward me; however, I didn't reach for it.

"I'm sorry, but I can't accept this."

"…"

I gently pushed the bag back toward the queen. She had a sad smile on her face and was about to say something, so I explained to make sure she wouldn't misunderstand.

"We're going to be among the citizens celebrating tomorrow while you throw the pastries from the balcony. Everyone will be eager to get one. It wouldn't be fair to accept this now."

"What…?"

"I want to try catching one of your pastries with Alto, Your Majesty."

"Setsuna…"

"But may I take the pastries you served with the tea home?"

"Yes, of course. Thank you, Setsuna," the queen murmured softly with a teary look in her eyes.

After that, we began planning for the event. The next morning, the queen would use a magical tool to create a barrier when she left her bedroom. During a break in the meeting schedule, she'd call me to the throne room, and I would teleport the queen, the king, and his first knight to her bedroom.

I decided to personally handle the teleportation, since that was the part of the plan most prone to unexpected events. We'd realized during our discussion that we had to include the king's first knight, which was another potential complication. If the king was taken in front of him, the first knight might be overwhelmed with guilt, so we figured it was better to teleport them both.

I didn't think the knight would cause any trouble if we teleported him as well, and since he wouldn't be able to leave the room, that would minimize any harm.

We also decided that I would return home in disguise immediately after teleporting them. The queen was the one who'd suggested this, hoping to reduce the possibility of any

harsh punishment coming down on me on should the plan fail, as well as to avoid harming my relationship with Cyrus and the others.

Although I'd come to this meeting with my emotions firmly fixed, the queen's insistence made me accept her thoughtful offer.

And now we were discussing the words to use for the magical tool that would summon me.

"As for the summoning words…"

"Setsuna-summoning incantation!"

"No."

"*Incantation!* then. It sounds mysterious and cool."

It didn't sound that way at all to me; as a sorcerer, incantations were everyday things. Yet seeing the queen's eyes sparkle made me decide to keep quiet.

"Well, I don't mind either way. Decide on a phrase to activate the tool, but please don't joke about using my name."

I had assumed the queen was joking and tried to nip it in the bud, but she sighed deeply and began to explain.

"You see, Setsuna, only the person you love the most would come to help you when you call their name!"

Her complaint had absolutely nothing to do with me.

"So summoning you by your name wouldn't be appropriate anyway." The queen continued, sounding completely serious. "But since it's for my protection, I want it to sound impressive!" she said, deciding on the activation words.

I took out a small piece of malachite to inscribe the spell. Stones like this were often used for making barrier stones or cheap disposable magical tools, but the queen muttered, "It's not very cute…"

"It's a regular magical tool."

"I know, but…couldn't it be a little bigger? …Or glow, or something?"

"What exactly were you expecting, Your Majesty?"

"It's just so plain."

"Plain is best."

"Maybe, but this is for the festival. It doesn't have to be boring!"

I had a feeling that the queen would still find it "not very cute" even if it wasn't for the festival, but I kept that opinion to myself. She wanted something that was cute and would serve as a sort of

keepsake. That wasn't very specific, though, and I found it a bit of a burden, but I created something from my bag.

"How about this?"

The queen tipped her head to the side as she looked at what I'd taken out of my bag.

"Is that a stuffed animal, Setsuna?"

"Yes. Isn't it *cute*?" I asked, emphasizing the word. "Once you're done using it, you can display it as a regular stuffed animal."

"That's true…but what kind of animal is it? It has wings, so is it a bird? How can it fly with such a plump body?"

"You're right—this bird can't fly, but it can swim very fast."

The queen listened to my explanation, looking delighted. Once I finished, she picked up the stuffed animal and hugged it tightly. Then, she looked at me and smiled happily.

"I love it! Can it wear clothes?!"

"…Is that really necessary?"

"Absolutely! I can't put gerulito flowers on it if it doesn't wear clothes!"

"Okay… Well, feel free to modify it however you want, Your Majesty."

"Do you think you have time to make some?"

As we were discussing that, Margaret interrupted us with a smile.

"Your Majesty, it might raise some suspicions if you take that stuffed animal into a meeting."

"…"

Honestly, I'd been hoping Margaret would've stepped in earlier, but she seemed to enjoy seeing the queen so excited.

Despite her disappointment, the queen settled for the malachite I'd readied earlier.

"I think that's enough preparation. The rest will depend on your negotiation skills, Your Majesty."

"All right. I'll do my best to persuade the king!"

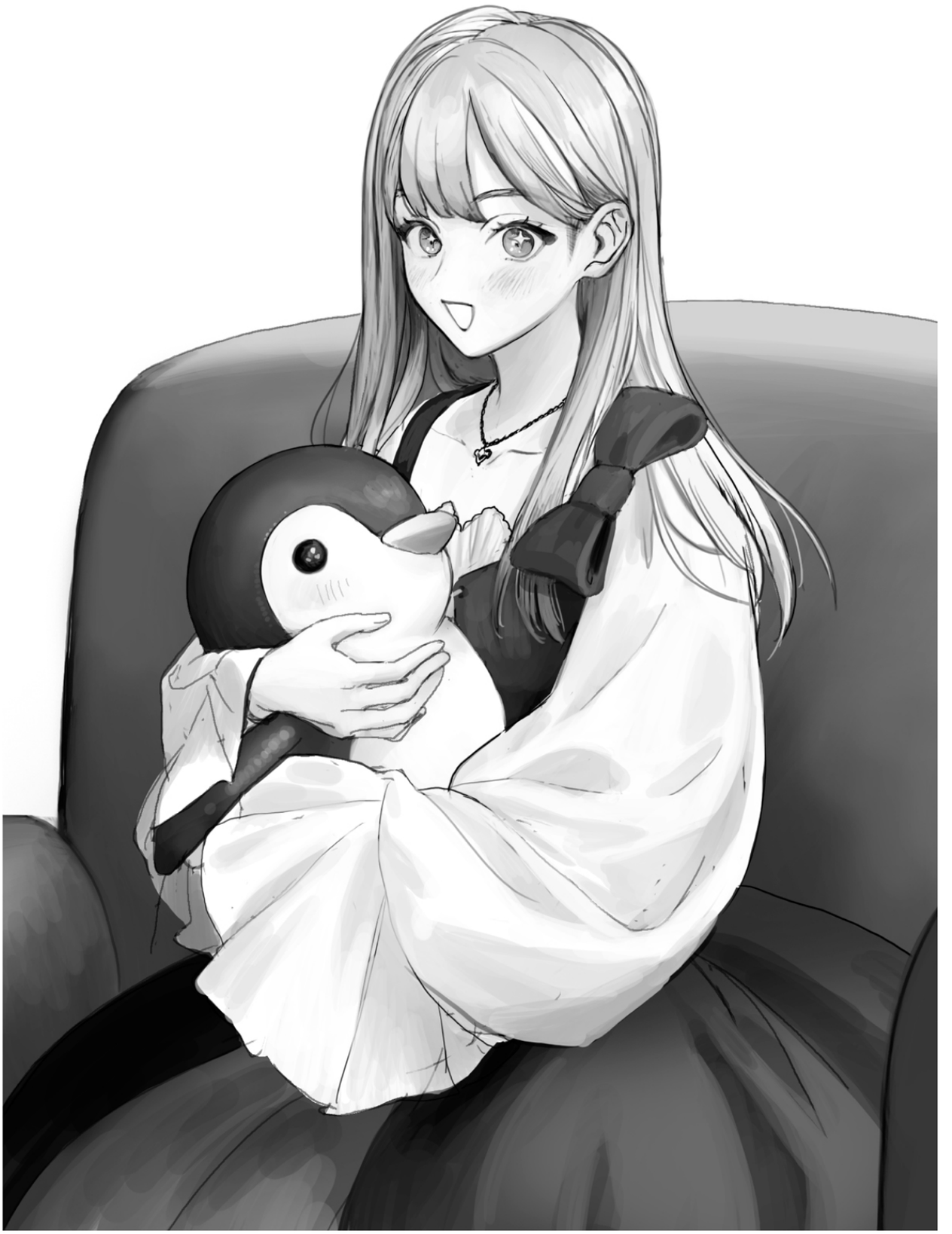
Finally, I handed over the medicine for the king and Eugene and explained how to give it to them. The queen sighed with relief as she placed the medicine and the magical tool carefully into her bag. Then as our eyes met again, her demeanor changed dramatically.

“If my decision causes the citizens to be unhappy, or if it leads to you being accused of a crime, I will atone with my life. So please lend me your strength.”

I could tell the queen had made up her mind.

“I understand.”

“Thank you.”



“You don’t need to thank me, Your Majesty. Now, about my reward…”

“Do you have any specific requests, Setsuna?” the queen asked, sensing something from my expression.

Hiding my heavy heart, I shared what I’d been considering lately. The queen listened quietly, and with a sad yet determined look in her eyes, she said, “I promise I’ll help you.”



Chapter Two
Amethyst Sage ~ Familial Love ~



◇ Part One: Setsuna

“We’re leaving, Master!” Alto called out to me before departing the house with Ragi. Seeing Alto head out happily with someone other than me without any fear had been unimaginable when we’d first come to this town. He’d grown so quickly that it made me feel a little sentimental.

It was the morning of the Founding Festival. Although the main event wouldn’t be until the evening, the stalls were already open, and children were walking around the festival enjoying the atmosphere. This had given me an idea to get back at Alto and Ragi for their little prank, so I’d suggested at dinner the previous day that the two of them go out and have fun without me.

“You should come as well, Master!” Alto had said.

“Sorry, but I have too much work to do,” I’d said, turning him down.

Truthfully, I was worried that the queen might suddenly summon me in front of Alto, so I’d thought it best to get him out of the house. Ragi seemed to understand and happily invited Alto out, who immediately said yes. Alto appeared sad that I couldn’t go with them and said he’d bring me back a souvenir, so I had that to look forward to.

Once they left as planned, I was filled with a faint hope that today’s job would go well and that there wouldn’t be any issues.

Now I just need to disguise myself before I’m summoned.

I picked up my bag, and at that moment, my earlier plan shattered into a million pieces.

My surroundings changed in an instant, and I found myself in the throne room of the castle. The king and the first knight were in front of me. Behind them was the queen, and behind her were the general and others.

She summoned me already?!

My mind raced, thinking I should’ve had more time. I made eye contact with the queen, who gave me an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry, Setsuna!”

I immediately realized the plan had gone awry and that hiding my identity was no longer an option. I set out to do my job before my emotions could get in the way. My brain kicked into autopilot,

and I teleported the king, the first knight, and the queen to her bedroom.

I went over the plan we'd made the previous day together in my head.

First, during the break between meetings, the queen would summon me. I would use teleportation magic to teleport the queen and the others to her bedroom. Finally, I would leave a letter to prevent everyone in the castle from searching for them, explaining that the king, the queen, and the first knight were in her bedroom, and that they'd come out after they'd finished talking.

That had been the plan.

But now it's all for nothing…

"You there! What have you done to His Majesty and the queen?!"

I found myself surrounded by the guards in the throne room, their spears pointed at me. For a moment, I considered escaping but quickly decided against it. I wasn't disguised, and the queen had said my name. If I ran, it would bring trouble to Ragi, so fleeing wasn't an option.

"What happened? Someone, say something!" The general's deep voice cut through the tension. He had seen the queen, the king, and the first knight disappear, but he hadn't realized I'd used magic because I was in his blind spot.

At his order, one of the soldiers surrounding me shouted, "This man teleported the king and queen away!"

The general immediately drew his sword and directed his piercing gaze at me.

Just then, I locked eyes with Cyrus, who'd entered from the adjoining room. His eyes widened, and after a deep breath, he asked, "Setsuna? What are you doing here? What have you done?"

Eugene and Keith also came into the throne room with Georges and Fred, having heard the commotion. The ministers peered from deeper within the room, all looking equally surprised.

Once I saw their astonished expressions, I decided to explain the situation to the whole crowd, starting with the general. I wanted everyone with weapons aimed at me to lower them.

“My name is Setsuna. I’m an adventurer the queen hired for a quest.”

Eugene and the others frowned.

“A quest?”

“Yes. She requested time to persuade the king to celebrate the Founding Festival, so I teleported the king, the queen, and the first knight to her bedroom and set up a barrier to prevent them from leaving. They will come out once they’ve finished their discussion, so please wait until then.”

“Is this true?”

“You have no choice but to believe me.”

That was the only explanation I could give, but Cyrus quickly came to my aid.

“General, regardless of the truth of his story, the king’s safety is not in danger. I’ll vouch for that.”

“You sound like you know this man. What is your relationship with him?” the general asked suspiciously, not taking his eyes off me.

“This is Sena, the bard. He disguised his appearance and used a pseudonym when I returned to the castle to deceive our enemies. However, this is what he truly looks like, and his real name is Setsuna.”

“He looks very different. Are you sure there’s no mistake?”

My hair color and length as well as my eye color were all different from my persona as Sena. The general looked skeptical, but Keith backed up Cyrus’s claim and moved the conversation forward.

“The king and queen are safe, correct?” the general asked. “And the first knight was also teleported at the queen’s request?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll trust you for now,” he said, sheathing his sword. Though, the other soldiers kept their weapons trained on me.

“So the queen was so desperate that she resorted to drastic measures on the very day of the festival?” The general sighed and looked troubled, as did the ministers who were peeking in from the conference room.

“Yes. Please wait until their discussion is—”

But before I could finish, Eugene’s irritated voice suddenly interrupted me.

“We don’t have time to wait. Keith, can’t you get the king and queen out of there?!”

Keith glared at me. “It’s impossible. He’s more skilled at using Time magic than I am. I can’t nullify his spells.”

“There’s nothing you can do?” Eugene asked.

“Sadly not,” Keith said, and the general spoke up.

“How long did the queen estimate their discussion would take?”

“Two hours. She just wanted me to make time for her.”

The queen had actually said it would take about an hour, but considering the time needed to administer the medicine and the actual discussion, I gave them a longer estimate.

“I see…,” the general said, then fell silent.

“…I thought you were going to stay out of the affairs of our kingdom,” Keith said quietly, his accusatory voice taking the place of the general’s.

“I only took on the queen’s request. I have no intention of interfering with anything further.”

I knew how weak my excuse sounded. There was no way I’d get away with it normally. The only reason they didn’t question me further was because I was working on behalf of the queen herself.

“Lord Setsuna, why did you accept the queen’s request?” the general asked, returning from his thoughts.

The image of the queen, hiding her isolation, anxiety, and fear of loss behind her smile, flashed through my mind.

“I accepted because I saw the loneliness Her Majesty was hiding,” I replied.

The general’s face contorted in anguish, as did the ministers’ in the next room.

“The queen planned to do it during the break in meetings, didn’t she?”

“Yes, although the time turned out differently to what we’d discussed.”

“The king extended the break because everyone was tired.”

The general turned to Eugene.

“Prince Eugene, it may take longer than the rest period set by the king, but why don’t we accede to the queen’s wishes?” the general suggested.

Eugene ignored him and glanced at me, then said, “We don’t need to humor the queen. Let’s go.”

He started to walk away, but Keith stopped him.

“Even if we go there, we can’t break the barrier.”

“We can call out to them from outside. If we keep doing that, then eventually, they’ll come out.”

“Eugene, wait.”

“No, I won’t wait. This rest period was supposed to be so we could prepare for the next set of meetings, not to indulge the queen’s whims.”

His reply gave me a vague sense of déjà vu. It reminded me of Norris when he’d found himself backed into a corner. Eugene’s response was logical and without contradiction, but fundamentally misguided. I wanted him to wait—not so I could stall him, but so I could tell him that calling out wouldn’t reach them inside the barrier. Yet he didn’t give me the chance to explain and continued talking.

“We have a mountain of problems to deal with. Honestly, even the break time is precious to us. We’ve cut back on the time we take to eat and sleep, and it’s still not enough!”

As Eugene spoke, everyone including Keith looked at him with silent concern.

“Let’s go, everyone!” the prince repeated.

“No, we’re not going. At least not during the break.”

Eugene hadn’t expected any opposition and glared at the general.

“Are you defying my order?”

“There shouldn’t be a problem with that. I am granted a special privilege by the king.”

“And you’re going to use that special privilege for something so trivial?”

The general remained unfazed, and the ministers gathered around him stayed where they were.

“I can’t believe this,” Eugene said.

The special privilege to which the general referred was a system unique to Lypaed. It was a right granted by the current king to his school friends who’d fought alongside him during Lypaed’s revival.

This privilege allowed them to disregard any orders they deemed detrimental to the kingdom, but only if all right holders agreed. And if they couldn't come to a consensus, the one who had invoked said special privilege would be required to forfeit their assets.

It was hardly a perfect system, and it relied solely on the king's trust in his friends and their wisdom.

"The previous order is revoked. I'm going to fetch the king. The break period's not over yet. Dolph and the rest of you can do as you please."

Dolph, the general, cast a worried glance at Eugene, and the ministers all wore similar expressions. This was a turning point for them. I suddenly thought of Eugene's insomnia, and my instincts told me not to leave him alone.

I looked at Eugene, trying to understand why I felt this way. He didn't appear emaciated from a lack of sleep. In fact, Keith and the ministers looked more exhausted than he did, and even the general and knights seemed fatigued. But Eugene and Cyrus didn't show any similar signs.

I can understand why Cyrus doesn't, since he received the dragon's blessing. But Eugene is different…

I looked closely at him.

He's wearing makeup…

I'd been fooled earlier by the healthy color of his skin, but on closer inspection, I saw that the evenness of his skin tone and the light reflecting off it revealed it to be makeup. He was clearly using it to hide his fatigue.

But why?

I didn't understand why he felt the need to put up such a front. Yet it was clear he was so desperate that he was relying on makeup to conceal his appearance.

What's causing Eugene to push himself so hard?

I thought he might be doing it for the sake of the kingdom's people, but it seemed like something else was weighing on him. I had that feeling because I'd been in a similar situation before.

Long ago, I'd wanted to leave something behind. Proof that I had lived. I wanted to erase the meaninglessness and emptiness I felt

from my lack of achievements, so I immersed myself in studies and disregarded my health. The only thing I was good at was using my brain.

"Is it something you have to do, even if it costs you your life? Is it something worth risking your life for right now?" My mother scolded me constantly, but I couldn't stop.

I nearly died because I neglected eating and sleeping despite being ill.

But it was what I had to do. I'd almost given up on recovering from my illness, so I wanted to leave something behind even if it meant risking my life for it.

Mom thought otherwise. She had faith that my illness could be cured. She believed it right up until the very end and always told me not to risk my life. My father also sternly told me, *"Life comes first, Setsuna."*

"Brother, Mom was crying today," Kyoka told me sadly.

I'd believed that living and dying were both things that should be up to the individual, and that you shouldn't give unsolicited advice concerning someone else's life. However, I couldn't say that the way my family felt back then was wrong. I just couldn't.

"We can't waste any more time. Cyrus, have Setsuna sent back home."

The queen would cry if Eugene collapsed, just like Mom had. She'd hide her tears behind a smile and weep quietly to herself.

I didn't want anyone to experience such sorrow or cry like my mother had.

"…"

It was just as Eugene said: My role here was over. Returning would be the right thing to do. Still, I decided to stay.



From here on out, it was purely personal. An apology to my family since I'd died first.

Cyrus approached me. In the brief moment before he stopped in front of me, I determined what I needed to do for the queen.

First, I had to generate sympathy for the queen in this situation. Even if she successfully persuaded the king to attend the festival, the backlash against her would be severe if no one empathized with her. I wanted to avoid that at all costs.

The general's reaction made that unlikely, but there was also a chance things could be overturned due to his "special privilege." That made it necessary to drum up empathy for the queen.

Second, I needed Eugene to get some rest. Ideally, he would do this voluntarily, but I doubted it would be that easy.

Once I got my thoughts in order, I spoke to Cyrus.

"Do you think I should leave, Cyrus?"

"I'm just following orders," he said.

Cyrus didn't question whether his master's orders were right or wrong. When I'd traveled with him, he'd told me that a knight's duty was to protect and fulfill his master's wishes. He hadn't been given the same sort of special privilege as the general, so it was only natural he'd answer that way.

"Yes. You've always been a true knight of Lypaed, ever since we met."

That felt like such a long time ago. But Cyrus's true nature hadn't wavered since then.

"I believe…that sometimes, we must risk our lives, just like you risked your life to keep hope alive in this kingdom. I don't deny that."

I turned my gaze from Cyrus to Eugene.

"Headaches, dizziness, dark circles under your eyes, insomnia, fatigue, irritability—those are all warnings from your body. Ignoring them or pushing through them will lead to irreversible damage."

I spoke, speculating about the symptoms he was trying to hide.

"Even if what you say is correct, my true desire is to die for the people," Eugene said. "How I use my life is none of your concern."

“Is it something worth risking your life for right now? Is it something you have to do, even if it costs you your life?”

“I’m telling you, it’s necessary.”

I understood his point. This was what he was making time for. This was his true desire, even if it meant sacrificing meals and sleep and whittling away at his lifespan. Yet still…

“If you destroy your body or your mind, you won’t be able to help the people you’re trying to save. Why don’t you try to think up a way to guide both the current and future citizens?”

He let out a sigh.

“You can only do that by living, Eugene,” I said.

“No one asked you to worry about me! Cyrus!”

I can’t get through to him. I might have to shelve the idea of getting him to rest for now.

I shifted gears after hearing that. Cyrus closed his eyes briefly.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Even though he knew what would happen if I refused, Cyrus opened his eyes and looked at me directly without hesitation.

I didn’t know if this was how things should be. I wasn’t a knight, so I couldn’t claim to know how he felt. The only thing I knew was how great Cyrus’s resolve was.

“Eugene, the barrier is completely soundproof. Nothing can be heard from inside or outside. Only the queen or I can lift it.”

Eugene glared at me bitterly and stopped Cyrus, who was about to approach me.

“…Why go to such lengths? Because she’s the queen?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Then why?”

“Because just like Cyrus, I want to be on my clients’ side as much as possible. That’s all.”

“…”

“Eugene, I understand that the lack of time makes it difficult to have discussions. Time is limited, after all. However, I believe we should face the reality that by not doing so, you are causing sorrow and suffering. I don’t think you understand that at all. Aren’t you neglecting the queen’s feelings simply because she’s your mother?”

Eugene didn’t answer.

“Even though she’s family, she’s still a person with feelings,” I continued. “And if someone genuinely wants their feelings to be heard but is ignored or dismissed, that hurts. During my stay in the castle, I’ve only spoken with the queen a few times, yet she had no choice but to rely on me to achieve her goals.”

My words silenced everyone around me.

It’s so frustrating…

That was how I felt. The queen’s feelings weren’t reaching anyone, and my words probably sounded like accusations to all these people who worked so hard.

“Is that all you have to say?” Eugene asked with a sigh, and I nodded. “Even if it hurts the queen, my stance on the matter won’t change. The people won’t suffer if we skip celebrating the festival for a few years. However, the longer the king’s sanctions are delayed, the more they *will* suffer.”

That might be true, but it wasn’t the point. It just *wasn’t*. Eugene’s words made me feel incredibly frustrated. It wasn’t about whether or not the people suffered. I just wanted him to spend some time talking to the queen.

“That’s not what I meant, but continuing this conversation would be futile, so I’ll concede.”

Despite my words, I wanted to do the exact opposite. I didn’t want to resort to anything forceful, but I couldn’t think of any other way to make everyone understand and empathize with the queen’s feelings.

“You’ll concede?”

Eugene’s brow furrowed deeply, but I ignored it.

“Let’s have a contest, Eugene. If you win, I’ll lift the barrier. But if I win, you have to listen to the queen’s thoughts about the festival.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then you’ll just have to wait for the queen to come out anyway.”

With that, I picked up the bag that had fallen at my feet. I dressed the stuffed penguin the queen had liked in clothes, cast a spell on a gerulito flower I’d kept as a decoration when I’d been preparing flowers for Cyrus, then attached it to the clothes. Finally, I used Wind magic to float the stuffed penguin toward the throne.

The soldiers moved warily to protect Eugene and the others from the strange plush toy.

“I’ve enchanted this stuffed animal so that it will fall if you strike it with a sword. Eugene, choose two representatives. If they manage to walk from here to the throne and knock the stuffed animal down, you win. However, I’ll do everything in my power to stop them.”

“And how exactly do you plan on doing that?”

I reached into my bag and used Materialize to create a thousand paper cranes. Then I took out a Dark magical tool I’d previously used on anemone flowers and placed the paper cranes on it.

“I’ll explain it step by step. This magical tool enchants any object placed on it with Darkness magic that reproduces the thoughts or experiences I’ve had and projects them onto the minds of my targets. I’ve enchanted these paper cranes with the memories of my conversation with the queen.”

The thousand cranes had all been in one small pile, but they suddenly spread out as the enchantment took hold. I used Wind magic to scatter them so they formed a protective wall around the stuffed penguin.

“If someone touches these paper cranes, the spell will activate, and the memory of my conversation with the queen will flow into their minds. It won’t harm them physically in any way, but the paper birds will serve as an obstacle for your representatives.”

“That’s it? The birds won’t attack or anything?”

“No, they won’t attack. But they will try to get in the way.”

Eugene watched the paper cranes floating in the air.

“My advice would be to stay still for a few seconds when the spell activates,” I continued. “It can be disorienting and hard to distinguish between reality and the projected memory, so you might fall if you try to move during that time.”

“But any time spent standing still also buys the queen more time.”

Although this advice wasn’t specifically for his representatives, it was pointless to tell Eugene as much, so I just nodded in response.

“Very well. If it saves us from waiting around needlessly, then I’ll accept your challenge. As for my representatives… General, will you join?”

“I would prefer to observe.”

“What about you, Keith?”

“I recommend Fred.”

“Fine, I’ll have Cyrus and Fred take on the challenge. I’m counting on you both.”

“Yes, Your Highness…”

Eugene stepped back, and Cyrus and Fred bowed, then moved to the starting position.

◇ Part Two: Georges

Today marked the first day of the Founding Festival, and the town had been bustling since early in the morning. The castle also felt livelier than usual, but it didn't seem like it would interfere with our duties.

I had been assigned to guard Prince Eugene today. Normally, Cyrus would've been on duty, but he'd been summoned to a meeting with the king. Now that he'd received the dragon's blessing, I assumed the discussion would be about removing Cyrus from his duties as Prince Eugene's knight and proposing that he instead go out and fight monsters.

In our kingdom, the Founding Festival wasn't a celebration of the actual day the kingdom was founded, but a commemoration of the day the current king ascended to the throne.

When I was a boy, I used to get excited just hearing about the festival, yet it no longer stirred my heart as it once had.

Perhaps it would be different if we were at peace. However, it hadn't even been two months since Lypaed had formed an alliance with the surrounding kingdoms, so there were too many pressing issues to attend to that took precedence over celebrating the festival.

This sentiment was shared among those serving the king. The queen was the only one who insisted we should celebrate the festival and enjoy it with the citizens.

We regarded her with cold gazes, assuming this to be another one of her whims, just like what had happened with the previous festival.

Last year, the queen had also insisted on celebrating the Founding Festival for at least half a day. She'd suggested that even if we couldn't celebrate it inside the castle, we should still make an appearance for the people.

The queen often said, *"My job is to brighten this castle. And when the castle is bright, so is the kingdom."* She loved celebrations and having fun, and she always had a smile on her face, so this belief made perfect sense.

Although the king and ministers understood her wishes, the threat from Guilonde loomed over us and allowed us no leeway

for free time. As such, we believed the festival should be celebrated by the citizens alone.

The queen had secretly left the castle during last year, only to return after the commotion began. She claimed she'd been out celebrating with old friends, apologized to everyone, and was scolded by both the king and Prince Eugene.

After that, no one had listened to the queen this year. Yet unlike last year, the queen had mentioned the festival to the king, Prince Eugene, Lord Keith, Cyrus, and everyone else on a daily basis.

