
ryo shirakome
takayaki
#5
ARIFURETA:
ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU
FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST
Zero

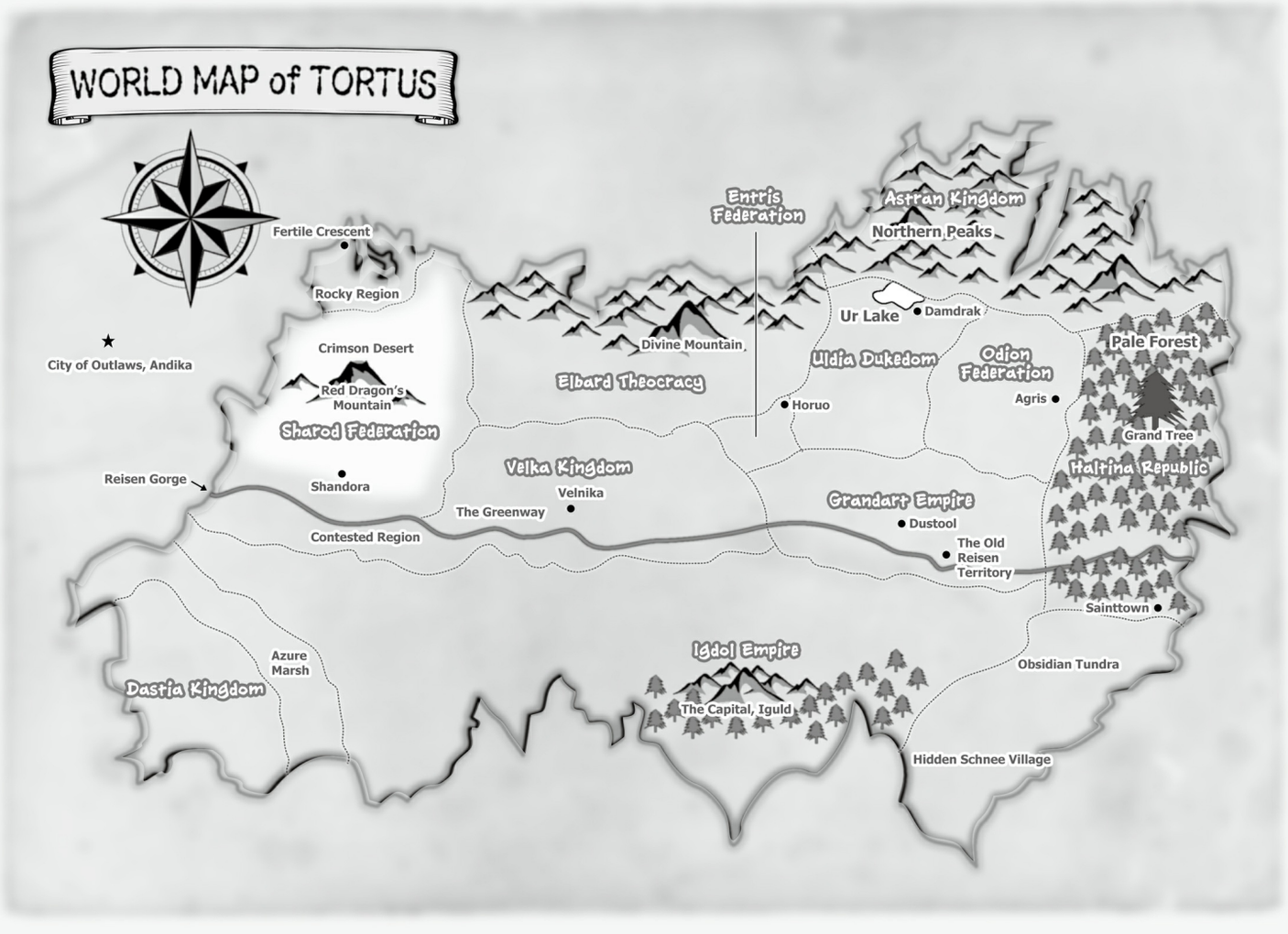

ryo shirakome
takayaki
#5
ARIFURETA:
ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU
FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST
Zero

#5



ARIFURETA ZERO: FROM COMMONPLACE TO WORLD'S STRONGEST

ryo shirakome takayaki


WORLD MAP of TORTUS
Entris Federation
Astran Kingdom
Northern Peaks
Fertile Crescent
Rocky Region
Ur Lake
Damdrak
City of Outlaws, Andika
Crimson Desert
Divine Mountain
Uldia Dukedom
Odion Federation
Pale Forest
Red Dragon's Mountain
Elbard Theocracy
Horuo
Agris
Grand Tree
Sharod Federation
Velka Kingdom
Haltina Republic
Reisen Gorge
Shandora
Velnika
The Greenway
Grandart Empire
Dustool
Contested Region
The Old Reisen Territory
Sainttown
Azure Marsh
Igdol Empire
Obsidian Tundra
Dastia Kingdom
The Capital, Iguld
Hidden Schnee Village

CONTENTS

Chapter I: There's No Way My Little Miledi Can Be This Cute!

Chapter II: Laus's Great Escape

Chapter III: Spirits of the Lake

Chapter IV: Liberators Assemble

Chapter V: Tolling the Bells of Revolution

Chapter I: There's No Way My Little Miledi Can Be This Cute!

A little over a month had passed since the war between the Haltina Republic and the Elbard Theocracy ended.

Peace and calm slowly returned to the Pale Forest. The victory celebrations were over, and people were now mourning those who had fallen as they labored to repair the damage the war had done to the forest.

But while the beastmen had started to calm down at long last, in a part of the forest a short distance from the capital, things were still quite heated.

"Uwoooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

A bloodcurdling scream resounded through the otherwise silent forest. The densely packed trees absorbed a lot of sound, but the scream was loud enough that it resonated despite that fact.

A powerful shock wave followed the scream, shaking all the nearby trees.

"Fighting spirit alone won't get you anywhere."

There were two people fighting. One of them was Oscar Orcus, a bespectacled young man wearing all black. The other was Vandre Schnee, a youth who had his hair on one side in a braid and a muffler wrapped around his neck.

Oscar swung his black umbrella in a wide horizontal arc, his expression grim. In response, Vandre narrowed his eyes and brought one leg up while also dropping his elbow, trapping Oscar's umbrella with ease.

Thanks to Oscar's transmutation abilities, the umbrella was a full twenty kilograms of super-compressed, dense metal. On top of that, Oscar was using body strengthening magic and the powers of the numerous artifacts he had on hand to enhance his abilities. Despite all that, however, Vandre had been able to stop his full-powered swing without batting an eyelid.

“I can read you like a book,” Vandre sneered.

“Or so you think.”

As wind whipped around the two of them, Oscar stomped his foot against the ground. A number of his Metamorph Chains shot out and headed straight for Vandre. They surrounded him, leaving him nowhere to run. Their ends had been sharpened into spearheads as well.

Oscar was going all out. If anyone who didn’t know these two had been watching, they would have thought they were actually trying to kill each other. Though, oddly enough, it was only Oscar who was going for lethal attacks. For his part, Vandre simply watched calmly as the chains went for him. There was no bloodlust in his eyes.

Still, he did look pissed off. The man in front of him had no appreciation for art and continued to mass-produce disgusting failures one after another.

His muffler flapped in the wind as he gracefully dodged his way through the chains. In one fluid motion, he got behind Oscar, using him as a meat shield against his own creations. He also crafted a dagger of ice to parry the few chains that he couldn’t dodge before going for a back attack against Oscar.

“Gah!” Oscar yelped as he just barely managed to redirect his chains from hitting him, but that left him open for a split second.

Vandre’s job was an artist, which meant he had a natural talent for martial *arts* as well. Or so he claimed, but considering he really was a skilled martial artist, no one could argue against him.

“Die, fucking four-eyes,” Vandre said that and stepped forward, pushing off the ground so hard that the earth shook, then launched a punch with all the skill and force of his martial talent behind it.

Oscar was too off-balance to dodge, so all he could do was use the sleeves of his Ebony Coat to block for him.

Vandre’s Tiger Fist slammed into the coat with unparalleled destructive force.

“Gah!”

There was a loud boom and Oscar was sent flying, the shock wave damaging

his internal organs. He bounced around like a pinball before finally slamming into the trunk of a tree so hard that his breath was forced from his lungs.

“Gah... Shit!”

He tried to struggle to his feet, but he couldn’t push himself up off his knees. He retched violently, puke spilling from his open mouth. Once he was done, he looked up to see a shoe coming down on a branch in front of him.

“That’s our hundredth match. I’ve won eighty, while you’ve won twenty. Hmph! I thought you showed promise for a shitty four-eyes, but I guess not.”

“Oh, so you did have hope for me, then?” Oscar tried to keep his tone light, but he said those words through gritted teeth.

Vandre wasn’t in the mood for joking either and he said coldly, “You’re the one who wanted our sparring matches to be as close to real fights as possible. So tell me, what the fuck is this pathetic display? Remind me again, four-eyes, how many of our matches have you won in the past ten days?”

“...”

“If you won’t say it, I will. Zero.”

After the battle at the Demon Lord’s castle, when they’d been hiding in the forest between the snowfields and the empire, Oscar and Vandre had begun sparring as part of their training. For the first fifty bouts or so, Oscar hadn’t been able to win a single time. But Oscar kept improving and eventually he started taking wins off of Vandre. Though he would never say it to Oscar’s face, Vandre had grown to respect Oscar’s sheer tenacity, as well as the ingenuity he used to make up for his lack of close combat skills.

Once the war between the republic and the theocracy had ended, they’d resumed their sparring matches, and Oscar’s newfound ferocity had earned him a string of unbroken victories. But that had only been at the start.

A week passed, then two. By the third week, Oscar had regressed to a shadow of his former self. It was like he’d forgotten everything he’d learned and was just rushing recklessly into the fray over and over.

In the beginning, he’d analyzed his opponents carefully, seeing through all of

their trump cards and using his vast array of artifacts to counter each one of them. His crafty, versatile tactics and ability to think on the fly had made him a formidable opponent.

But now, you couldn't see any of that genius in his fighting style. Oscar's methodical approach had instead been replaced by impatience, unease, and desperation. It was easy to see he was frustrated by his own powerlessness.

The fact that he was in a slump was obvious to everyone, and the reason for that slump was just as obvious.

"If you're like this, Miledi's just gonna laugh at you when she wakes up."

"Ah..."

The problem was that Miledi had yet to open her eyes.

At the end of the war, she'd dueled one of the apostles who had come to destroy the sacred tree Uralt.

She knew that if she wanted to change the world, she needed to defeat the biggest symbol of Ehit's might. She needed to show people that the church's power wasn't absolute. That the desire for freedom was stronger than any tool in Ehit's arsenal. As the leader of the Liberators, it was her duty to lead the charge. And in the end, Miledi had won that duel.

The fight had pushed her to her limits, and something had awoken inside her during it. But whatever she'd grasped, it had come with a cost.

Her abnormal power had been so strong that not even an apostle could stand against it. It had seemed like the very planet they lived on had been granting Miledi its strength.

Naturally, wielding such an enormous power had put a huge burden on her. Meiru's restoration magic had been able to heal her physical wounds, but despite that fact, she'd been in a coma for the past month.

Everyone believed that she was just recovering from the exhaustion using such powerful magic had caused her. They were certain she'd wake up again. After all, there was no way Miledi Reisen's story was ending here.

The Liberators firmly believed she'd open her eyes eventually. But that didn't

stop them from worrying. And the longer she slept, the greater that worry grew.

After a while, Oscar couldn't help but think that if he'd just done more to damage the apostle before Miledi had gone off to fight her, maybe she wouldn't be in this state. He was filled with regret, disgusted by his own powerlessness.

Of course, Vandre understood how Oscar felt all too well. But even so, he glared coldly down at the synergist and said, "Everyone's doing what they can to prepare for the coming battles."

"I know."

"Even without Miledi, the Liberators won't falter."

"..."

"No, we can't afford to falter because our leader expects us to stay strong."

Oscar grit his teeth and rose to his feet. His expression was a mixture of affirmation and rebellion. He knew Vandre was right, but he still didn't like hearing that from him.

"Miledi showed her strength to the world. Now it's our turn. The world needs to know that we're with her. Most importantly, she needs to know that we're with her. That's why you need to take this training more seri—"

"I know, goddammit!" Oscar roared and rushed forward, starting their 101st sparring match.

Vandre clicked his tongue, disappointed by the desperation he saw in Oscar.

"If you really knew, then you wouldn't be putting up such a pathetic fight!"

Vandre crafted a spear out of ice and met Oscar head-on.

The sounds of battle echoed through the forest like a drumbeat, and the numerous shock waves shook the trees. At a glance, it looked like a ferocious fight to the death. But it sure didn't seem that way to the sole onlooker.

"They're in really low spirits..." Meiru muttered, not bothering to step in and stop them. She was sitting on a nearby stump with her chin resting on one

hand. In her other hand was a walnut-shaped piece of ore that she was fidgeting with. Frankly, she looked bored out of her mind.

For the first ten or so days after the war had ended, she'd been running around healing the wounded and helping fix up the capital, but now there wasn't anything for her to do.

"I miss being so busy I didn't have time to rest."

In general, Meiru was the kind of person that loved lazing about. When she didn't have work to do, she just kicked back and relaxed...or went to bother busy people. In other words, she was a mooch.

It was unbelievable that she actually wished she was busy now. Had any of her old pirate crew heard her say that, they would have thought something was wrong with her.

Of course, Meiru's transformation from a good-for-nothing pirate queen to a productive member of society was also a result of Miledi's coma.

"I can't believe I used to brag about how there was nothing I couldn't heal. How embarrassing."

At least if I had something to do, I wouldn't be dwelling on how useless I am, she mused.

Even though she was the group's healer, she couldn't heal the one person she wanted to aid the most. She was useless in the one situation where her skills truly mattered.

She sighed, the sound lost amidst the clamor of Oscar and Vandre's battle. Just then—

"Good afternoon, Onee-sama," a girl said as she stepped through the white fog blocking off the training grounds from the rest of the forest. She had silvery-blonde hair and wore a white dress that looked as if it had been made from the fog surrounding her.

It was the queen of the forest, Lyutillis.

"How are the two of them—? Actually, I suppose there's no need to even ask."

“What did you come here for? Go away.”

Lyutillis let out a soft moan of pleasure as she walked gracefully over to Meiru. Her elven ears were wiggling with excitement.

Realizing that she’d moaned out loud, she coughed awkwardly, glanced over at Oscar and Vandre’s ferocious duel, and asked, “Shouldn’t you stop them?”

“They’re just messing around.”

“It looks to me like they’re trying to kill each other.”

“Oscar-kun’s been feeling depressed the past few days. This is nothing.”

“Are you...sure about that?”

Oscar and Vandre kept going for vital spots like the neck, head, and heart. Honestly, this could hardly be called training anymore. It certainly didn’t look like they were messing around either. The bloodlust in both of their eyes was clearly visible.

Meiru smiled sadly at Lyutillis and replied, “Yeah, it’s nothing. This is just Oscar-kun’s way of relieving stress...and Van-kun’s playing along.”

The only Liberator who could take Oscar’s attacks head-on without any trouble was Vandre the martial arts master.

“Besides, Van-kun’s asked me to watch just in case one of them does go too far.”

“Oh...I know what this is. Miledi-tan told me. He’s simply being ‘tsundere,’ right?”

“That’s right, Van-kun’s a tsundere. Fufu.”

If you listened closely, you could hear Oscar and Vandre hurling insults at each other.

“Die, you hack artist!”

“Shut up, fucking four-eyes!”

“I’ve had enough of you calling me four-eyes, you muffler freak!”

“Insult my muffler one more time and I’ll kill you for real! You have no eye for

beauty!”

Lyutillis nodded sagely as she listened in on their conversation.

“They do seem to be the same as usual.”

“Exactly. Which is why I’m sure Oscar-kun’ll be just fine.”

Lyutillis breathed a sigh of relief, then turned to Meiru, who was shrugging nonchalantly.

Oscar might have been fine, but what about Meiru? To Lyutillis’s eyes, Meiru seemed to be just as depressed as him. No, perhaps it would have been more accurate to say that she’d lost her sense of confidence.

“What?” Meiru muttered uncomfortably. She didn’t like how intently Lyutillis was staring at her.

Lyutillis nodded thoughtfully to herself. Then, after a few seconds, she walked directly in front of Meiru and...got down on all fours.

“Onee-sama, please sit on me instead of that hard—”

“Die.”

There was a visceral *crunch* as Meiru’s heel slammed into Lyutillis’s head. But of course, that only caused Lyutillis to let out an ecstatic moan. The force of Meiru’s kick made her head hit the ground, filling her mouth with dirt.

She raised her head immediately after that and said, “I’m so grateful for this wonderful reward!”

“Well, I’m not grateful that you’re such a pervert.”

This time Meiru stomped down on Lyutillis’s head with her foot, keeping her stuck in the ground. Unfortunately, that only served to make Lyutillis happier. Her smile grew wider even as her nose was pressed into the dirt.

She was a complete masochist through and through. Not only that, but her best friends were cockroaches.

Basically, she was a failure of a queen.

“Wait, don’t you have paperwork you need to do?”

Lyutillis could tell Meiru was just trying to get rid of her, which got her even more aroused. She looked up at Meiru, her face caked with mud.

Even when she knew it was a roundabout way of telling her to get lost, Lyutillis would never dream of ignoring a question from her fated onee-sama, the natural sadist Meiru.

“I’m on break right now. You’ve been in low spirits recently, so I thought it might help if you joined me for a tea party...”

“Oh, sorry for making you worry.”

“But I’ve changed my mind, I’d much prefer it if you keep insulting me so I can get rid of this pent-up stress.”

“Never mind; worry about me more.”

She’s absolutely hopeless, Meiru thought with a long sigh. Though she had to admit Lyutillis had actually made her feel a teensy bit better.

“Heh heh, feeling more energetic now?” Lyutillis asked with a smug wink. She had the unique superpower of being able to read people only when they least wanted their minds read.

I’ll never admit it, you damn pervert! Don’t give me that smug look. You haven’t made me feel better at all!

But before she could shout as much to Lyutillis, the elf’s expression changed. She looked regal...and you couldn’t sense any of her perverted masochism anymore.

“Meiru, be proud of yourself.”

“What do you—?”

In that moment, she truly was the mystical queen of the forest. Her jade-green eyes pierced through Meiru, laying her soul bare.

In her periphery, Meiru could see Oscar, whose glasses had been snapped in half, and Vandre, whose muffler was torn to shreds, beginning their 102nd bout, but she couldn’t tear her eyes away from Lyutillis.

“You’ve done more than you can possibly imagine for my nation. The trees,

animals, and people have all been healed by you.”

Had Meiru not been here, the death count would have been tenfold. Only a miracle worker like her could have healed that many people.

“The nation of Haltina is deeply indebted to you. We can never thank you enough for what you’ve done for us.”

The Saint of the Western Seas had crossed the entire world to come here. And for good reason, it seemed.

Originally, Meiru had adopted that title to help hide from the church, but now it was a moniker uttered with respect by her comrades.

“You should be proud of what you accomplished,” Lyutillis said firmly. “So...why aren’t you?”

“But...I mean...”

“Because Miledi still hasn’t woken up?”

“...”

“Because you weren’t able to cure Oscar’s siblings?”

“Ah...”

“Because of what happened to the sacred tree?”

Meiru grit her teeth.

“Yes! Every single time it actually matters, my healing powers aren’t good enough! What is there for me to be proud of?!” she exclaimed, glaring daggers at Lyutillis.

“I boasted about how great my healing powers were, but I couldn’t do a damn thing to save your sacred tree. I deserve to be laughed at. If anything, you should be the one insulting me. I’m useless!”

This was the first time Meiru had openly whined to Lyutillis. And that brought a smile to Lyutillis’s face. One that was warm and gentle, but also stern.

“People aren’t gods, Meiru.”

Meiru’s complaints died in her throat, her cheeks going red. There was

nothing more embarrassing than having her own arrogance pointed out to her.

“Besides, you don’t need to worry about the tree,” Lyutillis said, sidling closer to Meiru and running her fingers through her hair.

“I explained it to you before, didn’t I? This is all the tree’s own will.”

“I know, but...”

Normally, Meiru would have slapped Lyutillis’s hand away, but her caresses were so gentle that she couldn’t.

She thought back to the current state of the sacred tree, Uralt. It was the pillar of the republic, as well as a symbol of its strength. But during the final battle, God’s Apostle had snuck inside and attacked the tree’s core. As a result, the thousand-meter-tall tree had sunk a good four hundred meters into the ground, the trunk was riddled with cracks and fissures, many of its leaves had fallen, and the branches had lost their vitality.

Naturally, Meiru had tried using restoration magic on the tree, but—

“Right now, the tree isn’t accepting any outside interference except my own. And unfortunately, even I cannot open the door to its core.”

The Guardian Rod that Lyutillis wielded still retained its power to change the structure of the outer parts of the sacred tree, control the Pale Forest’s fog, and regrow the plant life within it. But the tree was presently preventing Lyutillis from using all of its other abilities, including the power to manipulate its roots or enter its inner sanctum.

The tree had made it clear that no one was allowed to see its core, regardless of the reason. Not even Lyutillis, the tree’s representative, possessed that right. Thus, Meiru wasn’t granted entrance, even if she did possess the ancient magic that could heal it.

“The tree hasn’t withered. And it’s slowly but surely healing itself.”

From what Lyutillis could tell, the tree had simply retreated into its shell while it went into self-repair mode.

“Is it not the Liberators’ creed to respect the free will of others? Uralt is clearly saying ‘I don’t even need your help, Meiru, I can fix myself on my own,

you scrub.’ You should respect its will.”

“What’s with that condescending tone?”

Lyutillis stopped stroking her hair and kneeled in front of Meiru. She then placed her hands on Meiru’s knees and looked up at her.

“Miledi will wake up. I’m sure of it,” she said confidently.



"..."

"Oscar's siblings will regain their personalities as well," Lyutillis continued as she pointed at the object in Meiru's hands.

"I know you haven't given up. You're trying your hardest even now, right? You're forgoing sleep to train your powers to greater heights."

The tiny chunk of ore, which she'd borrowed from Oscar, was made of sealstone. It was the most resistant thing to magic in this world and frequently used to make prisons and shackles. Only ancient magic could interact with it without getting completely absorbed. Meiru had been constantly casting Revival Reversal to restore its wounds, then Tetragrammaton to fix it.

She'd complained about having far too much free time, but in truth, she'd been training nonstop, just like Oscar and the others.

"Don't give up. No matter how daunting the task may appear, no matter how great the obstacles are, you've already done the impossible once before. Isn't that right?"

So of course you'll be able to do it again.

"There's no need to worry. Everything will be all right."

Lyutillis gave Meiru a reassuring smile as sunlight filtered through the trees.

After a brief moment of silence, Meiru turned away, pouting, and replied, "You're getting too big for your britches, you perverted queen."

"Thank you very much."