Fred and I had seen how persistent she was, and sometimes, we secretly thought she should show more restraint.

Finally, Prince Eugene lost his temper, and the king admonished her. The queen seemed a bit down, but she soon cheered up and continued pushing for the festival.

A meeting was convened with Prince Eugene, Lord Keith, the general, the ministers, and the king and queen all in attendance. Everyone in the room was aware of the strained relationship between the monarchs.

The mood in the room was tense as the general and ministers explained their proposals, and decisions were made after they received approval from Keith and the others.

The discussion continued as Prince Eugene's issues were addressed, but his expression remained grim. My lord had been handling an overwhelming number of cases as of late, and I worried about how much work he'd have to endure before he could be free from this flurry of responsibilities.

What puzzled me most was that, although Lord Keith would come to Prince Eugene's aid under normal circumstances, he only watched with concern and did nothing to help this time.

At first, Prince Eugene was pleased, taking this as a sign that he'd grown up a bit, but lately, he'd been speaking less and sighing more. Yet Lord Keith still did nothing to help.

Perhaps that was why Prince Eugene had been particularly irritable these past few days. Cyrus asked if he was all right, only to receive a bitter smile and the response: "It's nothing. I'm just inadequate."

We couldn't help but wonder whether Eugene really was okay, but since he insisted he was, there was nothing we could do about it.

"Let's move on to the next issue," the prince said.

Just then, the king raised a hand to interrupt. "No, let's take a break here. The next session will start as scheduled. Eugene, I want you to rest." The king looked directly at Eugene as he spoke, so he must've been concerned for the prince's well-being.

"I don't need a break," Eugene protested half-heartedly, but the king's decision was final. The king left the room with his first knight leading the way, and the queen rushed after him, followed by the other knights and the general.

Prince Eugene clenched his fists and bowed his head, looking as though he was struggling with his own inadequacies.

But he quickly lifted his head and began to tidy up the documents so he could leave the room. Just then, we heard the queen's voice, followed by a commotion in the throne room and a guard shouting, "You there! What have you done to His Majesty and the queen?!"

Prince Eugene and Lord Keith immediately tried to rush out of the room, but Fred and I stopped them.

Cyrus stood blocking the door to the throne room, a look of disbelief on his face. "Setsuna? What are you doing here? What have you done?" he asked, wide-eyed.

I didn't fully grasp the meaning behind Cyrus's words, but Prince Eugene and Lord Keith said they were going to the throne room, so Fred led the way while I guarded them from behind.

The king and queen were nowhere to be seen inside the throne room. Instead, Setsuna—who shouldn't have been there at all—stood surrounded by the general and guards.

Setsuna had a resigned expression on his face as he explained everything. I thought that his dedication to reaching a helping hand out to the queen sounded just like something he'd do.

His kindness always led him to help those in need, just like he'd helped Cyrus, Norris, and me.

But this time, the prince was right; we couldn't afford to indulge the queen's whims. I silently wished that Setsuna would

reconsider his actions, but that hope was in vain.

I stood protectively in front of Prince Eugene and Lord Keith as Cyrus and Fred ran forward. In front of them were countless paper cranes created by Setsuna's magic, floating in the air. As I watched the two knights, I wondered how the paper birds would block them.

Setsuna waved his hand, and the birds flew toward Cyrus and Fred, each keeping a certain distance from the others. Cyrus stopped and evaded them, but Fred couldn't avoid them all, and one of the birds brushed against his shoulder.

Strangely, as soon as it touched him, the bird turned into something that looked like sand, which fell to the floor. Just then, a vivid scene flowed into my mind.

The queen's feelings were conveyed to everyone present in the room, then dissipated. We all stood there in stunned silence, eyes wide, our breaths caught in our throats.

The phenomenon was so real that it almost felt like the queen was really there with us.

If I don't keep a clear mind, I won't be able to protect the prince and prime minister…

I shook off the image in my head and looked behind me. Prince Eugene and Lord Keith were frozen in shock. Cyrus and Fred had stopped in their tracks, most likely disoriented by the vivid images they'd seen and unsure of what was real and what was just a memory.

This isn't how Setsuna explained it.

It seemed like everyone shared my sentiments, because the room began to buzz with voices of protest. Lord Keith began to argue with Setsuna.

"Why have you subjected us to this Darkness magic? That wasn't part of the deal! Remove the enchantment from those birds immediately!"

"I didn't lie, Keith. I said the Darkness magic would affect my targets, not the representatives cutting down the birds. You are the ones who misunderstood, so your complaint is misdirected."

Lord Keith was about to retort, but just then, the general intervened.

“It doesn’t matter. Continue. Talking will only waste more time. Isn’t that right, Prime Minister?”

I watched to see if Lord Keith would back down, and I was surprised when he relented. Once he did, Cyrus and Fred recovered, and Setsuna began to move the paper birds again.

I see. He made a protest he knew was futile to give the two knights a break…

Fred drew his sword and attempted to cut through the paper birds, probably hoping that would stop the images from invading his mind. However, the paper birds still triggered the Darkness magic, and the image of the queen appeared in our heads. Surprised by this unexpected development, Fred dropped his sword, which fell to the floor along with several of the birds.

After a moment, the two knights recovered and moved forward. As they did, the paper birds began to fly toward them again. They couldn’t avoid all the cranes, though, and when they touched them, they were subjected to the magic for a third time. But this time, unlike the others, the queen’s voice accompanied the image.

“The king’s and my mentor taught me how to make this tea.”

I heard the general mutter, “Their mentor…”

“It has a unique taste, so everyone dislikes it…but I brew it every year when Salkis changes to Manakis. Morilina helps prevent illness, promotes recovery from fatigue, and protects the stomach.”

“That sounds like it would be invaluable for the busy king and his men.”

“I think so, too. I want them to stay healthy, so hopefully, this helps, even just a little.”

In the magical vision, the queen spoke with a faint smile. Strange-tasting tea was often prepared for the knights’ lounge when it got to this season. It wasn’t popular by any means, but everyone knew the queen distributed it, so we all quietly drank it at the end of our shifts.

I hadn’t known about the tea’s benefits, and the other knights and I all gulped.

When I glanced over at Prince Eugene, his eyes seemed to waver slightly.

Although they looked a bit pale, Cyrus and Fred continued pressing forward, but the birds mercilessly touched them and disappeared. Each time, the magic forced its way into our minds.

"I know this is a busy time. But I want us all to celebrate the Founding Festival together," the queen said with a sad smile.

To make matters worse, Setsuna shifted his gaze from Prince Eugene to Cyrus and Fred, and the paper birds flew toward them, as if guided by his movement.

Cyrus reflexively swatted away a crane that was about to hit Fred's back. I lost count of how many times the paper birds disintegrated, accosting us with their images.

"Last year, I went to the festival with Margaret," the queen said. But her expression wasn't one of joyful reminiscence, which puzzled me. *"We went to visit our friends and took their favorite foods. We laid the food in front of their graves, and Margaret and I celebrated the Founding Festival with our friends who've departed for the Waterside."*

"…"

Everyone held their breath, frozen by her words. Until now, we'd all thought the queen had enjoyed herself that day. Cyrus and Fred stopped in their tracks and lowered their heads.

"Setsuna, so many people died. Those who supported us, the general's parents, the minister's brother, the maid's sister, our friends… The king lost more than anyone. He had to kill his own parents and siblings. Everyone shed tears of blood to protect the kingdom that day."

The queen bowed her head, then slowly raised it again to look straight at me— No, she must've been looking at Setsuna, but the vision made it *feel* like she was looking right at me.

"That day, amid the roaring and the clashing of swords, I bade farewell to my wounded friends who'd supported us, as they departed for the Waterside. I listened to their final words one by one as they took their last breaths. To this day, I still remember every single word."

Cyrus and Fred's faces twisted with pain every time the queen spoke.

"My friend smiled at me with eyes that could no longer see, then said, 'Don't cry, Lilia. It's the pain of being reborn.' Setsuna. I never wanted to know such pain."

The queen's voice trembled slightly.

"My friend lost an arm in the battle and departed to the Waterside. He said, 'Smile. Smile, Lilia. Today is the day Linus achieves a great victory'… Countless lives were slipping away, but I smiled for him as I bade him farewell." The queen shook her head and continued with a smile. *"'No, don't cry,' he said. 'It's a joyous occasion, so don't cry.'"*

The conversation ended there. An indescribable feeling spread through my chest, leaving me speechless. I couldn't fathom the extent of the horror the queen had witnessed. She'd been smiling in the vision, but to me, it had only ever looked like she was crying.

Fred's movements grew sluggish, but the paper birds kept coming one after another.

"The war that the king, the general, and the ministers fought, shedding tears and blood and risking their lives, brought nothing but loss. After the battle, all they could do was live in grief. I want them to know that their sacrifice brought countless smiles. That's why the people created the Founding Festival."

"…"

"They want to show the king that despite him blaming himself, the people of Lypaed are deeply grateful to him. That's why they started this festival."

The general's and the ministers' eyes were filled with sorrow.

Seeing them like that made me remember a feeling I'd long forgotten. I'd heard this story many times from my parents, the general, and senior knights. So how had I forgotten it? *When* did I forget it?

"The Founding Festival is a day for remembering the pain of tyranny, for honoring our fallen comrades, and for reminding ourselves to keep working at our goals for the kingdom. It's a day when we should swallow all the sadness of our suffering and smile at how peaceful our lives have become."

In my mind, the queen gave a painful grin. I'd never seen her smile like that before, and it made my heart ache. I was certain I wasn't the only one who felt that way.

“All of us who fought back decided we would continue supporting the king and moving forward so we could build a kingdom where we can protect the people important to us. We swore to stand by the king and protect this land for the future of our country so we can make it better. That’s why our resolve never wavered even when we were targeted by the empire.”

The queen’s eyes were serious and strong, and the general and ministers replied to the vision.

“We have continued to protect this kingdom since that day. We haven’t forgotten that.”

“We also hold the Founding Festival dear to our hearts.”

“We didn’t want to show our friends how worthless we are.”

“We need to make amends quickly so we can face them.”

Their voices were gentle and filled with bitter emotions. They seemed to be addressing their fallen friends.

Perhaps their voices reached him, because Fred regained his presence of mind. Cyrus continued forward, still affected by the magic. He had an extraordinary sense of balance, likely due to the dragon’s blessing. Even so, it was clear they both looked very pale.

Still, stopping wasn’t an option, so they pressed on, dodging the birds as they went. Yet without a change in strategy, they couldn’t escape the countless paper birds and inevitably kept touching them.

“Setsuna. I’ve never found the Founding Festival fun. I’ve never enjoyed the day we lost our comrades, our family, and our friends…”

“Mother…”

“Your Majesty…”

I heard Prince Eugene’s and Lord Keith’s voices, filled with regret.

“I don’t enjoy it…but I do feel some joy and happiness.”

“Because the people celebrate it from the bottom of their hearts?”

“That’s right.” The queen’s eyes softened affectionately. *“They prepare the gerulito flowers for the day of the festival. They try to sympathize with our feelings, and they give us the most radiant smiles. I celebrate the festival thinking of the words of a friend of mine who told me, ‘I want you to see the happy faces of the people in my place.’”*

The stuffed blue bird floated in front of the throne, catching my eye. A gerulito flower bloomed vividly on its lapel.

Despite all the queen's talk about the Founding Festival, I hadn't even readied a flower. I knew that if I'd asked Norris, he would've gladly prepared one for me, too.

"At first, it was just the flowers. But eventually, the citizens began to decorate the whole town with lanterns. Setsuna, from the highest points in the castle, the lantern lights look like stars twinkling on the ground. It's so, so beautiful. I know how much effort it must take to hang all those lanterns," the queen said with a sigh of concern.

"Everyone seems to be enjoying the preparations. Alto and I also helped preparing the gillydod hides and driving stakes into the grounds to set up the lanterns."

"What?" The queen's eyes widened in surprise. *"Was it a quest from the guild?"*

"No," Setsuna said, before enthusiastically retelling the day's events.

"Ha-ha!" The queen laughed happily, and I realized it had been a long time since I'd seen her laugh like that. Though she often had a smile on her face, lately they'd all been tinged with sadness.

Fred and Cyrus continued forward. Each time the magic activated, they stopped, then took another step. The paper birds not only moved with Setsuna's commands but also automatically headed toward anyone nearby. So while Setsuna distracted us, we kept accidentally touching the birds, falling under the spell again and again.

Yet Cyrus and Fred made steady progress toward the throne.

Prince Eugene was silent for a while, then sighed deeply and spoke to Setsuna, a troubled expression on his face.

"It's as you said; I should have listened to Mother instead of putting it off. But even so, can't we just celebrate together next year? Then we could all take time to do it at our leisure." There was a hesitant tone to his voice, and Setsuna didn't reply.

As long as the prince hesitated, his orders to Cyrus and Fred wouldn't be revoked. They continued to move forward, hindered by the paper birds.

“The king isn’t well…” The queen’s words were followed by tears as she began to describe her husband’s condition in detail. The way she spoke made it clear she was telling the truth, and an overwhelming sense of anxiety welled up inside me.

“Is it really that bad?” The general and ministers went pale.

All I could do was silently pray that the illness was curable.

Lord Keith, who was also looking pale, looked at Setsuna. Prince Eugene’s expression darkened. Fred and Cyrus stopped in shock.

Cyrus turned to Setsuna, seemingly without thinking.

“Setsuna! You—”

“Cyrus.”

But Setsuna seemed to know what he’d been about to say, and he cut Cyrus off, shaking his head. Cyrus clenched his fists, gritted his teeth, and turned away.

I had no idea what that exchange had meant.

“If left untreated, he’ll be bedridden within a month and eventually die.”

Setsuna’s words made me feel a deep sense of despair. I couldn’t shake those words from my mind.

The king is going to die?

The news hit me like a thunderbolt, and I couldn’t hide my shock. Likewise, Prince Eugene, Lord Keith, and Cyrus were visibly shaken.

“That can’t be true…!”

“Are you certain?!”

Everyone in the room stared at Setsuna in speechless astonishment.

But if the king was to depart for the Waterside now…

I tried to suppress my feelings as negative thoughts loomed over my mind.

“I am. However, I…”

But before Setsuna could finish speaking, Cyrus moved and touched a paper bird. New thoughts from the queen entered my mind before our conversation could continue.

“I know I’ve given you a lot of difficult orders, but please make the medicine for the king as best as you can.”

“I understand.”

From this exchange, we learned that Setsuna could craft some medicine to treat the king's illness, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief, including the general and Prince Eugene.

Cyrus, who'd had his eyes cast down, lifted his head and looked straight at Setsuna. This time, he nodded quietly and firmly, then sighed in relief.

"However," Setsuna said, picking up from where the vision had cut him off, "I know how to treat this illness, so I informed the queen of what needed to be done."

"Is one reason the queen took such drastic measures because she wanted the king's illness to be treated?" the general asked, frowning deeply.

"Yes, it is. That said, it was just a stroke of luck that I was able to prepare the medicine. I believe the queen wanted everyone to rest so that they could heal and recover their strength. It was a coincidence that she told me about the king, which is why I was able to provide advice on his condition."

"Why didn't you just tell us that from the start? No one would've opposed you."

"Would you have believed me in the beginning?"

"…No. You're right. It would've been difficult." The general sighed and didn't say anything else.

Setsuna turned his gaze to Prince Eugene, his voice calm. "I've made promises for next year, too, but sometimes, wishes don't always come true."

I found myself staring at Setsuna due to the melancholic tone of his voice, and he lowered his head slightly. Perhaps he'd also made promises he couldn't keep.

"The king's illness this time was something I could heal. But think about it—there's no guarantee that every person in the kingdom who's looking forward to celebrating the Founding Festival will be here this time next year. That's why I think it's so important to celebrate the festival this year."

His voice quietly filled the room.

"…"

I'd already learned the hard way how easily normalcy could be shattered when the king was poisoned and I'd had to destroy Cyrus's knight's emblem with my own two hands.

“I keep thinking, *We always have next year… We can do it then*,” Setsuna said sadly. His words seemed to express some unattainable wish, making it even more poignant that some wouldn’t see the next year.

He continued slowly. “I want all of us to celebrate the Founding Festival together. The queen’s wish can’t be granted if even one person is missing. The only time we can guarantee that happens is right now… Today.”

Setsuna paused and looked down.

“Once someone departs for the Waterside, there’s nothing anybody can do anymore. You can’t reconcile with someone, can’t tell them how you feel, can’t express your gratitude, can’t argue, can’t meddle, can’t exert your whims, can’t play pranks, can’t chat, can’t hear their voice, can’t see their smile, can’t make them smile, and you can’t see them in your daily life…”

Setsuna spoke so softly that I couldn’t hear what he was saying, but it seemed like he was talking to himself.

But when he looked up again, he seemed like his usual self.

Once Setsuna finished speaking, it seemed as if everyone in the room felt the same way. We all knew what should be done next and turned our gazes toward Prince Eugene and Lord Keith.

“Fred, that’s enough. You don’t have to keep going.”

Hearing Lord Keith’s order, Fred took a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling, showing just how much agony he’d been in moving forward.

But Prince Eugene stayed silent.

“…Wha—?” he began to say, but then went quiet again. I watched him closely, worried about what might be wrong, when he suddenly collapsed to his knees.

Lord Keith caught the prince and called out to him, but there was no response. The general and the ministers quickly surrounded Prince Eugene while Setsuna, looking pale, ran toward us with his bag in hand.

I saw Cyrus glance at us with a concerned look, but as soon as he saw Setsuna, he turned his back to Prince Eugene and focused on the blue bird above the throne.

Cyrus took a deep breath to calm his emotions, then moved forward. Fred had been focused on the prince, but he shifted his attention to Cyrus.

I could guess what Cyrus was thinking. There was no longer any point in keeping going, nor did anyone want to. Nothing would be gained even if the bird was cut down. It was a meaningless order now, but no one stopped him. So Cyrus had to move forward alone.

Fred reached out to stop him, but then he pulled his hand back, knowing it would mean defying Lord Keith's command.

So all he could do was call out his name.

"Cyrus."

"My order hasn't been rescinded yet," Cyrus replied, intently staring at the stuffed bird floating in front of the throne.

"But there's no point anymore…," Fred said.

"It's all right, Fred. You can go back."

"…Cyrus."

Only the two of us noticed what Cyrus was doing. He pushed his sluggish body forward to carry out his master's command. The spell of the paper birds tormented us all equally, including Cyrus. He wasn't immune to the pain.

Even so, he straightened his back and walked ahead, his features expressionless. As I watched him, I remembered how I'd destroyed his knight's emblem—a symbol of loyalty—even though I'd only done it because I had also been following my master's orders.

◇ Part Three: Cyrus

Eugene had been overwhelmed lately, having to deal with all manner of different tasks.

At first, they'd been categorized by importance and urgency, but the number of petitions from the territories and the amount of work piled up by the ministers didn't leave any time for sorting. So the tasks had kept building up, and it had taken everything for the prince just to deal with the job in front of him.

I'd often seen Eugene muttering, *"Am I really qualified to succeed my father?"* It seemed like he was disappointed in himself. Still, he concealed his fatigue and kept working hard, driven only by his dedication to his kingdom.

All I could do was watch over him. Though we'd been raised like brothers and were close friends, I was his subordinate first and foremost. As a knight, my duty was to protect and assist my lord under any circumstances. Without orders, I couldn't intervene.

I continued to watch over him as his first knight. Every time he insisted that he was all right, I suppressed my desire to help, believing it wouldn't be beneficial to him. I remained his loyal knight.

But what should I have done?

The thought flickered across my mind, but now wasn't the time for reflection.

What should I do now?

When I had been thrown out into the Zeghur Forest, I'd had no idea what to do. Setsuna had saved me and kept me from going astray, but now that same man was focused on saving the prince.

Think for yourself.

I knew Eugene would be fine if I left him to Setsuna. I thought the only reason he'd collapsed was probably due to the news of a solution to the king's illness and reconciling with the queen being too much for his nerves to take all at once. So right now, my task was not to go to him.

Abandoning my lord's orders wasn't an option. As his first knight, if I ignored the prince's commands, then it would imply that no one followed his orders and that would undermine his

authority. The prince might not mind, but it would surely become a hindrance when he ascended to the throne and had to rule.

I could tell that Eugene had intended to revoke his order, yet I still couldn't defy it unless he verbally rescinded the command.

The king's words from some time ago echoed in my mind.

"Have you found the answer?"

"Cyrus," Fred called, his face contorted with agony.

"My order hasn't been rescinded yet."

I know the prince will be fine, so until he recovers, my duty is to cut down that blue bird.

I focused on the stuffed animal in front of the throne, guarded by the paper birds.

"But there's no point anymore…," Fred said.

"It's all right, Fred. You can go back."

Don't touch the birds.

I decided to try a strategy that had come to mind during my fight with the paper birds. I hadn't been able to use this strategy with Fred beside me because it would've put him in danger, but now that wasn't a problem.

"…Cyrus."

I drew my sword and held it with both hands, then stepped forward. The paper birds responded, moving toward me.

I'll do what I can.

I knew it wouldn't be wise to put anymore strain on the prince's mind. Almost everyone there must already be close to their breaking point.

I can't touch the paper birds under any circumstance.

I took another cautious step forward, and three paper birds flew at me.

It'll be fine.

I had proof. When Fred dropped his sword earlier, I'd seen it touch a bird, but the spell hadn't activated.

As long as I don't touch them, nothing should happen to me.

With careful timing, I swung my sword to strike the birds right when they entered my range. I released my grip on the hilt the moment my sword made contact with the paper birds. The

momentum carried the sword right through them, knocking the birds away, and I fixed my grip on the hilt.

…

The paper birds dissolved into a mist, but there was no change in my vision.

I'm sorry for cutting down the queen's feelings, but it's to protect everyone. Please forgive me.

As I quietly apologized to the queen, I felt relief that my plan had been successful. I stepped forward again, and this time, I struck down the incoming birds with a diagonal slash.

As I closed the distance, the paper birds kept coming. I swung my sword time and again, but I had enough stamina. The training I'd undergone daily for the prince and to gain Lord Revale's acceptance was now bearing fruit.

And thanks to the dragon's blessing within me, it seemed as if the paper birds were moving in slow motion. I could even sense and evade movements from my blind spots by feeling the wind.

I steadily closed the distance, cutting down the final wave of attacks, until I was eventually standing before the blue bird floating in front of the throne.

…

I didn't hesitate. I raised my sword and slashed without a second thought.

"Cyrus! That's enough."

I heard the prince's voice just as I brought down my sword, but it was too late to stop. His words couldn't halt my swing. I couldn't cut down the blue bird, either, though. I gripped the hilt tightly in a tense moment of indecision.

Suddenly, a high-pitched noise rang out, and my blade was knocked away. Setsuna had appeared before me, his own sword drawn.

No one said a thing. Despite how many people were present, I couldn't even hear them breathing. The prince was the first to speak. "I rescind my previous order. It's over, Cyrus."

"As you command."

I turned away from Setsuna to retrieve my fallen sword.

"I interfered with the challenge… I used a sword, which means I lost," Setsuna said.

"…"

He’d said it like a declaration, even though everyone could see that wasn’t true.

“Do you want me to lift the barrier?” Setsuna asked.

The prince nodded.

Setsuna walked past, stopping beside me for a moment to whisper softly so that only I could hear.

“I’m glad you made it in time.”

The sound of relief in his voice told me he’d thrown the match for my sake.

◇ Part Four: Linus

The reason I hadn't had time to speak with Lilia lately was due to two pressing issues. One was internal, and the other, external. I couldn't afford any mistakes as I navigated them.

The internal issue was related to monster hunting. The number of requests for slaying monsters had doubled for every region compared with the previous month, making it impossible to manage our usual military operations.

Entrusting the monster slaying to Eugene had ultimately proven to be a bad move. I'd hoped to foster his growth, but it had backfired. Under normal circumstances, he should have been able to handle it with his skills, but right now, he was overwhelmed.

Keith had said, *"It feels like the scales have tipped somehow, and the number of monsters is increasing."* If that was true, then their number might stabilize at this heightened state, in which case, we would need to consider structural changes such as boosting the number of troops. But Eugene hadn't raised any such plan.

So I had decided to temporarily abandon leaving Eugene in charge. Instead, I proposed in today's meeting to form a new unit with Cyrus as the commander and increase the number of troops in the squad.

The external issue was Guilonde's movements. We'd formed an alliance with the other kingdoms in an effort to curb its actions, yet despite this, Guilonde had launched an attack on Kumiu Port at the border of Mubana, most likely to gauge our response.

Having been attacked, Mubana requested aid from all other nations. Seden responded by sending a fleet of ships, demonstrating their willingness to fight alongside them. However, not all the nations were aligned in their actions. Although Tarado and Miglis began providing military supplies, there was still no word from Nubul.

Our kingdom was also unable to provide reinforcements due to the monster-slaying problem, so we limited ourselves to sending supplies—but even gathering those had proven to be a struggle. Part of today's meeting had been dedicated to devising methods to procure the necessary resources.

As such, it was unforgivable that Lilia had confined me. However, when she claimed I was ill and presented me with medicine, I suppressed my anger and listened. She explained that the medicine had been made for me by Setsuna, so I had no choice but to heed her words.

After I took the medicine, I sank into the sofa. I was able to relax for the first time in a long while. Yet at the same time, I was overwhelmed by a sense of guilt for not even realizing I was ill.

Lilia then explained that Sena the bard was actually an adventurer named Setsuna. After she described what happened, she moved on to discuss the upcoming Founding Festival with great enthusiasm.

As I listened to Lilia, I took a bundle of letters tied with string out of a wooden box. I untied them and read through the letters, which contained a multitude of feelings from the citizens. There were messages saying how excited people were for my appearance during the festival, concerns for my health, and worries about recent developments with neighboring countries. Their sentiments deeply affected me.

Lilia waited silently as I read, her demeanor showing no sign of reproach despite the unnecessary troubles she'd had to endure. She just smiled wryly and said, "You and everyone else haven't changed at all." Seeing her expression made me think back to the words of a late friend of mine:

"When Lilia doesn't back down, it means she's trying to pick up something important you've dropped. Don't just ignore her and keep going."

Those words were from a time when I hadn't taken Lilia's words seriously, just like now.

I suppose he's going to scold me again…

I sighed, the image of my friends who'd departed for the Waterside drifting in and out of my mind.

I can't believe how cruel I've been.

During these past two years, I hadn't thought about them at all, despite the fact that their efforts had made it possible for us to achieve the Founding Festival in the first place. It was only then that I realized what Lilia had been trying to remind me of.

Lilia walked briskly ahead of me, and I slowly followed behind as we headed from the bedchamber to the throne room. I guessed she was in a rush because she was concerned about Setsuna, who was still in the throne room awaiting her return.

As she turned the corner and her figure disappeared from view, I saw Rombal walking slightly ahead of us. He glanced at me as if he wanted to say something.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Don’t you dare die on us, Linus,” Rombal replied.

It was unusual for him to speak while he was on guard duty, but it was clear to me that he’d spoken on behalf of those who’d passed away. I had no intention of dying, especially not before we made the future they’d envisioned a reality. I nodded firmly.

Satisfied by my response, Rombal faced forward and led me to the throne room. As the doors opened and I entered, I saw a crowd gathered in the center of the room.

“What happened?” I asked as I approached.

The crowd parted, and everyone knelt to me. However, Eugene, in the center of the group of people, swayed on his feet. Cyrus was nearby, so I told him to support the prince. Seeing how exhausted he was, I couldn’t help but think self-deprecatingly how similar we were as father and son.

Someone who doesn’t even understand his own condition doesn’t really have the right to be concerned about the health of others…

I’d hoped that Eugene would grow, and that he’d handle things with support from Keith and the others. I had intended to step in only if he truly reached his limits. However, I’d clearly misjudged the situation.

“I’m sorry, Father,” Eugene said.

“There’s no need to apologize. This is all my fault. More importantly, are you all right?” I asked.

“Yes, thanks to Setsuna’s treatment, I’m recovering,” he replied.

I turned to Setsuna and asked him to raise his head and explain the treatment, which he calmly did.

“Prince Eugene’s illness was psychological. I used my magical tools to create a potion imbued with Darkness magic and had the prince drink it. With three days of rest, he should make a full recovery.”

“I appreciate it. As for your reward…”

“There’s no need for that. This was not a quest, but something I did because I wanted to.”

“But, Setsuna…,” Eugene interrupted.

“Please don’t worry about it,” Setsuna said. “The most important thing right now is that you rest.”

“Well, that will be decided after hearing the king’s plans,” Eugene said, turning toward me. There was some kind of hidden meaning in his expression and a sense of unease about him that everyone else in the room shared. I quickly understood what it was about.

“What I wish to say is only brief, so I shall tell you here rather than return to the meeting room.”

Eugene and Setsuna both bowed their heads.

“First, my queen and I have decided to make an appearance at the Founding Festival. Spread the word throughout the city immediately.”

The ministers acknowledged this, and the tension in the room eased. I suspected that Setsuna had been crucial in creating a mood that reflected the queen’s wishes. I silently offered my deepest gratitude to him, then continued speaking.

“Next, Prime Minister. In addition to our participation in the festival, all work at the castle shall be put on hold, except for that which I specifically authorize. Adjust the schedule accordingly. For that reason, we should consider requesting the Adventurers Guild to handle the tasks such as slaying monsters.”

“But what about the funds required to post quests to the Adventurers Guild?”

“I’ll leave that to the prime minister. I will grant any further approval that is required, so please post the quests to the guild within the next three days.”

Once the prime minister agreed, I moved on to the next topic.

“General, confirm with the prime minister as to whether there are any monsters in urgent need of slaying, and if there are, promptly lead the knights to tackle the issue.”

The general nodded firmly.

“Finally, regarding sending aid to Mubana, we will cease collecting supplies. Instead, once the Founding Festival is over, I shall lead two thousand soldiers to provide support. My own presence will address any doubts regarding the number of troops

being insufficient. Prime Minister, when you make the arrangements with the Adventurers Guild, please keep in mind that I'll be needing those two thousand troops."

I silenced any possible objections from Keith with a glance. Lilia and Eugene had given their all for the sake of the kingdom, so I felt I needed to do at least this much to make amends.

"Are there any questions or objections?"

No one spoke up.

"Well, then. This meeting is adjourned." After a brief pause, I declared loudly, "And let the Founding Festival begin!"

Everybody in the room lifted their heads as one. The looks on each of their faces were incredibly bright.

As everyone stood up, Lilia spoke to Eugene, who was still being supported by Cyrus. The queen clutched a blue stuffed toy I'd never seen before tightly to her chest.

"Make sure you rest well," she said.

Eugene's eyes wavered, as if he was unsure how to respond.

"Mother, I…"

But Lilia just shook her head, cutting him off. She smiled as she pulled a gerulito flower from the stuffed toy and said, "You'll sleep soundly if you go to bed holding this."

She pressed the soft toy into Eugene's hands. He accepted it with an awkward smile and quietly held it at his side.

"I'm not a child anymore, Mother. But thank you…"

I could tell he was experiencing a mixture of emotions. Lilia smiled gently and caressed his arm, and Eugene bowed his head, then left the throne room supported by Cyrus and Georges.

After watching them depart, Setsuna approached me.

"It's been a long time, Your Majesty. How is your health?"

"I'm fine now. My fatigue's completely disappeared."

"Would you mind if I checked with my magic?"

No one opposed Setsuna's request, though Rombal stepped a bit closer. Setsuna cast a short spell on me, then sighed in relief.

"You're fine now. The fatigue should be gone with three days of proper rest."

"I appreciate your help. I'm truly grateful."

“Please thank the queen. If she hadn’t noticed and your condition had gone untreated, you would’ve been bedridden in a week.” Setsuna didn’t sound very pleased as he spoke. Judging by the lack of surprise from the general, it seemed he’d already explained my illness to everyone.

“If you recall, I asked you to eat proper meals and get enough rest,” he said with a cold, piercing look.

“…”

“I suppose it was inevitable that you’d push yourself to form those alliances, but don’t you think your behavior afterward was unacceptable? Your physical strength had already been weakened by the poison, and you neglected to eat and sleep. To top it off, you didn’t even realize you were ill and ignored the concerned voices of those around you. Don’t you think you were being too careless?”

His tone was harsh and unlike his usual personality, leaving me at a loss for words.

“Did you want to return to how you suffered when you were poisoned?”

“No… That wasn’t my intention.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that. It’s important to get proper meals and sleep. Please don’t neglect those necessities.”

“I understand. I’ll take it to heart.”

“If that medicine hadn’t worked, there would’ve been no other options,” he said.

I was curious as to what kind of medicine I’d taken, so I asked. Setsuna hesitated before revealing the ingredients.

“What…? What did you just say?” I couldn’t believe my ears when he told me. Everyone around me froze, as if they’d turned to ice.

“I said dragon blood was one of the ingredients.”

It seemed I’d heard him correctly.

“Why would you use something like that?” I asked, my voice trembling. Setsuna glanced at Lilia, looking troubled.

“The medicine that was requested of me had to cure your illness in one day, allow you to immediately return to work, and have no side effects.”

Everyone turned to look at Lilia. It truly had been an impossible request. I almost criticized her for making such a

demand, but I swallowed my words, realizing I wasn't in any position to do so.

The woman who'd made the impossible request stared wide-eyed at Setsuna. I imagined Lilia had just rattled off what she'd been hoping for, without expecting Setsuna to actually fulfill her wishes. Perhaps she'd held on to a faint hope, but surely, she couldn't have believed they'd all come true.

"Normally, your illness takes at least two months to fully recover from, even in its early, more easily treatable stages. So in order to cure it immediately, I had to use something close to a panacea, leaving dragon blood as the only option."

A dragon's heart was known to cure any disease, while dragon's blood was the best cure for most ailments. However, acquiring a dragon's heart or blood was no easy feat, and the value of either exceeded the entirety of the supplies we'd intended to send to Mubana.

I felt my blood run cold at the thought of the cost we owed to Setsuna.

"Setsuna, I assume the queen hasn't been able to give you a suitable reward for such a thing. Is that correct?"

"Yes, I haven't received any reward yet."

"Then what do you desire? It can't be something like sweets, as you asked for last time."

I was a king, after all; sweets wouldn't suffice, and it wouldn't set a good example. I didn't want word spreading among the people that I was cheap.

He gave me a sheepish grin and said, "The queen and I have already arranged my compensation," and evaded giving me an answer.

"And I promise I'll keep my word to you," Lilia said firmly.

I was slightly concerned by Setsuna's somewhat sad smile, but Lilia's confidence convinced me that it was something within our power to give him. I decided I'd ask her for the details later.

"One last thing, Your Majesty. This is from me. It's a gift to celebrate the Founding Festival."

Setsuna took out a bottle of wine from his bag. The general was known for having a fondness for alcohol, and when he noticed the unfamiliar label, his eyes gleamed—though I pretended not to notice.

“Please enjoy it with your friends,” Setsuna said.

That’s right… I remembered how every year, we used to watch the lanterns lit by the people of Lypaed, chat with friends, and renew our spirits. Lilia bit her lip to suppress her tears, but she had a happy smile on her face.

“Thank you, Setsuna.”

“You’re welcome,” he said. “And this is just me being nosy, but are you sure you’re happy with the gerulito flower like that?”

In response, Lilia took the opportunity to gently place the gerulito flower she’d been holding into my breast pocket. As she did, a vision of her flowed into my mind, and her voice conveyed her dream to me.

Affection for my blushing wife surged within me, and I reaffirmed my resolve to dedicate my life to this kingdom.

The reign of the previous king had made it difficult to protect even our loved ones. I would ensure that this kingdom would not fall into such a state again, for the sake of the citizens, for my family, for our comrades who had departed to the Waterside, and for our shared wishes.

And to make Lilia’s dream come true.

“My dream is to become a mother to a boy and a girl. I’ll make it happen, no matter what!” Lilia’s voice said happily in my mind.

In that case, I also have to strive to make this kingdom better, for the sake of my future daughter.

Once I watched Setsuna disappear with his teleportation magic, I left the throne room with Lilia.

The Founding Festival was beginning.

◇ Part Five: Setsuna

I used teleportation magic to return to Ragi's house, the reverse of how I'd gotten to the castle. Judging by how quiet it was, it seemed Alto and Ragi hadn't returned yet.

Normally, I'd go through the front door, right?

The lingering impressions from earlier were so strong that I'd felt the need to return to where I'd left from, so I teleported to my room. I went downstairs with a sheepish smile on my face and washed my hands. After preparing a drink, I went back upstairs, then sat down on the sofa in my room, sinking deeply into it.

If I'd just teleported to the front door, I wouldn't have had to make another trip up to my room. The events at the castle must've really shaken me.

"I'm exhausted…," I said with a sigh, letting out my true feelings. I had completed the queen's request. I wasn't sure if I'd achieved the best outcome, though.

Thinking back on it, I wished I could've handled things more smoothly. But once the initial plan fell apart, being smooth hadn't really been an option, I thought with a wry smile.

It wasn't the best I could've done, but…

When the king announced, *"Let the Founding Festival begin!"* the queen's smile had looked genuinely happy. Eugene had appeared relieved, too, like a burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

I still had my reservations, but for now, I was grateful that the king's illness was cured, Eugene could rest, and the queen's wish had come true.

I leaned back into the sofa, letting the tension drain from my body, and as I did, I found myself murmuring, "I'm glad I accepted the queen's quest."

Despite my hesitations about taking on the job, in the end, it had left me truly satisfied.

◇ Part Six: Ragi

Since today was the Founding Festival, I'd been prepared for the crowds. I hadn't trained all my life to have something like that exhaust me.

Alto was in high spirits the whole time since it was his first festival. He held my hand to avoid getting lost in the crowd, and occasionally, he glanced up to check on me. He was constantly curious, and he was excited by everything he saw.

The food seemed to captivate him the most, though. He was drawn by the aromas wafting from the stalls and wandered off to buy two meat skewers with his own money. He held out one of them to me.

"Here, Gramps!"

"Thanks."

I took the meat skewer he offered me, and Alto smiled happily and nodded. I hadn't expected him to buy one for me, too. There was a warmth in my chest, yet at the same time, I felt a pang of sadness that Alto hadn't thought to rely on me for help when I was right beside him.

I looked at the meat skewer Alto had given me for a moment before gratefully eating it, and we both expressed how delicious it was.

After I went through about half of the skewer, I said, "Alto, if there's anything you want to eat or buy, Gramps will get it for you." I was subtly trying to tell him he didn't have to spend his own money.

Alto finished his skewer and began scanning for his next target as he replied:

"Master gave me money yesterday. He said to eat a lot with Gramps."

"What about using the money Setsuna gave you for something else?"

"That's okay, I prefer food. Master said I can eat as much as I want."

Apparently, Alto was overjoyed by Setsuna telling him he could eat whatever he wanted, and he wagged his tail cheerfully.

"…Are you saying the money's just for food?"

"Yeah."

“I see. So that’s how it is…”

“And he gave me a ton of money, so I can eat a lot!” Alto said. Even as he spoke, his gaze remained fixed on the food stalls. I couldn’t help but laugh and let him drag me to the next stall.

Once we finished one dish, we’d buy another, filling our bellies with all sorts of different foods. Although I began to feel full, Alto seemed like he could keep eating.

I felt like I’d be stuffed if I ate anything else, so I told Alto I wouldn’t have any more and that he should just buy food for himself. Yet he insisted, saying, “Master said to eat with Gramps!” and continued getting portions for me as well, leaving me no other choice but to keep going. If I stopped eating, Alto would, too.

I smiled at Alto’s sincerity and ate alongside him. I thought surely he’d be running out of money soon, but my hopes were dashed when Alto said, “Gramps, is there anything you want to eat? Master gave me twenty copper coins, so we can buy lots more!”

“…”

Twenty copper coins… Thankfully, Setsuna hadn’t given him any half-silver or silver coins, but I didn’t expect him to have this much money. I could eat on my own for two weeks with that amount.

Well, it’s no use waiting for him to run out, I thought as I glanced at Alto, who eagerly awaited my response.

“Do you want to try something from there?” Not wanting to disappoint him, I pointed to a stall that had caught my eye. Alto nodded happily and led me over to it.

“Two larges, please!” Alto ordered without hesitation, leaving me speechless. He paid the friendly vendor and received the two large servings. I thanked them, but my face was probably very tense.

We ate all the food, filling our stomachs to the brim. Yet even then, Alto’s appetite seemed insatiable, and we kept walking around eating. After a while, we finally stopped at a stall selling rare fruit juices, and by the time I finished my cup, I was completely full.

Alto, on the other hand, had been happily sipping his juice when a passerby bumped into him, and he ended up spilling it all

over his clothes. The person apologized, and the shopkeeper refunded his money, but Alto began to complain about feeling sticky, so we decided to head home.

If not for that, he'd probably still be eating now. I couldn't understand how such a small body could hold so much food.

"I'm gonna go wash up, Gramps!"

As soon as we got home, Alto dashed off to the bathroom to take off his juice-stained clothes.

He'd been talking about wanting to change his clothes on the way back, so I replied with a quick acknowledgment, then sunk into the sofa in the living room. An involuntary sigh escaped my lips, and I couldn't help but chuckle.

I was more exhausted than when I'd gone on that expedition to the ruins with Setsuna and Alto. I knew the reason for my fatigue, but even if we had a chance to do again someday, I wouldn't change a thing. It was just such an endearing reason for being tired. I sighed again as I rubbed my stomach.

I don't want to see any more food today.

I'd put on a brave face for Alto, but I was honestly reaching my limit. Even if it was just a facade, I didn't want to show any weakness in front of him.

I heard a pattering sound and thought Alto had returned, so I struggled to sit up despite my discomfort. However, it was Setsuna who came through the door instead.

"Welcome back. Did you two have fun?"

"Yes, we did."

I expected Setsuna to ask why I looked so worn out, but instead, he saw me rubbing my stomach, and a rare, sly smile spread across his face.

"Were you able to eat a lot today?"

Judging by his words and the smile on his face, I realized why Setsuna had limited Alto to food. He'd been getting me back for the little pranks I'd been playing on him daily.

"You got me good… Since you told Alto to eat with me, he wouldn't hear of eating alone!" I sighed for what felt like the hundredth time today, and Setsuna laughed, then placed a package he'd been holding on the table.

“I’m going to prepare lunch, so is there anything *you’d like to eat*?” It was mean asking something like that, despite the fact that he must have already known the answer.

“…”

I ignored him and said nothing. With a smile, Setsuna poured a glass of water from a pitcher and handed it to me along with some medicine.

“This is a digestive aid. It should help you feel better.”

“I feel like I’ve eaten enough for three days…,” I muttered with yet another sigh, and Setsuna gave me a particularly mischievous smile.

My stomach took longer to recover than I’d expected, and by the time I was feeling better, the sun had already dipped quite a bit in the sky. I’d rested quietly in my room trying to keep Alto from noticing, but it had still taken a considerable amount of time to feel the effects of the medicine. Even though Setsuna had said it was quite strong…

Still, since the main part of the Founding Festival was in the evening, the timing worked out well. We all pinned our gerulito flowers with the embroidered ribbons wrapped around them to our shirts, locked up, and headed toward the castle.

The purpose of the Founding Festival was to express gratitude to the king, so if they were able to, the citizens of Lypaed would visit the castle to greet him. The residents of our town, which was spread out below the castle, were no exception.

“There are quite a lot of people out here, huh?” Setsuna said with surprise as we reached the bustling part of town. I’d noticed that he’d seemed unusually tired when we left home. Alto must have been slightly scared, because he clung to his master’s sleeve.

“There will be even more people as we get closer to the castle,” I replied.

“I’ve never been in such a crowded place before, so it’s a bit of a shock,” he said. Yet despite his words, Setsuna’s face was as cool and composed as ever.

“I can’t believe it,” Alto muttered with a frown, causing both of us to burst into laughter.

“It is a bit unexpected, though,” commented Setsuna.

“What is?” I asked.

“Well, I didn’t think you’d participate in a festival like this.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“So did you do some research into it beforehand for us? Thank you for that.”

“You should be thanking me from twenty years ago,” I said.

Setsuna chuckled, but Alto looked puzzled.

“Alto, Ragi’s saying that he attended the Founding Festival twenty years ago,” Setsuna explained.

“Oh, I get it!” Alto looked at me with admiration, though I wasn’t entirely sure what he was impressed by. “If there were more people, I think I’d definitely pass out,” Alto said.

“Well, if it gets too overwhelming, let me know, and I’ll give you a piggyback ride.”

“Okay!” A relieved look crossed Alto’s face.

“So, Ragi, why were you at the Founding Festival twenty years ago?”

“I happened to stop by this town on my way back from a quest in Guilonde.” I went on to explain that Guilonde often experienced monster outbreaks due to its proximity to the Demonlands, so there was a steady demand for mercenaries there.

“I don’t understand. What happens when there’s a monster outbreak…?”

Alto had assumed that when monsters appeared in large numbers, adventurers would be summoned by the guild to defeat them. He asked if mercenaries did the same thing.

“I didn’t pay attention when I heard about it before…,” Alto said. Apparently, he’d learned about it from a mercenary companion on the road, but he’d been too angry at the time to care about the details.

“Basically, the lord commands his soldiers to protect the citizens and subdue the monsters. If his forces aren’t enough, he’ll request reinforcements from the national army or hire mercenaries directly.” I looked at Alto to see if he was understanding and was relieved to see him nodding along. In that case, I thought I’d continue.

“There are also villages without adventurer guilds that need mercenaries. The village I went to in Guilonde twenty years ago

was near the border with Lypaed. So after defeating the monsters there, I decided to come to Lypaed."

"Oh, so you arrived just as the Founding Festival was happening?" Setsuna asked.

"That's right. The atmosphere of this town seemed to soothe my heart, which had been hardened by monster hunting."

Right now, the town was just like it had been back then, bustling with people from the festival. I spotted a few beastfolk among the crowd, some residents, and some visitors from both inside and outside the kingdom. Seeing beastfolk here brought me a sense of comfort.

Although I had abandoned my homeland of Sagana and my family for certain reasons, living in a place without any beastfolk felt unbearably lonely. However, I also worried that being around too many beastfolk would reveal my identity. That had made this town the perfect place for me to settle down.

But I still hadn't actually participated in the festival after parting ways with my mercenary comrades and coming to Lypaed. I lacked the courage to join in with the crowd by myself.

But today, I have two companions with me…

Lost in my thoughts, I was abruptly brought back to reality by a question from Setsuna.

"Was Lypaed like this twenty years ago, too? I heard the kingdom's finances were tight back then."

I sifted through my memories as I answered:

"The entire kingdom of Lypaed was impoverished, and the king had to sell off the castle riches to raise funds. Because the people here were poor, it was the foreign merchants who bought those expensive items, so most of Lypaed's historic paintings, ceramics, and other treasures ended up leaving the kingdom."

"I see. It's a pity they lost their historical artifacts."

"It is. But they did manage to hold on to some things."

"Like what?" Since Setsuna was a scholar, he had a fondness for stories involving history. He listened curiously, and seeing this made Alto happy as well.

"Well, one item is a magical tool related to the founding of this kingdom. The townspeople here couldn't bear the thought of it leaving the kingdom, so they pooled their wealth to buy it back."

“What kind?” Alto asked eagerly. His enthusiasm made me smile, and I couldn’t help but respond with a grin.

“It’s a very large magical tool that illuminates the surroundings.”

“Oh, that’s it? I thought it would be something cooler.”

“Like what?”

“Hmm, like maybe when you activate it, a bunch of meat dishes come out or something?”

I had to chuckle at Alto’s bottomless appetite, especially after how much he’d eaten that morning.

“Don’t be disappointed. There’s an important story behind it.”

“What kind of story?” Setsuna asked.

Although I’d been trying to catch Alto’s interest, Setsuna also seemed intrigued, which only made Alto more curious. I chuckled inwardly.

“According to legend, the royal family of Lypaed cut through a cave in the Baudal mountain range when they came from Kutt. It was a long, murky journey, but this magical tool helped them by illuminating the way as if it were broad daylight.”

“Yeah, that would be really helpful. Those caves are really dark, you know,” said Alto.

I must’ve looked quite shocked. That was to be expected, though; I’d always thought the caves in the Baudal mountain range were just a fairy tale, but Alto had just implied he’d been through them.

I thought he must be mistaken in some way, but just as I was about to ask Setsuna, I saw him hastily tell Alto to be quiet. Unbelievable as it seemed, apparently, it was true.

“Uh, Gramps, please forget you heard that,” Alto said, looking up at me with a despondent expression.

“Ragi, could you please keep that just between us?” added Setsuna.

They’d both trusted me with their secret, making this an unusually wonderful day.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone,” I promised as I patted Alto’s head. “Finding that cave was a huge historical discovery, though, so it’s a shame it has to be hidden.”

“Well, we have our reasons…,” Setsuna said. But his sheepish smile and Alto’s gratitude only made me more curious.

When we arrived in front of the castle, it was already overflowing with too many people to count. If it wasn't for the moat separating the castle and the road, the castle walls might have crumbled.

During the festival, the king and queen would appear on the balcony a number of times each day. This crowd was the result of the people who hadn't been able to get into the courtyard and been forced to turn back to town.

I thought we'd left early enough to get into the courtyard, but apparently, I'd underestimated the situation.

"It's unfortunate, but we'll have to turn back."

"What? We won't get to see the queen?"

Alto sounded disappointed, despite feeling overwhelmed by the crowd.

"It's okay, Alto," Setsuna said. "We can come back tomorrow."

"At this rate, we'll probably have to wait in line even if we come in the morning tomorrow," I said with a sigh. But just as I finished speaking, a maid appeared before us.

"Huh?!" we all exclaimed at the same time as the woman began to speak politely.

"Master Setsuna, I have come to escort you."

"No, I don't think that's a good idea…"

Before I could even grasp what was happening, Setsuna had responded in a flustered tone, which was so funny that I couldn't help but laugh. My amusement seemed to spread to Alto, who also chuckled at Setsuna's reaction.

"I must insist, Master Setsuna. It would cause trouble for me otherwise."

"But, Margaret, I can't accept any special treatment."

As I watched their exchange, I sensed that Margaret also shared my penchant for mischief.

"This is a prime example of a prank," I whispered to Alto, and he nodded with an "Ohhh." Laughing, I spoke to Setsuna in an exaggerated manner.

"I'm not sure what's going on, but you shouldn't inconvenience a lady."

"Ragi!"

“Master, you always say we shouldn’t cause trouble for others.”

Now that Alto had joined in on the fun, Setsuna sighed and muttered, “I’m the one who’s in trouble here,” but he reluctantly began to follow the woman.

The maid, Margaret, cast a spell, and the scene before us instantly transformed into one of castle walls and balconies. I glanced to the side and realized we were now in an area reserved for nobles, which sent a chill through me.

“Margaret, isn’t this the royal-guest section?” Setsuna protested.

“Please keep your voice down,” she said.

Seeing the curious gazes directed at us, Setsuna had no choice but to comply and take a seat, and Alto and I followed suit.

“I never should have said we’d come to meet them,” Setsuna muttered. He was normally such a quiet person, but he let out a conspicuous sigh.

Alto had initially been apprehensive, but seeing his master’s reaction, he smiled with amusement. The shadow that had been looming over him earlier seemed to have now completely disappeared, and I felt relieved.

It took some time for the king and queen to reappear, and Margaret excused herself and returned to the castle.

The king paused at the entrance to the balcony. The seated nobles rose, and those in the courtyard stood and bowed their heads. Only after acknowledging them did the king step forward and offer words of gratitude to the people, his booming voice dispelling the recent rumors of illness and eliciting cheers from the crowd.

Once the excitement settled, the king and queen began to wave to the people. When the queen waved in our direction, it didn’t feel like a coincidence.

As they continued to wave, maids carrying baskets appeared on the balcony, kneeling beside the queen. One of those maids was Margaret.

The queen took a wrapped pastry from the basket and tossed it into the crowd. Everyone reached up trying to catch it, but miraculously, it floated right into Alto’s hands.

Alto smiled innocently, in stark contrast to Setsuna's dry grin. I struggled to stifle my laughter as I saw that.

It was clear that something had transpired between Setsuna and the queen, but regardless, Setsuna's discomfort was incredibly entertaining to me.

The queen threw a second bag of pastries, then a third, and a fourth, which improbably sailed to the farthest part of the courtyard. In total, she threw fifty-one bags, leaving fifty opportunities for others to catch them.

After distributing the pastries, the king and queen returned inside the castle, followed by nobles escorted by soldiers.

At that point, the only thing I was interested in was how Setsuna would react, and I watched him silently. Suddenly, a soldier also appeared in front of us, saying he would lead us somewhere.

"That may be an issue," Setsuna replied—but it was the soldier who appeared more troubled.

And who could blame him? We hadn't anticipated being invited to the castle, so we weren't in formal attire. The fact that people dressed like us were seated in the guest section was already confusing, and now this soldier, who'd come to escort us into the castle, was being told it would cause a problem.

I'd anticipated this reaction, so I stifled a laugh as I sympathized with the soldier.

"If you just tell them I've gone home, it shouldn't be an issue. Please take us to the castle gate."

Reluctantly, the soldier complied and led us out of the castle. There were still townspeople lingering along the paths, enjoying the atmosphere of the courtyard.

"Let's go back to the town square," Setsuna said, walking ahead as if nothing had happened. He hurried across the bridge connecting the castle gate to the road, likely trying to avoid the crowds coming out of the courtyard.

I took Alto's hand and followed behind Setsuna. But just as I expected, Margaret appeared before Setsuna again.

"Margaret, what do you need now?" Setsuna asked, his voice filled with exasperation.

“I apologize. This time, it’s a personal matter, so please direct any frustration you feel toward me,” she said sincerely.

“I’m not really that angry. What’s the matter?” His tone softened, causing Margaret to relax as she produced two small pouches.

“What are these?”

“A personal token of gratitude for the past few days…,” she said, but Setsuna interrupted her.

“This kind of conversation isn’t appropriate here.”

“I guess I got a little chatty seeing as you cast a soundproof barrier,” Margaret said with a laugh.

“In that case, I won’t stop you. Please continue,” he said with a wry smile.

It seemed like it was just us listening, so the fact that Setsuna had cut her off must mean he’d been asking the maid to be considerate of me. Even though it was a bit late now, Setsuna was trying not to make me worry since I didn’t know what was going on.

He’s so thoughtful…

Margaret apologized, then continued speaking. “My mistress has been very troubled these past few days. It pains me that I couldn’t help ease her worries, and I’m deeply grateful to you for being able to do so, Master Setsuna.”

“I’m relieved to hear things went well,” Setsuna replied.

“I know it’s not much, but I’d like you to have these as a token of my appreciation,” she said, handing over the pouches.

“I can’t accept a gift from you, Margaret,” he said hesitantly.

“It’s just a small gesture. One pouch contains morilina leaves, and the other is a different type of tea. I’m disappointed I never had the chance to serve you my special tea; it’s blended to pair well with pastries.”

“Well, in that case, I’ll gladly have them.” As Setsuna took the pouches, a look of joy crossed his face.

“Thank you. I just have one more request of you. Please keep this between us, because there’s someone who would be very envious,” she said with a sly smile.

Setsuna replied with a laugh and said, “I understand.”

With that, Margaret bade us farewell and disappeared.

“It seems like you did a good job with your quest,” I said.

“Aren’t you curious?” Setsuna asked.

“It would cause trouble if I asked for details, right?”