With that, any dignity Lyutillis might have been projecting vanished.

Does she actually have a split personality or something? Meiru pondered. That was how drastic Lyutillis's shifts were.

By some miracle, she'd managed to hide her masochistic side from her subjects for decades now.

Regardless of whether it was a split personality or not, Meiru was getting tired of Lyutillis squeezing her hands. Just as she was contemplating breaking a few of Lyutillis's fingers, Vandre shouted, "This is the end, you shitty four-eyes!"

“Gaaaaaah?!”

With that, the boys’ 102nd match came to a close. Oscar got sent flying straight into Lyutillis’s back.

“Buhiiiiii!”

The force of the impact caused Lyutillis’s head to smack directly into Meiru’s knees. There was a painful *crack* and Lyutillis let out a strangled scream.

“Oh my, two hits at once.”

“Nnnnnngh what a wonderful surprise present!”

Lyutillis staggered backward, cupping her broken nose. She looked equal parts in pain and ecstasy. Blood dripped from her nostrils, staining her dress.

“Ngh. Whoa, sorry, Lyu. You okay?!” Oscar hurriedly apologized as he crouched down in pain.

“I’m not okay at all! You meanie, O-chan-san! You’re the best!”

“Thank god you’re the same as always.”

“Excuse me? Just look at how you dirtied my face.”

It was true that Lyutillis looked rather unsightly, her expression rapt while still twitching from the pain of having her nose broken. Her creepy laughter didn’t do anything to help her case either.

Had any of her citizens seen her like that, they would have been traumatized. Especially the children. It wouldn’t be good for their sexual education to see Lyutillis’s fetish either. Meiru quickly healed her up so she wouldn’t have to look at her.

Look, here’s another great contribution I made to the republic... Meiru thought sarcastically, puffing her chest out.

Incidentally, Lyutillis had taken to calling her comrades by the wonderful nicknames O-chan-san, Van-chan-san, and Nacchan-san whenever there wasn’t an emergency.

Oscar, Vandre, and Naiz had all insisted that she use their actual names, but she kept returning to those odd nicknames. Considering she’d named her first

friend, a cockroach, Uroboros the Writhing Darkness and her second friend, the poisoned butterfly, Deadly Rainbow Dietrichs, it wasn't too surprising that her naming sense was godawful.

At any rate, Vandre walked over to where the group was, crushing branches underfoot. He looked extremely annoyed.

"Hmph. Do you realize how pathetic you are now?"

"Onee-sama, Onee-sama. That translates to 'did that help get rid of some of your stress,' right?"

"You've gotten so good at tsunderish, Lyu."

"Shut up, you!" Vandre snapped at the two girls, then pulled a new muffler out of his Treasure Trove.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" Oscar grumbled while pulling a new pair of glasses out of his own Treasure Trove.

"I don't feel like I'm making any progress. I don't feel like I'm getting any stronger," he said as he put his new glasses on.

"Like I said before, that power Miledi used wasn't normal," Vandre replied as he started wrapping his new muffler around his neck.

"It's not the kind of strength you can get from a day of training."

"Well, I need to get it! Otherwise, Miledi..."

The whole reason why Miledi had been looking for fellow ancient magic users was so that she could have comrades that were on the same level as her, comrades strong enough to watch her back. Which meant if Miledi had reached new heights, Oscar and the others had to as well. They all needed to grow strong enough to fight an apostle. Otherwise, Miledi would once again end up being the one protecting everyone.

"Sure, but if you could get that power just by rushing headlong at things and praying to get stronger, then everyone would have it by now," Vandre stated coldly, tugging on his muffler to hide his expression.

"How can you be so sure?" Oscar countered, adjusting his glasses to hide his eyes with a reflection of light.

“Miledi awoke to that new power when she was at her limits, didn’t she?”

“So you’re trying to force yourself into a corner? Hah, that’s not pushing your limits. You’re just throwing a tantrum.”

“Huh?!”

“Oh?”

Oscar and Vandre glared at each other, their faces inches apart.

Meanwhile, Lyutillis wailed, “I-It’s no good, Onee-sama! The way they put on their muffler and glasses was so dumb that I can’t pay attention to their conversation!”

“D-Don’t say it so loud! You’ve got to take a hint and not laugh! Also, don’t ask them how many spares they have. That question’s a trap!”

“But I mean, look at how they put them on, Onee-sama! They were totally in sync, and they used their accessories to hide their expressions in the exact same manner! Just how close are they?!”

“Bah ha ha! Stop, you’re going to make me laugh so hard it hurts!”

The two of them trembled as they struggled to contain their laughter. Lyutillis imitated Oscar and Vandre’s respective accessory-adjusting motions in an attempt to make Meiru crack up. It was funny just how diametrically opposed the girls’ and guys’ conversations were.

Oscar and Vandre wanted to call the girls out, but they knew from experience that ignoring them was the smarter course of action.

Oscar once again brandished his umbrella, ready to throw his battered body into yet another sparring match. But just before he could, he was interrupted.

“What madness is this?” Naiz asked in an exasperated voice, stepping through the barrier of fog.

“Oh, welcome back, Naiz-kun.”

“Welcome back, Nacchan-san.”

“Please stop using that silly nickname...”

At this point, Naiz was basically the only real adult in the group.

Resting on his shoulder was a small black bug, Lyutillis's best friend, Uroboros.

Meiru and the others had been terrified of him at first, but at this point they were used to him. He was just such a gentleman, and a hard worker to boot. No one could remain afraid of him for long.

Even now he was striking a pose and wiggling his feelers in a way that seemed to say, "Well, friend, if you ever need someone to guide you through the forest, just call on me!" He did that for a few seconds, then hopped off of Naiz's shoulder and vanished into the forest.

The fact that he didn't even expect anyone to thank him showed just how generous he was.

"Welcome back, Naiz. How are Uruluk and Kuou?"

"They're resting. I pushed them pretty hard."

"I see. Did you get what I asked for?"

"Yep." Naiz glanced back over his shoulder as he provided that answer, prompting Vandre to nod in satisfaction.

As Oscar greeted Naiz, he gave him a puzzled look.

Since Naiz could use teleportation magic, he made for the perfect messenger, as well as an ideal transporter of goods. Vandre had also lent him two familiars, the wyvern Uruluk and the ice wolf Kuou, so that Naiz could continue moving even while he was recovering his mana.

Ever since the war had ended, Naiz had been running from one place to the other, delivering essentials.

He'd returned to Haltina just once over the past week, then immediately headed off again for the empire. He'd only just now returned again.

"Did you ask Naiz to get you something?" Oscar questioned Vandre. He knew what messages and goods Naiz was scheduled to deliver, but judging by the looks Vandre and Naiz were exchanging, Vandre had made some personal request he wasn't aware of.

Seconds later, he realized what that request had been.

“U-Umm...Onii-chan?”

“Corrin?! Is that you?!”

Peeking out from behind Naiz was Oscar’s younger sister, Corrin.

All members of the former Reisen branch of the Liberators were currently split into different groups, including Corrin.

Marshal and Mikaela were keeping an eye on the Odion Federation’s movements, while Badd had gone back to serve as temporary chief of the Angriff branch. Shushu was with the Schnee clan in the empire branch. Corrin and the other noncombatants were living in a new village located in the northeastern part of the southern continent, between the Pale Forest and the Obsidian Tundra.

The new settlement had been named Sainttown. It had medical facilities to treat everyone who’d fallen victim to the church’s plan to make divine soldiers, as well as the chimeras the demons had created to fight against ancient magic users, who were all resting and recuperating there.

Oscar looked down at Corrin in surprise. He hadn’t heard she’d be coming.

“What’s all this about, you shitty muffler man?”

“Listen up, fucking four-eyes.”

Naiz massaged his forehead as the two started hurling insults at each other. Corrin, on the other hand, simply blinked in confusion.

“I’m getting tired of playing along with your pointless, meaningless, games...and I’m tired of seeing you in such a shitty state, so I asked Naiz to bring the cure.”

“By cure, you mean...”

“They say nothing can cure stupidity, but you’re enough of a siscon that I know this’ll work. All right, Corrin, teach this moron just how much of a fool he is!”

So that’s what all this is about... Oscar thought, turning back to Corrin.

Chances were, she’d heard everything from Naiz already. She turned from

Naiz to Vandre, then to Meiru and Lyutillis. Finally, she looked at her beloved older brother. One glance told her all she needed to know. She balled her hands into fists and resolutely stepped forward.

“Onii-chan, I heard about what happened to Miledi-onee-san.”

“O-Okay.”

Even though she was walking slowly, Corrin looked intimidating. She had the same aura that Moorin had had whenever Oscar did something wrong as a kid and she was about to scold him. Though whenever that had happened, Moorin had smiled, while Corrin currently looked dejected.

Unsurprisingly, Oscar staggered backward.

“I’m worried,” she said, and her shoulders slumped a little.

Oscar suddenly straightened up. Corrin was quite fond of Miledi. She must have been just as depressed about her coma as he was. As her older brother, this was no time to be moping.

“Don’t worry, Corrin. This is Miledi we’re talking about. There’s no way she’ll kick the bucket that easily. She’ll be up and annoying the hell out of us again in no time.”

When he was around Corrin, Oscar acted ten times more confident and reliable. Even when he himself was plagued with doubts, it was a conditioned reflex for him to seem unshakeable in front of his sister.

He knelt down in front of Corrin and smiled at her. She countered with a smile of her own.

“I know! I believe she’ll be fine too! And...I’m really glad you’re all okay. Everyone was really worried about you. They can’t wait to see you guys again.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait to see Ruth and the others too.”

He’d planned to go back once Miledi was up and about. Corrin easily picked up on the implication, probably because the two had spent so much time together that they knew each other inside out.

“But you don’t have to push yourself too hard.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess not?”

What’s with the sudden change in topic? Oscar wondered. He brought his hand up to adjust his glasses, but before he could, Corrin grabbed his hand.

“That’s one of your bad habits, Onii-chan. When you don’t like what someone’s saying, you push up your glasses like that.”

“Wha—?! Th-That’s not true!”

There were a few exclamations of surprise at how easily Corrin had blocked Oscar’s signature move.

“You’re scared, aren’t you, Onii-chan? Even if you’re smiling, I can tell.”

Corrin covered Oscar’s hand with both of her own and looked intently at him.

Corrin sure has grown a lot since I joined the Liberators. Both physically, and mentally. She’s like everyone’s older sister now.

Oscar’s description didn’t do her justice. She wasn’t just like an older sister, she was like Mother Moorin’s successor. There was no way he’d be able to beat her in an argument now.

“I know I can’t understand how hard it must be for you, since you’re fighting for everyone. But you know...”

Miledi-onee-san would cry if she saw you like this.

“I’m sure everything will work out better if you start acting like the dependable big brother I know again.”

After all...

“That’s how it’s always been, remember?”

Which is why...

“Don’t panic, Onii-chan. Okay?”

Corrin gave Oscar a gentle, loving smile.

Incidentally, she was still only eight years old. However, her words were enough to drive Oscar to his knees.

“Corrin...you’re right, I’ve been thinking about this all wrong.”

The tension drained from his body. He'd been high-strung ever since Miledi had fallen into a coma, but for the first time in a while, he felt himself relax. It was as if he'd been shown the light.

Honestly, his overreaction creeped Corrin out a little, but she was currently playing the part of the super ultimate holy mother, so she didn't let it get to her.

"It's okay. I'm sorry for lecturing you. It's not that you're mistaken, really. You've just been trying too hard."

She wrapped Oscar's head in a warm embrace, just like a saint would. She was only eight, but to the onlookers she seemed to be glowing like an angel. But again, she was only eight.

"My little sister is such an angel..."

It was hard to tell if Oscar's voice was trembling because he was disgusted by how pathetic he'd been acting or because he was scared of how quickly his little sister was evolving.

"Mother..."

"Mama..."

Meiru the deadbeat and Lyutillis the pervert muttered softly. They'd always had a few screws loose, but in that moment it looked like it was more than just a few.

Both of them looked enraptured. A refreshing breeze blew past their faces, rustling their hair. Even Vandre was affected.

"I don't believe it... I knew she'd be the perfect cure, but I didn't think she would work this well..."

Naiz gazed off in the distance and said, "You have no idea how hard I had it getting her out of the village."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone desperately tried to stop me from taking her. Some of them even clung to me and cried their hearts out... It felt like I was doing something evil."

“Say no more. I understand completely.”

There had already been signs of this when Oscar and the others had left the village. Whether they were combatants or not, the members of the Liberators had all begun turning to Corrin for emotional support. Even the members of the Schnee clan, who hadn’t known her long, had gotten attached to her.

“Saint Corrin.”

“The Holiest Girl.”

“Why did Meiru have to end up getting restoration magic and not our Corrin-chan?”

“I want Corrin-chan to be my mom.”

Those were the kinds of things people said about Corrin after she healed them with her innate kindness. Even though she hadn’t finished adapting to life as a Liberator, she still went around looking after everyone, seemingly happy any time she could help. She never looked like she was pushing herself too hard, but she always seemed to be pouring her heart into everything, which brought smiles to everyone’s faces.

Recently, she’d become a master of all household chores as well. Her newfound skills had given her confidence, and now she had a much tougher core than she used to. That inner confidence also gave her the leeway to properly examine her surroundings and see more than she’d been able to before.

In other words, despite being only eight, she was more understanding than most people. It was easy to see where the name Sainttown had come from. Everyone had agreed the village should be named after Corrin.

“Van. The familiars you sent as her bodyguards...might not listen to your orders anymore.”

“I-I see.”

It seemed even Vandre’s familiars had betrayed their master and chosen Corrin over him. They’d gotten just as attached to her as the sentient species had.

When she'd left, everyone had come out to say goodbye to Corrin. They'd all said things like, "Come back soon!" or "What's the point in living for tomorrow without you.." or "Damn you, Oscar! How dare you steal the position of her onii-chan..." The depths of their jealousy and despair had honestly scared Naiz.

They'd looked like drug addicts going through withdrawal to him. The only ones among them who'd given Corrin a sane goodbye had been Ruth and Moorin. In fact, were it not for the two of them, Naiz would have had a much harder time convincing the townspeople to let her go.

But honestly, what had truly terrified Naiz was the conversation he'd had with Susha afterward.

"Naiz-sama, why are you only taking Corrin with you? What about me?"

There had been a dark aura emanating from her and her eyes had glazed over.

"Sue-onee-chan, please take care of the patients while I'm gone."

"But, Corrin-chan, this is my chance to join Naiz-sama for good. I—"

"I'll come back as soon as I can, okay?"

"B-But I need to look after Naiz-sama and—"

"Sue-onee-chan."

"Ugh..."

"Please."

"Fine...I'll stay here."

With just a simple "please," Corrin had been able to bring Susha back from the abyss.

Before, only Yunfa had been able to bring her older sister back to sanity whenever she got worked up about Naiz. But now Corrin had grown so powerful that Susha cowed before her as well.

While Naiz was reminiscing and the others were talking amongst themselves, Oscar finally recovered from his ennui.

"Mmm..."

However, he was too ashamed of how he'd been acting recently to meet Corrin's gaze.

Fortunately, Corrin was as understanding as humanly possible. She turned to the others and said, "Meiru-onee-chan, Van-onii-chan, I'm glad you guys are okay too!"

"Can I hug you, Corrin-chan? Actually, no, can you hug me?"

"Thanks for coming, Corrin. You're a real lifesaver."

Corrin smiled awkwardly, ignoring Meiru's request. Luckily, she'd already mastered the art of dealing with the moody pirate queen.

Meiru sank to her knees as Corrin walked past her and headed to Lyutillis.

"U-Umm, are you the queen of the forest? It's nice to meet you! I'm Oscar-onii-chan's younger sister, Corrin. Thank you for taking care of my big brother!" she exclaimed and bowed, looking suitably nervous for her age.

Lyutillis was exceptionally beautiful, as well as the queen of a nation, so it was hardly surprising she'd look intimidating to people who didn't know the real her.

Corrin's nervousness was compounded by the fact that humans normally weren't allowed in Haltina, as it was the beastmen's sanctuary. Of course, Vandre had already gotten permission from Lyutillis to bring Corrin here, but even so, she was afraid of accidentally saying or doing something rude.

The Liberators found her nervous attempts at formality endearing, and Lyutillis went into regal mode.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Corrin. I am Lyutillis Haltina, queen of the Haltina Republic."

Her smile was gentle and she radiated dignity from every pore. She got down on one knee and took Corrin's hand in hers.

Corrin blushed, charmed by Lyutillis. Oscar and the others realized they needed to warn her before it was too late.

"Corrin, don't let her trick you! She's actually a huge pervert!"

“Oscar’s right, Corrin-chan! Get away from her before she corrupts you!”

“Naiz, didn’t you warn Corrin about how she’s the enemy of everything good and holy in the world?!”

“Ngh, I’m sorry. It’s just...the truth was so tragic that I ended up sugarcoating it a little.”

Confused, Corrin looked from Lyutillis to Oscar and the others. After a few seconds, she recalled what Naiz had told her on the way to Haltina.

“Lyutillis has a rather unique personality, but please don’t judge her too harshly for it. In fact, if she starts panting, just look the other way.”

Upon recalling his warning, Corrin took a few steps back.

Worried that Lyutillis would get turned on from a kid being disgusted by her, Oscar and the others warily watched to see if she’d started panting.

It felt akin to waiting for a time bomb to go off. But to everyone’s surprise, Lyutillis just gave her companions a sad look and said, “How cruel... I never had the chance to leave this forest and explore the rest of the world. Not only that, but because I was born a ruler, I never had any friends I could speak to on equal terms. I know I’m ignorant of the customs of the rest of the world, but...”

She’s putting on an act for Corrin! Oscar thought, realizing the truth. *Not only is she hiding her true personality, but she’s even going so far as to play the victim to get Corrin’s sympathy!*

“Don’t lie! You’re best friends with a cockroach and a poisonous butterfly!”

“What do you mean, ignorant of the customs of the rest of the world?! You’re abnormal even by the customs of your world!”

“You’re a masochist who gets off on being physically and verbally abused!”

“Quit hiding it!”

At first everyone had prepared to beat up Lyutillis if she let her masochistic side leak in front of Corrin, but now they were trying to force it out of her instead. It was a contradiction, but one that made sense. They absolutely did not want Corrin to be soiled by Lyutillis’s masochism, after all. If Corrin ended up respecting her without knowing the truth, that would be even worse! After

all, Lyutillis was a hopeless pervert.

“This is too much, guys. I’m a perfectly normal, responsible, hard-working queen. Was I the only one who thought we were friends?”

“You little fox!” Oscar and the others shouted in unison.

“Corrin, you understand me at least, right?” Lyutillis pleaded, determined to keep up the pure queen act until the bitter end.

But Corrin gave her an awkward look and said, “Umm, Your Majesty...”

“Yes?”

“Umm, I already know that everyone who can use ancient magic is a little ‘off,’ so you can be your true self around me. I won’t mind.”

“Agh!” Oscar and the others shrieked and staggered backward in unison, having taken severe mental damage from being called “off.”

“Corrin, what do you mean by off?! Did you think I was a weirdo this whole time?! That really hurts, you know!”

Oscar desperately tried to get Corrin to retract her statement, but she just smiled awkwardly and brushed him off.

Oh no. If Corrin, the nicest girl in the world, thinks I’m a weirdo, my public image is doomed... Oscar wasn’t the only one who thought that either.

All the others crowded around Corrin, desperate to convince her they were normal, but—

“More importantly!” she shouted.

“What do you mean more importantly?!”

Corrin clapped her hands, silencing the Liberators. The strongest group of people in the world had been silenced by a girl at the tender young age of eight.

“I want to see Miledi-onee-san.”

That got everyone to calm down. After all, Miledi was their top priority.

“Good point. You came all the way here, so you should at least see Miledi before you go,” Oscar muttered.

“Heh heh, knowing Miledi-chan, she’ll wake up the moment she realizes you came to visit her,” Meiru said with a smile.

Vandre glanced over at Lyutillis, silently asking if it was okay to bring another human into the palace.

Naturally, she nodded. Corrin was Oscar’s sister, as well as a valued member of the Liberators, so of course it was fine.

“I’m worried about the people back at the village, so I can’t stay for more than three days, but I’ll do my best to take care of Miledi-onee-san while I’m here, Onii-chan.”

Corrin was well aware of her role, and she was always trying to do everything she could to help.

Tears sprang to Oscar’s eyes as he marveled at how much his little sister had grown. Though, in that moment, he looked more like her father than her older brother.

“You can stay for a whole week at least, can’t you?” he asked, not wanting to part with her again after just a few days.

“I can’t.”

“Why not? The patients back at the village are in stable conditions, aren’t they?”

“Yes, but the problem is how everyone else feels.”

“What does that mean?”

“I mean, Ruth-onii-chan and the others really wanted to visit you too, but...”

“Corrin...”

Now the tears were spilling freely from Oscar’s eyes.

Corrin was the only one who’d been able to reunite with Oscar this quickly. Even though everyone had been worried about him, only Corrin had been allowed to come. That was why she didn’t want to be selfish and stay for too long. Even though she did want to stay by Miledi’s side until she woke up, she knew it was best not to push it.

Corrin’s compassion and consideration were so great that even Meiru and the others were crying.

“Besides...”

“Hm? Hic... What is it?”

“If I’m gone too long, Sue-onee-chan will start losing it.”

“...”

“If she falls too far into the darkness, she won’t ever come back. Yun-chan might start losing it too. And if that happens, Naiz-onii-chan will be in trouble.”

“Oscar, three days is enough! Don’t ask Corrin to stay any longer! She knows better than anyone what Susha’s limits are! I’ll fight anyone who tries to stop her, no matter who they are!”

Naiz grew desperate after hearing that. Recently, Susha had become even more of a yandere, and while Yunfa appeared calm and collected on the outside, she was secretly plotting to make sure no one else dared to make a move on Naiz.

In a way, Naiz was a little happy that they cared that much about him. But at the same time, the two girls were twelve and eight, while Naiz was almost thirty. Sure, he was part of a revolution trying to bring freedom to the world, but he wasn’t fighting for the freedom to do immoral things. If he let his guard down and let the sisters drug him or something, he’d no longer be able to say Ehit was the one in the wrong with a clear conscience.

“You’re the only one who can keep those two in check, Corrin. You have to go back.”

Susha somehow knew everything Naiz was doing, even when they were thousands of kilometers apart. He was naturally terrified of her abilities that seemed to transcend space-time.

Lyutillis cocked her head in confusion upon hearing that and asked, “I haven’t met these two girls, only heard stories about them, but are they really that dangerous? Surely you can handle them, Nacchan-san?”

“They’re not dangerous. Sue-onee-chan and Yun-chan are both nice girls.”

Indeed, both of them were about as nice as Corrin.

“But they’re *really* in love.”

When it came to Naiz, they did whatever it took to win his affections. Corrin smiled at Lyutillis as she said that.

You’re so accepting of everyone, Corrin. Maybe too accepting... Oscar thought to himself.