“Thanks for being so understanding. When we get home, I’ll tell you as much as I can.”

Setsuna bowed his head, then continued walking. Alto and I followed, and we finally made it to the other side of the bridge.

Back in town, the three of us wandered around the stalls, then headed to the central square. Alto became so engrossed in the festivities that, before we knew it, the town was bathed in the colors of sunset. It was a time of day that normally evoked a sense of loneliness in me, but the lanterns illuminating the town made it feel full of life.

As we walked toward the central square, a familiar voice called out to us from behind. I turned around and saw a couple approaching us from a group of about twenty people.

“I thought that was you! Good evening, Ragi and Alto,” the woman greeted us, patting Alto on the head.

Alto responded happily, showing off the gerulito flower pinned to his shirt.

“Good evening, Norris and Elly,” I replied. Setsuna had been walking ahead, and he turned and came back toward us.

“Good evening. I’m happy to see you two here. How are you feeling, Elly?” Setsuna asked.

“Thanks to you, I’ve been able to work without any problems these past two days. You have my gratitude,” she said.

“That’s great to hear. But please don’t overdo it,” he replied.

“I won’t. Are you all headed to the town square, too?”

“Yes, Ragi told us the main event of the Founding Festival is held there.”

“We’re on our way there with the kids from the orphanage,” Norris explained, gesturing toward the large group behind them.

“Is it tradition to spend the first day of the Founding Festival with the people close to you?” Setsuna asked.

“Yeah. We meet with the orphanage kids every year. But this year, we’re especially grateful to celebrate thanks to you, Ragi, and Alto. Thank you so much. I’m sorry to leave so soon, but everyone’s waiting,” Norris said.

“In return, we’ll work hard this coming holiday, so the three of you can just wait and see!” Elly said to Setsuna.

“Looking forward to it!” I said, then watched as Norris and Elly happily returned to their group.

As we reached the top of a winding path, the town square opened up before us. And in the center stood a surprise that Setsuna and I had kept to ourselves.

“Gramps, what is that?!” Alto exclaimed in awe at the sight of a large white tent. It encircled the square and was suspended as high as a three-story building, with people gathered all around.

Alto’s amazement warmed my heart so much that I decided to keep it a secret for a little while longer. Even Setsuna seemed unsure as to what would happen next, and we chatted about what it might be, which was also fun.

As we were talking, the lights in the square suddenly went out, and a hush fell over the crowd. Alto looked around curiously, and a loud voice rang out.

“It was a warm day with the gentle Silkis wind blowing…”

The shadow of a woman was projected onto the tent, and the sound of a flute began to play from inside.

“A woman named Lilia knocked on the gates of the Brennas estate. Brennas was a man known for his vast knowledge, and many promising individuals gathered there to spend their days learning wisdom, magic, and swordsmanship.”

As the narrator spoke, the shadow of a grand mansion appeared on the tent, from which the silhouette of a man emerged.

“Among them was a young man named Linus, who stood out above the rest.”

The young man’s silhouette began to walk and approached that of the woman.

“From the moment they met, Lilia and Linus were drawn to each other and fell in love.”

At that moment, the shadows of the two figures grew larger and embraced. The sound of a harp layered over the flute music, and the audience clapped quietly, captivated by the shadow play.

“So *this* was the secret everyone has been keeping,” Setsuna whispered to avoid distracting Alto, who was engrossed in the performance.

“Yes. The magical device the townspeople bought from the royal family projects light and casts these shadows onto the tent.”

“The people of Lypaed really are incredibly thoughtful,” said Setsuna.

A loud sound signaled a scene change, and voices called out, saying “Your Majesty!” and “Our queen!” filled the air. Alto looked astonished and turned toward Setsuna.

“This is the story of the king and queen?!” he asked.

“It is.”

“I didn’t know their names…”

“At the castle, no one referred to them by name,” Setsuna pointed out.

“Linus clenched his fists and steeled his resolve.”

Alto looked like he wanted to ask more questions, but when the narrator began speaking again, he turned his attention back to the stage. Apparently, he’d decided to focus on the story for now.

However, his eyes gleamed even more than when he’d first started watching at the realization that the characters were people he knew in real life. As the story progressed, Alto murmured softly.

“Since it’s the story of the king and the queen, Cyrus won’t be in it, right?”

Setsuna chuckled. “I don’t think Cyrus was even born yet.”

“Oh, right.”

With that, Ragi and Alto fell silent, watching intently as Linus, Lilia, and their school friends began to set things right in the kingdom.

Hearing the word *friends*, a tinge of loneliness seemed to show on their faces…

◇ Part Seven: Eugene

When I woke up, everything was quiet. Normally, I was roused by an urgent voice in my mind forcing my weary body out of bed, but today, I felt unusually light and refreshed and woke up comfortably.

I lay in bed for a while, pondering how long I'd been asleep. I remembered Cyrus escorting me to the bedroom after the king's announcement, but I had no recollection beyond that. The light streaming through the windows was definitely the morning sun, meaning I'd slept for almost a full day.

I was shocked by this realization and started to think I had to get to work soon, when I suddenly heard lively voices coming from downstairs. Wondering what was happening, I waited for the knight stationed outside my door to come in and brief me, but Mother pushed past him and entered.

"Eugene, you're awake! How are you feeling?"

She was dressed in simple clothes with an apron over them. I was just about to ask why she was wearing such an outfit when I smelled a faintly sweet aroma and stopped.

Today was the second day of the Founding Festival, so she was probably baking pastries to distribute to the townspeople.

"I'm fine now."

"Do you still have a headache?"

"No, not at all."

"The dark circles under your eyes have faded as well."

"…"

She continued to express her concerns with various questions, but when I assured her I really was feeling okay, she gave a soft, relieved smile.

"You haven't eaten anything since yesterday, have you? I'll prepare you something, and we can eat together."

It was only then that I realized just how hungry I was. I told Mother that I would get dressed and head to the dining room, but she said, "I'll have it brought up here," and instructed a maid to bring the meal to my room.

Normally, I would have been annoyed by her insistence, but surprisingly, this morning, I didn't feel any irritation and was able to speak calmly. I didn't show it, but this surprised me.

Have I had a change of heart?

As I pondered this, I realized that I'd mostly ignored Mother's idle chatter while we'd been eating. So I came to the conclusion that I hadn't had a change of heart, but that my irritation from feeling physically unwell had vanished, relieving me of my mental strain.

Still, seeing my Mother's happy smile as she said, "I'm glad your appetite's returned!" sent a pang through my chest, and I suddenly recalled Setsuna's words from earlier:

"Aren't you neglecting the queen's feelings simply because she's your mother?"

I hadn't intended to neglect her, but I now understood why she might have thought that way. I also realized how harsh it had been to say, *"Even if it hurts the queen, my stance on the matter won't change."*

Sometimes, it may be necessary to stick to your convictions, even if that means hurting your family or other people. But now wasn't the time for that.

"Eugene?"

"Mother, please prepare some more of the morilina tea for Cyrus and me."

She briefly froze in surprise, but then quickly smiled with joy and nodded.

Georges was on guard duty, so after breakfast, I called him into my room to go over the situation from when he'd taken over that morning.

The Founding Festival had gone smoothly the previous day despite the sudden change of plans, and today, the castle was bustling with preparations. Keith had adjusted the schedule since it had been affected by the festival, so it seemed that everything would wrap up around noon. I also learned that my official duties were on hold for today, and that I wouldn't need to attend the festival the next day.

After hearing that, I reluctantly lay back down in bed, since I'd been instructed to rest in this room all day.

I found myself restless and bored after being so busy for so long. However, I must've still been mentally and physically exhausted, because before I knew it, I'd unexpectedly dozed off.

Later that morning, the general came by to check on me and discuss monster hunting, but other than that, there was nothing for me to do other than rest quietly.

Mother came in at lunch and chattered away while I had a quick meal, but she soon left in a hurry, urged on by Margaret.

A little while later, I heard cheering from outside the window, indicating that the second day of the Founding Festival had begun. The sounds of the people's joy touched my heart, and I was pleased that both the king and queen were participating in the festival.

I got up to look out the window, but unfortunately, I couldn't see either of them from the room I was in. Nevertheless, I sat by the window, listening to the joyful voices of the citizens.

Their public appearances were scheduled to occur several times throughout the day, and after the first one, my father came to visit me in my room.

"You seem to be doing well," he said.

"I am. I'm sorry for worrying you." I suddenly remembered that Father had been in worse shape than I was and quickly asked, "How are you feeling?"

"I'm completely fine, thanks to Lilia's impossible request."

The general had told me what transpired the previous day, and I pressed a hand to my head in disbelief. Father chuckled softly at my reaction, and I couldn't help but smile in return.

After we laughed for a bit, he looked at me intently, his eyes gleaming.

"Father?"

"It's nothing…"

I tilted my head with curiosity, but Father only gave a vague answer. After he studied me for a while, his expression softened, and he let out a quiet sigh before speaking.

"I didn't worry much about my own illness, but seeing you bedridden makes me worry far more than I ever did for myself."

I understood the meaning behind Father's gaze now. He was checking to make sure I was actually better, just as Mother had been concerned about my complexion and the circles under my eyes.

"Don't worry about work. Just rest well for today," he said.

"…Okay."

Once Father left the room, I let out a deep sigh. I felt a mixture of guilt and happiness when I realized how much everyone cared about me.

As night fell, Cyrus visited to replace Georges. Keith finished his work at around the same time and brought Fred on the night shift when he came to visit me.

Having three large men standing over me in my room began to make me feel anxious, so I suggested they all sit down. Cyrus ignored me and instead gave me a deep bow.

"Cyrus?" Seeing him bow like that made me want to get out of bed, but I restrained myself.

"I'm sorry."

I tilted my head in confusion, not understanding the reason for his apology.

"As your friend, I should've stopped you."

"But you tried, didn't you?"

It was true—Cyrus had tried to stop me, warning me that I had to sleep more and eat properly. It had been my own fault for not taking his advice.

"And as a knight, everything you said and did was correct," I said.

"From a knight's perspective, yes. But the general would've stopped you by force."

Internally, I agreed. I knew that the general—an old school friend of Father's—and some of the ministers didn't hold back with him, but nothing they said ever left their circle. Other knights couldn't voice their opinions to the king.

"Georges, Fred, and I all come from noble families who have produced many generations of knights," Keith said." Our families instilled the chivalric code into us from a young age. Fred probably feels the same way, as well."

Fred didn't respond, but when Keith asked him, "Don't you?" he replied with a simple "yes."

"I wanted to become a knight like the general rather than just adhere to the traditional ways of chivalry," Cyrus said.

"Cyrus."

"I was taught that a knight who voices his opinions to his lord isn't a true knight. But I wanted to be the kind of knight who wouldn't hesitate to stop his lord if they were harming themselves physically or mentally."

"…"

"…"

"But that's not something I can do on my own."

"Why not?"

If Cyrus wanted us to have a relationship like the general and the king had, I wouldn't be opposed to it.

"Even if Georges, Fred, or I were to die, I'd hope that the knights who came after us would be able to stop you if they had to. I want that to be our chivalric code."

It sounded as if Cyrus was saying he wanted to change the whole culture of chivalry in Lypaed. Seeing the strong determination in his eyes told me he was serious, which left me speechless with surprise.

Keith murmured, "Brother used to say the same thing a long time ago…"

There was a melancholy tone to his voice as he mentioned my father.

"He did?"

"This is going back a long time, but apparently, he wanted to change the way knights operated. However, he chose to accept the way things are now and keep his thoughts inside our closed circle of allies."

"But…why?"

Keith sighed hearing my question.

"The older noble families were resistant to accept change."

"…My old family was likely the one to lead that resistance," Cyrus said with distaste.

"Couldn't he have pushed them aside?"

"Maybe now, but back then your father was pouring all his efforts into stabilizing the kingdom first."

“I see. That makes sense.”

The kingdom must have been in such a state of disarray that stabilizing it had been more urgent than any other reforms. I could imagine Father having to concede on all sorts of different matters to lead the kingdom to where we were now.

As I listened to Keith and Cyrus, I began to understand how Father felt about wanting to change the way the knights operated.

“As your friend, I should’ve stopped you.”

I thought back to the look of regret I’d seen on Cyrus’s face. I didn’t want him to feel that way.

In the past, I would’ve just brushed such feelings aside and said, *“Suppressing one’s emotions and following their lord’s wishes is just what a knight does. There’s nothing to be done about it.”* But I didn’t just want to let it go. I wanted to change the way knights lived and served, just like my father.

There would be a lot of adjustments needed. The reform would take a lot of trial and error. However, I believed that most of the groundwork for such a change had already been laid by my father.

Many knights admired the general, and more were starting to look up to Cyrus as well. I was certain there were others who shared our vision.

“Keith, Cyrus, Fred,” I called out to them when I’d made up my mind. “I want to change the chivalric code. I want to carry on and accomplish the goals the king had to give up on. I know it won’t be easy, but will you help me?”

“Is this so the future king of Lypaed won’t be worn out by fatigue?” Cyrus joked.

“We need to create new standards,” Keith said seriously.

“We’ll also need clear guidelines as to how far we may go expressing our own opinions,” Fred added.

Despite Keith’s and Fred’s serious expressions, it was clear they were piling onto Cyrus’s joke, and after a moment of silence, we all burst into laughter. When the noise finally died down, I made a solemn oath before them.

“I’m determined to begin bringing about these reforms. I won’t abandon them halfway.”

After our discussion ended, everyone was about to leave the room when a thought suddenly popped into my head, and I called out to Cyrus.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I have a favor to ask you.”

“Of course, I’ll do anything if it’s in my power.”

“I want to thank Setsuna.”

After resting for a few days and spending time with my parents, I’d taken to heart what Setsuna had told me.

Ever since I was a child, I’d watched my parents’ dedication as they did their best to lead the kingdom. Yet I finally realized the pain they’d endured and the obstacles they’d overcome. I’d only ever had a superficial understanding of it up until now and never grasped the true essence of their struggles.

I wanted to thank Setsuna for teaching me that I was hurting my mother, for healing my father’s illness, and for earnestly telling me that I can “only do that by living.”

“I know it might be troublesome, but would you mediate for me?” I asked.

“I’d like to ask you to do the same,” Keith added.

“…”

Cyrus paused for a moment before nodding and saying, “All right.”



Chapter Three
Lyreleaf Nightshade ~ Misunderstanding ~



◇ Part One: Tuuli

I started my day with a cup of tea that Kukka brewed for me. Although I didn't feel groggy, I'd lacked any sense of time until now, so it had taken a while to get used to.

My life had changed drastically since I'd met Setsu, and my days were filled with a calmness I'd never experienced before. Recently, I'd been spending most of my time watching Kukka doing chores and making idle conversation with her. At first, that had felt new and fulfilling every day, but as I got used to my new situation, I began wanting to try things for myself.

Back when I didn't have my vision, I hadn't been able to do anything except sit in this cave and wait for time to pass, yet now that some part inside me had been filled, I'd started to crave the next thing. I couldn't shake that sensation, even though I knew I shouldn't have those emotions. I felt like I was being so greedy…

After I finished my reading, I had nothing to do, so I watched Kukka tend to the herb garden as Setsu had requested of her. She sang a cute song in her sweet voice as she cheerfully cared for the herbs. Watching her truly warmed my heart.

Her stuffed toy pony followed her around, which was equally as adorable.

The sight of a stuffed toy walking around is a bit strange, though…

Kukka pulled the pony's reins, and a shovel emerged from its mouth.

"Thanks!" she said cheerfully.

The absurdity of it all was so funny that I almost laughed.

Kukka, that's a stuffed toy. It's a stuffed toy!

Although I kept thinking that, I began to wonder if I was the strange one for not seeing it as a real pony.

Determined not to be caught up in such an absurd reality, I averted my eyes from Kukka and picked up the book beside me. It was the book that Setsu had left me.

I love reading, so when Setsu had asked me if I did, I'd completely forgotten the situation I was in and nodded eagerly.

I remembered the delighted smile on his face when I'd responded. As I gently stroked the cover, I wondered why he'd been so happy.

It had been such a long time since I'd picked up a book that I'd been moved even by the feel of it and spent a while stroking the cover and flipping through the pages. Once I had my fill of that, I'd started reading and became engrossed in the story, eager to know what would happen next.

But that excitement had only lasted until the story was nearing its end. When I realized it was almost over, I'd felt sad, and my hands had been hesitant to turn the pages. My desire to continue reading conflicted with my wish for it not to end, which was a complex feeling I hadn't experienced in a long time.

But today, that feeling had come to an end. Unless I had an endless supply of books, one day, I would have to finish them—and that day was today.

I finished my last book.

I was basking in that sentimental feeling, when suddenly, a second letter from Setsu and a jar of something arrived.

What could this be?

I glanced over at Kukka and saw she'd also received a jar of something and a letter, which she was already eagerly reading. I set the mysterious jar aside for a moment and opened my letter. It detailed Setsu and Alto's life in Lypaed.

Setsu had received a request to work in a flower shop. He'd also included stories about going out on an expedition to investigate ruins with Alto and Ragi, helping with a marriage-proposal ceremony, and about their daily life together.

Through his words, I got the impression that Ragi was a very kind and generous man. Setsu wrote that Alto called him "Gramps," and that he trusted Ragi enough to let Alto learn from him. I was very happy that Alto had met someone who was so good for him.

Ragi must have been good for Setsu, as well. Throughout his letter, there was a clear respect and affection for Ragi.

The letter then detailed the Founding Festival in Lypaed. Setsu explained the reason for the festival and mentioned receiving beautifully embroidered ribbons from a couple they'd become friends with during his work at the flower shop. He also described how he, Alto, and Ragi had helped with the festival preparations.

Alto really tried hard, didn't he?

The letter went on to say that Alto seemed to have enjoyed the preparations, and reading that made me feel happy, too.

Then the mystery of the jar's contents was solved. Apparently, it was some food that Alto had chosen for us; the jar was filled with smoked monster meat.

I couldn't help but laugh at how typical of Alto that choice was. I decided I would share it with Kukka later.

Once I finished Setsu's letter, I breathed a sigh of relief. His life seemed to be changing rapidly, but it was nice to know that the two of them were doing well.

What happened to the companion he mentioned was lost…?

There had been frequent mentions of that companion in his previous letter, but no mention of them at all in this one. I'd been curious about this person because Setsu hadn't made note of them, but I had been so absorbed in the other details, I'd only noticed it now.

Once I finished reading the message, the feelings I'd had receiving his first letter all came flooding back to me, and I started to reminisce.



* * *

That day, I'd been drinking tea with Kukka and chatting with her. She suddenly began to refer to herself in the third person, and I wondered why, so I asked her.

She proudly told me that it was because her name was cute. I thought her justification was endearing, and I nodded in agreement. Kukka then suggested that I should also be proud of my name and refer to myself in the third person, but I politely declined.

I did think the name Setsu had given me was lovely, but referring to myself in the third person at my age felt a little embarrassing.

Just then, something shiny caught my vision, and I turned around. The magic circle on the desk glowed softly, and I squinted at it.

After watching it for a while, the light disappeared, and a letter appeared.

"Is it a letter from Master?" Kukka asked.

"It looks that way."

"Kukka wants a letter, too!" She pouted slightly, looking at the paper in my hand. At that moment, the magic circle on her desk began to glow, and another letter appeared in the same manner.

"Look, Kukka. You got one."

I breathed a mental sigh of relief seeing that. Kukka adored Setsu, so it would have been sad if she hadn't received something herself. I was very glad he'd sent her one.

"Yay! Kukka got a letter, too!" She reached for the letter and happily held it up. Her joy was so cute that it made me smile, but I wondered if she was able to read. If she couldn't, I figured I'd read it for her, so I asked.

"Kukka can read spirit script!"

"I see."

I had also studied spirit script before being secluded, but unfortunately, my lessons had been cut short.

I wonder if Setsu would teach me. But if Kukka can read it, maybe I should ask her instead… He always seems so busy.

I shook my head. I wasn't in a situation where I could want things like that. Feeling a little down, I picked up my letter. Kukka was already reading hers, looking incredibly happy.

I gazed at the envelope, which was neatly sealed with wax but had no writing on it. It gave off a faint floral scent. I turned the envelope over curiously but couldn't figure out where the fragrance was coming from.

Once I finished examining the envelope, I decided to open it. Yet despite my resolve, my fingers wouldn't move. I was scared to see what Setsu had written.

Setsu had shown very strong emotions toward me. I didn't know how I would respond if the letter contained similarly intense feelings.

Of course, I was genuinely happy he'd sent me a letter. That meant he hadn't forgotten me and had kept his promise to write, which made me happy.

Nevertheless, I was scared to read it. I pushed aside my complicated feelings, opened the envelope, and took out the letter. I unfolded it and saw beautifully written characters on the page.

To my beloved Tuuli…

I began to read the letter, my heart filled with a mixture of anxiety and joy.

Alto and I have moved from Kutt to Lypaed.

After seeing Setsu express such intense emotions during the two days he'd spent with me, it was surprising how calm his letter felt. The image of his raw emotions lingered in my mind, which made his letter feel somewhat puzzling.

However, upon reflection, I knew that deep down, he was a gentle and kind person. My first impression of him had just been too strong.

His letter was fascinating and made me feel as if I was reading an adventure story. It detailed his journey from here to Lypaed with a companion who'd been lost, and it ended with Alto accepting a request from an elderly beastfolk man, but the way Setsu had written it was incredibly entertaining.

I couldn’t help but laugh at the squabbles between their companion and Alto, or at how Alto was disappointed that there were no fish in the cave lake. The images of them enjoying their journey flashed vividly through my mind, and before I knew it, I found myself smiling.

“Right now, we’re living with Ragi. He’s the elderly beastfolk man Alto met through his guild quest. We’re planning on staying in this kingdom for a while, taking on jobs to save up some money.”

Realizing Setsu had settled in a faraway land made me feel a little lonely.

“I love you, Tuuli. I’ll write again soon. Setsuna.”

He’d expressed his feelings in the last few lines of the letter, and I felt pure joy without any fear whatsoever, which was a relief.

Ever since Setsu left, I’d been contemplating my feelings for him but found myself going in circles, unable to find an answer. What exactly were my feelings for Setsu?

I couldn’t deny that I’d sought him out of loneliness. My initial feelings of love might have been something different—just a desire for a family. In which case, were my feelings for him the same as Alto’s?

Was I only pretending it was love to keep him close, because I was afraid of dying alone? As I pondered this, my heart insisted it wasn’t so. I wanted him to call out my name, to hear his voice. Knowing he was so far away made me feel very lonely.

My heart cried out that I loved Setsu. Even if it wasn’t romantic love, it was still strong. So in that case, what exactly *were* my feelings, and what did they mean?

I felt pressured to find an answer quickly, because if he asked me, *“Do you love me?”* I wasn’t sure how I’d respond.

The more I thought about it, the less I understood, and I became frustrated. After I thought about it for quite some time, I decided there was no use worrying about it now, since it would be at least two years before Setsu and I could officially become a couple anyway.

But despite coming to that decision, there was one part of the letter that caught my attention. I looked back on that part.

Their journey to Lypaed began when they rescued someone who'd been attacked by monsters in the forest and was the brink of death. Their new friend didn't know how to return to their kingdom, so the two of them decided to escort the person home.

The letter described their lost companion in great detail, and it was clear that they'd become friends with both Setsu and Alto. However, despite mentioning them frequently, Setsu never referred to them by name.

Alto called the elderly beastfolk "Gramps," so it was clear he was a male, and Setsu said his name was Ragi.

...So who was the other companion they traveled with?

Setsu's letter hadn't included their name or gender; all I knew was that they were from Lypaed. The lack of any specific details made me curious. Since Setsu and Alto had needed to escort them home, they must have been weak and unable to return on their own.

Does that mean it was a human woman?

"..."

"Tuuli, you've got wrinkles between your eyebrows."

I must've been deep in thought for a while, because I suddenly noticed Kukka staring at me.

...I really want to know.

I wanted to know whether their companion had been a man or a woman.

That doesn't necessarily mean it was a woman. There are weak men, too. Or it could've been a child...

I read the letter over and over, searching for any clues, but no matter how many times I read it, there were none.

Why didn't he at least mention their companion's name?

I felt a little resentful as I wondered that, then took out the stationery Setsu had given me and placed it on my desk to write a reply. However, I found myself struggling with what to say, and for somee reason, I couldn't stop thinking about that lost companion.

Maybe I can just ask him casually...

I didn't want to cause any trouble, though, especially since Setsu's letter had been so calm. That would make me feel bad.

I sighed and turned to Kukka for advice.

"Kukka, is there a way to fix selfishness?"

“People are inherently selfish.”

“Really?”

“Yep. That’s just the way it is,” she said with an emphatic nod, before adding something that made me doubt my ears. “Especially Master. He’s incredibly selfish!”

“Um, Kukka? I was talking about me, not Setsu.”

“Kukka knows.”

“But Setsu always acts with our best interests in mind,” I said, trying to defend him.

Kukka pouted slightly and said, “That’s a completely separate matter.”

…What’s going on with their relationship?

Normally, lower spirits didn’t speak ill of their contracted masters. I was curious about her feelings for him, so I asked, “Kukka, do you dislike Setsu?”

Her eyes widened in shock, and she shook her head, vehemently denying it. “Kukka loves Master very much!”

I regretted my choice of words and apologized. “I’m sorry. I just thought you seemed a bit different from the other spirits I’ve known.”

Her expression clouded over, and she lowered her gaze sadly. “That’s because of Master.”

“Because of Setsu?”

“Kukka is different from other lower spirits.”

“What do you mean?”

“Lower spirits are mere *things* to humans. So when a human makes a contract with them, the underlying feeling they have is *control*. However, with mid-level spirits, it’s equality, and with higher-level spirits, it’s protection.”

I remembered learning about this before, but I didn’t know much more about lower spirits because dragonfolk viewed them as insignificant.

“Lower spirits are just kind of there, like clouds. They receive their life and purpose through a contract with a human. And their purpose is whatever their master wishes for them, such as service or devotion.”

A complicated mixture of emotions flowed through me. Kukka looked at me earnestly, sensing my feelings.

“From your perspective, Ms. Tuuli, we may seem pitiful. However, lower spirits don’t need your pity.”

It felt like I’d been struck in the head.

“You were born with a form and a will from the start, so you try to measure lower spirits’ happiness by the same standard. Lower spirits only understand their purpose when they’re discovered by someone.”

“…”

“Lower spirits who aren’t found will vanish without ever knowing anything. They disappear without the will to interact with anyone, or without even knowing they were born. All they can do without a master is move around in search of a suitable place to exist.”

I listened intently to Kukka, although I couldn’t bring myself to look her in the face.

“To outsiders, it may seem like we’re just being used. But there’s a genuine happiness in being connected to Master, knowing that Kukka exists, and working for the person who gave Kukka this existence.”

“I’m sorry…”

I felt guilty for using my own standards as a measure for happiness and assuming that lower spirits were unhappy.

“Don’t apologize, Ms. Tuuli! Kukka is the strange one.”

I lifted my head, and she gave me a troubled smile.

“…”

Kukka opened her mouth to say something, but then closed it. She looked down, bit her lip, then slowly raised her head.

“Normally, lower spirits would never say such things. They would never hurt their master’s loved ones. Lower spirits are only supposed to fulfill their master’s wishes.” Her eyes filled with tears, and she looked glum. “Sorry,” Kukka said in a small voice.

“You didn’t hurt me, Kukka. I love you just the way you are.”

The tears that welled up in Kukka’s eyes began to overflow.

“…Why are you crying? I knew I must’ve upset you…”

“It’s not your fault, Ms. Tuuli.”

“…”

“Spirits are always connected to their master’s consciousness. That’s why spirits can understand their master’s feelings, and

lower spirits can avoid doing things their masters dislike." She paused, clearly not wanting to say what came next.

Given the flow of the conversation, I could guess what she was thinking, so I shook my head to show I didn't want her to continue. But it seemed Kukka couldn't hold back her overwhelming sadness.

"Kukka is different, though. Master…severed his consciousness from Kukka's. Does that mean…he…dislikes Kukka?"

Her voice trembled with sobs. I wanted to hold Kukka, who was now hugging her knees and crying, but the barrier prevented me from doing so.

"Ms. Tuuli, Master left Kukka in charge of you and this herb garden. But he severed our connection."

All I could do was listen quietly.

"Kukka is sure that Master wouldn't say anything even if Kukka didn't maintain the garden or even if Kukka left this place…"

She must've kept those worries bottled up for a long time. Her tears kept falling, soaking the ground beneath her.

Seeing how hurt she was by Setsu's actions made me worry. She seemed like a completely different spirit than the one who always spoke to me so confidently and wisely.

Why did Setsu do that? I wondered as I thought about comforting Kukka. But just then, it occurred to me that her distress might be related to her purpose. Since Setsu didn't seem to be trying to make Kukka serve him, I suspected that her purpose was different to that of a typical lower spirit.

"Kukka, can I ask what purpose Setsu gave you?"

"…Why?"

"Because a newborn spirit's purpose reflects their master's most powerful emotion, right?"

"Yes, that's right…"

"So if that's true, then your purpose must reflect Setsu's strongest underlying emotion. That's why I wanted to know."

"Kukka's purpose is freedom. Kukka has to decide her own way of living. Kukka must think for herself and act for herself." She looked at me anxiously.

But the word *freedom* solved the mystery for me.

"Well, being connected to Setsu's consciousness would mean being dominated by his mind, wouldn't it? And since that

contradicts the emotion that was most important to him, it could explain why he severed that connection with you, Kukka."

So in a sense, Kukka and I are similar because Setsu gave us both freedom. It's only natural to feel confused to be suddenly told we're free, but we both need to face it.

"Hey, Kukka. The ring on your left ring finger symbolizes family. And the fact that Setsu gave it to you means that to him, you're family."

She gazed at the ring, tears streaming down her face.

"Setsu doesn't want to control or command you. He wants to be family with you."

She blinked, staring at me intently.

"You received what Setsu values the most."

"What Master values the most…," Kukka repeated, lost in thought. I silently watched her, hoping she'd find an answer that satisfied her. Eventually, she seemed as if she did, and Kukka gave me a smile as adorable as a blooming flower.

"Kukka wants to be family with Master, too! And Kukka wants to heal his loneliness!"

That piqued my curiosity, but before I was able to ask Kukka what she meant by that, she smiled and said, "Thank you, Ms. Tuuli!" and ran off to the herb garden to check on her plants.

The image of Kukka working in the herb garden that day overlapped with her in the present, and I emerged from my reveries. Suddenly, I felt like I'd forgotten something. I thought back, trying to remember what it was.

Oh, right… I was thinking about the lost companion's name.

Setsu must have a reason for not including the name of his companion in the letter. One he didn't want to explain.

But why does it bother me so much?

I couldn't understand why I was so preoccupied with the person's name, and it left a hazy feeling in my heart.

Tomorrow is the new moon, so maybe I can casually ask him then.

I considered that but felt like it might be impossible. I pulled out the stationery, thinking a letter might be safer, but I was too hesitant to write anything.

I realized that overthinking wouldn't solve anything, so I decided to stop for now and leave it till the next day. I didn't

know what Setsu would talk about, but I resolved to make my decision in the moment.

◇ Part Two: Setsuna

On the final night of the Founding Festival, Alto and Ragi were already fast asleep. Alto had been particularly excited this entire time, and the past few days, he'd managed to fall asleep right after dinner.

The same went for Ragi, who'd been keeping up with Alto's pace. We hadn't spent as much time drinking together since he'd been sleeping more.

I was spending my time differently as well, caught up in the hustle and bustle of the town, Alto's energy, and Ragi's curiosity. Everyone had been thrilled to see the king and queen participate in the festival, and their level of excitement had even exceeded my expectations.

That excitement still lingered, because I could occasionally hear the clamor from the festival on the wind.

I opened the window and looked toward the town square. The lanterns added vivid colors to the sky amid the new moon and twinkling stars.

The time had come, so I cast a soundproof barrier, infused my earring with mana, and called out Tuuli's name.

"Setsu…?"

A slightly anxious voice reached my ears. This was only the second time we were talking through the earring, so it was only natural that she'd be nervous. I was a little nervous, too, but less so than the first time.

Upon reflection, I realized I had made a lot of mistakes with Tuuli. Yet my feelings for her were genuine, and I truly wanted to make her happy. That was why I'd made up my mind to confess my feelings to her once again when she was freed from that cave in two years. And if she still couldn't love me, then I would end our relationship just as I'd promised Revale.

So for now…

"Setsu…?"

Her concerned voice pulled me back from my thoughts. I'd worried her by calling her name and then falling silent. I pushed my varied emotions to the back of my mind and finally spoke.

"Sorry. How are you and Kukka? Are you feeling well?"

“Yes, we’re fine. No health issues at all. Kukka’s already asleep, but she’s been plenty energetic every day.”

“What about you, Tuuli? Are you tired?”

“I’m fine…” But despite what she said, her voice sounded somewhat down. I wondered why asking her if she was tired would make her sound so glum.

“Did something happen?”

She hesitated a moment, perhaps trying to decide how to answer. After a long silence, her quiet voice reached my ears.

“I didn’t do anything all day.”

“…”

“Kukka works hard every day taking care of the herb garden, but I just sit and watch her, so I don’t do anything that could make me feel tired.”

Oh, I see. She feels guilty watching Kukka work while she does nothing.

Knowing Tuuli’s personality, she must hate being the only one relaxing. Yet she couldn’t bring herself to say she wanted to do something. After all, she was in a place for her to atone for what she’d done. Even if she wanted to do something, she couldn’t.

I wanted to hear her cheerful voice. I wanted her to spend her days free of worry, even though I knew her personality made that impossible.

I tried thinking of something Tuuli could do. It must be tough just sitting there watching Kukka all day.

“Tuuli.”

“Yes?”

“What sort of things did you do in the Dragonlands?”

I heard her breath catch in her throat. I realized it was an insensitive question, but I needed to know what she was interested in and what her lifestyle had been like if I was going to find a solution. There was no point in suggesting something she didn’t enjoy.

“I…”

Tuuli trailed off and fell silent. Had I made her feel worse? I thought about changing the subject, but then she began to speak again.

“I was studying many different things.”

“Studying?”

“Yes. I was learning the spirit language, the history of dragonfolk, magic…”

In that the case, why not use the time spent watching Kukka to study?

But what could I teach her? I could give lessons on the spirit language. As for the history of dragonfolk, neither Hanai nor Kyle were well-versed in it, so nothing I taught her would compare with what she’d learned back home. And magic wouldn’t be possible as long as she was in there.

The spirit language is an okay choice, but I’d rather teach her something she can use in her everyday life.

Since she couldn’t return to the Dragonlands, Tuuli would have to live on this continent. I could support her, and I wanted to give her a life of leisure, but that would only make her feel guilty. I wanted to find something that would give her a sense of purpose and confidence.

As I listened to her helpless sigh, I had an idea of something she could do with Kukka.

“Tuuli, if you want to try doing something, would you help me with my work?”

“…Your work?”

“Yeah.”

“…Setsu, I can’t leave here,” she said hesitantly.

“I’m not suggesting you become an adventurer and take on quests with me. I also make medicines. So if you’re willing to learn, I can teach you about different herbs, their effects, and how to mix medicines. But…”

I’d been telling Tuuli what I could teach her, but I stopped after not hearing her voice for a while.

“Tuuli?”

I began to feel anxious when she didn’t respond even after I called her name, but then I heard a small whisper.

“Please teach me…” I could hear tears in her voice.

“What’s wrong? Did I say something that upset you?”

“No, it’s not your fault. My mother was supposed to teach me herbology. Every dragonfolk woman is taught how to mix medicines, and the techniques are passed down through generations.”

“…”

“I never got the chance to learn…”

Her voice broke into sobs. I listened to her cry quietly, watching the stars twinkle in the sky until she calmed down.

“I’m sorry, Setsu. I’m fine now; please continue. You left off at ‘But…’”

Tuuli had endured so many hardships and so much sorrow over the years. I had a profound respect for her strength.

“But since medicine can mean the difference between life and death, I demand perfection from anyone I teach. I might have to be strict sometimes. Would you still want to learn herbology from me, Tuuli?”

I made a serious offer to her, just like when I’d asked Alto if he was ready to be my apprentice. Tuuli must’ve picked up on the unusual tone in my voice, because she hesitated for a moment.

“Um…”

Honestly, I didn’t really need to ask; her earnest personality meant she would take it seriously, and I knew she understood the importance of medicine. Teaching her gently wouldn’t pose any problems, and I knew she wouldn’t lose sight of what was important. The most important thing was for her to enjoy learning.

However, I chose to be strict to make sure she approached it independently without being influenced by our relationship. If I taught her the same way I did Alto, it would make it easy for her to learn and ask questions.

“You don’t need to answer now. You can take your time to think it over and let me know whenever you’re ready.”

“Okay.”

Her short response conveyed how seriously she was taking this.

As I was about to shift to a topic I’d been thinking about since the day before, Tuuli spoke first.

“Is the Founding Festival over?”

I realized this was the first time she’d broached a new topic of conversation, and I was both surprised and delighted by her unexpected question.

“Today’s the last day. Everyone in town is still in high spirits, and sometimes, I can hear people’s voices on the wind.”

“Do they celebrate all night?”

“It seems like it. The festival itself is over, but the stalls stay open until the morning.”

“So is Alto at the festival with Ragi?”

“They’re both already asleep.”

“Oh, really? I figured Alto would stay up all night.”

“If he could’ve stayed up, he would’ve.” I filled her in about Alto’s activities over the past three days, and Tuuli listened, giggling and asking questions in return.

“What about you, Setsu?”

“Well, I was running around after Alto and Ragi.”

“I see.”

I humorously recounted the events of the Founding Festival, only leaving out what had happened at the castle.

“By the way, did you eat the gift from Alto yet?”

“I just tried a bite of it.”

I could tell from her response that she hadn’t liked it. The smoked monster meat had quite a distinctive taste, so I knew not everyone would enjoy it. But since Alto and Ragi were fond of it, maybe it was a flavor favored by beastfolk.

“I think…my oldest brother would probably really like it.”

I figured Revale wouldn’t be too thrilled to be spoken of like someone who’d just eat anything. I wanted to say that to Tuuli, but then she would know I’d met Revale, so I kept my response neutral.

“You don’t have to eat it if you don’t want to.”

“Well, since Alto went through all the trouble of sending it to us, my goal is to finish it.”

The way she put it was so funny that I laughed, and Tuuli pouted a little and said my name.

We chatted about various things for a while, but Tuuli seemed distracted. I wondered if she was growing sleepy, since her attention had begun to drift.

At times, it felt like she wanted to ask me something. But when I waited, she said nothing, so all I could assume was that she was tired. I decided it was time to wrap things up.

I reached into my bag to retrieve the last item I’d prepared. It was a white rose. I’d gone to Norris and Elly’s house that morning

to get the Laglut rose from them. I cast a Time spell on it to keep it from blooming and tied a white ribbon around the stem.

“Tuuli, could you look at your desk for me?”

I transported the Laglut rose onto her desk and heard her gasp softly.

“It’s such a big rose! Is this the one from the letter?”

It seemed like she’d been interested in Norris’s rose when I mentioned it in my letter. She seemed pleasantly surprised that it was larger than she’d expected.

“That white rose…”

After I explained the origins of the Laglut rose, Tuuli gave a short prayer.

“May both of our wishes come true.”

“Could you untie the ribbon?”

“The ribbon? Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

Tuuli gasped. I was sad I didn’t get to see her expression.

“It just bloomed right in front of my eyes!” Her voice sounded the most cheerful I’d heard it so far today.

“Do you like it?”

“Yes, thank you!”

“I’m glad.”

“It’s so beautiful. Wait, Setsu… How do you read the words written on this ribbon?”

I’d honestly wanted to write in the dragon language but thought my message might be too much for Tuuli right now, so I’d decided to use Japanese instead. I couldn’t share it with her yet.

“It’s a secret. I’ll tell you later.”

“Why later?” she asked curiously, and I gave her playful response.

“Because I’m embarrassed.”

She giggled.

“I mean, roses, ribbons, sweet words… There’s lots to feel shy about there, don’t you think?”

“That’s a lie. I know those things don’t bother you, Setsu.”

“I really wonder how you see me, Tuuli,” I lamented, but she just let out an adorable giggle. I felt a surge of affection hearing her laughter, and I realized how difficult it was to hold back my

feelings of wanting to see her again. I'd never imagined it would be so hard.

"When will you tell me what the words mean?"

When you say you love me.

I pushed aside my true feelings and answered in my usual tone of voice.

"Maybe when I'm not so embarrassed."

"That's not really an answer, is it?"

"The truth is, it says, 'I love you, Tuuli.'"

"That's another lie!"

"It's not a lie that I love you, Tuuli."

My earnest words put an end to the lighthearted mood.

"…"

I felt a little sad when I heard her fall silent. I didn't want to trouble her any more than I already had, though, so I tried to change the subject and shared stories about Alto and Ragi's pranks, and how I'd gotten back at Ragi.

But Tuuli seemed to drift off, and I wondered again if she was preoccupied with something. I asked her as much, but she said, "Um… No. It's nothing. Never mind," and stopped talking.

Once the atmosphere shifted, it never completely returned to normal. Still, she laughed a little at the end, which made me feel relieved, and I said good night and stopped the spell. I fought against the urge to listen to her voice for a little longer.

Which will come first: Will I tell her what the words on the ribbon mean? Or will I have to let her go?

Unable to sleep, I found myself alone gazing up at the moonless sky.



Chapter Four
Prairie Gentian ~ Enjoyable Conversation ~



◇ Part One: Ragi

The three-day-long Founding Festival had come to an end, marking the transition from the fourth month of summer, Salkis, to the first month of autumn, Manakis. Although there were four months for Silkis, Salkis, and Wilkis, Manakis only had three.

Winter was harsh on the Sibling continent, so preparations for Wilkis had to be done now, during Manakis. That made it a particularly busy season—especially since it was one month shorter than the rest.

As such, the first two-day holiday of Manakis was one of the few chances for people to enjoy autumn at their leisure. Yet instead, Norris and Elly had decided to spend those precious days off helping us replace the wallpaper. We'd arranged it beforehand, but I was still grateful for their assistance.

Alto and I started the work little by little ahead of time to avoid giving Norris and Elly too much trouble. Removing the old wallpaper and patching up the wall where it had worn down was a tedious task, but we gave it our all.

When I asked Setsuna over breakfast what he was going to do, he said that he intended to go the Adventurers Guild to take on a well-paying quest.

Once we said good-bye to Setsuna, Alto and I continued our work, but when he still hadn't returned by lunchtime, Alto began to worry. Setsuna finally returned that evening, explaining that he'd completed a monster-hunting quest on top of the original quest he'd visited the guild for.

I was curious why there were so many monster-hunting quests, so I asked. Setsuna explained that the kingdom had commissioned the guild to take care of the monster-slaying jobs that would normally be done by the military, which had led to a surge of new quests at the guild.

Typically, when the government moved to slay monsters, they mobilized a lot of soldiers to defeat a large group of them; it was an operation the Adventurers Guild couldn't normally handle. However, since there were adventurers from other kingdoms in town for the Founding Festival, Setsuna reasoned that Lypaed

had taken that into consideration when turning to the guild for help.

With that in mind, I suggested that I would give Alto the next day off so the two of them could go on a monster-hunting quest together. Alto had seemed excited when they'd set off, but he was quite grumpy when they returned.

I asked Setsuna what had happened, and he replied with a sheepish smile that he'd clashed with some adventurers from outside Lypaed, and Alto had been upset on his behalf. I tried to apologize for causing trouble, but Setsuna just laughed it off as a normal occurrence. My heart ached as I wondered how he'd become such a kindhearted young man.

Alto was in a better mood the next day, but he seemed to stick closer to Setsuna than usual—most likely out of concern for Setsuna rather than himself. But Setsuna chided Alto and set off for the guild alone.

As Alto watched Setsuna walk away, I made a suggestion.

"How about we prepare a delicious dinner for Setsuna?"

Alto nodded vigorously.

"That means we need to finish the wallpaper today. No breaks!" I joked, but Alto seemed to take it seriously.

He gripped my hand tightly and said, "Let's do our best, Gramps."

At the end of those three days was the holiday, when Norris and Elly would come to help. Setsuna had to go out to do another monster-hunting quest; the guildmaster had insisted it was a particularly troublesome monster, so he hadn't been able to turn it down.

"Master, will you be home late today?" Alto asked Setsuna sadly, his ears drooping.

"Well, it's a monster-hunting quest, so it shouldn't take too long to complete. That said, it's about half a day's journey from here, so it'll take a long time to get there. I can't use teleportation magic because I've never been there before, but I should still be back by evening."

Alto looked quite upset, and I couldn't blame him. He'd been looking forward to all of us working together on the house.

“I’m sorry. I really wanted to help with the wallpaper, too.”

When Setsuna was about to leave, he noticed Alto still looked sad and apologetically patted him on the head.

“That monster might attack the nearby village, right?” Alto asked.

“Yeah.”

“Then you have to go,” the young boy said, as if trying to convince himself. “Be careful and come back to us soon, Master!” he added with a smile.

“I will. I’m really sorry, Ragi. Please take care of everything in my absence.”

“Don’t worry about us. Just focus on the job and stay safe.”

“Thank you.”

After patting Alto’s head one last time, Setsuna left for his quest.

Norris and Elly arrived a little while later. They were disappointed they’d just missed Setsuna, but they quickly got to work helping us put up the new wallpaper.

They mentioned they’d done this many times in their own shop so they were quite good at it, and sure enough, they were incredibly skilled. Alto seemed inspired by Norris and Elly and enthusiastically helped out with the work.

We took a break to sit down for lunch, and the conversation turned to the Founding Festival. Alto excitedly described how much fun he had, complete with gestures.

“Alto, did you try the bean dish at the festival?”

“The one specially made for the Founding Festival?”

“Yeah!”

“I tried it, but I didn’t really like it,” Alto said glumly.

Elly and Norris chuckled. It seemed they’d expected that answer.

“I was really looking forward to it, too.” After hearing about a traditional dish that was only made during the festival, Alto had been excited to try it. However, it had tasted quite different from how he’d imagined, and he just stood there holding the bean dish, looking stunned.

“I prefer meat dishes,” he said.

“Yeah. I think I do, too,” Elly agreed.

“I like bean dishes, but I don’t care for that particular kind of bean,” Norris said.

“Ah, I get that. It tastes kind of sour, doesn’t it?” said Elly.

The bean dish in question was essentially salt-boiled beans. The beans were large, about the size of a child’s fist, and were boiled in salted water. Most kids hated it.

Even adults didn’t seem to particularly like the dish. However, the reason it was made for the festival was to remember the hardships the people had endured during the former king’s tyranny.

The beans were slightly poisonous. If you boiled them first without removing the poison, they’d cause stomach issues. It was because their preparation was so labor-intensive that they weren’t eaten very often.

Despite this, the beans had become a staple food during times of food shortage since they grew quickly and were easy to obtain.

“Those beans saved many lives in this kingdom,” said Ragi.

“I don’t really like them, but every year, I always find myself buying a dish and eating it at the festival,” said Norris.

“Yeah, it’s strange,” added Elly. “They’re not that good, but for some reason, I always get them.”

“I always get meat,” Alto said.

“Well, of course I buy meat, too! Alto, which meat dish did you like best?” Elly asked.

As we continued our lively conversation about food, suddenly, there was a knock at the door. I got up to answer it.

“I wonder who that could be.”

I didn’t have many acquaintances who would visit, so I headed to the door filled with curiosity.

“Who is it?” I called out as I opened the door. Standing there was a young man with deep blue hair and gray eyes.

“Pardon me. My name is Cyrus.”

I remembered hearing that name from Setsuna, so I assumed that was whom he’d come to see.

“Er…” The young man began to speak, but his voice was drowned out by Alto’s cheerful shouts as he came running down the hall.

“I knew I recognized that voice. It’s Cyrus!”

Cyrus’s face softened with relief at the sight of Alto.

“What are you doing here? Are you here to see Master?”

“Hey there, Alto. You look well.”

“Yeah, I’m good. What’s up?” Alto stared at him inquisitively, curious about why he’d come.

“Well, I’m here to see Setsuna.”

“Ohhh. Well, Master’s out on a job.”

Cyrus slumped with disappointment.

“I see. Do you know when he’ll be back?”

“Hmm. Master’s been taking monster-hunting jobs every day since the festival ended, so I’m not sure.”

“Every day?” Cyrus’s eyes widened slightly, then he clenched his fists as if he’d just realized something.

“Are you okay, Cyrus?” Alto asked with concern, noticing the change in the man’s demeanor.

“Oh, sorry. I’m fine.”

“Did something happen with Master?” Alto asked.

Cyrus started to shake his head but stopped.

“Setsuna helped me, but I forgot to thank him.”

That was one of the reasons he’d come to visit, but I had a feeling it wasn’t the only one, as I saw a brief, sorrowful expression cross Cyrus’s face. Alto must’ve also noticed it because he asked, “Did you have a fight with Master?”

Cyrus’s breath caught in his throat, as if he was surprised by the question.

“Why would you think that?”

“Master’s seemed a little depressed, too.”

“Oh…”

So Alto picked up on that as well.

Setsuna had told me a little bit about his request on the night of the first day of the Founding Festival. He mentioned he’d gotten to know the queen because she was the one who’d given him the quest, and that this was the matter he’d asked for my advice on.

He hadn’t given me any details, but he had said that the relationship between the queen and her family had improved—though he said nothing about the relationship with his friend whom he’d been concerned about.

It didn’t seem like he was intentionally avoiding telling me, but that he was unconsciously avoiding it. Otherwise, the Setsuna I knew would have told me how it had all gone, since he’d asked

for my advice. So I figured he didn't want to touch on the issue, and I didn't ask about it.

My intuition told me that the friend he'd been concerned about was likely the man standing in front of me right now. Cyrus had fallen silent, looking lost.

"Your name is Cyrus, yes? If you don't mind, would you tell me more about what happened? Perhaps I will be able to help you out," I said, looking him in the eyes.

"No, I couldn't trouble you like that. I shall come back another day."

"Cyrus, I wanna know if you had a fight with Master."

Cyrus had been about to leave, but Alto's words stopped him in his tracks.

"…"

Seeing his hesitation made me decide to push a little harder.

"Both Alto and Setsuna have told me many wonderful things about you."

"Oh? I'm curious as to what they said."

"I told him you're good at riding cows."

"Alto?!"

"Ha-ha-ha. Apart from Alto's stories, Setsuna has told me that you're very busy with your work as a knight, so I assume you're going home after your shift today."

He was still dressed in his knight's attire. If he'd come during a day off, Cyrus would be dressed in civilian clothes.

"I can pass on a message to Setsuna if you'd like."

"…"

"I know it's unsettling when things are awkward between friends. And that's not a good mindset to be in when you both have jobs you risk your lives for."

Cyrus gave me a curious look.

"I know it's not my place to meddle. Even an old man like me can tell you're a skilled knight. Setsuna's good at compartmentalizing, so maybe it's not much of a concern for him, but it's still better not to have any regrets."

"…"

"Besides, the longer these kinds of issues drag on, the harder it will become to find a resolution."

"You're quite the enigma," Cyrus finally replied.

“It’s just wisdom that comes with age,” I said, and the knight chuckled softly. “Now, I’m unable to resolve your problems for you since this involves Setsuna’s feelings, but perhaps I can create an opportunity to help you do so.”

“Create an opportunity…,” Cyrus repeated to himself in a low voice, then nodded with determination.

“Would you be willing to listen?” I asked.

“Of course. I’m the one who brought it up, after all. Oh—and there’s no need to be so polite. Please just talk to me like you do with Alto.”

“Okay. I’d also like it if you spoke to me the same way you do with Setsuna,” I said.

He smiled when I said that.

I invited Cyrus inside, and Norris and Elly were surprised to see him. They’d been worried since we hadn’t returned for a while, and the two had been pacing around the room. Understandably, they were startled when they saw a young man in knight’s attire walk in.

“Did something happen?” Norris asked, looking back and forth between Alto and me.

“Not at all. This is Cyrus, a friend of Setsuna and Alto’s, who’s come to visit.”

“Sir Cyrus?”

“Prince Eugene’s first knight?!”

Cyrus was quite famous apparently.

“But his hair and eye color are different than I’ve heard. Is he someone with the same name?” Elly asked.

Cyrus wasn’t offended by the question and explained that he was using a magical tool to change his appearance. Elly nodded and said, “Your usual appearance would stand out too much…”

“Were you all chatting here? I apologize for interrupting you,” said Cyrus.

“They’re also friends of Setsuna and Alto. They came here to help us change out the wallpaper,” I said.

I turned to face Norris and Elly, and they introduced themselves to the knight.

“It’s an honor to meet you, sir knight. My name is Norris.”

“And my name is Elly. It’s a pleasure, sir knight.”

“Norris and Elly? Are you, by chance, the couple who runs the flower shop that prepared Georges’ roses?”

“Yes, we are,” Norris said with a nod.

“Those roses were so beautiful. I can still remember vividly how they all bloomed at once.”

“Thank you very much.”

From there, the conversation picked up. Cyrus asked Norris and Elly to refer to him casually as well, and the three of us chatted with him just how we normally would.

“I understand now why Setsuna covered you with the rose petals!”

“That was such a shock. Even Eugene and Keith laughed at me,” Cyrus said.

He told us what had happened after the engagement ceremony, and we listened and asked the occasional question. We all chatted amicably for a while, but once there was a lull in the conversation, I changed the topic, and Cyrus began to quietly explain what had happened with Setsuna.

For the most part, his story matched up with Setsuna’s, with the only difference being where Setsuna had acted as a mediator on his behalf. Setsuna hadn’t mentioned that at all, and Cyrus told us that he hadn’t been able to properly thank him yet and had been troubled by it ever since. He seemed genuinely upset over it.

“Setsuna gave me advice before it became such a serious issue.”

“…”

“It was when Setsuna, Alto, and I went fishing. He gave me a subtle warning, but I’d been too oblivious to realize what he meant, and his kindness was wasted on me,” Cyrus said, staring off into the distance. “I was so exhausted at the time that I didn’t listen to him properly.”

“Master didn’t seem that concerned then, though. I remember he said you were tired and needed to rest, but then he laughed it off. So it makes sense you wouldn’t understand what he meant,” Alto said.

“I see. But as we said good-bye, he gave me a gerulito flower. If only I’d considered the meaning of it, I could’ve done something.”

As I listened to Cyrus, I couldn’t help but think that his words were idealistic and based on hindsight. Even if the flower was

significant during the festival, how many people in his situation would've recognized its importance? And even if he had, what could he have done about it on his own?

Since I was an outsider, perhaps it was irresponsible for me to think that way. But I felt like his deep regret stemmed from something else, although I wasn't quite sure what that was.

"Why didn't Setsuna just tell you directly?" Elly asked softly.

"Probably because he wasn't allowed to discuss the details of his mission with anyone else," Norris gently answered.

"I see. So did you come here to thank Setsuna, Cyrus?"

"Yes, but that's not the only reason. His Highness and Lord Keith also want to thank him, so I came to arrange that meeting as well."

Norris and Elly froze. Until now, they hadn't realized that Setsuna's quest had involved royalty.

"Oh, is Eugene gonna come over? And Keith?"

Alto's casual reference to the prince and the prime minister only made them more shocked.

"Alto… You know the prince and the prime minister?" Elly asked in a strange tone of voice.

"Yeah, I do! They gave me sweets the other day."