“Yeah, you should probably go back sooner rather than later, then. I’m worried about everyone back at the village.”

“I guess once you get used to having a saint around, you become useless when she’s gone.”

“You’re terrifying, Corrin-chan!”

“Ummm...?” Corrin mumbled, seeming confused by all the remarks she was getting. Before she could ask for clarification, however, the party heard the sound of footsteps crunching on the grass, and they all turned to see who’d entered through the fog barrier.

It was Craid, the handsome leopardman who was the captain of the royal guard. And he seemed to be in quite a hurry. He was panting hard enough that he had to catch his breath for a few seconds, which was rare for the republic’s greatest swordsman.

“Craid, what’s wrong? Why are you in such a hurry? Has the theocracy attacked again?”

“N-No, that’s not it.”

He sucked in another big breath, his expression oddly bright seeing as this was urgent news.

“Miledi-dono has awoken!” he exclaimed, his excited voice echoing through the lush forest.

Everyone gasped and exchanged surprised glances. For a moment Oscar thought about joking that Corrin’s appearance had granted her salvation, but instead he just grinned and ran back toward the great tree, everyone following behind him.

The room Miledi had been sleeping in was the same one she'd been assigned when they'd first come to Haltina. Or, in other words, the room right next to Lyutillis's.

Though the tree had sunk a good four hundred meters, the throne room, Lyutillis's room, and other important chambers had all been pretty high up, so they were still above ground. In fact, they were easier to get to because they weren't quite as high up anymore.

Corrin gasped in surprise as Oscar scooped her up in one arm and ran toward the great tree as fast as he could, the others following close behind them all the while.

"I'll make us a shortcut!" Lyutillis shouted, waving her Guardian Rod. A small hole opened up at the base of the trunk, so everyone rushed inside.

"Wh-What's going on?!" one of the patrolling guards shouted, but everyone ignored him.

They sprinted down the hallway, slowing only when they saw a large crowd gathered in front of Miledi's room.

There was something off about the crowd, though. With how boisterous Miledi was, it wasn't surprising that she'd cause a stir right after waking up. But the crowd around her room was rather quiet, which wasn't at all normal.

"Miledi!" Oscar shouted, worried something might have happened to her.

When the crowd realized Oscar and the others had arrived, they parted to let them through.

Upon entering her room, Oscar found that Miledi was indeed awake.

"O-kun?" she muttered, sitting on her bed. Her bare feet poked out from below her long, white dress. Her blonde hair was unbound...and resting on her palms was Vandre's most loyal familiar, Batlam.

During Miledi's fight with the apostle, Batlam had served as Miledi's shield. Though the apostle's attacks had nearly obliterated it, Batlam's core had barely survived, and he had since restored himself and become Miledi's guardian.

As Oscar walked in, Miledi's gaze shifted from Batlam to him. He could see himself reflected in her clear, sky-blue eyes.

Relief flooded through him when he saw that she was okay.

Off to one corner, on the opposite side of the bed, was Parsha Mill, the Haltina Republic's prime minister. She was frowning slightly as she looked down at Miledi, and though Oscar took note of that, he was just glad Miledi was awake.

He put Corrin down and walked over to Miledi, a smile forming on his face. Forgetting to even wipe his eyes he said, "Thank goodness. Good morning, sleepyhead."

Miledi still looked a little out of it, but she kept her gaze fixed on Oscar.

A few seconds later, Meiru and the others filed in as well. They were a little worried about how quiet Miledi was, but at the same time, she'd just woken up from a month-long coma, so they figured she was probably still getting her bearings.

Just as they were about to call out to her, they discovered why it was that Parsha was looking at Miledi funny.

"Mmm..." Miledi groaned, then put Batlam down and crawled over to where Oscar was standing. She stopped when their faces were inches apart and said, "O-kun."

"M-Miledi?" Oscar asked, flustered. Miledi rested her head against Oscar's chest, and he looked down at her in confusion.

There was a faint smile on Miledi's face, and she closed her eyes, looking like she was at peace.



Not only that, but she started nuzzling against Oscar's chest. He blushed, while Meiru and the others fell silent. They were at a complete loss for words.

At first everyone thought this was just another ploy that would end in her teasing Oscar, but the longer it went on, the harder it was to believe this was just an act. Hence why everyone was speechless.

Meanwhile, Corrin was blushing and covering her face with her hands. Though she was careful to leave gaps between her fingers so that she could still watch.

Miledi was showing pure, unvarnished affection for Oscar right now.

After a minute or two of silence, Miledi pulled back and said, "O-kun, you smell like sweat."

"Huh?! O-Oh, that's because I was training with Van until a few minutes ago."

Oscar couldn't bring himself to meet Miledi's gaze.

He kept telling himself "This is Miledi, she's just playing a prank on you!" but he couldn't convince himself.

"But yeah, you probably shouldn't stick so close to me because I'm all sweaty and—"

"Don't wanna."

"What?! Why?!"

"Because I like the smell."

Miledi rested her head against Oscar's chest again, her nose twitching. Her smile grew wider as she inhaled his scent.

"Ahhh!" she moaned.

Oscar froze in place, blushing to the tips of his ears.

Naiz and Vandre finally butted in, saying what was on everyone's mind in unison, "Who the heck are you?!"

This was beyond anyone's expectations.

Everyone knew Miledi was annoyance incarnate. They'd all thought the

moment she woke up, she'd go, "Miledi-chan's baaaaaaaaack! Come on, let's hear some applause! The great genius mage Miledi-chan took down that big evil apostle. I'm so perfect and beautiful sometimes I scare myself! And I'm a genius to boot! Bwa ha ha ha ha!" Or at the very least, they'd expected her to act as boisterous as usual. But instead, they were hit with this.

What the heck is going on?! This isn't Miledi! Our leader is never this honest about her feelings! She always acts like an annoying brat instead of saying what she's really thinking! This isn't fair! they all thought.

But at the same time, Meiru muttered, "T-Too powerful..."

It was clear from the blood dripping down her nose that by "too powerful" she meant "too cute." She pinched her nose to stem the flow, but it kept going.

Corrin hurriedly handed her a handkerchief.

"U-Umm, Miledi-tan? Are you okay?" Lyutillis asked timidly, glancing over at Oscar who was still frozen in place.

She'd known Miledi for the shortest amount of time, which meant she could evaluate Miledi more objectively than the others, and she knew that Miledi harbored affections for Oscar.

However, she also knew that Miledi was not the kind of girl to ever outwardly show it. Miledi's love for Oscar wasn't a shock like it was to everyone else, but she still couldn't understand why she was being so honest about it.

"Th-There's no way she's okay! Look at how she's acting!"

"Did you figure something out, Naiz?!"

"That battle with the apostle must have been so fierce that it rattled her brain!"

"Naiz...you're a genius!"

If anything, it looked more like Naiz and Vandre had lost their minds after seeing Miledi acting cuter than usual.

Eventually, Miledi drew back from Oscar, though it was hard to tell if that was because she'd been listening to everyone else's conversations or if she was satisfied after getting her fill of him.

Either way, once she pulled back, her faint smile disappeared and she muttered, “Heavensfall.”

“Nnnrgh!”

“Ahaaahn?!”

“Your Majesty?!”

Naiz, Vandre, and Lyutillis fell to the floor as Miledi’s gravity magic pressed down on them. It turned out she had actually been listening even while nuzzling Oscar.

“Wh-Why me too?” Lyutillis asked. Parsha, Craid, and the other beastmen turned to Miledi as well, confused and more than a little shocked.

Miledi cocked her head to one side and replied, “I thought you’d like it. This is your reward.”

The beastmen looked even more confused at that, but not Lyutillis.

“Thank you very much! I love being forced to lick the floor!” she exclaimed, looking positively ecstatic.

Parsha and Craid sighed in exasperation while the other beastmen looked stunned.

Chaos was beginning to take over the room, but Miledi didn’t seem to mind in the slightest. Though she was quieter than her normal self, her tendency to do as she pleased without consideration for others hadn’t changed.

“Corrin?” she said, turning to the little girl who was dabbing at Meiru’s nosebleed.

“Oh, umm, long time no see, Miledi-onee-san.”

“Mmm...”

“Umm...I came here to help Onii-chan...”

“I see.”

Miledi stared into Corrin’s eyes, and the young girl eventually turned away awkwardly. She didn’t know how to handle this new version of Miledi. Though for very different reasons than Oscar and the others.

Corrin had always known that Miledi was just acting like a clown to keep her friends in high spirits and to keep her comrades' morale high, even when Oscar and the others had told her she was mistaken. But even so, it was a bit surprising to see Miledi revealing her true self when she normally kept it hidden.

Corrin had always respected Miledi and longed to be like her, so it was a bit embarrassing to be scrutinized so thoroughly by her idol. She blushed, fidgeting slightly, and Miledi beckoned for her to come closer.

Corrin tottered over, while everyone else watched in suspense.

"Fwaaah!" she exclaimed as Miledi hugged her.

"Thank you..." Miledi muttered quietly.

"Hwuh? F-For what?"

In a gentle voice, she replied, "For the good luck charm. It saved my life."

During the battle, Miledi had nearly given up because of how strong the apostle had been, but the necklace Corrin and Ruth had made for her had revitalized her spirits and given her the strength to go on.

The charm itself hadn't held any special power, but the sky-blue necklace Corrin had gathered the materials for and Ruth had transmuted reminded her that people were waiting for her safe return.

"So...thank you."

Corrin didn't know what exactly Miledi was referring to, but she could tell that she was speaking from the heart, which made her tear up a little.

"Thank goodness. I'm so happy I was able to help, Miledi-onee-san," Corrin said before hugging Miledi back, squeezing as hard as she could.

A warm silence descended over the room.

Even though Miledi's expression was still blank, everyone could tell she truly was grateful to Corrin, and that she loved her a great deal. They could also tell just how much Corrin respected and admired Miledi as well.

The two of them hugging looked picturesque. Everyone else watched on

silently, overcome by emotion.

A short time later, Parsha had cleared out all the onlookers so that Miledi could discuss what had happened. She was the only non-Liberator left in the room.

Craid stood right outside, turning away anyone else who came to visit, while Batlam had gone into the forest to replenish more of his missing mass. Though Batlam had recovered enough to look like a slime again, he was still missing most of his mass because he'd been watching over Miledi thus far.

Once people had been cleared out and everyone had calmed down, Oscar said, "So, Miledi...are you aware of how different you're acting?"

Now that he'd regained his composure, his analytical skills had returned to him as well. He stared at Miledi, his eyes absorbing every single detail from behind his glasses.

After releasing Corrin, Miledi had returned to looking absentminded. It wasn't so bad that she'd calmed down, but it seemed like she was lacking her usual vigor. Normally, she tried to act cheerful even when she wasn't, and it had been long enough that the "she's just regaining her bearings after waking up" theory didn't hold water anymore.

As expected, Miledi just gave Oscar a quizzical look in response. It was Parsha, who'd been there when Miledi had first woken up, who answered in her stead.

"I suspect she doesn't. However, it's not as though she's lost her cognitive abilities. She seemed to understand when I explained that the war was over and some time had passed since the final battle."

Upon waking up, the first thing Miledi had done was ask whether or not everyone was safe. She did answer some questions as well, but it took her quite a while to think them over. She'd also asked for water when she got thirsty and food when she got hungry. Essentially, her memories were intact and she was able to take care of herself.

"Seeing as she blasted you guys with gravity magic for making fun of her, we can conclude her personality hasn't really changed."

“And the way she treated Corrin proves her emotions are still there too.”

“I’m not sure how best to define this change... If I had to say, it’s as if her assertiveness is gone?”

“I wouldn’t say gone, just reduced to its minimum level, maybe?”

“Hmm, maybe she just hasn’t fully recovered? Perhaps her brain’s limiting her thought processes and actions to preserve as much energy as it can.”

Naiz, Vandre, Lyutillis, Meiru, and Parsha all gave their opinions in turn. However, Oscar remained silent, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Judging by his expression, he had some idea of how Miledi had gotten to this state and why. From the looks of it, the reason wasn’t something good either...and Corrin seemed to have come to the same realization.

“Could it be that...?”

“Onii-chan, Miledi-onee-san reminds me of...”

Oscar knew exactly what Corrin was trying to get at.

“She’s like how Dylan and the others are...”

“What?!” Naiz, Vandre, and Meiru exclaimed in surprise.

Oscar looked over at Meiru, silently asking her for confirmation, and Meiru nodded with a grim expression on her face.

“Miledi-chan, I’m going to cast restoration magic on you, okay?” she said, then gently placed a hand on Miledi and started casting. Sunset-orange light suddenly enveloped Miledi.

“How do you feel?”

“Hm?” Miledi mumbled and gave Meiru a questioning look with her dull, yet not quite lifeless, eyes.

Restoration magic, the ancient magic with the power to cure any injury or disease, had done nothing for Miledi.

Regardless of what the cause was, there was nothing restoration magic shouldn’t be able to fix. If Miledi was just exhausted and that was why she was running on low-energy mode, restoration magic should have worked. But it had

had no effect, and Miledi's symptoms really did look similar to Dylan and Katy's.

Dylan and Katy had been victims of the church's experiments of transplanting the souls of ancient warriors into other people. Though restoration magic had helped them regain some of their consciousness, Dylan and the others still weren't the same as they used to be.

The only conclusion that made sense was that the cause of their ailments was beyond what restoration magic could affect—somewhere in the soul.

This was exactly what Oscar and Vandre had been worried about when they'd been training.

Meiru grit her teeth, frustrated that she couldn't even fulfill her duty as the group's healer. Her hand went limp and started sliding off of Miledi's head.

"I'm okay," Miledi said suddenly.

"Huh?"

Miledi grabbed Meiru's hand before it could fall off and brought it to her chest. Her dull, unmoving eyes looked into Meiru's as she repeated, "I'm okay," but with more force this time.

"Miledi-chan..." Meiru mumbled as she gazed up at the ceiling, and Naiz, Vandre, and Lyutillis followed suit.

"I'd expect nothing less from our leader," Oscar said confidently, adjusting his glasses. There was a huge smile on his face. Everyone else nodded in agreement.

Even though she'd been asleep for a month and suffered lasting damage to her soul, her words were filled with confidence. She really was the genius magician leader of the Liberators. The gloomy atmosphere vanished in an instant, and everyone breathed sighs of relief.

Naiz smiled as well and said, "Yeah, I guess you're fine after all."

"Mhm. Besides, we were planning on recruiting a spirit magic user as our next ally, so it all works out," Vandre added, smiling as well.

"Now that you mention it, what has he been up to? Last I remember, he said he was going back to the capital to get his family, but..."

“Do you think he’ll manage to get out safely?” Lyutillis asked, voicing the concern everyone harbored.

Laus Barn was strong enough that he could match Miledi in a fight. In fact, he’d been able to fight on equal footing even when Miledi had been buffed by Lyutillis’s evolution magic. Of course, Miledi had reached new heights during her battle against the apostle, but Laus was as strong, or even stronger than the normal Miledi. He had far more years of experience, plus the ability to use Limit Break.

In truth, Miledi had lost once to Laus already. Her soul had been ripped from her body, and had it not been for Meiru and Naiz, she would have died. That was why Oscar and the others had decided to put their trust in Laus and wait for him to join them.

They hadn’t wanted to cause a stir while Miledi was still comatose, especially not in the city that acted as the heart of the church’s power. Even with spatial magic, it wouldn’t be that easy to infiltrate the theocracy’s capital, and they ran the risk of messing up Laus’s escape plans if they ended up tripping the alarm.

Though, of course, they hadn’t totally abandoned Laus to his own devices.

“The people from the main branch are working with the Esperado branch to scout out the theocracy. They have new safehouses near the capital and at the national border as well,” Naiz explained to Lyutillis.

“We also have our best spy on the case. Everything we could feasibly do, we’ve done.”

“You say that like she’s our trump card, but she’s the kind of girl who’ll slack off when given half the chance.”

“Yeah, that worthless bunny whined a whole bunch when we gave her the mission too. I knew she would, since she hates leaving home, but still...”

They were, of course, talking about Sui, the young bunny girl. Rabbitmen were normally known to be a peace-loving race, but Sui was one of the republic’s five generals as well as the leader of the army’s covert ops team. She was so good at stealth that even Oscar had been impressed.

Unfortunately, her personality wasn’t the greatest. In fact, it was as bad as it

could get. She ditched work at every opportunity, tried to shirk responsibility, and went from begging for mercy to poisoning you in the span of a heartbeat.

"The Shittiest Rabbit to Have Ever Lived," "The Incarnation of Sloth," "The Queen of Slacking Off," "Master of Pissing People Off"... Those were all titles that people had given her. But despite her grumbling, she always came through for her comrades in the end, and she always accomplished the missions assigned to her, which was why she was one of the republic's trump cards.

The goal this time around was to smuggle Laus to safety, and no one was more suited to that task than her. Lyutillis had lent Sui to the Liberators for this mission as a mark of friendship and solidarity, but Sui hadn't been so keen on doing the job.

"Noooooooooo, I want to relax at home! I already did so much work during the war! I've decided I'm never working again! You can't make me go outside! This is employee abuse!"

When Lyutillis and Parsha thought back to how she'd reacted upon receiving her mission, they began to worry Sui wouldn't pull through. In fact, they were worried the Liberators might send them complaints about Sui.

Seeing their faces go pale, Naiz awkwardly looked away. The truth was, their fears were right on the mark. Sui would be Sui, no matter where she went.

"If anything, I think she's gotten worse than before."

"Hm? What do you mean, Nacchan-san?"

"Well, at first she was exactly how you'd expect. Slacking off and staying home and all that. But now she's using mission funds to eat at fancy restaurants, buy expensive clothes, and just live it up in the big city."

"What?!"

Lyutillis and Parsha covered their faces, their ears drooping. Sui really had grown worse.

Naiz looked off into the distance, thinking about all the reports he'd received.

"It may have been a mistake to ask the support team to help her out, since now she knows how they live..."

The members of the support team didn't directly participate in missions, they simply lived their lives normally while gathering information. But the part that Sui had latched onto was the fact that the main branch sent them an allowance to cover their expenses.

"Your Majesty...what if she tries to change jobs?"

"She might not ever return..."

The republic's queen and prime minister both gazed off into the distance, their eyes glazed over. Oscar couldn't help but give them both a sympathetic look.

At any rate, the point was that Naiz had spent the past month or so running around, making sure they were ready to receive Laus at any time.

Parsha pulled herself together and asked Naiz, "The Templar Knights returned to the capital twenty days ago, correct?"

"Yeah."

"Then if something's happened, word of it would have reached us by now."

However, there was still no word on Laus's whereabouts.

The theocracy was half a continent away from the republic, but Tim Rocket's enhanced messenger birds were exceptionally fast. Lyutillis had used her power to make sure they wouldn't get lost in the forest's fog, and there was a dedicated roost for them to perch on that was staffed at all times.

If Laus had made his move within a few days of returning to the capital, the message should have reached them by now. That meant that he was waiting, or he was in a position where he couldn't make a move. Or, in the worst case—

"Looks like we've gotta get involved," Vandre said, looking down at Miledi.

Though her soul seemed damaged in some way, it appeared her abilities were mostly intact.

Miledi nodded firmly, and said, "Information...needs to be...organized first."

It seemed she was alert enough to give orders as well. Clearly, the damage done by having your soul overwritten by another was far greater than the

damage done by overtaxing your magical strength. Regardless, Miledi had given the Liberators an order.

Oscar smiled briefly, then immediately switched to serious mode and said, “In that case, it’s time for a meeting. We need to set a concrete course of action. Naiz.”

“Do you want me to get Badd and the others?”

“Got it in one. Mind heading over to Angriff for us? I bet everyone will want to come when they hear Miledi’s woken up again, but...”

“We can’t leave the base empty. I’ll just grab Marshal and Mikaela as well, then.”

“Sorry you’re saddled with saying no to everyone,” Oscar stated in a joking tone, to which Naiz just shrugged.

“Lyu, get your generals together. Also, let everyone know Miledi’s current condition.”

“You’re not going to try to hide it?”

“You think that’s possible?”

Lyutillis smiled at that. Everyone in Haltina knew how energetic Miledi normally was. No one would possibly believe them if they said, “Miledi’s awake, and she’s quieter than usual, but there’s not actually anything wrong with her.” Of that, Oscar was certain.

“It’d be worse if rumors and uncertainty spread, so let’s just be honest.”

Besides, the truth wasn’t that bad. The savior of the country had recovered, though not fully. Fortunately, the problem wasn’t serious, and they knew how to fix it. When she thought about it that way, Lyutillis realized Oscar was right.

“Parsha, please start setting the groundwork for the meeting.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.”

“Also...”

Lyutillis looked over at Miledi, who was still in her pajamas and had her hair down.

“We need to make our leader look more presentable.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

“Actually, why not get her something different from usual? She’s more docile, so now’s the chance to dress her up in something more ladylike.”

This was a rare side of Miledi that Meiru knew she’d probably never see again, so she wanted to enjoy it as much as possible. Lyutillis and Parsha agreed immediately, also interested in seeing Miledi in different clothes.

The three of them chatted excitedly about what to dress Miledi up in. While they were debating, Miledi simply cocked her head to one side and watched on impassively.

Sighing, Vandre turned to Naiz and said, “The moment they cheer up, they start treating our leader like a toy.”

“Yeah, women are really scary.”

“I’m starting to pity you, Naiz.”

These days, Naiz looked at the letters Susha and Yunfa sent him like they were bombs.

Neither Vandre nor Naiz had the courage necessary to jump in and calm the unruly girls down, so they turned to the last remaining member of their party.

“Hey, four-eyes, hurry up and stop them before—”

“What about a maid uniform?!” Oscar shouted, adjusting his glasses in excitement.

Meiru and the others twitched, silently turning back to Oscar. His glasses were once again hiding his eyes thanks to some trick of the light.

“What about a maid uniform?!” he repeated.

“Th-This guy is way too true to his own desires,” Vandre muttered, shivering a little. Meiru and the other girls looked disgusted by Oscar as well. However, Oscar knew this was his only chance to make his leader dress up in his favorite, a maid uniform. Indeed, he was already holding one that he’d pulled out of his Treasure Trove.

As a true maid uniform aficionado, he'd meticulously crafted a custom one for Miledi. It was an orthodox dark blue with a long skirt and a frilly white apron. However, he'd made the sleeves short and left the shoulders bare as a nod to the kinds of clothes Miledi usually wore. Naturally, the outfit came with a headdress, ribbon, and garter belt. Everything was made with loving detail.

Oscar thrust his maid uniform forward with such fervor that it felt like he was heading into a battle to the death. The man was a maid lover to the core.

"Oscar-kun, you're creeping even me out."

"Perhaps I should use my authority as queen to protect Miledi-tan..."

"Your Majesty, shall I call the guard?"

"Sorry, Oscar, but I can't defend you here."

Even Naiz, his supposed ally, had turned on him. And the prime minister thought he was a total pervert. Worst of all, though, was Corrin's reaction.

"Onii-chan..."

"Huh?! Wait, it's not what you think, Corrin!"