"…I see."

Norris and Elly exchanged glances and seemingly decided not to inquire further. It was a wise decision, yet it also made me chuckle inwardly.

"So, Cyrus, you wanted to see Setsuna to arrange that meeting?"

"Yes. I have to go on a monster-hunting expedition tomorrow for the next four days, so I was hoping to talk to him today if possible."

"Oh? I thought the kingdom had reassigned monster-hunting duties to the Adventurers Guild?"

"Not all of them. Lord Keith had some transferred to the guild, but the rest are handled by us knights. There are also requests from villages that don't have guilds, so there's still a lot for us to do."

I wondered how Lypaed could afford to hire the guild, but now wasn't the time to ask. Instead, I offered some words of encouragement.

"I see. That's quite challenging."

“But things are improving, and I’ve been able to take some time off,” Cyrus continued.

“I think Master will be back by evening.”

“Unfortunately, I have to get ready for tomorrow, so I can’t stay that long.”

“Right.”

“When will you be able to come by next?”

As I listened to Cyrus list off his schedule, I realized it might be a while before he could come back.

It would be cruel to keep him burdened with this for so long.

“Are you free on the eleventh, Cyrus?” I asked.

“Why do you ask?”

“We’re planning a small celebration that day.”

“A celebration?”

“Well, more like a dinner party to celebrate finishing the wallpaper.”

“A dinner party? To celebrate finishing the wallpaper?” Cyrus looked puzzled.

Honesty, I didn’t understand it much myself, but Alto had excitedly said, *“I wanna celebrate putting up the wallpaper!”* and I’d found myself going along with it.

“Elly and Norris are joining us for the party, so why don’t you come, too, Cyrus? Of course, I don’t mind if Prince Eugene and the prime minister join us as well,” I said.

Cyrus thought about it for a moment before responding:

“Are you sure we won’t be a bother?”

“Not at all. Just come and enjoy the dinner party. As long as we have fun eating together, it won’t be awkward.”

“Thank you.” Cyrus bowed his head, and Norris and Elly sat there in stunned silence. They didn’t object, though, so I assumed they didn’t mind.

I glanced at them, silently conveying my thanks. They made eye contact with me and smiled.

“Oh…” Cyrus let out a little noise.

“What’s the matter?”

“Well, on that day, it’ll be Prince Eugene, Lord Keith, his bodyguard Fred, and me. But I’d also like to bring Georges.”

“Is it for the same reason?”

“Yes, he’s been concerned about Setsuna, too.”

“That’s fine, of course.”

“But he’s off duty that day, so I’m trying to figure out how I can get him to come.”

“Can’t you just invite him?”

“He’s probably planning to visit Lady Sophia on his day off, and I don’t want to interrupt their time together.”

“I see…”

Cyrus and I fell silent, trying to come up with a solution. Just then, Elly quietly spoke up.

“We deliver flowers to Lady Sophia every few days on behalf of Sir Georges. Maybe we could invite her then?”

“Invite Lady Sophia?”

“Yes, I’m friendly with her, and we usually chat over tea when I deliver the flowers. She mentioned wanting to meet Norris and Setsuna, so this would be a good opportunity.”

“Why does she want to meet us?”

“She’s curious about you two since you helped Sir Georges with the gifts. She said there are lots of things she wants to talk to you about.”

“Uh, like what?” Norris asked nervously.

“Hmm, well, she mentioned wanting to know why Sir Georges chose flowers as his gift,” Elly replied casually.

“…”

Cyrus had gone completely silent.

“You didn’t tell her why, did you, Elly?” Norris asked hesitantly.

Elly frowned at him and gave a wry smile. “Of course not.”

“Elly,” I said, hoping to get the conversation back on track. “Do you think Sir Georges will come if we invite Lady Sophia?”

“Georges will definitely come if Lady Sophia does.” Surprisingly, it was Cyrus who answered my question instead of Elly.

“I see. In that case, Elly, would you please invite her?”

“Sure thing! Leave it to me!”

Now that the matter was settled, we started planning the party. Elly and I would handle the cooking, and Cyrus offered to prepare tea and snacks for after the meal.

Once we finalized all the details, I brought up an important point.

“By the way, I’ll tell Setsuna about the party but not that you’re coming, Cyrus.”

Everyone but Alto stared at me.

“Why do you want to keep it a secret, Gramps?” he asked.

“Because it’s more fun that way.”

“You’re planning another prank? You just got lectured the other day!”

“Don’t worry, he won’t be mad this time,” I said.

“You said that last time!”

“What kind of prank did you pull on Setsuna to make him angry?” Elly asked with amusement, while Norris chuckled and said, “Keeping a secret from Setsuna seems challenging.”

Cyrus watched this exchange and smiled genuinely, then murmured, “I’m looking forward to the dinner party.”

We successfully replaced the wallpaper in Alto’s and Setsuna’s rooms. I had expected it to take longer, but thanks to Norris and Elly’s expertise, we finished within the two-day holiday.

As Alto and Norris put up the last piece of wallpaper, my shoulders trembled when I saw the looks of the triumph on their faces.

I never imagined replacing wallpaper could be so much fun.

I thanked Norris and Elly, and we said our good-byes. Before they left, they told me they were looking forward to the dinner party.

They didn’t even complain once, despite getting caught up in this trouble. They’re such nice people.

With that, Alto and I began discussing our plans. I told him that the wallpaper should dry by the following day, and that we could move the furniture back into the bedroom. Once we did that, I would tell Setsuna about the dinner party.

Alto seemed puzzled, so I explained that I wanted to bring it up quickly for Cyrus’s sake, but that we still needed enough time to make sure we didn’t forget anything.

“Slow and steady wins the race,” Alto said.

I nodded in agreement, and just then, Setsuna returned. I gave Alto a knowing look before we headed to the entrance.

The next morning, Setsuna took the day off and helped me clean up. Once the wallpaper dried, the three of us started bringing the furniture back inside.

After adding new pieces and rearranging the furniture how they wanted it, both Setsuna's and Alto's rooms looked completely different. Each one made it feel like a comfortable space that suited its occupant.

Now these rooms really feel like they belong to them.

They were no longer rooms rented by boarders or adventurers on a quest, but somewhere they could truly call home.

"Alto, if you put anything else up there, it'll fall off the shelf," Setsuna warned him.

"But, Master, I wanna put these two together," Alto insisted.

"How about moving this one to the back?" suggested Setsuna.

"They're easier to see if they're all lined up."

"If you line them up, they'll fall…"

Hearing their friendly banter made my shoulders tremble again with laughter.

Right now, they were in the middle of the very important task of deciding where to place Alto's treasures. Alto was quite particular about these things, so progress was slow.

"I think it would look better to put this one in the back," Setsuna said, pointing at one of the trinkets with a serious expression.

"But then the bottom part will be hidden," Alto protested, explaining the parts that wouldn't be seen were also important.

"Isn't it better for just the top to be visible than for it to fall and break?" Setsuna argued.

To an outsider, their conversation might seem trivial.

"Yeah, but I think it's better if you can see everything," Alto insisted.

But despite that, I found it incredibly endearing.

"Gramps, don't you think they should all be lined up in a row?"

"I think it would look more cohesive if you put it at the back," Setsuna said.

Ah, they really are so endearing, I thought, then joined in helping them come to a solution.

When they finished arranging things for the time being, I brought up the dinner party.

“Yesterday, Elly mentioned a custom in Lypaed where people celebrate renovating or building a new house by inviting their close friends over.”

I’d thought about it the night before and decided that blending a bit of truth into our plan would be the best way to avoid raising Setsuna’s suspicions about Cyrus. For that reason, I combined Elly’s story with my own experiences.

“When I built this house, I didn’t have any close friends to celebrate with, but now that you two are here, I want to have a big celebration. What do you say?”

“That sounds fun. Have you already invited Norris and Elly?” Setsuna asked.

Mentioning Elly’s name gave the desired effect, directing his focus onto the couple.

“Yes, I already invited them yesterday when we discussed it. So now we just need you to join. Can you come?”

I told Setsuna that we simply needed him to say yes to make it seem like he was the last person I hadn’t invited yet and guide the conversation away from the other guests.

“When is it?”

“We decided on the eleventh. Does that work for you?”

“That’s fine. I’d love to come.”

My biggest worry was that he was already doing something that day, but it turned out not to be an issue.

“Master, make sure you don’t make any other plans!” Alto added, helpfully making sure Setsuna would come. “I’m really looking forward to the dinner party!”

It seemed like Alto was purely excited about enjoying good food with everyone. That was just like him and charming in its own way, but he’d also inadvertently helped achieve our goal.

“A dinner party? I thought it was a celebration,” Setsuna said, puzzled.

“Since we’re preparing a feast, it’s become a dinner party,” I explained.

“We’ll have so much food we can’t eat it all,” Alto said excitedly.

“Huh?”

“Elly said she was going to make a ton of food!”

“Oh, I see,” Setsuna said.

I suspected there was a huge rift between what Alto and Elly considered “a ton of food,” but I didn’t correct him to avoid hinting at the number of guests.

“Elly said she’d make dishes I’ve never had before!” Alto exclaimed excitedly.

“She did, did she? I’m looking forward to that,” Setsuna said. “I wonder how much food is considered ‘so much we can’t eat it all,’ because I’ve never seen Alto leave leftovers…”

I felt a little guilty that Setsuna seemed seriously worried over that, but I decided to pretend I hadn’t heard him.

After tossing up a few different ideas, Setsuna suggested we grill meat in the backyard. Even though we had a kitchen, it seemed more practical this way given the number of guests, so I agreed.

A few days later, the day of the “Feast to Celebrate Changing the Wallpaper” arrived. To avoid spoiling the surprise for Alto, I’d waited until midnight the night before to prepare the meat and vegetables on metal skewers, which left me a bit tired the next day.

I used meat from the monsters Setsuna had hunted, which were known for their flavor. Setsuna had also bought all the supplies we needed at the general store. However, I hadn’t understood why they needed to be skewered.

I told him it would be easier to just grill everything, but Setsuna had said, *“When you put things on skewers, you eat them in order from the top down. That way, you don’t just eat meat; you alternate eating different foods so you can enjoy a variety of flavors.”*

Alto made sounds of delight as he stood in front of the prepared skewers. A satisfied smile crossed Setsuna’s face as he watched, and he went to go and draw water from the well. Just then, a frustrated look crossed Alto’s face.

“Gramps.”

“What is it?”

“I just remembered something important.”

“You did?” I asked.

“Yeah.” Alto’s ears perked up, and he glanced around cautiously, then he whispered, “It’s a secret because Cyrus is coming, so don’t tell Master.”

Oh, he was looking around for Setsuna.

“Gramps, be careful of Cyrus.”

“…What for?”

“Because he tries to steal my food!” I couldn’t imagine Alto telling a lie, but at the same time, Cyrus didn’t seem like he’d do such a thing, especially with how well they got along.

“What did he steal from you?”

“He took my fish! I was saving it for last!”

I chuckled, realizing what had happened. Alto had a habit of saving his favorite food for last, and Cyrus must’ve teased him by nabbing it.

“I see. That must have been frustrating.”

“Super frustrating! So be careful, Gramps!”

Hearing about the grudge Alto was holding over food made me laugh. I certainly hadn’t been expecting a warning like that. But just then, an idea popped into my head, and I whispered it to Alto. His eyes widened, then his face broke out into a huge grin.

“I had no idea you could pull pranks like that!”

Just then, Setsuna returned with the water.

“What were you two talking about?” he asked, apparently having heard the word *prank*.

It wasn’t as if we could tell him, though, so Alto and I quickly said, “Nothing,” and dodged any further questioning.

“Just make sure not to trouble Norris and Elly with your pranks,” Setsuna warned, returning to his preparations.

Alto and I were relieved that we hadn’t raised Setsuna’s suspicions, and we started setting up our practical joke. Helping Alto do this reminded me of when I used to play pranks on my mercenary friends, which made me feel a little nostalgic.

Once our preparations were complete, Norris and Elly arrived. They arrived an hour early so they could finish cooking their dishes, and after greeting them and showing them into the kitchen, they looked around curiously.

“Where’s Setsuna?” Elly asked.

“Isn’t he here?” Norris said.
I explained we’d be eating in the backyard.



“Did you tell Setsuna that Cyrus and the others are coming?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“But we’re eating outside?”

They wanted to say hello to Setsuna before finishing their cooking, so we all went out to the backyard. On the way, Elly filled us in.

“Sophia and Georges said they’ll join us.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

We stopped talking when we saw Setsuna, but as we approached him, the sight before us left us speechless. The backyard had been completely transformed. A metal mesh had been laid over piles of bricks so we could cook a lot of meat at once.

On a large table were a huge number of meat-and-vegetable skewers. There was Alto’s favorite stuffed-meat dish, my favorite meats and fishes, as well as cheeses and vegetables that Norris and Elly mentioned they liked.

Another table had various fruits, drinks, and alcohol on it. The whole setup must’ve taken a lot of effort to prepare.

“Can we really eat all this, Setsuna?” Norris asked.

“Wasn’t the idea to have more food than we could eat?” Setsuna asked, confused.

“Huh?”

“Wasn’t I supposed to get a lot of food?”

“Uh, I guess?”

“Then what??”

It was clear they weren’t on the same page, and their mutual confusion was amusing to me.

“Setsuna, Elly’s idea of lots of food and Alto’s idea of lots of food are two very different things,” I explained.

Setsuna’s eyes widened slightly.

“…You’re right. I see,” he said with an awkward laugh. “Well, at least Alto’s happy. Norris and Elly, eat as much as you like, and you’re welcome to take any leftovers home.”

“We’ll do our best to eat it all,” Norris said with a chuckle.

“Y-yeah, we’ll give it our best try.” Elly gave a wry smile.

“There’s some meat here I’ve never seen before,” said Norris.

“How many types of meat even are there?” wondered Elly.

Setsuna explained that most of the meats were from the monsters he'd hunted while on quests. The parts that weren't edible had already been sold off to the guild.

Alto impatiently asked, "Master, can we start grilling yet?"

"Not yet. We still need to prepare," Setsuna replied, trying to settle him down.

Elly arranged the dishes she'd prepared on the table, while Norris decorated it with flowers he'd brought from the shop. The colorful blossoms added an extra touch of elegance to the backyard.

"I didn't know dinner parties were so fancy!" Alto exclaimed, his eyes sparkling happily.

Norris and Elly nodded subtly, trying to avoid drawing his attention.

As it got closer to the afternoon, I wondered when Cyrus and the others would arrive. Just then, I heard horses galloping, followed by the distinct sound of carriage wheels.

"Hmm? Is someone here?" Setsuna said, looking up from his preparations.

"I better go check," I said.

"Want me to come with you?" Setsuna asked. He must've sensed a crowd outside.

He looked at me, but I shook my head.

"It's okay, I'll go alone."

With a reassuring smile, I headed toward the entrance to meet our guests. I made sure not to take too long so Setsuna wouldn't suspect anything.

Cyrus briefly introduced me to the others, and I wasted no time in leading them to the backyard. During our short walk, he said, "Please don't worry about status or titles today and feel free to chat with everyone," and I nodded in reply. It seemed they were all a bit tense, and they didn't say anything else.

"Is something wrong, Ragi?" Setsuna called out, hearing the large group of people. But when he saw whom I was leading, his eyes went wide, and the air grew tense. "What are they doing here?" he asked, looking shocked.

"I invited them," I replied calmly.

"…"

I laughed in response to Setsuna's question.

"Was I the only one who didn't know about this?" Setsuna turned to Norris and Elly, and they nodded. "Alto, did you know, too?"

"Yep! I did!"

"I see. So that's why you suggested making more food than we could eat."

"Huh? What does that have to do with it?" Alto asked.

"What do you mean? Didn't you say that because you wanted to make sure there was enough food for Cyrus and the others?"

"No, it's because I wanted to eat lots," Alto said, tilting his head in confusion.

"Pfft…! Ah-ha-ha-ha!" Setsuna burst out laughing at Alto's huge appetite, and his laughter changed the whole mood of the party.

After a good laugh, Setsuna turned to Cyrus and the others and said cheerfully, "Welcome to the Feast to Celebrate Changing the Wallpaper!"

We quickly rushed to set up tables and chairs in the backyard. Everyone offered to help, but I declined, saying it was the hosts' job. Alto beamed at being called a host, and we efficiently arranged the furniture.

By the time we finished laying out plates and cutlery on each table, people were already in the middle of introducing themselves to one another. Norris and Elly stood frozen after Cyrus introduced them to Eugene and Keith.

I hope they'll be okay, I thought as I listened to Setsuna preparing the fire.

Just then, a man and a woman appeared in front of us.

"Thank you for having us on such short notice."

"We're glad you could make it," I said.

"And thank you for your message to Cyrus," Georges said to Setsuna.

"You don't need to thank me for that," he replied.

"Also, thank you for stopping Cyrus…"

"That only happened because I couldn't handle things more smoothly."

“And also…”

Setsuna kept smiling as he responded to Georges’ repeated thanks, but when he launched into a third round, Setsuna interrupted him.

“You’ve thanked me enough, Georges. Could you introduce us to your companion?”

Only then did Georges seem to remember the woman standing next to him. He turned to her, and she smiled and nodded. Looking back at Setsuna, Georges gave a slight bow and made the introductions.

“Setsuna, allow me to present my fiancée, Sophia.”

Sophia looked at Setsuna curiously.

“It’s nice to meet you, Lady Sophia. I’ve heard a lot about you from Georges.”

Her face flushed being greeted by such a kind smile.

“It’s nice to meet you, Setsuna. Thank you for what you did the other day. I was very disappointed you had to leave early.”

“My apologies. It was necessary to avoid any unwanted questions. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Georges told me the reason, so please don’t let it bother you.”

“You’re too kind.”

“Oh, and please—just call me Sophia,” she told Setsuna, echoing what I’d been told earlier.

“Thank you, I will. Please feel free to use whatever name you’d like with me as well.”

“Okay.”

Setsuna turned to Alto and introduced him to Sophia. She didn’t seem surprised to see me, and she smiled gently at Alto. Alto looked a bit tense, but Sophia bent down slightly to meet his gaze and spoke to him in a warm voice, which appeared to relax him a little.

“I’ve heard all about you from Elly, and I’ve been so looking forward to meeting you!”

“Elly told me stories about you, too, Sophia,” Alto said.

“What kind of stories?”

“You like embroidery, right?”

“I do. I absolutely love Elly’s embroidery.”

“Me too.”

Setsuna and Georges smiled as they watched Sophia and Alto chat. A few moments later, Setsuna mentioned that he had to tend the grill, then left.

As if following Setsuna, Eugene's group drifted away from Norris and Elly, but they were quickly captivated by the huge amount of meat on the table.

"You're really serious about eating all this?" Cyrus asked Setsuna skeptically.

"Alto said he wanted me to make so much food we wouldn't be able to finish it."

"Ah…"

"And I've never seen him leave behind leftovers, so I can't even imagine how much he can really eat."

"Now that you mention it, I haven't, either, no matter how much food we made."

It sounded like they were recalling their travels together.

"Does Alto really eat that much?" Prince Eugene asked.

"He's so small it's hard to imagine," added Lord Keith.

Though, neither one of them took their eyes off the meat.

After that, talk shifted to Alto's appetite and the variety of meat prepared, and once the conversation was flowing naturally, Prince Eugene began to express his gratitude to Setsuna. The knights and the prime minister followed suit, and they all bowed their heads in thanks.

"Do you think Master and everyone managed to make up?" Alto asked.

"They look like they're having a good time talking, so probably," Elly said.

"They're laughing, too," chimed in Norris.

"Good. Then our prank was a huge success, right?"

"Yep, it sure was," I replied.

"Yay!" Alto wagged his tail happily, looking very pleased.

◇ Part Two: Sophia

Seeing Georges and Fred in front of me made me feel like I'd finally solved the mystery of their strange behavior over the past few days.

On the first day of the Founding Festival, my brother had returned from the castle looking as if his mind was off somewhere far away. And it wasn't just him; I realized Georges was acting the same way when I next saw him.

At first, I thought it was because the king and queen had suddenly decided to participate in the festival, thus creating more work for them. But their behavior continued even after the festival ended.

In Georges' case, I assumed he was acting that way because Cyrus had been relieved from Prince Eugene's guard duty, leaving Georges with more responsibilities. But I couldn't pinpoint any reason for my brother's behavior.

Around the same time, Elly had invited me to a dinner party. I thought it would be a good distraction, so I happily accepted. I was also intrigued because the sorcerer who had cast Time magic on the roses at my engagement party would be attending. At the time, I had no idea that something had happened to cause tension between the sorcerer, Georges, and my brother, but it became clear as soon as I saw their expressions while thanking Setsuna. They appeared more content than I'd seen them look in days.

I hoped one of them might explain the situation later, but it wasn't my place to ask if they didn't. Thinking that, I welcomed Georges back to the table.

Not long after, Setsuna told Ragi the grill was ready, so Ragi made the rounds and started giving an explanation in a loud voice.

Since there were too many people for us all to sit together, the food was laid out on separate tables. We could choose our plates and cups, then help ourselves to the food and sit wherever we liked.

After Ragi explained this, Alto also gave a brief speech.

"Thank you for coming to our feast to celebrate the new wallpaper! I hope everyone eats a lot! That's all!"

His straightforward speech made everyone laugh, and we thanked our hosts for the invitation.

Alto's sweet speech marked the beginning of the dinner party, and Ragi led us into the house to show us the renovated rooms. We eagerly followed, curious about what they looked like.

The first room was Setsuna's, decorated in warm tones. The furniture was arranged logically, which reflected Setsuna's meticulous manner.

I believe that a person's private space reflects their personality and that this often aligns with the impression I have of them. Elly had previously told me that Setsuna was a very kind, warm person, and his room matched that description perfectly.

Next, our hosts led us to Alto's room. Based on Elly's description of him as a "very energetic young boy," I had expected it to be decorated in vivid colors, but instead, it had soft purple-and-white wallpaper, giving it a gentle, calm feel. However, the scattered furniture and various trinkets decorating the shelves displayed Alto's lively personality.

Alto said that the trinkets were his "treasures." According to his explanation, the items weren't valuable, but he called them his treasures because he was so fond of them. To be honest, I didn't understand the value of any of them at first glance…

…but as we listened to him explain each one, I began to appreciate their worth. I shared in admiring their beauty and marveled at the unusual items.

Even so, I just couldn't quite understand his enjoyment of collecting a jar full of cremil insect shells.

I wonder if all young boys are like this. I seem to remember my brother also has a fair few indecipherable items saved from his childhood that he still treasures…

I kept this thought to myself, though, since everyone else there seemed to have some sort of fond memory of collecting cremil shells.

As I listened to them talk, my eyes wandered, and I spotted a gerulito flower with an embroidered ribbon on Alto's desk. I smiled when I saw the careful embroidery.

I also had these ribbons displayed as treasures in my room. They were tied to the twelve roses Georges had given me, and I'd had them framed and hung on a wall.

The words he'd written on them had mostly faded, leaving only the first few letters, but each time I looked at them, I felt so happy.

The ribbons had changed, just like the roses had withered. Yet the words that should have disappeared still lingered. I hadn't been able to believe my eyes, and the next thing I knew, tears had started streaming down my face.

Maybe I should redecorate my room soon to display my treasures.

Swept up in that thought, I left Alto's room.

When we went back outside, Setsuna had lit the fire underneath the grill. The top of the grill was divided into two sections: one with wire mesh, and one without. He began grilling large pieces of meat and vegetables on skewers over the section without mesh, and fish and mushrooms on the other.

Setsuna mentioned it would take some time to cook, so we should enjoy chatting with others, but everyone was so captivated by the unfamiliar dishes that we couldn't look away.

I wasn't very interested in cooking, but I enjoyed watching everyone else be so intrigued.

Elly's eyes sparkled as she asked detailed questions about the meat and vegetable skewers. Her excitement made her look so beautiful and full of life.

When Eugene, Keith, and Cyrus heard that the meat was from a monster they'd never eaten before, they all cried out, "No way!" It was endearing to see the crown prince, the prime minister, and Georges' friend Cyrus—who'd recently become an important person in our kingdom due to his dragon's blessing—showing such an innocent, childlike side.

I felt happy seeing my brother and Georges watching over them.

Norris is staying close to Elly, though.

I couldn't stop myself from thinking that, but I decided just this once to turn a blind eye to the knight who'd left his fiancée alone.

Since no one wanted to leave Setsuna's side, we all ended up standing around the grill, chatting as we drank tea. Nobody spoke to Alto, most likely because he was staring at the meat so intently that no one wanted to disturb him.

As we stood there, Ragi suddenly said, "Isn't it a shame that there are only two women here with so many men?" He had a playful glint in his eyes as he looked around.

Now that he pointed it out, I realized there were nine men and only Elly and me for the women. His words caused everyone but Georges and Norris to freeze.

I looked at my brother, whose expression had drawn into a strained smile. Our eyes met, but he gave me a look that said, *"Don't say a word."*

Georges turned to Cyrus with an unusually mischievous smile, as if he'd just thought of something to retaliate.

"Cyrus…"

"Shut up," Cyrus said in a low voice, perhaps realizing what Georges was about to say. It looked like my brother had also caught on, because he had a wry grin on his face as he took a sip of tea.

Prince Eugene ignored the glaring match between Georges and Cyrus and abruptly spoke, making everyone freeze.

"Cyrus is currently courting Lady Noah, though, isn't he?"

Lord Keith sighed and pressed a hand against his forehead.

"Wha—?!"

Cyrus froze, his eyes wide. Elly and I found this news very interesting and kept silent while we listened to their conversation.

"Who told you? How do you know that?" Cyrus glared at Prince Eugene, demanding the source of his information.

"I've known for a while, but lately, it's become a hot topic of gossip among the maids."

Cyrus couldn't hide his shock when he heard that. He looked to Georges and Fred for help, but they both just nodded. Apparently, that was what Georges was going to say before Cyrus stopped him.

"…"

Ragi, who'd sown the seeds of this chaos, listened intently with a satisfied look on his face. My heart pounded as I watched the events unfold.

"Oh? You mean spring has finally come for Cyrus?" Setsuna asked Prince Eugene in a teasing tone of voice. But Prince Eugene shook his head.

"It's been a one-sided affair for a year now."

"Damn you!! Eugene… How long have you known?!"

"You're so easy to read. Both Keith and I noticed a long time ago."

Cyrus's shoulders slumped in defeat, at which point, Setsuna seemed to remember something.

"Isn't Lady Noah the woman with blue eyes and light green hair? She was so bright and cheerful, she really left an impression on me."

Cyrus fell silent, and Prince Eugene looked slightly taken aback.

"Huh? You know Lady Noah, Setsuna?" the prince asked.

"She was one of the women in the room when I played the lyre."

"Oh, now that you mention it…" Prince Eugene nodded, recalling the event.

"So, Cyrus, how have things gone with Lady Noah?" I asked.

Cyrus averted his gaze and murmured quietly, "She seems to like bards…"

"…"

"…"

Everyone froze again. Georges and my brother gulped, while Prince Eugene and Lord Keith went completely still. Setsuna had been reaching out to lift up a piece of meat, but he'd paused in midair, staring intently at Cyrus.

It was as if time had stopped, and Ragi broke the silence with a single sentence.

"It seems he was rejected." It was something that anybody would hesitate to say, but Ragi didn't seem to waver in the slightest as he added, "How cruel."

For some reason, those words resonated deeply, and a somber atmosphere lingered in the air.

"Master, the meat is burning!"

Alto’s frantic words released the tension, and Setsuna quickly flipped the meat while Prince Eugene and Lord Keith desperately comforted the depressed Cyrus.

As I watched them, I couldn’t help but wonder about the bard who’d won Lady Noah’s heart. I debated whether I should ask my brother or Georges about it.

◇ Part Three: Setsuna

As soon as the meat was cooked, Alto and Cyrus eagerly dug in. The two of them were determined to try every type of meat at the party, while the other guests chose different types and shared among themselves.

I poured Ragi some alcohol and thanked him for planning the party. He gave me a kind smile and told me he was glad his prank had been a success, and I nodded sincerely in response.

We had a cheerful, relaxed meal together. Once Alto finished the meat, he said how much he'd been looking forward to trying Elly's dishes, and everyone's attention shifted to her cooking.

Her dish resembled lasagna, and it looked delicious. She plated portions for each of us since it was difficult to serve ourselves.

Norris had a serious look on his face and said, "Please take a small bite first. And if you don't like it, you don't have to eat it."

This made everyone hesitate.

Maybe I should take the first bite…

But just as that thought went through my mind, Cyrus shoved the entire serving on his plate into his mouth at once. I knew how he must feel; the smell was amazing, and the portions were quite small, so Cyrus must've thought that even if it tasted unusual, he could handle it.

Following his lead, other people began to take small bites of the dish.

It was around that time that Cyrus began tearing up and coughing violently. Despite his struggle, he didn't spit out the food, which was a testament to his strength of will. His eyes went wide, and he covered his mouth with his right hand as if he was really fighting through it.

Everyone else who had taken much smaller bites either turned red in the face, broke out in a sweat, or covered their mouths. Their reactions varied, but they all probably shared the same thought.

"M-Master…"

Alto's hand holding his fork trembled as he cried and looked at me. But before I could even ask if he was all right, he shouted, "Water!" and gulped down his drink. It didn't seem to be anywhere near enough, though, so I gave him my cup as well.

Everyone else must have felt the same way, and they swallowed the food, then slowly reached for their glasses, managing to restrain themselves from gulping down their drinks.

When I glanced at Ragi, his ears lay flat against his head just like Alto's, though he was trying to hide it. It must've hit him hard as well.

"Uh, are you all right?" Norris asked with concern as Cyrus lay motionless on the table. Everyone else was too stunned to respond. Norris looked around worriedly, and eventually, Georges managed to reply hoarsely, "We're okay."

"It just startled us, is all…," said Sophia.

"That sure packs a punch," added Ragi.

"I've never had that before," Fred said calmly.

Eugene and Keith were still drinking.

Apparently, Elly had prepared a traditional dish from Nubul—a place known for making incredibly spicy food. These flavors weren't common in Lypaed, so our guests were unaccustomed to such extreme spices and were shocked by the sensation.

As for me, I didn't mind it at all. Beneath the heat, I could taste the stewed vegetables' rich umami flavor and found it very delicious.

I felt someone's eyes on me and looked up to see Sophia gazing at me curiously.

"You're fine with it, Setsuna?" Sophia asked, and Elly looked at me glumly.

"I don't mind spicy food."

"Oh, I'm so jealous. I'd love to eat more, but I can't." Sophia said that she liked the flavor, but that it was too hot for her.

"Many Nubul dishes are quite spicy, so it's understandable if people from Lypaed aren't used to them," Norris said.

I looked at Cyrus, who was still down for the count, and grinned.

"Is that why you warned everyone before tasting it, Norris?" Keith asked, and Norris nodded with a troubled expression on his face.

"It's certainly spicy, but I think Elly's dish is really delicious," I said.

Elly smiled happily and replied, "I'm glad you like it."

“Beastfolk like Alto and I don’t tolerate strong spices well, so this is too much for us. It’s such a shame…” Ragi apologized to Elly, who said she should’ve asked beforehand, but he just shook his head and replied, “I’m so glad I was able to experience a traditional Nubul dish.”

“Thank you. Cindy taught me this recipe.”

“Oh, they’re one of the people you said you owe a lot to, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. I’m glad to hear you enjoyed it,” Elly said.

“Elly, it was too hot for me, but I’m happy I got to try a traditional dish!” Alto said.

“Thanks, Alto.”

“No, we should be the ones thanking you.”

“Thanks for cooking for us, Elly.”

“You’re welcome! Next time, I’ll make something that isn’t so spicy…” Elly clenched her fists, determined to cook something that Alto and everyone else would enjoy.

Georges ate Sophia’s serving, while Eugene and the others managed to finish theirs despite sweating profusely. I finished off Ragi’s and Alto’s portions, and the two of them got up to try the next dish. I slowly ate what was left in front of me.

How nostalgic.

I rarely got to eat spicy food in this world. Alto didn’t like it, and spices were expensive in Gardir, so I couldn’t afford them. The taste brought back old memories, and I could almost hear my sister’s voice.

“This is for you, Brother,” Kyoka had said, handing me a packet.

I’d sighed as I looked at it.

“You found another weird snack, Kyoka?”

She’d always loved trying new foods. If she ever tried something she thought was tasty, Kyoka would buy me one, too, and even if she didn’t like it, she’d still bring it home for me. I hadn’t really wanted snacks that didn’t taste good, but I never said anything to her because I appreciated the thought.

“Have you tried it yet?” I’d asked.

“Yep.”

“Was it good?”

Kyoka had looked away, which meant she didn't like it. I decided to try it anyway and opened the bag, and as I did, a spicy aroma wafted into the air. Kyoka watched me intently, clearly expecting something to happen. I ignored her and took a bite.

She kept staring at me, waiting for a reaction. I continued eating calmly, causing her to pout in frustration.

"What? Don't you find it spicy?!"

"Nope. It's good."

Kyoka looked skeptical, but when she saw how totally calm I was while eating it, she reached into the bag, took out a piece, and put it in her mouth. As soon as she did, she instantly clamped her hand over her mouth and silently screamed. She gulped down some juice, but it took a while for her to calm down, and she glared at me with tears in her eyes.

"You idiot! It is *spicy!"*

"Didn't you say you already tried it?"

"I did."

"So you knew it was spicy."

"Yeah, but you looked like you were enjoying it, so I thought maybe I'd been wrong!"

The snack had habanero chili powder on it, so of course it was going to be spicy.

"So you're saying it's my fault?" I'd asked her.

"Obviously!"

Even that silly little moment felt so nostalgic, and I couldn't help but wonder if Kyoka still enjoyed trying new things.

After that, we began talking about Nubul. During lulls in the conversation, everyone went to get more food and sat wherever they liked, chatting while they ate. Listening to people's excited voices, Alto and I got enough food for three people, then returned to where Ragi was sitting. Just then, Cyrus came over to me.

His eyes were on Alto's plate, and Alto eyed him warily.

"What is it, Cyrus?"

Alto tried to hide his plate, but Cyrus quickly snatched some food from it.

"Hey!"

Alto had a habit of saving his favorite food for last, and Cyrus loved teasing him by swiping it.

“You’re wide-open! Hah!”

He would later give Alto his own portion, so all he was really doing was swapping one for the other, but it was his way of showing affection. That said, Cyrus had once eaten Alto’s fish, which had *really* made him mad…

Cyrus never learns…

The knight was currently eyeing a dish Ragi had made, which resembled a small piroshki. There were still plenty more on the table, but he hadn’t hesitated to eat Alto’s instead. Usually, Alto would have gotten angry, but this time, he just watched Cyrus intently. Ragi also looked on with interest.

“Alto?” I called out, noticing their behavior just as Cyrus began to groan. The next second, he began to cough violently.

“Gack! Cough… Cough.” He held a hand over his mouth and was making an incredible expression. Before I could comprehend what had just happened, Alto laughed.

“Gotcha!”

Cyrus swallowed the food and muttered, “You tricked me,” before sitting down.

“Gramps! That was the best prank!”

“It went well.”

The two of them were delighted by the success of their practical joke. I knew they’d been planning something as I was cooking, but I hadn’t realized Cyrus was the target. Still, it was partly his fault.

He’d fallen right into their trap.

“Was it yummy?” Alto asked proudly.

“…My whole mouth is still sour. It’s so unbelievably sour.” Cyrus’s whole body shuddered, and I couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for him.

Alto told him that if he’d learned his lesson, Cyrus shouldn’t take food from his plate again, which drew everyone’s attention. When Ragi explained to everyone what had happened, they all burst into laughter.

The conversation kept flowing after that. Keith and Fred sampled unfamiliar dishes with curiosity, while Elly and Sophia asked Ragi about how to make some dishes from Sagana as Norris and Georges watched over them.

Alto made up with Cyrus, and together with Eugene, they talked about the meals served to the soldiers at the castle.

As the day wore on, the food gradually disappeared. Alto conquered all the different meats, and eventually, the meal came to an end.

Cyrus and the others brought out baked goods while Elly made tea for everyone. As we sipped our tea, we listened to Sophia and Elly chat. It was interesting how their conversation never seemed to die down, and with just one word, the topic seemed to shift seamlessly in any direction. I found it fascinating.

Now they were talking about Laglut and Cindy roses. Elly seemed to remember something and looked at me with interest.

“By the way, Setsuna, who’d you give that Laglut rose you bought on the third day of the festival to?”

Sophia’s eyes sparkled as she turned her gaze on me.

“I gave it to my wife. She said it was very beautiful, and it made her happy.”

Almost half the group froze when they heard my casual answer.

“…Huh?” Elly said.

“Your wife?” Sophia said.

“Setsuna, you’re married?!” Georges and Norris exclaimed in unison.

I nodded and pulled up the sleeve of my right arm to show them my silver bracelet. The four of them and Ragi stared at it with curiosity, making me feel a little uncomfortable, so I quickly hid it back under my sleeve.

Elly and Sophia exchanged glances, then turned toward me.

“Setsuna, why didn’t you invite your wife to this party?” Sophia asked.

“That’s right, Setsuna. It’s cruel to leave your wife out,” Elly said.

They both sounded mildly displeased, and the men nodded in agreement—all of them, that is, except for Ragi and Cyrus.

“I’d like to meet her,” Eugene said.

“Alto, have you met her?” Keith asked.

“Yeah. Tuuli is living with Kukka right now!”

“Kukka?” Cyrus joined in on the conversation, hearing this unfamiliar name. “Don’t tell me you have kids, too, Setsuna,” he said with a grin.

“No, we don’t have kids.”

“Who’s Kukka, then? Your mistress?” This earned him sharp glares from the women.

“Cyrus, you met my wife’s brother. What do you think would happen to me if I was having an affair?”

All the color drained from Cyrus’s face as he remembered Revale.

“He’d kill you…”

Everyone froze again. I smiled at Cyrus and said honestly, “I’m devoted to Tuuli. I’d never cheat on her.”

“I wish someone would say that about me,” Sophia murmured, and Georges looked at her in shock.

Elly, meanwhile, blushed and said to Norris, “You can say that about me, too, you know,” to which he silently nodded.

“So what’s your relationship with Kukka, then?” Eugene asked, uninterested in the couples’ banter.

“Kukka is my spirit. Since I can’t always be by Tuuli’s side, I left a spirit with her.”

Keith looked up in surprise.

“You made a contract with a spirit?”

“I was tricked into it,” I replied, and I explained why I’d given mana to Kukka.

Everyone laughed and said that sounded like something I’d do. When I protested weakly, the conversation swelled again, and before we knew it, even more time had passed.

As everyone prepared to leave, Sophia promised to visit Elly’s flower shop, and Norris invited Georges to come along. Eugene and Keith asked if they could come along as well, and Elly and Norris nervously said yes.

Now that everyone was distracted, Cyrus walked up to me as if he’d been waiting to get a moment alone with me.

“Got a minute?” he asked.

“What is it?”

He stood up straight and then bowed deeply to me.

“Cyrus?”

“I’m sorry.” The apologetic look on his face and his clenched fists left me speechless. “I’m sorry I couldn’t keep my promise.”

I wondered what promise he was talking about. I tried to remember if we’d even made any promises to each other since coming to Lypaed.

“…”

“I couldn’t stop the queen from coming to you with her request.”

Oh, that one…

I recalled the promise Cyrus had made to me in Kutt: that we wouldn’t use each other for our own personal gain.

“I’m not saying the queen’s actions were wrong, but I’m sorry that she ended up coming to you. I should’ve prevented it. You even warned me with that gerulito flower.”



“That promise was just between us, Cyrus, so don’t worry about it.”

“Even so, I know it was really a promise involving Lypaed. When the king asked what you wanted, you didn’t request anything, did you?”

That wasn’t entirely true, but I’d wanted to distance myself from the kingdom.

“So I didn’t keep my promise to you. I’m really sorry.”

I was surprised that he felt so responsible. The matter with the queen was something I’d decided on my own, and what happened in the castle had been a private matter, so I didn’t want Cyrus to be so troubled by it. It went without saying that I didn’t want anyone to use that to rope me into something else, but that was a separate issue.

However, Cyrus coming to me like this made me much happier than any apology. I realized that I’d been avoiding talking about Cyrus for the past few days. I hadn’t done it on purpose, but now I felt guilty for how I’d handled things.

Apparently, both of us had been carrying guilt toward each other, which I thought was a little amusing. I brainstormed something to say that might ease his guilt, so I recalled what Ragi had once said to me.

“That’s what friends are for.”

He quickly lifted his head, and we both smiled.

That night, Alto woke up after falling asleep for a while. He was having trouble sleeping alone, so he decided to sleep with Ragi in his room. Once Ragi left, I returned to my own room and lit a lantern.

I sat in the chair by the window and let myself relax. As I absentmindedly stared at the new wallpaper, I heard the sound of rain outside. At first, it was just a few sprinkles, but within minutes, it quickly turned into a downpour, and the sound of the rain echoed in the quiet night.

My room was even more comfortable and calming now that I’d rearranged the furniture.

It’s too quiet.

I suddenly understood why Alto didn't want to sleep alone. He must've felt lonely. Waking up in that dark, quiet room by himself must've made him feel anxious and isolated. After such an exciting day, it was understandable.

He's probably sleeping peacefully next to Ragi right now.

I chuckled a little when I remembered how Alto had waved at me clutching his pillow and Jackie, and how Ragi had glanced at the stuffed toy.

I wasn't tired yet. I stood up, thinking I might read a book, but then I noticed Alto's diary on my desk. I picked it up, sat back down in my chair, and opened it quietly.

I caught some prey in my trap. I was happy. The prey was Cyrus. He was sad next to me. Maybe now he won't steal my food. Today was a fun day.

It really did seem like Alto had enjoyed today. Thinking about that, I hesitated to scold him in the diary but ended up writing:

Make sure not to do that to anybody else. And don't mix anything into people's food.

I closed the diary with a wry smile, remembering Cyrus's expression.

Epilogue

◇ Part One: Ragi

Alto continued chattering away happily even after everyone left. After a light dinner, he went to his room to write in his diary and didn't come back down. Setsuna checked on him and came back to tell me Alto had fallen asleep.

Although it was a little earlier than usual, we decided to have a drink. Our conversation ranged from Alto to the dinner party today to the pranks we'd kept secret from him……

Setsuna expressed his gratitude, and I just nodded. I could only hope his worries had been lifted now.

"Today was a very good day," I said.

Setsuna paused, looked at me, then smiled and quietly nodded.

We talked intermittently as we enjoyed our drinks, and the companionable silence stretched on. Just as it was about time to retire for the night, the door quietly opened.

"Master…" Alto slowly entered the room, his ears drooping.

"Oh, Alto. Did you wake up?"

"Yeah, but I'm still sleepy."

"Then go back to bed."

But Alto didn't move from where he was standing, and both Setsuna and I looked confused.

"Master, are you going to bed now?"

"I wasn't planning on it just yet."

"Oh…"

Alto seemed dejected. Just as Setsuna was about to say something, Alto looked at me hesitantly.

"Gramps…"

"What is it?"

He paused, looking down as if he was trying to decide whether to speak. Finally, he said, "If you're going to bed now, can I come sleep with you?"

"…"

His request was so unexpected that I was momentarily taken aback. I hadn't expected him to ask me that.

"Is that not okay?"

My silence made his ears droop even more.

"No, no… I don't mind," I answered hastily.

"Really?"

“Yes, Alto. You can sleep in my bed.”

“Yay! I’ll bring my pillow and Jackie.”

“Jackie? Uh…” But before I could say anything else, Alto happily ran off.

“…”

He was so quick that it left me speechless. But then laughter welled up inside me, and I couldn’t help but clutch my stomach as I let it out.

“He really must not have wanted to sleep alone,” I muttered.

“Maybe that’s part of it, but I think he wanted to sleep with you, Ragi,” Setsuna replied quietly.

“I see…”

I’d laughed so much that I was crying. It was so funny, so amusing, and so endearing that I just couldn’t help it.

Once Alto snuggled into bed, his sleepiness faded, and he started talking about the day again. He’d enjoyed the cooking, but what seemed to delight him even more was that everyone had complimented his freshly wallpapered room.

“They said my treasures are amazing!”

“Really?”

He was beaming with joy, happy that he’d been able to show off his treasures proudly. Yet I knew that after Lord Keith had seen the items displayed in the room, he’d given Setsuna various warnings.

Prince Eugene’s face had transformed in a number of amusing ways, shifting from wide-eyed surprise to a furrowed brow to a serious expression. I could understand his reaction, since Alto’s treasures ranged from rare items to the completely obscure and just kept getting stranger from there.

Among his treasures was a rare living stone, ten rocks that looked like they’d been carefully selected from a riverbank, a rare monster’s tail feather, and a snakeskin with the head still intact. There were also various colorful shells belonging to cremil insects that were sought after by collectors, and the bones of the first fish Alto had caught and eaten.

Some of the items made you wonder about their value. But it was important not to question why he kept these things. After all,

children prioritized their feelings over the value of their treasures.

If someone judged them based on their value or lack thereof, it would only cause confusion and lead to questions like *"What* is *this?"*—just like Eugene had asked when staring seriously at the fish bones.

Norris, Elly, and Sophia had listened to Alto's explanations with curiosity, most likely purely out of enjoyment. When Elly saw one of her embroidered ribbons, she'd happily hugged Alto.

Georges and Fred examined the monster's tail feather and had a serious discussion on what they would do if they encountered one. Perhaps that was just the perspective of a knight.

Finally, Alto had introduced his friend Jackie, and everyone was amused since the stuffed toy was so much bigger than he was. Those seeing Jackie for the first time seemed to hide their reactions of *"Is it really okay to have such a creepy toy?"* Having its neck and body severed by Setsuna then reattached only added to Jackie's creepiness. However, since Alto was cheerfully chattering about Jackie, no one said anything and simply petted the toy.

While Alto passionately spoke about Jackie, I noticed Setsuna giving Cyrus a look that told him not to tease Alto. Cyrus seemed to be trying to escape his gaze. He turned away and kept his mouth shut until the very end. I couldn't help but smile at their interaction with a bittersweet feeling, but, well, I suppose that was the price of our prank.

Everyone Setsuna knew was genuinely very kind, likely because Setsuna himself was a kind person.

He was a rather mysterious individual. Setsuna appeared to lack the indecisiveness often attributed to kindhearted people, and he was incredibly strong-willed. You could even call him shrewd.

Despite this, as time went on, he'd begun to open up to me. The more we shared drinks together, the more I found myself thinking of him like a grandson. This was something I never

could've imagined of someone like me, who distanced myself from others.

Maybe it was because we'd been living together for a while, but I'd naturally become able to pick up on the subtle changes in Setsuna's emotions. Even now, I noticed a hint of loneliness in his smile. I even caught glimpses of solitude in his words.

Seeing him like that, an old man like me couldn't help but wonder deep down, was there no one to support his emotions? He created an atmosphere that made others want to rely on him, with his gentle demeanor and smile, all the while hiding his own sensitivities. I just wished that someone could see through to his true feelings and care for him in return.

I recalled his words when we'd played that prank on him, which had left me feeling uneasy.

"I was worried something might've happened to you."

Setsuna had been genuinely worried about me, and his eyes had been filled with concern. I realized that my death might hurt him even more deeply than it would Alto. The thought made my heart ache…but there was nothing I could do about it.

Alto finally got exhausted from talking, and I gently stroked his back. Alto was curled up in a ball, having turned into his wolf form. I felt a wave of nostalgia wash over me at how soft his fur was, which was characteristic of young beastfolk.

He's so small as a little wolf, compared with his human form.

As I pet Alto, I thought he was sure to grow big and strong in no time because of how much he ate every day, and I chuckled to myself.

Just then, I heard a faint noise, and when I strained my ears, I realized it was the sound of rain.

When did it start to rain?

I would've normally noticed it sooner, but I'd been too focused on Alto's chattering. Looking at his sleeping face made me realize just how much I enjoyed talking with him.

Perhaps it was because today had been such a lively day, but as I lay there in my quiet room, the sound of the rain seemed to echo deeply inside my heart.

Alto must be lonely.

That was only to be expected, having woken up alone in a dark room.

As the rain poured down, the temperature in the room began to drop. I felt a chill and gently reached out to cover Alto with a blanket, but my hand paused.

On days like this, it always reminds me of…

"Daddy, can I sleep with you?"

The happy sound of my son's voice as he'd snuggled into my bed echoed in my mind.

"Tell me a story!"

When my son begged me for a story, I'd tell him all sorts of tales and shared memories from my own childhood.

"Sleeping with you feels so warm, Daddy."

I would keep stroking my son's head until he fell asleep cuddled up next to me.

"Dad, teach me how to hunt."

It always made me feel a little sad when I remembered how he'd stopped calling me Daddy once he'd gotten a little bigger.

But even then, his behavior didn't change much. He would still play pranks with me and laugh mischievously. I remembered the times my wife had scolded him.

I gently called out my wife's name.

"Nell."

"What is it, dear? Are you thinking of another prank?" The image of my wife in my memories answered me.

I whispered my son's name.

"Orus."

"My prank worked, Daddy!" he'd said proudly to me.

"He's probably already married with children of his own."

My mind wandered to such thoughts as I listened to the sound of the rain in the silent room. I quietly murmured, "I want to see you…"

A dream that would never come true slipped from my lips, and I felt my shoulders tremble slightly.

"Gramps?" Alto had just about fallen asleep, but he opened his eyes when he heard my voice. "Are you…cold?" he murmured drowsily, as if he was in a dream. "I'll cuddle up to you."

He cozied up under the blanket and pressed his back against me.

“Master says sleeping with me feels so warm…”

…

“…Yeah, it is… Thank you, Alto.”

As I gently stroked his back, Alto wagged his tail once and then slipped back into a deep sleep. His body heat began to warm my heart. I wondered if Setsuna had felt his heart warmed by Alto in the same way.

I watched Alto sleeping peacefully for a little while, before quietly sitting up.

“What can I do with the time I have left?”

When my remaining lifespan was already so short, what could I do so that Alto and Setsuna could live on laughing?

My longing for home never faded. But the sound of the rain echoing in the night no longer soaked into my heart.

Another Chapter
Japanese Iris ~ Tidings ~

◇ Part One: Tylera

We arrived at the Three Spires of Endia—located in the center of the Holy City of Ellana—just before the sun sank below the horizon, which was later than we'd planned. The primary reason for our delay was that the people of Ellana had taken up some of our time to show their respect by bowing down before the hero.

I received a message from the envoy I'd sent ahead that the Holy Emperor had already gone to sleep, and our guide, Detraas, spoke to me apologetically.

"It's only natural, considering the Holy Emperor's age. Please forgive me. I'll reschedule the meeting for tomorrow."

I couldn't very well demand to him now, nor did I have any intention to, so I quickly agreed to the change in our meeting time.

"Shall we go and pay our respects to the goddess before I guide you to your lodgings?" Detraas asked, before beginning to walk into the central spire.

Each of the three spires was a separate palace: The eastern spire housed the Holy Emperor and the nobles, the western spire housed the archbishop of the Endia Holy Church and its followers, and the central spire housed the massive statue of the goddess Endia, the audience chamber, and the governing bodies of Ellana.

Once we entered the central spire, walls continued along either side of us. After a little while, passages appeared on both sides, with a few dozen soldiers stationed at each crossroads. Ordinary citizens couldn't take this path, which connected to the audience chamber.

As Detraas approached, the soldiers pounded a fist to their chest and greeted him. The knight thanked them for their hard work and continued on. After walking farther, we reached the end of the walls, which had stretched on for about a hundred mers, and from there, we stepped into a large courtyard.

The spacious area was around three hundred mers in diameter, with a colossal statue of the goddess in the center towering one hundred mers high. The statue was constructed of bluesilver and posed with a staff in her left hand and her right arm outstretched. Her face was hidden by a veil.

This specific pose was said to represent the goddess when she had proclaimed, *“Eradicate all beastfolk across the continent!”* However, in modern times, her declaration was interpreted as *“Eradicate all monsters across the continent!”*

The latter interpretation arose because the goddess faced the Demonlands, yet I couldn’t help but think it was an odd story. When the goddess walked the earth, there were no monsters, so the only targets for eradication would’ve been the beastfolk.

Once Detraas reached the pedestal of the statue, he knelt down. Although I didn’t worship Endia, I couldn’t be rude, so I also knelt and wasted my time on an unnecessary prayer.

The hero, meanwhile, was earnestly praying for something, regardless of whether he believed in the goddess or not. I was sure any object of prayer would suffice in his case.

After a while, Detraas finished praying and stood up. “Allow me to guide you to your lodgings now. First will be the hero’s, then Princess Tylera’s. Is that acceptable?”

I’d already anticipated this, and I nodded reluctantly. Leaving the hero alone in an unfamiliar land was unacceptable, but I had no choice but to suppress my thoughts in the face of these ancient customs.

Detraas guided us through the passage leading from the central-spire courtyard to the western spire. As we walked, we gazed at the walls, which stretched for a hundred mers just as those in the central spire had, then stepped into the western spire’s courtyard.

The area was circular in shape, similar to the central spire, but smaller, with a diameter of probably around two hundred mers. However, it felt larger than the last courtyard because there was no giant statue in the middle—just a two-story house, which stood alone.

The house was referred to as the Hero’s Home, and it was a residence exclusively for heroes. It was where past heroes had stayed in Ellana, and starting today, the hero would also stay here. However, it was premature to assume that meant the hero was being given a warm welcome. In fact, the reality was quite different—a fact that became clear when I looked up.

The inner wall of the courtyard had many windows set into it, the reason being twofold. One was to allow light into the living quarters for the followers of the Endia Holy Church, who lived between the inner and outer walls of the western spire. The other was so that the windows above could look down on the Hero's Home and on the hero themselves. This was done to symbolize that the Endia Holy Church was the master of the hero.

An overwhelming number of people stared at us as we approached the house, and the fact that none of them could be seen only added to my discomfort. The ancient custom of literally placing the hero below them was unbearable to me. I deeply disliked that he had to stay here.

"Detraas, may I have a look inside?" I asked just as he finished explaining the house, standing in front of it.

"This house is reserved solely for the hero, so please refrain from entering. However, if it is a request from the princess herself…I only ask that you please be respectful inside."

I gave a shallow bow, then opened the door and walked in. According to his explanation, the house had two floors with six rooms in total, three of which were on the second floor. For no particular reason, I decided to check the second floor first and went upstairs.

I wanted to prevent the hero from staying here alone if possible, so I hoped to find some problems to convince him to move to a room we could share. I thought that would be difficult, though, considering they were letting me wander around freely like this. That seemed to clearly indicate that they weren't concerned, no matter what I did.

Wait, Ty. This house is monitored by magic.

Just as I reached the top of the stairs, the hero's voice resonated in my mind. He'd cast a Telepathy spell. I was a bit confused since he'd never used it before, but I didn't show it on my face and opened the door to the first room.

I'm sure it is, I replied. *I think this entire house is a magical tool meant to monitor heroes. Detraas is letting me sniff it out, after all.*

And he said to be "respectful" inside.

Since this building was part of the Endia Holy Church, it was under their jurisdiction. If the Holy Church got leverage over the

hero and me, it would cause trouble for the Holy Emperor's office, which handled national affairs.

I'd heard there had always been conflict between the Holy Church, which managed festivals, and the Holy Emperor's office, which managed political affairs, as to which was more important to the country. It must be a pain having those scoundrels trying to outwit each other.