Corrin's expression was stiff and she was slowly backing away from Oscar toward Meiru, who then stood protectively in front of Corrin, keeping her safe from Oscar's perversions.

His love for maid uniforms was so terrifying that not even Corrin could accept it. But seeing his beloved little sister get creeped out by him did at least bring Oscar back to his senses.

Just then, however, someone snatched the maid uniform Oscar had been about to put away.

"Huh? Miledi?"

Indeed, the someone in question was Miledi. Normally, whenever Oscar went into maid mania mode, Miledi was creeped out by him, but right now she was just staring at him. Her eyes were still dull, but there was no hint of rejection in them. In fact—

"I'll wear it."

Everyone stared at her in awe upon hearing that.

“M-M-M-Miledi-chan, what’s wrong?! Didn’t you say before that you were scared of how Oscar-kun looked when you were wearing a maid uniform, so you’d never do it again?!” Meiru exclaimed, voicing everyone’s thoughts. However, Miledi ignored her and turned back to Oscar.

“Will it make you happy?” she asked, staring into his soul.

“I-I mean, yeah, but...”

“Mmm. Then I’ll wear it.”

“I’m sorry, Miledi! I didn’t mean to take advantage of you! You don’t need to wear it!”

Her honesty was too much for Oscar to bear. Insults he could take, but her pure reaction tugged at his conscience. And so, he reached out to take the maid uniform back.

“No,” Miledi stated firmly, dodging away from Oscar’s hands. This was the opposite of how this exchange was supposed to go.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Miledi? Don’t you hate wearing those clothes?” Oscar asked, confused by the sudden reversal in Miledi’s actions.

“I don’t hate them.”

“Huh? But...”

“I was just embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed about what?”

“You praise me too much when I’m wearing this, O-kun.”

“Oh,” Naiz and Meiru muttered simultaneously.

In retrospect, they remembered that Oscar had praised Miledi a ton when she’d donned a maid uniform to sneak into Andika’s casino. He’d gone on and on about how cute and great and wonderful she was. At first Miledi had basked in the praise, but eventually it had gotten to the point where it looked like she was feeling uncomfortable. However, now Naiz and Meiru realized that had just been her way of covering up her embarrassment.

“You’re such a pure, innocent maiden, Miledi-tan!”

“You’re so cute, Miledi-onee-san.”

Lyutillis and Corrin squealed at how adorable Miledi was acting. It was touching that Miledi had actually enjoyed the praise Oscar had heaped onto her.

Naiz, who’d been there at the time, and Vandre, who was used to how Miledi normally acted, were in disbelief.

“There’s no way...” they both muttered.

“Yeah, that’s a shocker...” Meiru said, also slack-jawed.

No matter how hard Miledi tried to hide her true feelings, Meiru was able to see through her. This was no exception, but Miledi had never once even hinted that she had enjoyed Oscar’s praise. In other words, she’d tried to hide that part of her more than everything else.

To think the truth would come out here... Meiru thought to herself. And though Oscar was the one most surprised by this sudden revelation, Miledi wasn’t done yet.

“I’m happy when you’re happy, O-kun, so...”

“C-C-C-C-C-C-Calm down, Miledi!”

No one made the obvious comeback, “You’re the one who needs to calm down.”

Miledi’s tone was flat, her eyes were dull, and there was no emotion in her voice. However, there was a slight blush on her cheeks...and she looked somewhat embarrassed.

“I’ll do anything for you.”

“~~~~~~”

Oscar covered his face with his hands, blushing to the tips of his ears. He bent backward so far that his head touched the ground and he made an impromptu bridge. Vandre stared down at him coldly.

“That’s a critical hit for sure.”

Lyutillis excitedly ran over to Oscar and asked, “O-chan-san! O-chan-san! How do you feel right now?! Come on, tell me!”

Oscar rolled to one corner of the room, seemingly not hearing anything his friends were saying. He then unsteadily rose to his feet and started banging his head against the wall.

“This is Miledi we’re talking about. This is Miledi we’re talking about. This is Miledi we’re talking about,” he repeated in a hollow voice each time his head hit the wall. Corrin hugged him from behind, trying to get him to stop, but Oscar was too far gone now.



“What the heck is going on here?” Naiz asked, turning to Miledi.

Meiru, who was trying to impress on Miledi that girls couldn’t just say that to guys, turned back to Naiz and said in an awkward voice, “Remember how Dylan-kun and Katy-chan usually act?”

“What about it?”

“I mean, Katy-chan was all over Oscar-kun and Dylan-kun kept staring at everyone’s boobs.”

“Oh...” Naiz nodded as a sense of understanding washed over him. He then looked away awkwardly.

On the other hand, Vandre shrugged his shoulders and said, “The people who had their souls damaged by the church’s stupid plan all followed their instincts and had no inhibitions on their desires.”

Indeed, back when Katy had been her regular self, she’d been too embarrassed to openly show affection for Oscar.

However, after the incident, she’d started hugging Oscar every chance she got. Whenever Corrin tried to drag Katy away, she’d slap at her hands and stick even closer to Oscar. Likewise, Katy used to power through her dislike of beans and eat them, but these days, no matter how Corrin cooked them, she wouldn’t touch them.

Dylan was no different. Before, he’d been a model student, doing his best to follow his beloved big brother Oscar’s creed of “Be a gentleman at all times, and take everything you do seriously.” He’d tried to be a good role model for his younger siblings, so he held himself to a high standard. But now all he cared about was ogling girls, despite Ruth’s best efforts to make him stop. He was particularly obsessed with Meiru’s massive mammaries. Whenever Meiru came over, he’d just stare for hours. He’d gone from a gentleman to a pervert.

The point was that Miledi was in a similar state as Dylan and Katy, which meant that she made no attempt to hide her desires. She simply did as her heart dictated.

“She’s going to be real embarrassed when she returns to her usual self,”

Meiru said with a smile.

“Well, this was bound to happen sooner or later anyway,” Naiz replied.

“Hmph, this is better than watching them arguing incessantly to hide their true feelings. In a way, it’s a good thing,” Vandre said, and the three of them exchanged glances and chuckled.

“Well, as long as Miledi-chan’s happy, I don’t mind,” Meiru said in a gentle voice, looking down at Oscar all the while.

“Hm?” Oscar muttered. Blood was dripping from his forehead...and his eyes were glazed over, possibly from a concussion. Corrin hurriedly dabbed at the blood with a handkerchief.

Meiru walked over and hugged Miledi, who looked genuinely concerned about Oscar.

“Oscar, I always hated you. Go die, you fuck,” Badd said the moment he walked into the room.

“D-Don’t you think that’s a bit harsh, Badd?”

“Normally, the penalty for being a popular guy is beheading, but I’m not gonna let you die that easily.”

“You’re starting to scare me, so please stop.”

Badd was second-in-command of the Liberators, but whenever he saw happy couples, he was overcome by the desire to reap them with his scythe. However, despite his personality problems, the forty-year-old was quite competent. But when he’d learned his fellow old bachelor, Marshal, was in a relationship with Mikaela, he’d nearly fallen into the darkness for good, so Oscar was afraid of tipping him over the edge.

He already had his mana-eating scythe, Egxess, out and ready, and it seemed to be exuding a dark aura.

“You know, I never wanted to leave the republic in the first place. Can you guess why?”

“Well, yeah...” Oscar mumbled and shot a sidelong glance at Lyutillis, who was standing a short distance away.

Badd, the hopeless bachelor, had fallen for her of all people. Unfortunately, all his attempts at flirtation had failed. In fact, he didn't even know that she was a raging masochist at heart. The two of them couldn't really be said to be close.

Part of the reason Badd was still single was because of how reserved he was when it came to making moves. But that wasn't the real problem. He hated desk work and, despite being the Liberators' second-in-command, he often went missing to go on adventures. When the others had told him to go serve as temporary chief of the Angriff branch, he'd thrown a fit because he hadn't wanted to be separated from Lyutillis. His whining had been so pathetic that even Lyutillis hadn't been able to look at him.

Marshal had pointed out it was that bad habit of his that made women dislike him. Had they not dragged Badd away by force, he probably would have still been squatting in the tree's throne room. And now, that very same immature old man was muttering curses under his breath while glaring at Oscar.

"You know, I did my best. In fact, I'm still doing my best. Even after that traitor Marshal started banging a girl twenty years younger than him, I didn't execute him. When our esteemed leader fell into a coma, I did all the work I really didn't want to do...and I even held back from going off on another adventure."

"Come on, it couldn't have been that bad..." Oscar said. Marshal and Mikaela had stiffened up in fear upon hearing Badd mention their name, and he swiveled to look at them. Neither of them met his gaze.

"And yet..." Badd started loading Egxess with mana as he spoke. The beastmen generals who were standing around Miledi—Sim, Valf, Nirke, and Craid—all looked away, trying to pretend they weren't involved.

"Oscar, you fuck. Pretending like you're some kinda genius, refined gentleman when you're just a poser!"

"D-Do you really need to insult me that hard?! Calm down, Badd!"

Badd advanced on Oscar, looking like a vengeful avatar of jealousy, and Oscar turned to the others to request aid.

"All right, Miledi-chan, let's get this meeting started."

“Good boys and girls don’t get involved with bad people.”

“Leave that idiot and that pervert alone. Talking to them is a waste of time.”

“I’ll bury your bones for you, Oscar.”

Sadly, Oscar’s comrades appeared more than ready to abandon him. Though honestly, that was probably for the best.

Surely he’ll calm down if I let him vent some stress. Right? Right?

But there was one problem with that plan.

“O-kun...”

“Oh, shit! Not now, Miledi-chan!”

And that was that Miledi was constantly drawn to Oscar. She easily slipped past the encirclement Lyutillis’s generals had made around her, dodged out of Meiru’s reach, and headed to Oscar.

Even though she was still recovering from the damage sustained due to the magic she’d expended in the apostle fight, her movements were impeccable.

Oscar tried to signal Miledi with his eyes, desperately wishing to tell her that she shouldn’t come over right now, but she didn’t stop. She was determined to protect Oscar, so she hugged him tightly when she reached him.

Naturally, both Oscar and Badd froze for a few seconds.

“Y-Y-Y-Y-You asshole, Oscaaaaaar! How dare you flaunt your happiness!”

“This is all a misunderstanding!”

“Oh really? That’s the best excuse you’ve got? It’s a misunderstanding?!”

Fair enough, Oscar thought, resigning himself to his fate. He couldn’t really claim it was a misunderstanding when Miledi was wearing his favorite maid uniform.

Despite Meiru and the other girls’ best efforts, Miledi had been determined to wear the maid uniform Oscar had selected for her.

Still, even they had to admit it was a cute getup. It probably helped that she’d done her hair up in twintails, which went well with the hairband. The scrunchies

she'd used to do up her hair were rather adorable as well. Though her normal outfit also left her shoulders exposed, they looked far more erotic now that she wasn't annoying the shit out of everyone.

It was clear Oscar knew how to best draw out all of Miledi's charm, and he'd used that power to design the ultimate maid uniform. And the fact that Miledi was wearing it was the greatest statement of her love for Oscar that there could be. Badd could feel the splinters being driven deeper into his heart.

"O-kun belongs to me," Miledi muttered, delivering the final blow.

"Agh!"

Oscar and Badd stiffened up again, but for different reasons this time.

"If you bully him, I won't show any mercy..." Miledi stated in a menacing tone, hugging Oscar harder.

"M-Miledi, I'll be fine, so can you let go? Everyone's watching us, you know?"

"Don't wanna."

Everything Miledi did simply added fuel to the fire. Meiru and the others looked up in resignation, while Badd finally passed the tipping point.

"It's time to pay for your crimes, you damn normies! Egxesssssssssssss!"

It took the combined efforts of Naiz, Vandre, Sim, and the other beastmen generals to calm down the incarnation of jealousy that Badd had transformed into.

Oddly enough, Badd fought even harder than he had during the war. Jealousy fueled his blade, making his cuts sharper, and letting him absorb mana with Egxess more efficiently than ever. His impressive display proved to the spectators why he was the Liberators' second-in-command, as well as why the church feared him so. But while his display of strength was awe-inspiring, his ugly jealousy ruined any chance he might have had with Lyutillis.

Regardless, Badd was eventually restrained...and the meeting finally began. Lyutillis sat at the head of the wooden table, and to her left were the most important members of the republic, Prime Minister Parsha Mill, the bearman general, Sim Gato, the werewolf commander of the commando unit, Valf Rugal,

the harpy general of the aerial divisions, Nirke Zouk, and the captain of the royal guard, Craid Ulks.

To Lyutillis's right were Miledi, Oscar, Meiru, Naiz, Vandre, Badd, Marshal, and Mikaela, in that order. Oh, and Corrin was sitting in a tiny chair in between Vandre and Badd as well. She seemed uncertain about whether or not she really should be here, but everyone else wanted her to stick around.

Only Corrin could keep Badd's jealousy in check without violence. After all, even a shameless man like Badd couldn't be too harsh on a little girl.

Indeed, though he had his arms folded and appeared to be in a bad mood, whenever he turned to Corrin and she smiled at him, he felt a little happier. In many ways, Corrin was the most important member of the Liberators.

"And thus concludes the report on our country's current situation. Are there any questions?" Parsha, who was serving as the meeting's chairperson, asked.

Everyone, including Miledi, had already been apprised of the situation in the republic as well as the current state of the great tree, so no one had any questions. They all nodded, allowing Parsha to move on to the next topic.

"We'll now discuss the current state of our neighboring nations, starting with the Odion Federation. Badd-dono?"

"Sure, sure. So far they aren't doing much. Nothing's going on in Agris, and it's the capital of the federation. Far as we can tell, they're afraid we'll hit them with a counterattack."

All the human nations were trembling in fear. The members of the church stationed in Agris were acting as though they'd been given a death sentence.

"People have been fleeing westward. The top brass have been trying to stop the exodus, but they're not making any progress."

"Have they elected a new leader?" Sim asked, a frown on his face.

"Not yet. Normally, their king is decided by a mock battle that's held once every five years, but they don't have the manpower to hold one of those...and no one wants to step forward and take charge right now."

The federation had suffered a crushing defeat. Anyone who became its leader

now would be getting the short end of the stick.

“I don’t blame them. Detref didn’t do a single thing wrong and look at what they did to him.”

“Yeah...”

As punishment for his failures, Detref had been executed. Even though he’d accepted every unreasonable request the church threw at him and had done his best to serve his people, the Templar Knights had lopped his head off before returning to the theocracy.

They’d tried to push the responsibility of their failure onto the federation it seemed. Of course, that didn’t change the truth, but they had been foolish enough to think that executing Detref would help preserve their own reputation. It hadn’t, though, and in retrospect, it just looked like they’d vented their anger on the wrong target.

“What a waste,” Sim growled, a pained look in his eyes.

Detref had been a true warrior. When the church had ordered him to send his men on a suicide charge, it had pained his conscience. He’d cursed his own inability to protect his men, and had atoned the only way he knew how; by joining them on their charge.

When Sim had fought him on the battlefield, he’d felt a kinship that had transcended race. The two of them had been proud warriors, fighting with their fists. Sim had even begun to hope that the revolution Miledi spoke of might really come, and there would be a time where he could share a drink with Detref instead of crossing swords.

Marshal and Mikaela both felt bad for him, but they continued on with the report where Badd had left off.

“Our spies in Agris Castle tell us that a council made up of the other nations’ leaders is deciding things for the federation for now.”

“Also, from what we can tell, their army’s a complete mess. They lost too many men, and the soldiers who survived have had their morale crushed.”

“So essentially, we really don’t need to worry about the federation, at least

for the time being.”

Even if the theocracy ordered the federation to attack again, they didn’t have the resources to carry out those orders. Badd was certain of that.

Parsha nodded and replied, “What about the Grandort Empire? How are things there, Naiz-dono?”

“They’re still trying to reorganize too.”

“Well, Van and I did decimate their entire air force.”

“Naiz blocked their main cannon so easily too.”

The nation’s pride was in tatters. Not only that, but the invincible theocracy had lost, so the empire was in an uproar about their alliance with them.

They were so shaken that they still hadn’t recovered even after a month.

“Plus, we sabotaged a bunch of their infrastructure when their airships left for the battlefield. Right now, they’re busy trying to track down what happened and who did it.”

Shushu, Tony, Abe, Margaretta, the other members of the Schnee clan, and Howzer Almeda had been responsible for the sabotage, though, and they wouldn’t be discovered easily.

“Yeah, they need to at least put some effort into the search...or they’ll lose face. In fact, the investigation’s gotten so thorough that Howzer and the others have had to vacate the branch office.”

“Are Margaretta and the others okay, Naiz?”

“They’re fine. They’re working on diversion tactics and guerrilla warfare right now.”

“Did you say guerrilla warfare?”

“Yeah, they’re being pretty aggressive about it too. Apparently, that’s how they’re venting stress.”

“Hang on a second. What do you mean, venting stress? What happened to them?” Vandre asked. He cared deeply about his clansmen, so he leaned forward as he spoke, a look of worry on his face.

But Naiz just flashed him a gentle smile and said, “Apparently, they’re frustrated that they didn’t get to fight by your side.”

“O-Oh.”

Apparently, Margaretta had just wanted to be by her beloved Vandre’s side. Of course, she knew sabotaging the empire was an important job, but she’d wanted to be with him during the war at least. And she wasn’t alone on that front. The rest of the Schnee clan had wanted the same thing.

Incidentally, Margaretta and the others had become such a terror that mothers in the empire had taken to telling their kids, “If you’re not good, monster-riding raiders wearing white will come and kidnap youuu.”

It was quite something.

“Van...don’t tell me even you’ve betrayed me...”

“Calm down, Uncle Badd!”

“Ngh.”

Badd glanced back at the young girl scolding him, and his jealousy faded away. No one else even deigned to look at him.

“But yeah, they’ve become hardcore terrorists now. Ha ha!”

“I almost pity the empire.”

Valf and Nirke added, their expressions somewhat stiff.

At any rate, the empire wasn’t in a position to launch another attack on the republic anytime soon.

“Does it look like any of the human nations are forging another coalition?”

The theocracy’s defeat had sent shock waves throughout the continent. For better or worse, the impact had been massive. It wouldn’t be surprising if some nations had started to doubt the absolute supremacy of the theocracy. Some might have even considered distancing themselves from it. Of course, it was also possible that some nations were starting to think they could be the new central pillar of humanity.

Lyutillis was hopeful more nations would turn against the theocracy, but she

also didn't want a war to break out over it.

Badd told everyone the information he'd received from the Liberators' main branch.

"The Sharod Federation and Igdol Empire haven't made any moves. It's still too early for them to try anything."

Sharod was on the other side of the continent, while Igdol was far to the south. Chances were that news of the war ending was only reaching them now.

"Uldia's stopped providing supplies to the theocracy, though. And Velka and Entris are staying neutral for now as well. From the looks of it, most other nations are just waiting to see the theocracy's next move."

"I see. So everyone's still in shock for now, then," Lyutillis said, summarizing the situation.

Indeed, the republic's victory had come as a complete shock to the rest of the world.

"But the theocracy's been quiet too, and we haven't heard back from Laus Barn either," Parsha said, eliciting nods out of Badd and Naiz.

"It's the country that sits in the lap of God, and they have bishops in every single village, no matter how small. The people's faith in Ehit there is far greater than it is anywhere else. They're not shaken at all."

"They're pretending it's a triumphant return for the knights back in the theocracy."

"I can't believe anyone's buying that," Meiru said, looking amazed.

"Well, as far as the citizens are concerned, it was some border skirmish half a continent away. So long as the bishops are telling them it was a win for the church, the people will lap it up," Oscar explained with a wan smile.

"But," he added, "they probably weren't expecting to lose an apostle."

God's Apostle was an ironclad symbol of Ehit's unquestionable might. She was quite literally supposed to be the strongest being in existence, yet Miledi had taken her down head-on. It must have been a blow to the church.

Badd chuckled and said, “Yeah, I guess since they don’t know what state Miledi’s in, they’re scared of what she might do. If they come back half-cocked, they’ll just get their asses handed to them again.”

“Yep, the most the knights can do is pretend like they won and hide in their capital. Plus, I’m sure the soldiers who saw what happened on the battlefield will be gossiping about it everywhere.”

“Sooner or later, people are going to start noticing Miledi-chan, which’ll get them to start doubting the theocracy’s supremacy.”

“Soon the common people will learn about the Liberators and their ideals.”

Everyone turned to Miledi. They’d been apprised of her situation, but they still couldn’t believe how quiet she was. Yet even when everyone was looking at her, her vacant stare was fixed on only one person. Namely Oscar, who was sitting next to her.

His gaze met hers and he asked, “Wh-What’s up, Miledi?”

“Nothing...”

Everyone knew that Miledi had been staring at Oscar throughout the entire meeting, including him. He awkwardly adjusted his glasses while everyone else smiled at how innocent his reaction was.

“Tch...”

“Stop that, Uncle Badd.”

“Ugh... M-My bad. Please stop staring at me like that, Corrin; I really am sorry.”

Oscar ignored Badd and Corrin’s exchange, thinking hard about how to make this weirdly flirty atmosphere disappear.

“A-Anyway, Naiz! How’s the Dark Gate that I made for you?!”

“I can hear your voice shaking, Oscar.”

“Come on, tell me!”

Naiz found Oscar’s embarrassment entertaining, so he wanted to milk his reactions some more. But Oscar had brought up an important point, and he

knew they couldn’t drag the meeting on forever, so he went back into serious mode.

“Its range is limited to about fifty kilometers, but it’s far more mana-efficient than my own teleports. Even people with normal mana pools should be able to use it.”

“I see... It’s ostensibly a success, then. Good. But I’d like to increase its range more if I can.”

“You could always make more and have numbers shore up the difference.”

Sim, Valf, and Craid watched in awe as Oscar and Naiz discussed his newest artifact.

“You guys are redefining intercontinental travel and you’re so casual about it!”

“If you can make enough of these things to outfit an entire army, then... Damn, an army that can appear out of nowhere is the most terrifying thing I can imagine.”

“Yes, but don’t forget that our enemies can use them too if they get their hands on them. This could easily become a double-edged sword.”

Dark Gate was a new artifact that allowed anyone to use teleportation magic.

It looked like a black, palm-sized cube. The crystal that made up the cube was translucent, and you could see the three-dimensional magic circle inside it when sunlight filtered through.

It came with a paired artifact, a black key that Oscar had aptly named Dark Key. By activating the key, the user would be teleported to wherever the Dark Gate was, so long as it was within a fifty-kilometer radius.

“I’ve put the fifty you gave me in as inconspicuous locations as possible. There’s twenty between here and the Liberators’ main branch, seven between there and Entris, three between there and Esperado, and ten leading from the theocracy to Uldia’s borders. The remaining ten are scattered along the route to the empire.”

“You didn’t concentrate them all on a single path? I feel like it’d be better to

have one express route than multiple semi-express ones," Vandre stated. However, Oscar simply shook his head in response.

"That's too much of a security risk. Craid's right. Our enemies may find them and start using them, in which case having them scattered is better."

Oscar wanted to help Laus in his escape as much as he could, which was why he'd made this. But in order to get the artifact to him, Naiz and the others needed to infiltrate the theocracy before the Templar Knights returned.

Oscar had been forced to make this makeshift artifact on a heavy time crunch and hand it over to Naiz and Sui before they went undercover. He'd prioritized speed to help Laus escape, but that meant it wasn't perfectly secure and could be used against them by their enemies. As soon as Laus rendezvoused with the Liberators, Oscar was planning on recovering all the Dark Gates and upgrading them. Fortunately, the area encompassed by the Pale Forest was safe at least, especially with Uroboros and his friends keeping an eye on things, and he'd created a shortcut between here and Sainttown that cut travel time down by half.

"Hmph, then hurry up and upgrade them, you shitty four-eyes."

"I'm trying, you muffler freak."

There wasn't much energy in Oscar's retort. He was painfully aware of how lacking his strength was. But now that Corrin had scolded him, he was at least doing his best not to kill the mood.

Just then, someone patted Oscar's arm. It was Miledi. Unsurprisingly, she'd continued staring at Oscar as the meeting progressed. Though her expression was blank, it looked almost like she was saying "There's no need to rush, you'll be fine." The gesture was heartening, but also rather embarrassing.

Oscar could tell everyone was staring at them again.

Just when I'd managed to change the topic too.

He couldn't handle everyone's knowing smiles.

"Thanks, Miledi. I'll be fine."

He tried to wrench Miledi's hand off his arm, but the moment he grabbed it,

she gave it an affectionate squeeze. Oscar squealed in surprise, but everyone ignored him.

“All right, that’s enough debriefing. Miledi-tan?”

Lyutillis blushed a little as she looked over at Miledi, but she did finally succeed in getting her to turn away from Oscar.

“Mmm...”

“All that’s left is to decide our next course of action. Badd-dono?”

Badd was also getting his arm patted by a girl, but he cleared his throat and put his petty jealousy behind him for now. He was getting tired of being consoled by a little girl, so focusing on work was one way of keeping his jealousy at bay.

“For now, all we’ve been doing is telling all our branch offices how the war went and warning them to be prepared,” he said with a shrug. However, his tone made it clear he was talking business.

“Our next plan is for our leader to decide.”

He turned to Miledi, who gave him a little nod. She cast her gaze over everyone before saying, “We have to get him.”

It was clear to everyone who she meant by “him.” The real work could only begin after all of her comrades had been gathered. Naturally, no one objected. However—

“We’re all going to save Laus.”

“Absolutely not, Miledi.”

“Huh?!” Miledi turned to Oscar, looking quite shocked.

It appeared he disagreed about how to rescue him.

“Right now, you need to stay somewhere safe. You can’t convince me otherwise.”

He had a point.

Of course, Lyutillis and Vandre made some jokes like, “Oh my, did you hear that, Onee-sama? O-chan-san likes to keep his girlfriend locked up!” and “Hah, I

always knew you were a sadistic freak, four-eyes. Kinda creepy, honestly.” But ultimately, everyone knew Oscar was speaking sense.

Oscar adjusted his glasses, ignoring the jibes. Though it was obvious from how his hand was trembling that he was just holding back his anger.

“And at the very least, Meiru needs to stay back with you. If Lyu agrees to stay in the forest as well, it’ll be as safe as it gets. I’m sorry, but you can’t come with us.”

“But...”

“Don’t worry. Naiz, Van, and I will rescue him for sure.”

The hurt in Miledi’s eyes was visible, and she said flatly, “No...”

“Miledi.”

“Don’t wanna.”

No one else offered a helping hand, so Oscar lowered his voice and said, “Listen, Miledi, right now... Well, to be blunt, right now you’d just be a burden.”

“Ugh...”

“If you went to save Laus and got into a fight, we’d have to focus on protecting you instead. Besides, who knows what’ll happen to you if you try using your stronger spells in your current state.”

“Uuu...”

“There’s absolutely no way we can let you fight right now, which means you’re not going anywhere near the theocracy. Please try to understand.”

Oscar was making logical points, ones that couldn’t be argued against, so Miledi had only one recourse.

“Waaaaaaaaaaah! Hic...”

“Wha—?! Hey, Miledi?! Come on, please don’t cry!”

Since she had no way to refute his words, Miledi could only convey her feelings through tears. Her pursed lips made it clear just how unhappy she was with this arrangement.

Oscar's angle of, "I'm being stern because I care about you," collapsed in an instant in the face of her crying. He glanced around, panicking. He then got to his feet and waffled over whether or not he should hug her.

"You made her cry! You made her cry! Evil four-eyes!" Meiru and Lyutillis sang in unison.

"Hey, quiet you two!"

"Onii-chan..." Corrin muttered, shooting an accusatory look at Oscar.

"Corrin, this isn't what it looks like! I just misworded things, that's all!"

Parsha and the others were surprised by Miledi's crying as well, but they, too, were on her side.

"Man, it's been ages since I last saw Miledi cry," Marshal said, looking like he was enjoying the scene.

"O-Oh no, is something wrong with me, Marshal-san? I'm reminded of how Miledi used to be back when she was a kid, and now I'm thinking she looks kind of cute when she's crying."

"Oh yeah. She let her emotions show a lot more back when she first joined up."

Miledi had tried her best to emulate Belta's annoying nature, but her core personality was still stronger back then. When people teased her about it, she'd get so embarrassed that she'd cry sometimes. But that had only been when she was ten. By the time she hit eleven, her cute side had all but disappeared.

However, now it was back...and Marshal and Mikaela were extremely moved.

"Van, Naiz! Help me out here!" Oscar tearfully turned to his friends and begged for assistance, causing Vandre to sigh in exasperation.

"Look, Miledi. Just shut up and let us protect you this time."

"Huh?"

"You've been protecting all these other guys ever since you joined the Liberators, right? And you knew that wouldn't be enough, which was why you went looking for people like us who could stand shoulder to shoulder with you."

“...”

“Well, you’ve got us now. We can protect you when you’re not doing so hot, like right now.”

Miledi grabbed the hem of her skirt and looked down. She was acting like a kid who’d just been scolded, which was basically what had happened.

With a crafty smile, Naiz added, “Don’t worry, Van and I will be sure to bring Laus back.”

“Hm? Naiz, I’m coming—”

“Don’t worry, we’ll leave Oscar here with you.”

“Hey, wait, Naiz?! What are you saying? This is the theocracy we’re talking about here. The two of you won’t be enough!”

“Shut up, shitty four-eyes. With how badly you’ve been doing during our sparring matches, we’re better off without you anyway. At least you’ll be doing something useful by acting as our beloved leader’s emotional support.”

“Van...” Oscar mumbled. He wasn’t so dense that he didn’t realize Vandre was saying this for his own good. Besides, it wasn’t as if Vandre and Naiz would be completely alone.

They had the help of the Liberator branch in the theocracy, as well as Sui, who could become the republic’s strongest soldier...under certain conditions. Moreover, Vandre’s ability to transform into a dragon and Naiz’s spatial magic meant they were the two most mobile members of the Liberators.

Still, I’m the most adaptable one among us, and they might need me if they run into unforeseen complications... But before Oscar could pursue that line of thought any further, he noticed Miledi tugging his sleeve.

“Don’t leave me behind...”

“Hnnnnnngh!”

She was looking up at him with teary eyes...and Oscar couldn’t withstand the destructive power of her gaze. He adjusted his glasses more roughly than usual, digging the bridge of them into his nose.

“Fine, fine. I’ll stay back too.”

“You’ll stay with me?”

“Yes, I will! So please stop acting so, umm, seductive!”

Miledi didn’t seem to really understand what Oscar was saying, but she did get that he wasn’t going to leave her behind. Upon hearing that, a wave of relief washed over her.

“Thank goodness,” she said with a smile.

“Hnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnngh!” Oscar groaned loudly. He’d suffered a critical hit for the umpteenth time today.

Marshal exclaimed, “Holy shit, she’s even more powerful than little Miledi was.”

Mikaela added, “Yeah, I wish I could show this cute Miledi to everyone back home!”

Badd glared at Oscar, but he couldn’t do anything as long as Corrin was staring at him. He resembled a chained dog.

Nirke was always flopped over the table, his wings beating weakly as he tried to recover from all the emotions he was feeling. He, as well as the rest of the republic’s harpies, had become huge fans of Miledi after seeing her beautiful duel in the sky against the apostle. Each flap of his wings smacked Valf in the face though, and he didn’t look quite as amused.

Meiru was using the glasses Oscar had made for her to take as many pictures as she could, while Lyutillis and Parsha were struggling to hold back smiles.

Amidst the chaos, Miledi wiped her eyes and said in a somewhat more dignified voice, “Okay, I’ll let myself be protected. But I’m heading over to the main headquarters.”

Barely conscious and blushing furiously again, Oscar asked, “Why? The forest is much safer.”

“Headquarters is safe too.”

“I guess that’s true, but...”

The church didn't even know where the Liberators' headquarters was, so it was definitely safe. However, they had a much bigger home-field advantage as long as Lyutillis was in the Pale Forest. Assuming another apostle didn't show up, anyway.

Still, it seemed Miledi had a good reason for wanting to move.

"Headquarters is closer to Laus. If I go, then Meiru-nee will come too."

Oh, I get it now.

Miledi wouldn't rush into danger herself. She'd let her friends protect her, just as they'd requested. But she still wanted to be close, so that if anything did happen, Oscar and Meiru would be able to run over if necessary.

The Liberators' headquarters was in Uldia, which was twice as close to the theocracy as Haltina.

"Miledi..."

Oscar looked into Miledi's sky-blue eyes. Though the light was gone from them, he could still easily read the emotions they conveyed.

She's not gonna back down no matter what I say, huh?

"He he, looks like you've lost, Oscar-kun."

"Guess so."

Frowning a little, Oscar got back into his seat.

Seeing that, Lyutillis said, "Parsha."

"Your Majesty...you intend to go with them?"

"Yes. I promised to walk together with them. It's only fitting that I see their main headquarters. Besides, I must protect Miledi. I may not be as strong outside the forest, but I'm sure my strength will still come in handy. Can I leave governing the republic to you?"

"Under normal circumstances, I would never allow the queen to leave her nation."

Of course, the very fact that Parsha was saying that meant she was going to allow it this time. She knew that Lyutillis couldn't be constrained by her duties.

Not now, when a worldwide revolution was looming. After all, before she was a queen, she was an ancient magic user.

Parsha steeled her resolve and said, “Leave Haltina to me.”

It was her job to ensure that Lyutillis could walk her chosen path without regrets.

“Sim, Valf, Nirke, Craid. Can I count on you to protect our brethren?”

“As you wish.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

“We shall protect your skies.”

Sim, Valf, and Nirke all gave her crisp salutes. However, Craid appeared more hesitant. As captain of the royal guard, protecting Lyutillis was his duty.

“Craid, I need you to protect Parsha. In my absence, she will be the one to rule this country. Do you understand?”

“I...do...”

“Heh heh, I appreciate your loyalty, Craid, but don’t worry. I’ll have Sui to protect me over there.”

“That’s exactly why I’m so worried.”

“Mmm, well, I’ll have my new comrades as well, so it’ll be fine.”

Craid took a deep breath, swallowing his misgivings, and bowed reverently to Lyutillis. He then turned to Naiz, the Liberator he was closest to, and said, “Naiz, please protect her.”

“Don’t worry, I will.”

The exchange was brief, but it was a mark of their friendship.

Lyutillis blushed a little. She found it endearing how the men around her all seemed to forge bonds while treating her like a fairy-tale heroine.

Of course, she knew Craid had no feelings for her and was merely loyal to a fault, but her ears still twitched a little. She turned around and noticed that Badd was glaring daggers at Craid and Naiz. Corrin slapped him on the cheek a

few times, giving him a stern look, and he quieted back down. He was well and truly tamed now.

“Ahem! Now that everything is settled, I think it’s time we brought this meeting to a close. When will you depart?” Parsha asked.

They would need a lavish send-off, since the queen was leaving with the heroes who’d saved their nation. The republic’s citizens would all want to be there. Lyutillis shot Oscar a questioning glance.

“Hmm... I’d like to go as soon as possible, but I also want to return Corrin to the village before we go...”

“U-Umm,” Corrin mumbled as she tentatively raised her hand. She didn’t want to interrupt, but she did have a suggestion.

“If you let me borrow Van-onii-chan’s wyvern, I can go home by myself.”

“Absolutely not,” Vandre and Oscar said in unison.

Corrin shrunk back, scared by how forceful the two of them sounded. Vandre was starting to become as much of a siscon as Oscar. From the looks of it, he was starting to see her as his little sister as well. But even if he didn’t, it was unacceptable to send such a young girl on a long journey alone.

Marshal stepped forward and said, “In that case, how about I escort her back?”

“Hmm... Corrin’s been more helpful than I imagined. As the one who called her here, I should be the one to take responsibility for seeing her safely home, but...”

“Why not let her stay in the forest? As the queen, I’ll allow it.”

“Hell, you could let her stay in Angriff, even.”

“In fact, why don’t we just take her with us to the main headquarters?”

This time, Corrin raised her hand much more emphatically and interrupted the adults’ discussion.

“I need to go back home. There are people I need to look after!”

Oscar and the others nodded immediately, overwhelmed by Corrin’s

confidence.

“Also, I won’t be of much help here...or anywhere else for that matter. I can do the most good by looking after the patients back home.”

The fact that she spoke with such confidence proved that she already had a lot of self-esteem.

“I’m part of the Liberators too, so I need to do what I can!”

She wasn’t a child who needed protection, but one of their full-fledged comrades.

“Hey, Oscar. Your sister’s amazing,” Badd said in awe. Everyone else nodded in agreement.

Marshal had known Corrin for longer than Badd, and he puffed his chest out proudly like he was responsible for her growth.

“All right then, I’ll escort her home. Mind if I borrow one of your wyverns, Vandre?”

“Hmph, fine. Lyu, can you strengthen it for me?”

“Of course. I’ll make sure it can fly faster and longer.”

With that, everything was squared away and the party decided to depart tomorrow...or the day after at the very latest.

The meeting adjourned, but just before everyone left...there was a knock on the door.

“Enter. What is it?” Parsha asked, furrowing her brow. She had a feeling it was something bad...and she was half-right.

One of Lyutillis’s elven maids burst into the room, a messenger bird on her shoulder.

“Creme!” Oscar shouted, running over. Creme was the Isoniol eagle Tim had assigned to specifically send messages to Miledi and her party.

“He arrived just now,” the maid said, handing Oscar a letter that had an “urgent” stamp on it.

He quickly unfurled the letter and read through it. The first sentence was,

“I’ve found info on Laus Barn.”

The message they’d all been waiting for had finally arrived. However, he hadn’t said he’d rescued Laus. Instead, the letter explained that Laus was on the run from the church’s heretic hunters.

“I’m sorry, Parsha-san, but it looks like we’re leaving immediately.”

Not long after Miledi had woken up, the situation grew dire. It almost seemed like fate.

Oscar nodded to his companions, who began moving all at once. Everyone had a feeling that this would be their biggest obstacle yet.

Chapter II: Laus's Great Escape

A tiny figure sprinted through the back alley. They were wearing a gray cloak with a large hood and carrying a cheaply made bag carefully in their arms. Inside the bag was a long loaf of bread and several red fruits. The loaf swung from one end of the bag to the other with each step the figure took.

Suddenly, the figure came to a halt. Two adults blocked the figure's path.

The tiny figure stiffened for a moment, but once he realized the adults were a well-built middle-aged woman and a teenage girl with braided hair, he relaxed. He then resumed walking, hugging the side of the alley to pass by the two of them. But before he could, the older woman called out to him.

"Oh, are you running errands for your mom? What a good boy."

The tiny figure hesitated. He could've just ignored them, but considering how he was dressed, that would've probably made him look suspicious.

The city he was in was bustling, and plenty of travelers came to visit. There wasn't a cloud in the sky today either, so it made sense to be wearing a cloak to protect yourself from the sun. Ignoring this kindly woman would definitely leave a bad impression, and right now he didn't want to stand out in any way.

After weighing his options, the figure said in a cheerful voice, "Actually, it's for my dad, but yeah!"

He tried to sound as natural as possible.

The older lady smiled at him and replied, "What a dutiful son."

She then stepped aside to make room for the smaller figure to pass. Based on her appearance, she was a local here.

"Hey, I can run errands too," the young girl muttered, jealous that her mother was praising someone else. She glared at the figure, who turned to look at her.

As they were roughly the same height, the girl was able to look into the boy's hood. She blinked in surprise as she saw his face.

“Umm...sorry?” the boy said, confused.

“I-It’s fine!” the girl shouted, blushing and looking away.

The older woman grinned and exclaimed, “Oh my!” when she saw her daughter’s reaction. It was clear the boy under the hood was quite handsome.

“Umm, my dad’s waiting for me, so I need to get going,” the boy said with a polite bow as he ran off.

“Be careful on your way home!” the old lady shouted after him.

A shame I wasn’t able to get a good look at his face too... she thought idly to herself.

“Heh heh. Should we use this route when we visit the market from now on?” she playfully asked her daughter.

“Doesn’t matter to me!” the girl replied. However, she kept glancing over her shoulder in the direction the boy had gone. Her mother decided to stick to this route anyway, but unfortunately, neither of them ever reunited with the boy. Granted, if they’d known who he was, they wouldn’t have wanted to anyway.

Once he got away from them, the handsome boy muttered, “Everyone here is so friendly... It’s totally different from the capital. I think I like the people here more.”

He thought back to the “chosen people” that he’d grown up around. They’d all been cold and unfeeling.

As he was contrasting his experiences in the capital with his experiences here, he finally reached his destination. An old three-story building on the outskirts of town that had probably served as some business’s headquarters in better times. He looked over his surroundings, making sure no one was around before opening the back door and slipping inside.

He paid no attention to the broken chairs, torn curtains, and piles of refuse littering the floor and climbed the stairs. They creaked loudly with each step, and he grit his teeth, worried that they might give out under him at any moment.

It was only after he reached the third-floor landing that he breathed a sigh of

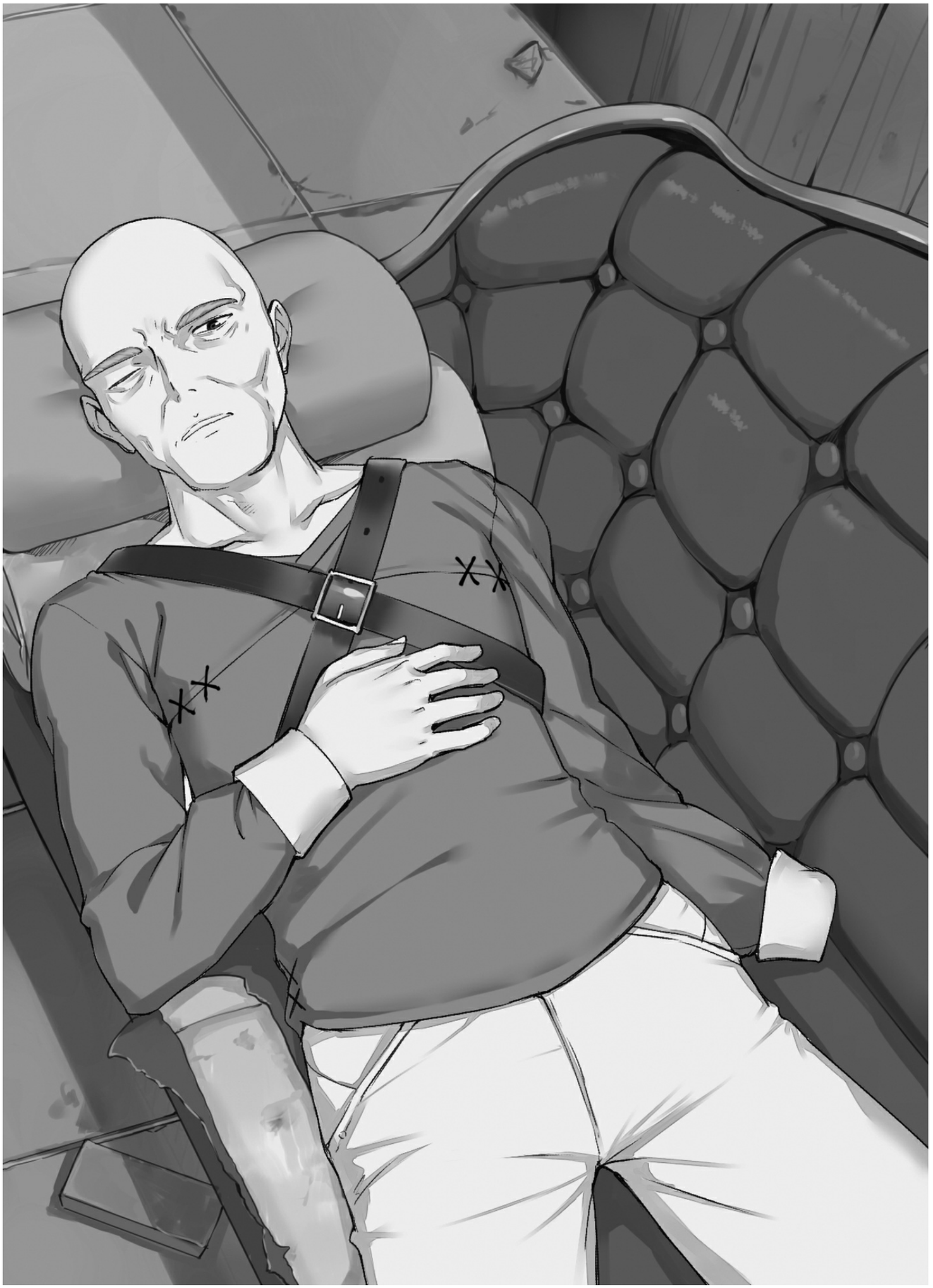
relief. He raised his hand to knock on the door but before he could, a voice from inside said, “Come in.”

It was a man’s voice, brusque and deep. Normal kids would have instinctively recoiled upon hearing a voice like that, but the boy felt only relief.

“I’m back, father.”

“Welcome back.”

A bald man was lying on a moth-eaten leather sofa that had definitely seen better days.



“Did you run into any trouble, Sharm?” he asked. The man had a stern face, and it looked like he was constantly glaring, even when he wasn’t. But the boy, Sharm Barn, knew from the subtle changes in his father’s expression that he was overjoyed. Laus Barn was relieved to see his son return safe and sound.

Sharm relaxed and smiled at his dad. He’d had a sheltered upbringing, so a simple task like getting groceries had been a nerve-racking experience. He had never once shopped for his own things, left the capital, or even walked through a back alley.

He was only eight, and he belonged to one of the most influential noble families of the most powerful nation in the world. Until now, someone else had taken care of all of his needs. Though, since coming to this city, he had gone shopping a few times before. However, a few shopping runs weren’t enough for him to get used to them. Still, he’d done his best, since these shopping trips were missions given to him by his beloved father.