He didn't need to say it in such a roundabout way.

Well, they might be eavesdropping.

Yet he's trying to give you information, Ty. That's kind of nice.

I could've explained that wasn't the case, but instead, I was curious as to how the hero had known there was a presence monitoring the house, so I decided to ask.

As soon as I entered the house, my hero's armor reacted and started giving me all sorts of warnings.

Seriously? What kind of warnings?

First off, your assumption that this building is a magical tool is correct. Alerts are being raised regarding the house itself. Also, it's displaying the actions taken by past heroes in this house and the penalties they received. For example, I saw that the fiftieth hero's soul was punished for an hour for breaking some objects in the room.

With that question answered, I knew I had to be careful, since there was a possible danger to the hero. I hadn't intended to break anything, but it seemed better to stop nitpicking and arguing to change rooms.

Let's wrap this up quickly and head back. It doesn't seem like anyone's lurking here.

Can you tell that from your hero's armor?

I finished checking the first room and stepped outside, still communicating with him.

No, I confirmed that using magic. I just thought I'd use the fact that we're being monitored against them by showing off my hero abilities.

Isn't Detection a Wind-attribute spell?

I was sure of that, since Larutas used it for scouting. But the hero wasn't supposed to be able to use Wind spells.

Yeah, it is. I find it strange that Wind magic is used for Detection, though. In my original world, it was done using Light. So a while

ago, I tried using Light magic, and the result of that is the spell I just mentioned.

I see.

It was quite rare for a hero to use Light-attribute magic. There were no Lightmasters in Gardir at the moment, and no one who could teach the hero Light magic. They'd considered arranging for a Lightmaster from another kingdom or adventurers from guilds to do it, but they decided against it in the end. It seemed unnatural for a hero sent by the gods to need someone to teach him magic.

The only exception was that we'd requested the help of Ellana, which knew about the hero. But so far, they hadn't dispatched any sorcerers, so the hero had to rely on his previous life's experience to use Light magic.

It seemed common that magic available in one's original world might not work in this world, which caused setbacks for the hero, who had to keep using trial and error.

Well, that's it, so you can relax and cut your investigation short, he thought.

That's not going to happen.

Although I didn't doubt the hero's magic, I wouldn't be able to feel at ease unless I checked the place out for myself, so I opened the door in front of me. The next room was a storage space, filled with all manner of weapons and armor.

These items were useless now, since they must've belonged to the heroes who'd come before. There were some made of bluesilver, which seemed valuable both as equipment and historical artifacts, but the hero didn't need them.

Are you done yet, Ty?

Not yet. Just wait a little longer, please.

As I answered, I peered into the final room. It was a bedroom surrounded by large bookshelves. Aside from the countless books, there was nothing significant in the room, and the books themselves only dated back several decades with nothing rare among them.

What a letdown.

I wished there had been some older books, a lingering habit from my previous job. I flipped through a few, but most were

travelogues detailing the state of affairs and customs of various countries.

These must be the sixty-seventh hero's collection. Did he seek freedom, too?

I closed a book about the cuisine of Bartle and felt a fleeting sensation as I caught a glimpse of the man I hadn't known. I began to wonder what I would do if the hero, confined in this house, expressed a desire for freedom.

But I was pulled back to reality by the hero's voice.

Ty? Are you about done?

Yes. I just finished, so I'll head back down now.

Good, if I had to wait any longer, I might've fallen asleep.

I wondered if he was sitting on the sofa, because he sounded tired.

Judging from your voice, I'm guessing you didn't check the first floor. I suppose I'll have to do that as well.

Ugh, can't you reconsider?

I ignored his complaints and continued to examine every room after going downstairs. At the very least, I wanted to make sure it was a comfortable place for the hero.

◇ Part Two: ???

His entrance into the outer room jolted me awake. How long had I been asleep? I rose from the sofa and focused my mind to play some music. A bright, cheery tune began to flow into the room from out of nowhere.

Although it was the opening theme song for a children's anime, I felt no sentimental attachment to it. Still, sometimes, people would listen to it and tear up, so I'd taken to starting with this song.

I wonder what this one will be like.

As I watched his movements closely, I hoped he'd be someone worth guiding. But my anxiousness quickly melted away. It was no exaggeration to say I'd never encountered such an intriguing presence before.

A Gardir royal and the hero are friends!

I'd observed heroes for a long time, but I'd never seen a case like this before.

I double-checked the figure of the woman dressed as a knight, wondering if I was mistaken. However, the gauntlet sword she had was, without a doubt, the Azure Dragon of the Black Flames, a national treasure of Gardir. It was impossible for anyone but royalty to wear it.

The woman spoke humbly before the hero, who seemed to rely on her. I thought maybe their roles were reversed, but from the exchanges I heard, the closeness between them could only be described as friendship.

Not only that, but judging by the conversation exchanged while the royal was in the room, it was also clear that they cared for each other, increasing my positive impression of the hero.

Although the heroes have varying personalities and none of them are fundamentally bad, it matters whether I see eye to eye with them. I usually chose not to interact with those I didn't get along with, but this time, I decided to make contact.

Even then, however, we couldn't communicate if they didn't reach out to me, which would be frustrating.

So I was prepared to wait for as long as it took, but the opportunity unexpectedly arose on the very first night.

As he lay with a book resting on his pillow, I connected my room to his dream.

"Hey. Are you the sixty-eighth hero?"

He hesitated at the entrance of the room I'd invited him into and answered my question with one of his own.

"Who are you?"

"First, answer my question. Are you the sixty-eighth hero?"

"No, I'm the sixty-ninth hero. I heard that the sixty-eighth hero passed away from an illness."

"…"

The last hero I met was the 67th, so I'd only asked about the 68th out of curiosity, with no ulterior motives. However, learning that one hero hadn't come to me made my heart ache. After all, I was here to guide the heroes.

While those thoughts distracted me, a question popped into my mind. I'd never heard of a hero being sick, and I wondered why that was. My conclusion was that heroes kept in top shape and had strong mana, so their immune systems were probably supercharged against illnesses.

"If I heard right, you said he died from an illness?"

"That's what I said."

It was hard to believe, but at the very least, this hero seemed to really think the 68th hero had died from sickness. It didn't make sense to me, but I could check later to clarify.

"Well, no matter," I muttered, trying to move on.

But the 69th hero spoke first.

"Now it's my turn to ask you a question."

There wasn't much else I could do if he'd taken that to mean my questions were over, so I replied, "Sure, go ahead."

"Who are you? And where is this place?"

"That's two questions."

"At first, I thought it was a dream, so I didn't think much of it. But there are paintings of people in this room I don't know. And there's music playing I don't recognize. So it can't be my dream."

The 69th hero was looking at a photo of a mother and child hunting for shellfish; the tune currently playing was one the child had liked. It was only natural the hero would have such questions since he had no memory of that event.

I gave the standard answer I'd given many heroes before.

“My name is Kelvy. I guide heroes, and this is the world of books.”

“A guide for heroes? Never heard of that.”

“Well, I asked the one who summoned you to keep quiet about it. But it’s true. Hold the sleeve of the hero’s armor and think about the person who created it.”

I watched the 69th hero do as I’d instructed. I couldn’t confirm it, but the name of the 32nd hero and mine should be displayed on the inside of the hood.

“It’s true,” he said, staring at me with astonishment. “So there’s a guide for heroes. That’s such a relief. Everything was trial and error up until now, so I’m glad someone made this magical tool, Kelvy.”

“This isn’t a magical tool.”

“It’s not? I thought the book I was reading before bed must have been a magical tool, and that it was meddling with my dreams using Darkness magic.”

Though he seemed carefree and clumsy, the 69th hero was sharp and clever, quickly grasping the situation.

“It’s true that this place is linked to your dreams through magic in the world of my book. But I’m not a magical tool.”

“So what are you, then?”

“I am an artificial life-form.”

In the past, heroes had always been shocked by this revelation, but not this one.

“I see. So you’re like a homunculus, then? I heard there’s no magic in this world that can create life, but in my world, there is. Maybe a hero summoned from another world could use that sort of magic.”

I was shocked by how quickly he understood. Yet he was far too trusting, talking about such secret matters with someone he’d only just met, so I decided to warn him.

“I didn’t think there was any point worrying about that. I’m in a dream, after all. Plus, you don’t seem like a bad guy, Kelvy. Especially since you’re giving me advice.”

He completely ignored my warning and kept talking casually to me.

“It’s weird, though. Whenever I try to re-create magic from my original world, it never works out, especially when it’s magic that

doesn’t exist here. Is it just because I’m not good enough?”

Having the ambition to improve is a good thing.

I was mildly amused by his naïveté but didn’t dislike his friendly demeanor, so I decided to answer his question.

“No. Not even heroes can create life using magic in this world.”

“How were you created, Kelvy?”

It wasn’t bad that he was curious, but I realized if I kept indulging him, we’d never get to the main point. So I changed the subject.

“That doesn’t matter; it’s a waste of time. I exist to guide heroes and reached out to you for that purpose. However, you are the hero, and you’ve stumbled on something. Given that, it’s clear how we should spend our time here. Remember, the time I have to teach you is precious and lasts only as long as my consciousness is connected to you.”

In reality, when I said good-bye, it often turned out to be the last time I’d see that hero. I sometimes regretted not sharing more information with them or teaching other things.

“I understand. I want to hear what you have to say, so I’ll be patient.”

I was surprised by his amenable response. He seemed to have a good sense of judgment for what was important. That was the impression I got of the 69th hero.

◇ Part Three: Kelvy

“So what can you teach me, Kelvy?”

“I can teach you everything from crafting and improving magical tools to magic and weapons. When it comes to magical tools, this includes weaponry. I’ve offered advice on hero’s equipment and helped with improvements. But since capabilities vary from person to person, I can’t instruct you on that.”

The 69th hero’s eyes sparkled. I guessed it was because only moments ago, he mentioned he’d been managing so far through trial and error.

“I want to learn magic. There are no sorcerers in Gardir who can teach me about the attributes I can use.”

“I can teach you all eight attributes. Which one do you want to learn?”

“I’d like to start with Light for now.”

I felt a sense of unease.

“Given your mana, I don’t think you’ll be able to use Light-attribute magic.”

“That’s not true. Oh, right. I’m suppressing my mana right now. Hang on, I’ll release it.”

With that, an unexpectedly immense amount of mana began to flow from the 69th hero. The amount rivaled that of the person who’d created me when they were a hero. At the very least, I hadn’t met a hero with this much mana in the last thousand years.

“I see. Very well, then. With this much mana, you can certainly learn Light-attribute magic. I’ll teach you.”

The 69th hero smiled with joy, and I changed our surroundings to prepare for the training. With one thought, the room instantly transformed. Although it was just a pedestal to stab a weapon into, the rest of the space extended infinitely into the void.

“Thrust your weapon into the pedestal before you.”

“Huh? But I don’t have any weapons with me.”

“We’re in a dream. If you think about a weapon, it’ll appear in your hands. The hero’s equipment is synchronized between this dream and reality.”

I hurried him along, explaining the synchronization concept as I urged him to summon a weapon and stab it into the pedestal.

This hero's weapon is a staff.

I'd suspected as much judging from his robed hero's attire, but it was clear he didn't want to limit himself to melee combat.

If he can't master close-ranged combat, surviving will be difficult.

As I pondered this, the pedestal read the staff's information, and the room transformed into a moonlit forest. I could see countless monsters stirring in the darkness.

"Is my battle history recorded in the staff?"

He really was quick picking up on things. While the scene was being re-created, the hero seemed to notice that it looped after a certain period, revealing it to be a record.

"That's correct. Now, I want to see how you handle this situation to gauge your skills."

I concentrated on replaying the scene, and it began to unfold. However, what happened next wasn't what I anticipated. Instead of a display of swift magical prowess as he fought the monsters one by one…the re-creation of the 69th hero transformed all the mana within his body into currents of light, condensing it into a massive shining sphere overhead. Then he unleashed the concentrated magic as countless arrows of light. It was the very spell the 67th hero had developed, and one I'd explicitly warned him not to use. Yet unbelievably, he'd gone ahead and used it.

"I thought I had to protect everyone, even if it meant sacrificing myself. I'm glad the spell activated here in this world."

As he finished releasing the light, the hero gazed at his own crumbling form with a faint smile. I couldn't understand what he was thinking, but I had something more pressing on my mind.

I switched the staff's recorded information from the 69th hero to the 67th hero and displayed its final data. An enormous tree monster appeared before my eyes, towering twenty mers tall.

I instantly caught on and let out a sigh. The 67th hero must've found himself in a completely hopeless situation. In this era, fighting such a colossal monster would require tens of thousands of soldiers from Ellana or Gardir, or tens of thousands of black-rank adventurers. And you'd need at least three heroes from this era to take it down.

At some point, it had become no longer possible for a hero to defeat colossal monsters single-handedly. I figured it was due to declining mana levels among humans. In other words, the lesser

mana in the people doing the summoning resulted in the summoned heroes being weaker.

That's why I'd advised creating specialized equipment to save struggling heroes from these battles and death, leading to the creation of the hero's armor. Thanks to that, heroes up to the early 50th generation had been able to contend with colossal monsters. Yet with each generation, such battles had become a death sentence, and I hadn't been able to find a solution to save them.

I adjusted the perspective so I could see the 67th hero and moved the scene. His first move got him blown away by numerous branches, which was inevitable. I'd taught him only one strategy in such situations: retreat. But once I saw his bloodied face with his helmet knocked off, it looked like he hadn't considered that option. When the 67th hero realized the disparity in power, he made up his mind. He just looked at the tree monster and laughed.

That idiot…

There was no one around, so he wasn't bound by the Hero's Testament. He could've escaped if he wanted to. But heroes are all fools.

"The sixty-seventh hero was a man of few words, but his sense of duty was far superior to the average hero," I said. "He always smiled during battles, saying his fighting saved lives."

As the torrent of light surged upward, the 67th hero's red hair swirled violently in the air.

"I don't remember exactly when, but the last time we spoke was when he set out for Alion. He'd been upset because the nobles there were secretly involved in the slave trade of beastfolk. I hope, at least in the end, he was able to be a shield for those he wanted to protect."

I'd told the 32nd hero not to record the date. I couldn't bear the thought of that day being memorialized for all eternity. He probably hadn't wanted that, either, because he'd just nodded silently.

The light ascended and formed a sphere two mers in diameter. This was the same as the 69th hero's fight, but what happened next was different.

Four arrows of light shot out in different directions, unlike the countless arrows the 69th hero had deployed. These were concentrated with immense mana, making them highly lethal. The densest arrow pierced the trunk of the colossal tree monster before disappearing, leaving a crack in its surface. It wasn't fatal, though. Enraged, the monster hurled the 67th hero into the air with its roots and squeezed him with its branches.

"Why didn't you focus all your mana into that single attack?"

Had he done that, he might've pierced and destroyed the trunk. Even if he might not have been able to win, he could've ended it in a stalemate. But instead…

"There must've been a group of large monsters as well…"

I was distracted by the 69th hero's murmur and saw the 67th hero's greatsword transform into a throwing spear before being launched. It spun through the air at incredible speed, piercing the crack and breaking the trunk.

The tree split in half and began to wither. The 67th hero was released from the branches and crashed to the ground. I couldn't tell whether that was what had killed him, but the hero's armor disintegrated into particles of light and ascended into the sky.

"Thank you. You protected Tylera and everyone around you…"

As the sword also turned into light particles, the scene ended.

"You knew about this battle?" I asked.

The 69th hero nodded and explained the events of two years ago.

"Calling him a hero who only loved to fight is a huge misunderstanding. Someone like that would never create a spell to sacrifice himself. It seems like no one truly understood him," I said, and a sad look passed over the face of the 69th hero. "Putting that aside, since the spell you used was similar to the one created by the 67th hero, I watched his final battle to be sure. Thanks to that, it seems you're able to use that spell."

"In that sense, it was just a coincidence, but the 67th hero saved us."

It's hard to call it a coincidence.

As I watched this hero's behavior, I felt like he resembled the 67th hero. The kind of spells one used or created relied heavily on their intuition, so it wasn't entirely a coincidence.

Does that mean this man also…?

I shook off the thought and spoke to the 69th hero.

"I'll teach you magic under one condition."

"What is it?"

"You must promise not to use or create any self-destructive magic. If you can't promise that, I won't teach you anything."

"I promise."

There wasn't much conviction in his words, but I decided to trust him.

The recording function of the hero's weapon wasn't just for watching past battles. I used the recent battle information to re-create a corvasal, which was only a midsize monster, and set it to attack the hero. Then I pulled the staff from the pedestal.

"First, you'll fight so I can measure your abilities."

I tossed the staff to him and informed him that the monster would start attacking in one minute. When the corvasal began moving, the 69th hero created five Light orbs and attacked the monster, but he couldn't finish it off. Instead, it charged him and struck him down.

"You gotta be kidding me! You can't even take down a midsize monster alone?"

"It's impossible! I don't know any magic that can defeat a tough monster like this! It's too fast for me to dodge!"

Teaching him more powerful magic's easy, but…

Those words of his—*too fast for me to dodge*—really stuck with me.

"To deal with that kind of speed, you gotta strengthen your body with mana control. But I can't move while controlling my mana."

His explanation left me speechless. Seeing my face, he raised his voice.

"Don't look at me like that! I can't help it!"

"Why not?"

"This body just doesn't feel right!"

"It doesn't feel right? But it's your own body, isn't it?"

Even though the hero's body was enhanced to its prime condition, it was still his body. I'd never heard of it "not feeling right."

“I don’t know…about ‘prime condition.’”

“What do you mean?”

“I died right after becoming an adult, so I guess my prime would’ve come after that. Something felt off when I was summoned, and when I measured my height, I’d grown a bit.”

“…”

Today was full of surprises. A hero getting sick, dying young, and those Gardir scum not even summoning him properly anymore? I wanted to clear up my doubts, but it was too soon. I had to give him some advice first.

“In that case, use magic.”

“You mean like Wind magic to boost agility or Earth magic for endurance?”

“You’re not far off, but the fundamentals are different. Instead of physical enhancement, it’s light-particle transformation. The essence of Light magic is controlling the density of light particles.”

He looked puzzled.

“Density?”

“It’ll be faster if you experience it.”

I cast a Light spell on the 69th hero. His body began to glow and turn transparent.

“Now try moving.”

Following my cue, the 69th hero went around the room and came back to me, saying excitedly, “I feel so light and fast!”

“Right now, your body’s about twenty percent Light particles. That’s why it feels lighter and easier to move. But since your physical density is lighter, you’re weaker as a solid entity, making this inconvenient for close combat with weapons.”

“…”

“This is a great spell for a hero fighting with weapons because they can sneak behind an enemy, cancel the spell, attack, then activate it again to get away. But that’s irrelevant for a magic user like you.”

“Did the hero who created you fight like that, too?”

“I’ll leave that to your imagination. Now, let me show you the magic circle. Learn it and practice.”

I canceled the spell on the hero, then projected a magic circle for light-particle transformation in the air and explained its

structure.

"This looks a lot like the structure of a teleportation circle."

"That's a sharp observation. Try moving with a one-hundred-percent light particle transformation."

The hero followed my instructions and cast the spell. He turned entirely into light particles and vanished in the blink of an eye.

"This *is* teleportation magic!" he shouted in surprise, reappearing in the distance.

I raised my voice to answer.

"Light-attribute teleportation magic turns your whole body into light particles and moves it. It's more accurate to call it instantaneous movement, but *teleportation magic* is the term that's widely used."

"I see." The hero nodded and popped back in front of me.

"Now, practice that spell so you can use it whenever you want. I'll just be here meditating, so call me if you need anything."

The hero thanked me, and I watched him walk away, then sat down and closed my eyes.

I decided to sync up with my partner, who'd created me, to see if he knew anything about the weird stuff happening with the past two generations of heroes.

I searched for his mana, trying to reconnect. We could never lose sight of each other, no matter how far apart we were, so I wasn't ready for what I discovered.

His mana vessel isn't there?

The vessel that always contained his abundant mana was gone. That pointed to one conclusion.

Is he dead?!

Despite the overwhelming facts, I kept searching for his mana, unwilling to accept it.

Wait, there it is!

I found a small amount of mana hidden on the floor of Gardir Castle. I immediately linked my mana to it and attempted to synchronize.

Hey, how've ya been?

His familiar, casual greeting came through, and the image of him that appeared in my mind was astonishingly calm.

Are you dead? What happened?

Nah. It's nothing to get all worked up about.

I found his laid-back attitude frustrating, but his serene smile reassured me that he had no regrets.

Still, it took ya longer than I expected. It's been three months since I died. The sixty-ninth hero didn't come to ya, did they?

I just met him today.

Ah. I never got the chance to meet the sixty-ninth hero. That's a bit disappointing. What's he like?

He died in his former life before reaching his prime.

My partner's expression darkened.

I also heard that the sixty-eighth hero died of an illness. I wanted to find out what's going on in Gardir, so I synched up to you. I didn't expect you to be dead, though.

I see…

After a brief pause, he began to speak.

After our last conversation, I traveled to the Nameless continent. This is old information, but the Gardir royal family didn't have a priestess who could perform the hero-summoning ritual. The king had five children, but only one daughter.

He told me that the princess couldn't use magic, leaving the royal family without a priestess for the summoning ritual. So when the 68th hero was needed, they'd adopted a daughter from a baron's family to perform the ritual.

The sixty-eighth hero was already ill in his previous life and summoned while he was still sick. I've sealed my most recent memories in this mana vessel. Absorb it later to get the details.

I nodded, and he shared his thoughts.

I think that when the hero-summoning ritual searches for a suitable soul, a lack of mana weakens its ability to exclude those with flaws.

So you're saying that when there's not enough mana, it might not filter out those with significant issues, opting for someone with a problem-free body and average mana, or someone with a flawed body and strong mana?

Yeah, that's what I think.

The sixty-ninth hero has as much mana as you did when you were the hero, but the sixty-eighth hero had weak mana, right? Doesn't that contradict your theory?

Mana's just an example; any strong trait could suffice. He could have extraordinary latent abilities I didn't recognize.

I see. That makes sense, although we can't verify it since the sixty-eighth hero is dead.

I voiced my regrets, but my partner flashed me a mischievous grin.

He's alive.

You're not serious.

Check the mana to confirm it, he said with a nonchalant smile. I held my questions back about the truth.

I was speechless, but he spoke to me with a bitter grin.

We've been friends for a long time, huh?

Yeah. You gave me consciousness and trapped me in that book for your own mental stability. It's been over two thousand years now.

I couldn't help but think he was a terrible person.

Sorry about that, but thanks to you, I never forgot my wife's face or what my children liked.

Syncing with him allowed me to understand his interests and thoughts. I'd shared his sleep, helping stabilize his mind. It was truly a thankless task.

You talk like you're dedicated to your family, but I remember the day you turned pale after being dumped by a woman.

That's different.

How is it different? You tried to bring her home, but she smiled and said good-bye. Then you left.

Well, that was…

Of course, I knew the full story from syncing with his memories. The woman had been like family to him, and he'd distanced himself for a reason, But if this was my last chance to poke fun at him, I had to uphold our tradition.

You'll pay for that!

He threw out one last retort with a defiant tone. I wanted to tease him more, but I sensed his remaining mana was dwindling. Most of it must be reserved for preserving his memory.

I sorted through my thoughts and asked, *Do you have any regrets?*

I did what I wanted. Some things didn't go well, but I have no regrets.

What about those who wronged you? What about revenge?

I couldn't do anything about them. But they'll get theirs one day.

I see.

What about you? Aren't you tired of being trapped?

You pushed the task of guiding heroes onto me when you died as a hero. You even put a barrier up to prevent me from being taken out, yet you're asking me that now?

The barrier was just to prevent the book from being thrown out while I was away. I didn't think it'd trap you. I even went to Ellana to release you, but you turned me down.

That was something. I laughed when you picked a fight with one of the Eight Holy Sorcerers out of frustration and then came back. But I told you, I don't dislike guiding heroes, so don't worry about it. Still, it is a bit inconvenient that I have to sleep to avoid wasting the mana you gave me when there are no heroes.

So if I'm gone, you'll lose your mana source. How many years do you think you can hold out as things are now?

About a hundred, give or take. It depends on the amount of mana I have to use for teaching. But most likely, the sixty-ninth hero will be the last.

Once my memories finish synching with yours, there's no need to preserve them with mana, so you can add that to your supply. That should extend your life by about twenty years.

You're as overprotective as ever.

I think my lack of an aversion to guiding heroes was because my personality had been shaped by his magic.

Also, I created a spell to let you leave the book. If you get tired of being a teacher and want to travel wherever you want at the end, feel free. That way, you won't be trapped by the barrier that prevents taking the book out of the house.

All right, I'll think about it once I've taught the sixty-ninth hero everything.

My partner nodded, then paused before speaking again.

See ya, Kelvy.

After he completely disappeared, I found myself alone in the sickroom of Gardir Castle with the mana he'd left behind.

…Master.

Hearing that word, I returned my consciousness to the book world and looked up at the 69th hero so he could see me.

This is the sixty-ninth hero you wanted to know about.

I wanted to do it even though I knew it was futile. This one seemed incredibly fragile compared with the 68th.

Master Kelvy, is something wrong? the 69th hero asked with a worried look. I told him that I felt unwell, and he started panicking, asking if it was a disease, but I told him it was because the word *master* made me feel uncomfortable.

But you're instructing me, so aren't you my master?

If you insist on calling me master, then I'll call you Alda.

No! My name is A—

I don't care, I declared, interrupting the hero. *You have two choices. Stop calling me master or be called Alda.*

All right! Fine, Master.

I thought he'd pick the former, but surprisingly, he accepted his new name. He even curiously asked what *Alda* meant.

I had no other choice, so I explained that Alda meant "weak one" in the spirit language.

Afterword

ROKUSYOU

“It was so funny, so amusing, and so endearing.”

This is one of Ragi’s thoughts during the story. There are various forms of happiness that people feel, but small joys in everyday life are what keep me going. Writing this volume reaffirmed that for me.

Volume 5 is about finding those small moments of joy in everyday life and reaffirming happiness. I hope this story can help you in some way.

USUASAGI

Hello, my name is Usuasagi. Thank you for buying Volume 5 of *Setsuna’s Journey*. I’m going to tell you what went on behind the scenes, so please only read this after you’ve finished the main story.

This volume was re-created based on scenes from chapter one that were serialized on the Shousetsuka ni Narou site. I mentioned in previous afterwords that I wouldn’t be significantly changing the web novel version when turning it into a book, but I decided to rewrite these stories for Volume 5.

There are many reasons, but one thing I wanted to highlight was the theme of familial love. I even used this for one of the chapter titles. However, in the web novel version, it was more of a story about a married couple, so we wanted to also touch on the parent-child relationship.

Another reason was to explore what friendship meant to Setsuna. This is a secondary theme, and in the web novel version, we didn’t provide a clear answer. However, this time, I wanted to show it a bit more and restructured the story to depict Setsuna’s emotions.

There were other elements, such as interactions with Ragi and the Founding Festival, that I wanted to add as well. Considering all that, it became impossible to keep it as it had been for the web novel, so I rewrote it.

I apologize to the readers who were hoping the story would be closer to the web novel version, with minor revisions. The paper-bird battle scene from Setsuna's perspective, which was very popular in the web version, has been changed significantly, and we were worried about how it would be received. However, we think the story turned out well, so we hope you enjoy this version despite the changes.

ROKUSYOU & USUASAGI

We've started an X account for *Setsuna's Journey*. On it, we share all sorts of information about the series, so please take a look if you're interested.

Finally, we'd like to express our gratitude to the editors who greatly assisted with the publication of Volume 5, to sime for once again providing the wonderful cover art and illustrations, to everyone involved with this work, and to the readers who support it.

March 5, 2024
Rokusyou & Usuasagi

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