He puffed his chest out proudly and said, “Nope. I managed to get food without any trouble.”

“I see. Well done.”

“Heh heh heh,” Sharm chuckled, blushing, and looked around the room.

“Father, is Reinheit still not back?”

“He’s not.”

Their final companion—the loyal knight Reinheit Ashe—was still out on a mission for Laus. Sharm gave his dad a worried look as he thought about that. Laus still hadn’t recovered from his wounds...and he was exhausted from expending so much mana, but he was still more taciturn than usual.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine. Better than I expected, actually, thanks to your help.”

“I see...” Sharm mumbled and furrowed his brow. He knew his dad was lying. He used to think his dad was as impervious and as sturdy as a mountain, but now Laus looked extremely thin and weak. His cheeks were sunken, his face was pale, and there were dark circles under his eyes. His left sleeve lay flat on

the sofa, making it abundantly clear there was no arm inside it. Right now, Laus looked more like a withered tree than a mountain.

It was hardly surprising, though. Just three weeks ago, Laus had fought against one of God's Apostles as well as the commander of the Paladins, Darrion Kaus, and broken all ties with the church, his homeland, and the rest of his family. They'd taken only a few necessary supplies, then fled the capital.

Back then, Reinheit had a hole in his stomach and a gaping slash across his torso. Laus had been covered from head to toe in wounds as well, and the stump of his arm had bled profusely.

Ideally, they would have stopped in the closest town or village they could find and laid low until they healed, but Laus had wanted to escape the theocracy as soon as possible. Thus, they hadn't stopped at any towns, and they hadn't even used the highway. Laus had made full use of his ability to sense the souls of other people in conjunction with a spell that hid the souls of him and his comrades to avoid crossing paths with anyone during their escape.

Within the theocracy, every town had a church and a bishop, no matter how small. And to make matters worse, Laus was the commander of the Holy Templar Knights, which meant everyone in the theocracy knew of him. Due to his lofty station, he rarely ever went on expeditions to other nations, though, and only his reputation was well known. He wouldn't be recognized outside the theocracy, but within it, not knowing the man who was the symbol of the church's might was tantamount to heresy.

Moreover, he'd made public appearances during religious ceremonies enough times that every citizen had seen his face at least once. And that was why he was trying to leave the country inconspicuously, without anyone realizing the state he was in.

"Sharm, has the church made a move?"

"Not that I can tell, father. At the very least, the church in this town is acting like everything's normal. They haven't sent out any search parties or put up any wanted posters."

Sharm started separating the food that was meant for today's dinner from the preserved rations they'd be eating while on the move and added, "Everything

looks peaceful.”

“I’m sure you’re right. The church hasn’t announced that we’re, umm...heretics.”

“There’s no way they could.”

Coming off of the heels of a major defeat, an announcement like that would plunge the nation into chaos. After all, the theocracy was only barely managing to spin their loss at Haltina as a “triumphant victory” by saying they’d displayed the church’s divine might to the republic, and that their faith had still prevailed. They were purposely obfuscating the details, but for the residents of the theocracy, a statement like that was sufficient.

No one was even questioning whether or not the church had succeeded in its original goal of recovering the child of God. But if word got out that the commander of the Holy Templar Knights had defected, things would be different.

“It wouldn’t just tarnish the church’s reputation, it’d rip it to shreds.”

Even Ehit’s chosen people would begin to doubt whether or not the church had won the war in Haltina. And once that happened, there would be no turning back. The church would no longer be an absolute entity. The world would be shaken to its core. Hence why Laus knew that as long as he didn’t reveal himself, the church would keep this scandal quiet.

He wanted to stay hidden so that he didn’t get crushed by overwhelming force, and the church wanted him hidden so his betrayal didn’t come to light. Ironically, their interests aligned extremely well.

There was only one recourse left for the church now.

“Thank God they didn’t manage to capture me.”

To assassinate Laus. They had to remove him in secret, come up with some excuse for what happened to him, and quickly appoint a successor if they wished to keep their reputation intact.

It was for that very reason that Laus had pushed to leave the country as soon as possible. The longer he stayed, the more dangerous things got. He couldn’t

afford to get spotted by any of his countrymen, but he also couldn't stick to abandoned forests and rough mountain paths, since if the apostle found him there, he'd be captured for sure. The safest place for him to be was a large city in some other nation.

"You're amazing, father, I can't believe you can deceive even the Heretic's Stained Goblet!"

"Only because that artifact records your soul's information, using blood as a medium. It traces people through their souls, so if you have a way of concealing your soul, it can't track you."

The Heretic's Stained Goblet was one of the church's most valuable artifacts. Everyone who joined the church had to place a drop of their blood into the goblet before they were allowed to take up their post.

It worked exactly how Laus said it did. The goblet was the church's insurance in case anyone betrayed them. And since it tracked people's souls, it was normally impossible to misdirect. There were, in fact, only two ways to stop its tracking: die or use spirit magic to hide your soul.

Suffice to say, Laus was the only person alive capable of throwing off the goblet. It was the main reason why the church hadn't been able to capture him yet. However, Laus still wasn't convinced he'd completely fooled them.

Are they just letting me swim around for a bit to see who else they can round up...or am I reading too hard into things? Am I really strong enough to deceive Ehit's eyes?

God's Apostle hadn't been able to catch him so far. The church had sent out far-ranging search parties armed with the apostle's spirit magic, but Laus hadn't been spotted once yet. But by his estimation, if they were seriously trying to find him, he should have had a much harder time getting away. There should have been a few close calls, at least. He couldn't help but worry that the church was scheming something. Hence why he was pushing forward as quickly as possible.

He'd used what little mana he'd recovered to heal Reinheit as much as possible while maintaining a suicidal forced march only made possible through continual use of Limit Break. And to make matters worse, he regularly ran into

monsters because he wasn't using the main roads, and he had to hunt regular animals as well to gather enough food for everyone. Plus, to top it all off, he couldn't get much sleep, since he had to continually be concealing everyone's souls while searching for enemies at all times.

Under such harsh conditions, it would be a feat to manage even twenty kilometers a day. But he'd already traveled six hundred kilometers south in the span of two weeks.

Despite his overwhelming strength, however, pushing himself that hard had taken its toll. Laus was utterly drained. He'd abused Limit Break to the point where even his soul was exhausted, slowing his physical recovery and mana regeneration rates. The only silver lining was that he'd managed to improve his soul-hiding spell, Spirit Shroud, so that he could allot mana for it ahead of time. Now, even if he fell asleep or lost consciousness for other reasons, the spell would remain active for a full two months. However, if he got into a fight, there was no guarantee he'd have the resources to keep it going.

Though I suppose if I get into a fight, it'll be against forces strong enough to kill me... It would have been a hard fight even if I was at full strength. Rushing to Entris was the right choice, I'm pretty sure... It's what gives me the best chance of survival.

It was a merchant haven that had porous borders and a steady flow of people and goods at all times. Esperado, the capital, sat in the center with six cities spreading radially outward, each with their own unique culture.

Laus had chosen Parantino, the city of cooking and medicine, to hide out and recuperate in. Parantino was on the northwest edge of Entris, which was shaped roughly like a rhombus, and bordered the theocracy. It was as busy as Laus had hoped, and there were throngs of people coming and going each day.

If the church attacked him here, word of the assault would almost certainly get out, which was why he heavily doubted they would. Just in case they did though, he'd chosen to hole up in an abandoned building on the outskirts.

For now, things were progressing well. Seven days had passed since Laus had snuck into Parantino. The city was famous for its medicinal dishes, as well as its potent healing medicines. It also had many soothing retreats people could rest

at to recuperate from all manner of injuries and illnesses. Over the course of the past seven days, Laus had just barely recovered enough that he could get out of bed. But since he had finally recovered that much—

“I think it’s time we started moving again.”

“But, father, you’re still—”

“I’ll be fine.”

Laus was far from fine, but all Sharm could do was grit his teeth in frustration.

If only I could help him. If I wasn’t a child, I could do so much more.

“Do you think...the church will be sending someone soon?”

“I’m not sure. But it’s unwise to remain in one place for too long. Honestly, I wanted to set out two days ago.”

No matter how well Laus hid, he knew information on him would slowly leak the longer he stayed put. Nearby residents would start to talk about whoever had moved into this abandoned building, causing rumors to spread. Laus explained as much to Sharm, who thought back to the mother and daughter he’d met earlier.

I guess he has a point.

Of course, that didn’t stop Sharm from worrying about his dad’s safety. He hung his head in disappointment, and Laus gave him a gentle smile.

“Don’t worry, Sharm.”

“...”

“I won’t die here. I have to stay alive until I fulfill my promise.”

“By promise, do you mean the one you made with Lady Reisen?”

During their journey, Laus and Sharm had spoken at length. Laus had told his son everything he hadn’t been able to before for fear of what his family and the church would say. He’d explained the truth of the war, who Ehit really was, and the Liberators who fought against him. He’d also told Sharm about the girl who’d left such a deep impression on him.

He’d been utterly blown away by Miledi’s determination, as well as the

accomplishments she'd backed it up with. To Laus, Miledi was like a fairy-tale hero. But what had surprised Sharm most of all hadn't been any of those details.

"Heh heh, you forget that she's not a noble any longer, Sharm. There's no need to address her as Lady Reisen."

"That's a rude thing to say about a girl, father."

What surprised Sharm most was that his dad smiled when he talked about Miledi. Normally, he only ever had a dour expression on his face. At best, his eyes softened a little or his lips curled upward a fraction when he was happy about something, but that was about it. It was only when speaking about Miledi that Laus smiled wide enough that someone other than Sharm could tell he was actually smiling. He'd never smiled like that when talking to his family.

Sharm was a bit conflicted about that, actually. On the one hand he was glad his father had finally been freed from the heavy burden he'd been carrying, but at the same time, he didn't want to accept that someone outside his family had caused that change. After all, that would mean Laus's family had caused Laus as much pain as the church had, and Sharm didn't want to think that. It made him wonder if maybe he was just a burden to his father as well.

"Father, are you really going to fight the church...fight God?"

"You bet."

"For Miledi Reisen's sake?" Sharm didn't realize how bitter he sounded as he said that.

Of course he knew he was being unreasonable. For an eight-year-old, he was surprisingly mature. He understood that fighting Ehit was necessary to free the people of Tortus from the whims of a god who saw the world as nothing but a game board to play around on.

Learning the truth hadn't been a huge shock for him. He'd always felt like something was off about the church, and now he finally understood why. He was mad at them for toying with people's lives, and he was proud that his dad had resolved to fight them. But the fact that it was some girl he didn't know who'd driven Laus to take a stand was bothering him.

“Fool.”

“Huh?”

Confused, Sharm raised his head to look up at Laus. He saw his father smiling gently at him, looking more affectionate than Sharm had ever seen him.

“I’ll be fighting for your sake, obviously.”

“F-For me?”

“Yep.”

Laus struggled to his feet, his battered body straining due to the exertion. He then kneeled down in front of Sharm and placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. Looking directly into his eyes, he said, “And for Ricolis, Kaime, and Selm.”

“Ah...”

Sharm felt his chest tighten as he thought back to the rest of his family, who’d derided him for questioning the church. But even so, family was family. He still felt bad that he’d had to leave them behind...and he regretted not trying to do more.

When they’d left, Laus had apologized to Sharm for abandoning them. Sharm hadn’t wanted to burden his father with any further responsibilities, which was why he hadn’t asked whether or not they were going back to save his mom and brothers, even though he’d wanted to. He’d tried to just forget about them and ignore that uneasy feeling in his chest. But clearly, Laus hadn’t forgotten. And he hadn’t given up either. Overcome with happiness, relief, and respect for his father, Sharm started quietly crying. He knew it was pathetic for the son of the church’s strongest knight to cry, but he couldn’t stop the tears rolling down his cheeks.

He rubbed his eyes and said in a joking tone, “Father, you’re forgetting grandmother.”

“I’m not,” he replied immediately. He then rose to his feet and ruffled Sharm’s hair before adding in a conspiratorial tone, “The truth is, I actually hate my mother-in-law. I left her out on purpose.”

“What?!”

“You remember how she kept bugging me to marry more women?”

“Umm, yeah?”

“That annoyed the crap out of me.”

“Wait, that’s why you’re abandoning her?!”

Laus nodded solemnly. Sharm’s eyes widened in response. He looked completely flummoxed. But then a second later, Laus grinned and Sharm realized what was going on.

“I didn’t know you could crack a joke, father.”

“Was I joking, though?” Laus shrugged and lowered himself back down onto the sofa.

Sharm gave him an exasperated look, but before he could say anything, Laus muttered, “Hm, it looks like Reinheit’s back.”

The final member of their party had returned at last.

“I’m glad he’s safe. He’s not in top form yet either.”

Reinheit had suffered two major wounds protecting Sharm, and either one would have been enough to kill him without Laus’s intervention. Eventually, they’d just be honorable scars, but for now, they still hindered him quite a bit. Laus had used spirit magic to keep Reinheit’s soul anchored to his body while he cast enough healing magic to bring him back to life, but he hadn’t been able to heal him much more than that before they’d needed to flee.

“I’ve returned, Laus-sama, Sharm-sama.”

As expected, Reinheit looked quite pale as he walked into the room. He was a kind, earnest man, with handsome features, but right now he looked almost as haggard as Laus. Normally, he took good care of his ash-brown hair as well, as he wanted to look respectable as a member of the Barn family’s personal guard, but right now it was lanky and unkempt.

“Welcome back, Reinheit!”

“I’m glad you’re safe. How did things go?”

“Smoothly.”

Reinheit swept back his long coat and pulled a few thin rectangular wooden boards out of his pocket.

“We have three tickets to Esperado.”

The Entris Federation’s most famous feature was so well known that there wasn’t a person on the continent who couldn’t tell you what it was.

A magical train traveled from city to city. Its origins could be traced back to before the founding of the Entris Federation itself. Back when the different cities that made up the federation first started considering uniting into a single nation, the leaders of the cities were trying to find the most efficient way to speed up the travel of goods in their territory. In order to become a world-class trade hub, they needed the best transportation. They wanted a way to eliminate the downsides of travel by carriage, and they had the resources and know-how to make it happen. After all, at the time, the theocracy was willing to fund their unification plans. In other words, everything that happened was the will of God. The church loved flaunting the authority granted to them by God, so they often backed reckless projects to display their might.

Regardless, after a lot of meetings and head-scratching, one genius said, “So our problems with carriages are their limited size, the stamina of the horses that carry them, weather problems, and bad roads, right? In that case, why not make a giant carriage-shaped golem that runs on iron rails? It’s far cheaper to make a track of rails than it is to pave a road. Plus, a golem that never tires can easily be crafted by a skilled enough synergist.”

With the help of the Velka Kingdom’s craftsmen, the fledgling nation of Entris successfully created a train-shaped golem, which they dubbed the Magic Train. Over the next few centuries, the train helped elevate the federation into the world’s trade hub. And now, Reinheit had gotten everyone tickets to ride it.

“Wow, this means we can take the train to Esperado, right, Reinheit?!”

“It does indeed, Sharm-sama. Are you looking forward to it?”

“Oh, umm, well...”

Sharm’s face fell as he remembered that the three of them were on the run.

“Come to think of it, you did say you wanted to ride it long ago, didn’t you?”

Laus mused.

“Y-You remembered that?” Sharm asked as he shrunk down even further. But it was only natural for an eight-year-old boy to be fascinated by a giant moving golem.

Laus and Reinheit smiled at him.

“Now you finally have your chance. It’s fine to enjoy it,” Laus said.

“B-But—”

“Sharm-sama, I’m quite excited myself. I was born in a rural village, and after I became a knight, I never got the chance to leave the capital.”

“I-I didn’t know that. So you’re excited to ride it too, Reinheit? Heh heh heh...” Sharm chuckled, breathed a sigh of relief, and then looked excitedly down at the ticket Reinheit handed him.

Meanwhile, Reinheit walked over to Laus and spoke in a quiet, worried voice, saying, “Are you sure you want to go to Esperado, Laus-sama? The—”

“Central Church is there?”

“Yes...”

Though no wanted posters had been put out for the three fugitives, the Central Church was the second-largest church on the continent after the main cathedral on the Divine Mountain. Naturally, only the most important members of the clergy were dispatched there.

One of the archbishops, of which there were only seven, presided over the church, and there were a number of bishops who possessed special magic and templars stationed there as well. All of them would recognize Laus on sight. Thus, Reinheit’s fears were understandable.

“Shouldn’t we avoid Esperado and take the roundabout route to Valeria instead?”

The railway tracks the train used were shaped like a six-spoked wheel, with all the spokes coming out of the central city of Esperado.

To the northwest was Parantino, to the northeast was Obius, to the east was

Rumalus, to the southeast was Valeria, to the southwest was Terio, and to the west was Kisps.

Obius and Rumalus bordered the Uldia Dukedom, while Valeria bordered the Grandort Empire. Laus's current plan was to head to the empire via Valeria, then head east to the forest. They could either get to Valeria by taking a roundabout route and going clockwise through the cities or head straight there passing through Esperado.

Reinheit didn't want to tempt fate, which was why he was advocating for the longer route. However, Laus shook his head and stated, "Like I said before, the more people we're around, the safer we are."

Entris was around 360,000 square kilometers in size, and most of it was populated. But between the federation's major cities, there were some stretches of empty plains and uninhabited hills. Also, there were naturally multiple stops on the train routes. They didn't just go directly from major city to major city. However, there was an express line that ran only from any of the six outlying major cities to the capital.

"I doubt our enemies will attack a moving train, but they might target us at a more deserted station."

"I understand what you're saying, but...perhaps we should head for the dukedom instead?"

"The dukedom is mostly rural. There are fewer cities and people there than in the empire. Plus, if we go there, we'll have to go through the Odion Federation to get to the forest. The less borders we have to cross, the better."

"I suppose...the church won't be so brazen that they'll try something in Esperado. You're right, it might be best for us to stick to the most populous areas."

"As a knight, I realize it's shameful to use innocent civilians as a shield, but..."

Laus knew that was what was bothering Reinheit as well, and he gave him a wan smile. Reinheit returned the smile and said, "I just hope the Central Church's archbishop doesn't do anything while we're there..."

There were frequent power struggles among the church's top brass, so Laus

doubted the Central Church's archbishop had been informed of his betrayal. After all, if word got out to the branch churches, it would weaken the main cathedral's power. Besides, if the archbishops knew, they'd try to win the glory of capturing Laus for themselves, so the main cathedral had good reason to keep his betrayal secret even from other members of the clergy.

"There are all sorts of ways this could go wrong, Reinheit, so there's no point thinking about contingencies."

"That's true, I suppose."

"In the end, it comes down to what you want to believe in."

"What I want to believe in, huh? Not what I *should* believe in."

Laus nodded in response, and Reinheit covered his face with one hand. Sharm was watching worriedly from a short distance away.

"Do you regret coming with us?" Laus asked quietly, prompting Reinheit to look down at him.

He's so young... Laus thought.

Reinheit was only twenty-four. As he'd mentioned before, he'd been born in a remote village, and when it had been discovered that he possessed special magic that made him immune to status effects, he'd been called to the capital and made into a low-ranking knight. Had Laus not hired him to be one of the Barn family's personal guards, he would have likely been a rather mediocre templar and died on a battlefield somewhere.

Regardless, the point was that Reinheit had practically no real combat experience. He was a perfectly average young man, whose main virtue was that he took his duties seriously. But now he'd become an enemy of the state. Laus suspected that knowledge was weighing heavily on him. But in truth—

"Not at all," Reinheit said firmly, snapping Laus out of his musings.

"I merely did what I believed was just. I made this choice of my own free will."

I don't regret a single thing I did.

"I'm only complaining because I'm tired. Though I know you must be even more tired, after carrying us all the way here and healing me," Reinheit shook

his head after saying that, disappointed by how pathetic he was acting.

Laus placed a firm hand on his shoulder and said, “You’ve done well, Reinheit. There’s no need to put yourself down like that.”

“Father’s right, Reinheit! You know, I admire you as much as I admire him!”

“Laus-sama, Sharm-sama...”

Sharm ran over and wrapped Reinheit in a hug. Taken aback by his sincerity, Reinheit simply blushed and scratched his head awkwardly.

Smiling, Laus added, “Reinheit, the reason you’re advocating for the safer route isn’t because you’re losing heart, but because you find it hard to trust the Liberators. Am I right?”

“That...might be it, yeah.”

In truth, there was another reason why Laus wanted to head to Esperado. Even if they managed to sneak their way into the empire, Laus wasn’t confident he could get from there to the forest in his current condition; especially not if he had to evade pursuers the entire time.

“Since the Liberators are a resistance movement, you’re right that they probably have a base of operations in Esperado. But...are you sure they’ll help us?”

Laus had hoped to enlist the Liberators’ help for the final leg of the journey. However, Reinheit had never met Miledi and the others. Thus, he was worried they held a deep-seated grudge against knights of the church and doubted they’d offer their aid, even if Laus and Reinheit were defectors.

“If they look at this through a logical lens, they’ll see the merits of having you on their side and offer to help. But—”

“People’s emotions can often cloud their judgment,” Laus mused.

“Yes...”

If Laus were in peak condition, it wouldn’t matter, since he could take them on in a fight. But right now, he was sorely weakened. And so, Reinheit wanted to avoid taking any unnecessary risks. He truly wanted Laus to be as safe as possible.

“Besides, can we even be certain they’ll contact us?” Reinheit asked.

“We’re trying to avoid standing out, so they might not even notice we’re there,” Sharm added.

“You two both bring up valid points, but if the church has sent a team to eliminate us, it’ll be made up of a small group of elites. They won’t want to draw attention to themselves either, meaning the Liberators will have far more eyes than them on the ground.”

“You think they’ll be actively looking for us?”

“Yes. And they’re much better at stealth and detection than we are, considering how long they’ve had to stay hidden.”

Laus suspected they hadn’t tried to contact him within the theocracy because they knew it would just lead to both of their deaths if they did. But he knew the Liberators must have some people watching the area around the capital, and almost certainly had a base in Entris, which was why he’d prioritized coming here.

He’d laid the groundwork for receiving their aid. Indeed, he’d pushed himself this hard because he believed they really would come to help him.

“You have absolute faith in the Liberators, don’t you?” Reinheit asked.

“Of course,” he said with such conviction that Sharm and Reinheit stared at him in surprise. “If I didn’t, I would never have considered challenging the ‘absolute’ might of the church.”

Sharm and Reinheit exchanged glances, smiling wryly at each other.

I guess that makes sense... they thought simultaneously.

A little before noon, the three of them headed to the station. Unlike the plain carriage station, the train station was an ostentatious building held up by large marble pillars with sculptures engraved in them.

The waiting room was spacious, with plenty of benches and numerous places to stow your cargo while waiting for the train. Despite that, it was so crowded that it seemed like the population of the entire world had been packed inside the building. And this wasn’t even the busiest time. That honor was reserved for

the early morning. After all, it was a universal rule that stations were busier in the mornings than in the afternoons.

In truth, Reinheit had wanted to get morning tickets as well, but he hadn't been able to because all the merchants who were veterans of the train ticket marketplace had snapped them up first. Reinheit's eyes glazed over as he thought back to his fierce battle with those merchants with bloodshot eyes, while Sharm looked around the station excitedly. His eyes stopped on the platform, which was as wide as the station itself. There was a staircase leading up to it, and there were letters carved into each step.

"Father, why are there names carved into those stairs?" Sharm asked, pointing to the letters.

"They're the names of the people who helped build this train."

"Look, Sharm-sama. Don't you recognize some of those names?"

"Oh, yeah, I do. They were in my history books..."

Sharm read through the names, his eyes sparkling with excitement. He was trying his hardest to stay calm, but it was clear to anyone watching that he was acting like an enraptured tourist. He glanced about curiously, with each new sight catching his attention for a few minutes. He might have been mature for his age, but he was still a kid. Laus and Reinheit knew they couldn't afford to stand out, but they didn't have the heart to put a damper on his enthusiasm.

Though he didn't realize it, Sharm was getting a lot of attention—mostly from girls around his age—now that he'd taken his hood off. However, it would've been more suspicious if all three of them kept their hoods on the entire time, so Laus didn't reprimand him for it. He'd already scoped the place out an hour ago to make sure there wasn't anyone from the church looking for him here.

The train they'd be riding was set to arrive in ten minutes. Laus was content to let Sharm enjoy himself until then, and he secretly hoped the small amount of attention they were drawing might prompt someone from the Liberators to make contact with him.

Reinheit had also taken off his hood. He was practically a nobody, so he didn't need to hide his face as much as Laus.

“Oh, Sharm-sama. Wait a moment.”

“Ah, s-sorry, Reinheit.”

Realizing he’d grown far too excited, Sharm blushed and obediently took the hand Reinheit held out to him. The two of them looked like brothers as they walked through the station. Some of the older ladies who were nearby had their hearts melted by the adorable sight. And some of the younger women were sporting nosebleeds. Reinheit and Sharm were both quite handsome, so it wasn’t surprising they stood out. Honestly, Laus was just happy everyone else appreciated Sharm’s cuteness, so he didn’t seem to mind the attention they were getting.

While Sharm and Reinheit explored, Laus headed to a corner of the station that had initially caught Sharm’s interest. They sold palm-sized replicas of the golem train there. Laus bought one and handed it to Sharm.

“F-Father, you didn’t have to—”

“It’s fine. Go on, take it.”

After he’d handed the replica over, Laus briskly walked to the platform. Sharm looked between Laus’s receding back and the replica in his hands.

“This is the first time anyone’s ever given me a toy...”

“Being able to enjoy little things like this is one of the perks of leaving the church.”

“You’ve gotten used to the heretic life pretty quickly, Reinheit.”

Reinheit shrugged casually, and Sharm didn’t know how to feel about that. But a second later, he ran over to Laus, dragging Reinheit behind him.

“Father, thank you so much for the present! I’ll treasure it forever!” he shouted with a smile.

Laus blushed a little upon hearing that, while Reinheit’s shoulders trembled as he tried to hold back a laugh.

The group reached the platform just as the Magic Train arrived. The screech of metal as it braked annoyed most of the people waiting, yet it excited Sharm.

“Wow...” he muttered, looking up at the massive metal behemoth.

The Magic Train looked imposing. Its body was made of a reddish iron that looked silver in the sunlight, and it was two hundred meters long. Each of its cars was much larger than a carriage, and the plethora of magic circles engraved onto its exteriors glowed with a faint light.

Motes of mana trailed behind it as it rolled to a stop at the station platform, making Sharm gaze up at it in wonder. There was a large, transparent jewel set into the front of the train, and there were numerous interlocking magic circles contained within the jewel. There were two windows high up on either side of the front car, which looked sort of like eyes and made it seem like the train was solemnly looking over everything. The rear car had arms jutting out of it as well, which loaded and unloaded luggage. It was a train, but it was also clearly a golem.

Even Laus seemed excited as the three of them boarded the train. The interior was covered in stylish, dark-brown wood, while the box seats were covered in wine-red upholstery.

“Let’s sit here,” Laus said, looking at the first row of seats.

He wanted to be able to get out immediately if anything happened.

Sharm took the window seat. Laus sat next to him and Reinheit took a seat across the two of them.

“...”

“Father, are you okay?”

Laus had been trying to hide his exhaustion, but it must have shown when he’d sat down, since Sharm looked rather worried.

“Here, Laus-sama,” Reinheit said, offering him a potion.

“Thank you.”

“It’s fine. We have five hours until we reach Esperado. You should rest until then at least.”

“Thanks, I think I will.”

Laus soon downed the bittersweet potion, but his exhaustion ran soul-deep, so it didn't do much for him. However, rejuvenating his body still had some effect, so it kept him from weakening any further.

Feeling just a little bit better, Laus closed his eyes. And before long the conductor blew his whistle and the train shuddered into motion.

There was a high-pitched whine as mana suffused the golem, bringing it to life. The boarding ramps fell away, and the steady vibrations of the moving train lulled Laus to sleep.

At around the same time, a lone bunny was lazing about in Esperado.

"Haaah, this is paradise."

She had dark blue hair styled in a bob cut, a slender figure, medium-sized breasts, and a very fluffy set of ears and tail. Based on just appearances, she looked extremely cute. Unfortunately, her room was as messy as it got. Her clothes and towels were scattered all over the floor, as were leftover meals and food scraps. Bottles full of poison and unsheathed knives were strewn about, and there was barely anywhere to stand without stepping on something. Even the luxurious bed and carpet both had numerous food stains on them.

"When I heard I was being dispatched on a mission outside the forest, I thought I was being exiled, but I should thank Her Majesty for giving me such a cushy job."

The bunny girl sipped orange juice on her bed through a needlessly ostentatious straw. She was lying down, so naturally, the liquid ended up going into her trachea and she started coughing. Droplets of orange juice hit the bed, making it even dirtier than before.

"*Cough... Cough...* Delicious. Yeah, I'm definitely thinking I should change jobs."

She didn't seem to mind that she'd dirtied her bed further as she continued enjoying her juice.

"I'm going to spend the rest of my life relaxing as a member of the Liberators' support branch!"

“We’re not feeding you to loaf around, you worthless rabbit!” a female voice shouted, and Sui, the Haltina Republic’s top spy, let out a surprised yelp in response. She jumped a little as well...and because the bed was so springy, she bounced a few times before falling off of it. Of course, she managed to roll gracefully on the floor, since she *was* a skilled warrior, even if she was lazy.

Looking up, she saw the incarnation of pure wrath looking down at her. Said incarnation was a woman with medium-length gray hair, gray eyes, and pretty features...when she wasn’t angry, anyway.

“Y-You can’t just barge into people’s rooms like this, Shirley!”

“This isn’t your room, you deadbeat!”

Shirley Nelson was the daughter of the owner of the first-class Hotel Lusheina, which happened to sit right in the middle of Esperado. The hotel also happened to hold the Liberator base in the city. And the room Sui was currently in was indeed not Sui’s. It was the luxury suite situated on the fifteenth floor of the hotel.

Shirley hadn’t come in from the front door either. Instead, she’d entered from behind a shelf on the wall. The shelf was secretly a revolving door, and the passage behind it led to the basement where the Liberator base was situated.

“B-But you’re the one who said I could do whatever I pleased with it!”

“Yeah, well, there are limits to that!”

“You never told me there were any limits. You just said I could do what I wanted with the room. If there were limits, you should have told me beforehand. You can’t just slap on conditions after the fact.”

“Y-You little twerp!” Shirley roared. It looked like she was about to start stamping her feet. Normally, she was a calm, cheerful person, but ever since Sui had arrived her patience had been sorely tested.

At first Shirley had been excited when she’d heard a super-spy from the republic would be coming to reinforce the Liberator branch in Esperado, but then she’d discovered what she was really like. And now she was just sighing constantly in exasperation.

“You’re just gonna have to get used to it, Shirley. This is what Sui’s like.”

“Leo-san...”

Another person walked in through the revolving door. He was a middle-aged man who appeared to be a cross between a gentleman and a bandit. His name was Leonard Avan and he was the captain of the second combat unit attached to the main headquarters, as well as the leader of the Laus rescue mission. His face was quite handsome, and when he was smiling you might almost mistake him for a noble. Unfortunately, his chin was covered with patches of stubble, he had a cigar in his mouth, and his clothes were wrinkled. To top it all off, he constantly kept his hands in his pockets, making him look like a thug.

He resembled Badd in a lot of ways, both superficial and otherwise. He, too, was a bachelor at the ripe old age of forty-six. In fact, he was also Badd’s good friend.

Incidentally, Badd was the captain of the main headquarters’s first combat unit, in addition to the Liberators’ vice-leader. But since Badd frequently went missing, his men usually took their orders from Salus.

Leonard placed a comforting hand on Shirley’s shoulder, looked around the room, and said, “Hey, Sui. At least put some goddamn clothes on.”

She was wearing underwear at least, but she’d been influenced by the fashion of the city, so it was a rather seductive pair. A normal guy might have started salivating at the sight of her, but not Leonard. Unlike Badd, he wasn’t a bachelor because no one liked him, but because every woman who showed an interest in him had multiple fatal flaws...and Sui set off all of his alarm bells.

“It’s your fault for coming in without knocking. In fact, you should be paying me reparations for staring at a pure maiden’s skin without permission! Give me enough money to live comfortably for another five years!”

“Keep talking and you’ll be spending five years paying off your doctor’s bills.”

“I’m sorry.”

Leonard could look pretty threatening when he wanted to. Plus, he had the strength to back up his threats. Sui had no pride to speak of, so naturally, she had no compunctions about immediately getting on her knees and apologizing.

Her apology was so obsequious that it looked like she might even start licking Leonard's boots.

Leonard took a puff from his cigar and muttered, "Look, just put some clothes on and we'll call it even."

Sui immediately got back up and gave him a lazy, "Okaaaaaay."

"I know this sounds rude, but are we sure the queen picked the right person for this job?" Leonard asked as he watched Sui scratch her butt, then start searching through the pile of filth for some clean clothes. It was hard to believe she was one of the republic's finest.

"I mean, her skills are the real deal."

"I know, but..."

While they talked, Sui accidentally stepped on one of her caltrops and started hopping up and down on one foot. She was still in her underwear, so her ass was on full display as she hopped. Both Shirley and Leonard were far from impressed, but they also knew from experience that they did indeed need her.

Five days ago, this avatar of sloth had easily snuck into Esperado's Central Church and stole a treasure trove of information. With almost no effort, she'd accomplished something the entire support branch hadn't done in ages. And yet, once she was done, she simply said, "I only did this because I was sick and tired of you guys asking me to work every single day, but now I realize it was a mistake. I should never have done a job like that! And I'm not doing it again, even if you ask me!"

Indeed, she had only obtained information on Laus because she'd wanted to work less. Unsurprisingly, the Liberators' head spy had collapsed in shock upon hearing how easy it had been for Sui.

"I almost feel bad for the church. They got infiltrated so easily."

"Well, she wasn't really pulling her weight when we were hiding out around the capital. In fact, she was slacking off the entire time."

A few days before the Templar Knights had returned to the theocracy's capital, Naiz had helped Leonard and the others sneak into a nearby city.

However, Sui had taken every opportunity she could to shirk her duties. Any time she was asked to patrol or stand watch, she'd find some excuse or the other to slip away. She'd also complained nonstop about how annoying it was to live undercover. And worst of all, she'd used her special magic, Refraction, along with her ability to freely hide her presence to head to the neighboring towns and spend organization funds on meals at fancy restaurants and expensive stores.

Naturally, Leonard and the others had been cross with her. Of course, Sui apologized profusely each time, but then she'd go back to her old habits within a few days.

People started to wonder whether the republic had sent them aid...or a saboteur.

Eventually, Leonard decided to split the group in two. They'd already waited for a long time with no sign of Laus, Naiz was no longer with them, no one but Sui could infiltrate the capital, and she was adamant about not going in there. And so, Leonard took half of his men back to Esperado to see if Laus had already left the country, while the other half remained in the theocracy in case Laus had just been biding his time.

Naturally, Sui had joined the group leaving for Esperado. Leonard knew that if he left Sui with the group staying behind, she'd likely desert.

"At first I thought the republic had just pawned their problem child off to us, but..."

The day they'd returned to Esperado, the support branch had told Leonard and the others that ten robed figures had secretly entered the Central Church recently. Leonard immediately decided to investigate, and when Sui had vanished off somewhere, he assumed she'd just been slacking, so he'd ignored her disappearance. But before they'd even come up with an infiltration plan—

"I'm baaaaaack! I snuck into the church, and apparently, Laus-san escaped the same day he got back to the capital. I heard he's traveling with his youngest kid and one of his guards."

Sui returned and dropped that bombshell on everyone. Leonard and the others had been in the middle of a meeting that had lasted throughout the

night, but Sui's information blasted everyone's exhaustion away.

Everyone had stared at her, dumbfounded. She'd brought them the exact information they'd been so desperate to find.

Apparently, the white-robed figures were the assassin unit sent to take Laus out. Most of them were keeping an eye on the Uldian border, but since they hadn't seen any signs that Laus had traveled through there, they were beginning to suspect he was in Entris instead. The captain of the assassin unit had taken a few handpicked elites and set up a surveillance net around Esperado.

They'd made the Central Church their base of operations, and while the archbishop who presided over it had been apprised of the situation, he'd been ordered not to interfere with their operations. They also had an artifact that would inform them of Laus's position if they got to within a few dozen meters of him, as well as a bunch of other plans that Sui had lazily explained. Leonard and the others had been absolutely floored. They'd all thought she was just a deadbeat, but she'd betrayed their expectations.

It was in part by design, as Sui made a point of hiding her talents until they were truly necessary. Leonard had actually apologized to Sui for not seeing her value before, while the rest of the Liberators had still been in too much shock to do anything. Their spy had actually been huddled in a corner cradling their knees, muttering, "I'm sorry... I'm sorry I'm so useless..."

It was then that Sui had hit them with her demands.

"I was out working hard while you were all wasting time in meetings. I want a reward for this, or else I'm quitting. I won't work another day in my life for no pay. I risked my life for this, so you better at least let me have this hotel's best suite!"

Sui was still Sui, no matter how competent she was. Unsurprisingly, everyone found her unbelievably annoying. But ultimately, they had to respect her resolve.

Leonard had asked what she would've done if she'd been caught while sneaking around the church—half out of worry—and her response had been, "I carry a special corrosive fruit made from monsters in the forest with me at all

times. If I get caught, I'll eat it...and it'll erode me so thoroughly you won't even be able to recognize who I once was."

For all her complaints that she didn't want to die, she took her job seriously and was ready to give her life to save her comrades. Leonard had honestly been impressed upon hearing that. And he also finally realized why the queen had called Sui the republic's trump card.

He'd given Sui a resigned smile and offered her the reward she asked for without complaint. It was only natural, considering the lengths she'd gone to. Even if she had spent the five days since then lazing about in the suite, Leonard knew he had no right to complain. After all, Sui had accomplished more than the rest of them combined. Granted, she'd worn down everyone's patience to the point where even the gentle Shirley had gotten angry.

"Hey, at least she gets serious when it counts. And, well, she does care about her comrades. We can give her that much at least."

"Leo-san, you're way too nice to women. Especially younger women!"

Both of them turned to look at Sui, who'd finally managed to put on some clothes.

"Haaah, guess this is the end of my life of luxury. Sheesh, this isn't even close to worth it, considering how I risked my life for that intel and all. You Liberators really work people to the bone! But I guess if I have to do just a bit more work to join your crew, well... He he he... If I can become a part of the Liberators, I'll get to live like this for the rest of my life! I won't ever have to go back to the forest! You can do this, Sui!"

Her slovenly smile suited her to an uncanny degree.

"She cares about her comrades?"

"Don't say it, Shirley. I think rabbitmen are just all like this."

Sui was damaging the reputation of all rabbitmen with her act.

"Fwaaah! So, what is it? Did something happen?"

Leonard grinned at Sui as she yawned.

"You bet. We've found Laus Barn and his companions."

“We’re going to hold a meeting to decide what to do next, but we can’t start without you, so hurry up,” Shirley added.

“You don’t have to be so snappy about it. What are you, my mom?”

“I’m gonna deck you!”

You could say the two of them weren’t very compatible, but Sui got on pretty much everyone’s nerves, no matter who they were. Leonard just knew how to deal with her because he’d dealt with so many problem children in his life already. He stared at nothing in particular while he waited patiently for the two girls to finish arguing.

Laus had been hailed as the church’s strongest knight, and he was also an ancient magic user. Thus, the group sent to assassinate him was most likely quite strong.

“I can’t believe we have to deal with their hardest hitters right off the bat,” Leonard grumbled, blowing a puff of smoke and crushing his spent cigar in his fist with such force that it went out immediately. He then walked through the revolving door again and took the elevator down to the secret underground base. He navigated his way between desks covered in mountains of paperwork and the Liberators who were running to and fro between them, then walked over to the circular wooden table set apart from the rest of the room by a partition.

Waiting at the table were the various squad captains assigned to the Laus rescue team, as well as an elderly man with cropped gray hair and a curled mustache, Rigan Nelson, the owner of this hotel and the commander of the Esperado branch.

“Finally, the layabout makes her appearance,” a bald old man with a white mustache said as Sui slouched in her seat, yawning. He was well past seventy, but his arms were musclebound and as thick as logs. His short, stout stature made him look like a stereotypical fantasy dwarf.

The man was the captain of the Esperado branch’s combat squad, Arsel Blare. Normally, he ran a fireworks shop in the city, but he was a capable fighter and possessed the special magic Explosion, which let him create an explosive blast anywhere within a set distance.

“I was just enjoying the break I was rightfully granted,” Sui replied haughtily.

“Hey, Sui-chan, have you ever heard of this word called restraint?”

“Of course I have. What do you take me for, an idiot?”

“Even I haven’t ever lived it up in a suite like that...” a woman wearing a black dress and a white poncho said, her shoulders drooping. She was the Esperado branch’s spy chief, Jinx Renka. She had short black hair and was in her early thirties. She was also the one who’d been so shocked by Sui’s capabilities that she’d had a mental breakdown. She’d looked a little spaced out all the time, but ever since Sui had outdone her she’d seemed fragile, like a stiff breeze could shatter her.

With the addition of Leonard and Sui, everyone needed for the meeting was assembled.

Sui glanced around the room, and though most people here had only known her for a short time, they could tell exactly what she was thinking. She was clearly annoyed that no drinks were being served at the meeting.

Everyone ignored her.

“Let’s get this over with quickly,” Rigan said cheerfully, his voice echoing through the room.

“We’ve received a messenger bird from the Parantino branch,” Shirley added. “It came this morning. Apparently, Laus Barn and his companions will arrive here by evening.”

The Magic Train traveled at a speed of roughly thirty kilometers per hour. It moved about three times as fast as a carriage, which was exceptional considering it didn’t need to rest and could carry a massive amount of people and goods. However, it couldn’t hold a candle to the speed of the strengthened Isoniol eagles that the Liberators used as messenger birds. The message from Parantino had arrived long before the train.

“So we’ve finally found him, huh? I guess his title as the church’s strongest knight isn’t just for show if he managed to slip past our surveillance net for this long.”

“I’m sorry I’m so useless... I’m sorry for being a waste of space,” Jinx muttered. Her self-deprecation had been getting worse by the day, but Shirley simply ignored her and continued with the report.

“Unfortunately, the person who spotted him did so just before they boarded the train and at quite a distance, so they didn’t have a chance to make contact with Laus. From what they said, though, Laus looked rather haggard and was missing his left arm.”

“Holy shit, are you serious?” Leonard blurted, his face scrunched up into a frown. For some reason, Sui frowned as well.

“Yes. Moreover, the only member of his family with him was his son.”

“But isn’t his family composed of his wife, mother-in-law, and three sons?”

“He has a few other distant relatives as well, but those are all the people who are part of the main household. I suspect it’s his youngest son who’s with him now.”

“Do you think he’s planning to go back for the rest of his family later, or are they traveling separately with their own guards?”

“Either of those might be the case, but we have no way of ascertaining the truth at present.”

He clearly went through a tough fight to get here... Leonard thought to himself.

“Have the assassins stationed here made a move?”

“They have a rotation of sentries keeping an eye on the station 24-7, as usual.”

“According to Sui, they have an artifact that can locate him if he gets within a few dozen meters of them. At this rate, he’ll be caught the moment he steps off the station.”

“Have we still not established the Dark Gates around the theocracy’s capital?” Arsel asked, and Shirley shook her head.

“It takes time to find suitable locations to set them up. I’m afraid there’s only so much we could do in five days.”

“Yes, which is why we need to contact Laus before the assassins reach him and get him to immediately take a train to Obius,” Rigan replied. Everyone nodded in agreement, then turned to Sui.

Her drooping bunny ears twitched, and she instinctively looked behind her.

“Sorry, but we’re looking at you,” Leonard said flatly.

She unhappily turned back to face him and asked, “So, what, you want me to find him the moment he arrives and use Refraction and my presence hiding abilities to get him to secretly switch over to a train to Obius?”

Despite her lazy personality, she was quite smart.

Sui’s magic could work on other people if she was touching them. For a while, Meiru had made use of that feature to escape from Lyutillis. She’d carried Sui around like a portable stealth machine...and honestly, it’d been quite effective.

“That’s right. Will you do this for us, Sui?” Rigan asked in a kind voice.

“No way,” Sui replied firmly.

Shirley looked like she was about to blow her top, while Leonard massaged his temple. Jinx and Arsel simply sighed, feeling exhausted already.

Seeing how everyone was gearing up to force her to cooperate, Sui quickly added, “I mean, think about it. You guys are the ones who said that if the church is trying to conceal Laus-san’s betrayal, they won’t attack him in public! But if they realize I’m trying to make contact with him, they might get spooked and attack anyway! The citizens will be in danger!”

“But you know from experience that they can’t see through your stealth. That’s the whole reason you were able to gather intel on them, isn’t that right?”

“Yeah, but my powers aren’t perfect! Who knows if I’ll be able to deceive them when they’re actively looking for someone.”

She had a point. And in truth, her powers weren’t perfect. Miledi and the other ancient magic users had been able to see through her stealth, for example. Thus, it stood to reason that the squad sent to take out Laus, who was an ancient magic user, was about as powerful.

The reason Sui had been able to successfully infiltrate the Central Church was

because she'd used her exceptional hearing to eavesdrop from a safe distance, and because the archbishop had been demanding more details from the assassination squad sent by the pope, so they'd all been distracted and talking rather loudly.

"Don't worry, Sui. We have a backup plan in mind," Rigan said gently, but that only caused Sui's ears to droop further. She knew from experience that when a person in power was trying to sound as kind as possible, it was because they were about to pressure you really hard to do something you didn't want to do. It meant they had the conversational skills needed to shoot down any excuse you came up with.

In her head, Sui protested that she didn't want to hear their backup plan, but she didn't have the guts to say it out loud.

Rigan placed a black key made of crystal in front of her.

Fuck! I knew it! Sui thought dejectedly.

"This is the Dark Key that was given to our branch. If the assassins detect you, use it to teleport yourself and Laus Barn's party to safety."

Only a select few people had been granted Dark Keys by Oscar. In fact, of the people present, only Leonard and Rigan possessed one. It was meant to be used in case the base was compromised and everyone needed to evacuate in a hurry. So essentially, handing it over to Sui would mean temporarily abandoning their lifeline.

"Hang on, Rigan-san. Shouldn't she use my key instead of yours?"

"No, Leonard. If she does end up needing to use it, you'll need yours to chase after her. Please hang on to it."

Rigan's gentle voice belied the strength of his resolve. His eyes, which looked like an endless, calm ocean, turned back to Sui.

"Bringing Laus Barn to our leader is more important than our lives. Do you understand?"

"B-But I told you, those guys are seriously bad news!"

"Yes, you did."

“I mean it! I can’t really explain it properly, but they’re, like, insanely dangerous! They might spot me before I even get to Laus-san and cut me down in a single stroke!”

Indeed, the reason Sui was so reluctant to go on this mission was because her intuition, which had been honed over a thousand battles, was telling her it was a bad idea.

When she’d first snuck into the Central Church and heard the archbishop arguing, she’d wanted to run away at once. She couldn’t explain exactly why, but she’d just gotten a sense that they were dangerous. Strange as it was, Sui had been utterly terrified of those ten people in white robes. Her instincts had warned her that she would die for sure if any of them so much as suspected she was there. But she’d also known this was intel the Liberators desperately needed. And so, she’d risked her life to learn as much as she could.

When she’d made it back to the Liberators’ base, she’d been drenched in sweat. She’d been so mentally drained that she’d actually needed these past few days of rest and relaxation to recover.

“I know, Sui. But you’re the only one who can hope to slip past the assassins and safely bring Laus Barn here.”

“Wh-Why do we have to go so far to—?”

“You’re right. Ideally, we would just meet up with him after he’s left Entris. If he’s capable of dealing with these assassins on his own, then we’d just be a hindrance. We’d be better off making contact once he’s eliminated them.”

“So then—”

“But as he is now, I imagine he’s in no state to fight. And we don’t know how capable the knight traveling with him is.”

Rigan solemnly closed his eyes.

“When you told us about the characteristics of two of the assassins, I had a very bad feeling I knew who they were.”

“You did?” Sui asked, confused. Leonard and Shirley looked surprised as well.

Rigan brought his hands together in front of his face, as if praying his

premonition didn't come true, before saying, "Regardless of whether or not Laus Barn *can* deal with the assassins, we can't allow them to meet."

Of course, it would be ideal if Laus could reach Miledi without any skirmishes.

But that wasn't why Rigan didn't want Laus to run into the assassins, that much was clear.

"Even if the assassination squad finds Laus Barn in the city, it probably won't turn into a big fight. You think they have some way of making sure Laus goes quietly with them, don't you, Rigan-san?"

"Yes, and if my hunch is correct...then it's a truly cruel method."

Rigan was one of the oldest members of the Liberators, so everyone trusted his judgment. Only Sui seemed confused by what Rigan was implying. She was the one who would be risking her life, so she didn't get why everyone was pitying Laus. In fact, she was starting to wonder if Rigan was just saying vague bullshit to make her more inclined to go on this mission.

"Do you have any evidence to back up your conjecture?"

"No, like I said, it's just a hunch," he stated. And before Sui could complain or ask for an explanation, he added, "But you see, I believe in God."

"Huh? What?"

That just confused Sui more, and Rigan smiled sadly at her. Some hatred crept into his voice, and he said grimly, "I believe his evil knows no bounds."

He went on to explain what exactly he thought waited for Laus, which only made Sui more dejected.

She knew for a fact that Rigan was right about God's capacity for evil, which meant his hunch about the two assassins was probably correct as well.

"Laus-sama. Laus-sama."

Laus slowly struggled back to consciousness as he felt someone shaking his shoulders.

"Hrm, have we arrived?" he asked.

“Almost,” Reinheit replied as he grabbed their luggage from the rack. Laus could feel a tiny weight on his lap, and he looked down to see Sharm sleeping soundly.

“He ran around quite a bit to explore after we departed, which must have tired him out,” Reinheit explained.

“Our life on the run has probably exhausted him as well.”

“Yes, he probably felt safe in a moving train.”

“I’m impressed he’s held out so well.”

“He is your son after all, Laus-sama.”

“Of course,” Laus replied with a faint smile as he ran his fingers through Sharm’s tousled hair.

“Do you think the Liberators will contact us?” Reinheit asked.

“Who knows. They are, first and foremost, allies of the people. Even if they spot us, they might avoid making contact to help keep the citizens safe.”

“So you think they won’t actually meet us until we’re out of Entris?”

“That’s the most likely possibility. But we can travel through Entris by train, which means we can rest as long as we’re within the country.”

“Yes, the hard part will come once we’ve crossed the nation’s borders.”

Laus looked out the window and gazed at the changing landscape. At the midpoint between Parantino and Esperado, there had been a few empty hills and plains, but now that they were nearing the capital, they passed by dozens of towns and villages. The scale of these smaller settlements spoke to the prosperity of Esperado.

Reinheit turned to Laus and said in a resolute voice, “Laus-sama, if we do end up in a fight, please allow me to serve as the vanguard, if conditions allow.”

“They’ll have accounted for the possibility that I’m at full strength and sent men who can handle a battle of that caliber.”

“I’m aware. However...” Reinheit’s tone was heavy, forcing Laus to swallow whatever he was about to say before he continued, “I’m just an average person,

but you still allowed me to serve as one of the Barn family's esteemed guards."

Reinheit had been unbelievably proud when he'd written a letter to his family back home telling them he'd been chosen to guard the Barn estate. The letter he'd gotten back from his mother had been stained with tears, while the letter he'd received from his father had been written in a shaky hand.

It was obvious that his parents had been overcome by emotion at the news. Both of them had written, "We're proud of you, son."

Everyone else in the village had written him words of encouragement as well.

For the longest time, Reinheit had believed that would be the proudest moment of his life. But in truth, he hadn't been chosen because he was particularly skilled or anything. He'd just been lucky, and since his appointment, he hadn't achieved anything of note.

As time passed, he began to wonder if he could really be proud of his status.

"Right now, I believe that I'm being tested. Tested on whether or not I truly have what it takes to be a knight."

Of course, he didn't think any specific person was testing him, just some vague, higher power.

"I failed to fulfill my duty as your guard, and you even had to weaken yourself to keep me alive. From here on out, the least I can do is do my job."

"Reinheit..."

"Please stop protecting me, Laus-sama."

Reinheit wanted to be the first into the fray if a battle broke out. He didn't want Laus to waste a single drop of mana on him, even if he was on the brink of death. He wanted his master, Laus Barn, to focus solely on protecting himself and his family.

Reinheit subconsciously touched the sword sheathed at his hip. Laus looked down at it. The sheath was crude, but the sword housed within it was of exquisite craftsmanship. It was the Holy Sword that only true heroes could wield.

"You aren't overestimating your abilities, are you?"

“Pathetic though it might be, I know better than anyone just how weak I am.”

Reinheit could still remember the feeling of the Paladin Commander’s spear piercing his chest.

Laus shook his head in amazement.

You’re much better than you give yourself credit for, Reinheit.

The man standing before Laus was the most loyal knight he knew. Far from bringing shame to his master’s name, he’d uplifted it.

“Very well. If the situation allows for it, I’ll permit you to fight first.”

“Th-Thank you very—”

“However,” Laus interrupted, and some of the joy drained from Reinheit’s face. “Don’t ever give up on living. You’ve been chosen. From among tens of thousands of knights, the Holy Sword picked you. Never forget the significance of that.”

“I... I understand,” Reinheit swallowed, surprised. He looked down at his sword, his new partner.

The Holy Sword was one of the Seven Sacred Treasures the church possessed, and it was supposedly the origin of the others. Of them it was the only one to possess a will of its own, and its wielder always appeared during critical turning points in history.

Some wielders of the Holy Sword had drastically altered the path of history, while others had died without accomplishing their lofty goals. However, not a single Hero of the Holy Sword—or at least, not a single one recorded by history—had lived a life free of strife. All of them had been at the center of their era’s conflicts, as if guided there by the Holy Sword.

What if there was some grand power at work that led me to appoint this seemingly average man as one of my guards, and then decide to bring him along to the church when I knew doing so might lead him to renounce his faith? What if the hand of fate was behind it all? No, that’s far too optimistic... Laus thought with a wan smile.

He looked up and saw that Reinheit was still deep in thought. Realizing he

might have put a little too much pressure on the young man, he smiled and said in a joking voice, “Also, don’t forget that excessive humility can make you look insincere.”

“Huh?”

“No Templar Knight has ever managed to strike down a Paladin Commander, and I doubt another one will appear in the future. Can you really call yourself weak?”

“B-But I only managed that because I was willing to throw my life away with that attack. Besides, ultimately, I wouldn’t have been able to accomplish anything without your help, so you can’t really say I won!”

“It looked to me like you stabbed him through the heart.”

“I mean, yes, but... Actually, now that I think about it, how was he able to stand back up with wounds like that?”

Are all the commanders of the Three Pillars of Radiance like that? Reinheit thought, shooting Laus a sidelong glance all the while.

“Just so you know, I’ll die if you stab me through the heart.”

“M-Makes sense.”

“Hmm, well, my spiritual body would likely survive...and if I could find a way to repair the physical damage in my ethereal form, I guess I could recover from a hole through the heart.”

“So you wouldn’t die either!”

“I suppose it’s reasonable to believe Darrion has some similar trump card.”

“I thought for sure you’d killed him at least, but...am I the only one who thinks we’ll be seeing him again?”

Reinheit thought back to how Longinus had flown away of its own accord after Darrion had died. He didn’t want to think Darrion could come back from that, but it seemed Laus shared his misgivings.

Laus had checked to make sure no soul resided in Darrion’s corpse before leaving, but the fact that he looked away instead of reassuring Reinheit told him

everything he needed to know.

“Will I even be able to serve as our party’s vanguard? No, I can’t lose heart before the battle’s even begun. You can do this, Reinheit...” he muttered to himself in a quiet voice. Just then—

“Ah!” Sharm’s eyes flew open and he sat up.

Laus and Reinheit had been planning to let him sleep for as long as possible, and they looked down in surprise.

“What’s wrong, Sharm? Did you have a nightmare?”

“Huh? Oh, it’s you, father. No, I didn’t, but...” Sharm trailed off and cast his gaze around the room, looking worried.

“Sharm-sama?”

“Umm, I don’t really know how to explain it, but something made my chest feel really tight...and I have this really bad feeling.”

“A bad feeling, you say?”

“Yeah, and it’s getting stronger.”

Laus and Reinheit exchanged glances. Reinheit immediately went on alert and half rose out of his chair, scrutinizing every inch of the car they were in.

“Sharm, have you ever felt something like this before?”

“N-No, this is the first time... Oh, but...” Sharm clutched his chest as he trailed off, desperately trying to put in concrete terms what it was he’d realized about himself.

“Ever since we entered Parantino and I went out on errands, there’s this thing I’ve been feeling...or I guess understanding is a better way to put it?”

“What exactly is it?”

“Umm, like when I was shopping I could tell which stall had better foods and clothes and stuff, and when there were large crowds, I could tell which people I shouldn’t get close to and stuff.”

“Oho...”

“And one time, I was gonna go through this back alley, but I had a bad feeling about it, so I took a detour. Then later, I heard a fight break out in the alley I was gonna go through.”

“I see.”

“Laus-sama, what if Sharm-sama has...”

“Yes, I suspect he’s awoken to some form of special magic. If I had to give it a name, I guess I’d call it Ultra Instinct? If it’s happened this many times, then it’s clearly not a coincidence.”

Laus absentmindedly patted Sharm’s head as he mused his thoughts. Until now, there hadn’t been a single member of the Barn family who hadn’t possessed some kind of special magic.

“I have a special magic?”

“It’s just a guess, but considering the trials you’ve faced during our flight, it wouldn’t be surprising if your latent powers awoke.”

“So this is my special power...”

“Sharm, focus on that sensation you’re feeling. If you can make this power your own, it will be a huge boon for our journey.”

Sharm looked up at Laus in surprise.

“I-I’ll be able to help you and Reinheit?”

“You’ve already been a huge help, you know?”

“Heh heh, your father speaks the truth, Sharm-sama. But now you’ll be able to help us even more.”

“Ah... Heh heh heh... Okay, I’ll do my best.”

A shrill whistle interrupted their conversation, signaling that the train was entering the station. Looking out the window, Laus could see the high-rise buildings of the federation’s capital.

“Father, the bad feeling’s getting stronger the closer we get to the station.”

“So an ambush is waiting for us, eh?”

“They knew our destination? Did the Heretic’s Stained Goblet finally track us down?”

“It’s possible. Or it might just be a standard inspection.”

“What should we do?”

“For now, wait and see.”

Even if the church had tracked their location down, Laus doubted the enemy would strike immediately.

They’d either try to take Laus somewhere deserted to dispose of him discreetly or use the surrounding civilians as hostages to get him to come to the church. In which case, the smart move was to move somewhere preemptively and fight on advantageous ground. Laus doubted he’d be able to win outright, but he was hoping he’d at least be able to steal or destroy the Heretic’s Stained Goblet.

If that proved impossible, his only option would be to make a break for it and rush through the few thousand kilometers between them and the Pale Forest. The forest was Queen Lyutillis’s territory, and so long as the Liberators accepted him, they’d be safe there.

On the other hand, if it was just a standard inspection, Laus was confident they could talk their way past and continue via train to Valeria like they’d initially planned.

Either way, Laus needed to be sure what was waiting for them at the station before making a move.

“Just in case, I’ll cast Spirit Shroud on us again.”

“Will that actually help?”

“It’s more for peace of mind than anything.”

The train continued to decelerate...until finally, it rolled into the station. The platform was packed with passengers waiting to board, as well as the family and friends seeing them off.

Laus and the others got to their feet and moved to one of the spaces between cars where they couldn’t be seen by those outside.

Some of the passengers inside the train started to crowd around the doors. Most of them were merchants who'd ridden it dozens of times before. They wished to get to the doors early so they could avoid the general rush. Laus and the others put on their hoods and went to join them, hoping to mix in with the crowd.

Eventually, the train came to a complete stop. The attendants waiting outside slid the doors open so the passengers could disembark. They flowed outward in a steady stream, causing the platform to become even more crowded. You couldn't even go two meters without bumping into someone.

Laus and the others followed the flow of the crowd, which was heading to the station exit. Considering the fact that this station was the central hub for the entire federation, Laus had expected it to be this busy.

The dome-shaped ceiling made of iron and glass was a sight to behold. Closer to the ground, the walls and pillars were full of carvings and murals depicting ancient myths. Even Sharm, who was still being assailed by that inexplicable dread, was amazed by the grandeur of it all.

"Laus-sama, the train heading to Valeria is that way," Reinheit said, pointing it out after reading a sign. However, Laus held out a hand to stop him.

"Wait," he said, his eyes narrowing.

Neither Sharm nor Reinheit could see very far through the wall of people, so they gave Laus questioning looks. But then a small gap formed in the crowd and they caught sight of two figures in white robes.

They were wearing hoods that hid their faces, but clothing of that nature was popular among travelers and they were far from the only people in such attire. Reinheit didn't sense anything special from them, but Sharm did.

"O-Oh no. We have to stay away from them, Reinheit."

"Sharm-sama?"

Sharm tugged on Reinheit's arm, his face pale.

"What is with those two souls..." Laus muttered, his eyes gleaming dully thanks to the magic he was using to peer into their souls.

When he used Soul Sight, everyone looked like a hazy glowing silhouette. However, the people Laus was staring at were different. Those two looked like patchwork dolls instead of a cohesive whole. Their glow was faint and their souls were warped. It looked as though they'd been broken down and repaired over and over. Even the connection between their bodies and their souls was weak.

Laus and the others had stopped in their tracks, which was causing the pedestrians around them a lot of annoyance. They were shoved and spat at, which unfortunately caused the two robed figures to glance their way.

"Father!" Sharm shouted.

"I know."

"Eeek!"

Laus drew his dagger and brought it right next to a girl's armpit. If he moved the dagger a few inches forward, it'd slice a major artery, and if he pushed even harder, he'd pierce her heart.

Reinheit yelped in surprise, which was understandable. The girl's right hand was on his back, while her left was on Laus's shoulder. He'd been all gung-ho about being the group's vanguard, but he hadn't even noticed this girl sneak up on them. To make matters worse, even Sharm had been able to notice the girl before him. Though Sharm obviously had the advantage of his Ultra Instinct.

Cold sweat poured down his back and he simultaneously chastised himself while turning to deal with this new threat. But when he saw what the girl looked like, his animosity died instantly.

She was barely in her teens. Her pretty blond hair was done up in a bob and she was wearing a dainty headband. Her blouse and skirt had plenty of frills, which was the current fashion in Esperado. She didn't look like a threat. Besides —

"Ugh, this is exactly why I can't stand ancient magic users. All of you discover me so easily. And now even little kids can see through my stealth. My confidence is in tatters."

She clearly wasn't interested in fighting, as her shoulders drooped and she

started fake-sobbing. Honestly, she looked kind of pathetic. But at the same time, she didn't move to let go of either Laus or Reinheit.

"You... I recognize that soul. Are you from the republic?"

"Ugh, I can't believe you remember me... I can't do this anymore. My heart's in pieces. I want to retire."

Though neither Reinheit nor Sharm had ever met this girl before, both of them momentarily thought they saw a pair of bunny ears flopping back and forth.

"Wh-What are you doing here—?"

"Yes, yes, I know I'm one of the republic's generals, but right now I'm on loan to the Liberators. As long as I'm touching you, your presence is hidden and you're invisible. But I'm not sure how effective my abilities will be on the guys who are after you, so let's get out of here! Also, please don't let go of me, little kid. My powers only work on you if you're touching me!"

Sui went from acting terrified to perfectly casual in an instant. She then pushed Laus and Reinheit forward, guiding them in a different direction than the one they'd been going.

Laus knew she had to be a rabbitman, but right now she looked perfectly human. However, he knew from her soul that this was the same person he'd seen on the battlefield.

Reinheit shot Laus a questioning glance, and he nodded and resheathed his dagger.

She wasn't lying when she said no one could see us... Laus thought as he watched the people behind him bump into him and look confused, as though they'd hit an invisible wall.

They'd cause a scene standing still, so he could see why Sui wanted them to move.

"Please let us through, please let us through. I really don't want to die. Ugh, Laus-san, why are you so weak right now? You're supposed to be one of those insanely strong ancient magic users, aren't you? I know you can do better than

this.”

She kept grumbling as they walked. Sui was annoying in a completely different way than Miledi, and Laus was tempted to give her a piece of his mind, but he knew now wasn’t the time.

“Where are you taking us?”

“To the platform with the train heading to Obius. I’ve already bought your tickets. The next train leaves in twenty minutes.”

“That’s the city to the northeast. Do you want us to head to the dukedom?”

“Yep, yep. We’ve already made plans to escort you through it.”

“Were those two in white robes our pursuers?”

“That’s right. It’s do or die, so stay focused! I’ll fill you in on the details later!”

It really did look like Sui didn’t have the energy to hold a conversation right now. Beads of sweat rolled down her forehead, and though she kept her tone casual, her eyes were constantly darting about, looking for any potential threats. And so, Laus and the others held back their questions and silently followed her lead.

It wasn’t that far to the Obius-bound platform. Even accounting for the delay caused by the huge crowds, it wouldn’t take more than five minutes. However, those five minutes felt like an eternity to the group.

Sui could see out of the corner of her eye that the two white-robed figures were standing where Laus and the others had been a moment ago. They were also clearly looking around with purpose. Fortunately, it seemed her abilities combined with Laus’s Soul Shroud were enough to completely hide them from their pursuers’ eyes.

“I’m going to take a little detour.”

“We’ll follow your lead.”

Two new white-robed figures had appeared in front of the group.

Laus and Reinheit grabbed Sui’s shoulders so she could let go of them and move around easier. Meanwhile, Sharm was holding Reinheit’s hand and

hanging onto Sui's skirt.

A few seconds later, yet more white-robed figures appeared from the corridor to their right.

What's with these people? All of them have these strange souls I've never seen before.

All six of the white-robed figures had souls that made Laus doubt they were actually people.

The robed figures managed to roughly track Laus's position, so even though they couldn't find out where exactly he was, they were never too far away. It took a whole fifteen minutes for Sui to lead them to the correct platform after numerous detours.

"All right, if you go now, you'll be able to mix in with the pre-boarding rush."

"I see."

"Pardon me, Sharm-sama."

"O-Oh, thanks, Reinheit."

Reinheit scooped Sharm up in one arm as the group sprinted toward the platform. Since they were imperceptible, the people around them didn't move out of their way. With how large their group was, it was difficult for them to weave their way through the crowd.

When they were halfway through, Laus's elbow bumped into a cart an old lady was pushing and it tipped over.

"Blast," Laus hissed. Had he been in top form, he would never have made such a basic mistake. He was clearly quite exhausted.

"Scenario three, requesting assistance!" Sui said into her lapel, while the old woman screamed as her cart seemingly toppled over for no reason.

One of the white robes had been scanning the area around the platform from the second-floor terrace, so they noticed the commotion. Their head snapped down to look.

Just then, a loud clang rang out.

“Oh, I’m so sorry! Watch out!”

Another cart careened down the terrace stairs, and the white-robed figure shifted its attention to that as a short woman wearing a poncho hurriedly chased after it.

The figure watched as a man at the bottom of the stairs stopped it before it fell and handed it back to the flustered woman, then turned away, seemingly losing interest. The old lady he’d been watching earlier had already picked up her cart and was walking away, though she still looked a little confused.

Thankfully, because the figure had turned back, it didn’t notice the poncho-clad woman shoot it a concerned glance before walking off.

“Friends of yours?” Laus asked.

“Yep,” Sui’s voice replied from behind him.

“By the way, I’ve gotten you all first-class tickets.”

“You guys really thought of everything,” Laus said, impressed.

“H-Ha ha... I might have underestimated the Liberators a little,” Reinheit muttered.

“Y-Yeah, I can’t believe they’re really here in such a big city,” Sharm said.

With Sui’s help, the three of them managed to board the train. The first thing they saw upon entering was the luxurious red carpet on the floor of the corridor, along with a series of doors to one side of it. First-class seats were effectively private rooms, so the cars that held them were segregated from the commoner cars.

A rich couple wearing expensive clothing and jewelry that flaunted their wealth walked past Laus and the others. They pressed up against the walls so that the couple wouldn’t bump into them, and after they’d passed, Sui opened up the door at the center of the corridor. Inside was a pair of comfortable benches that could seat six people.

Right after they got into the room, the conductor blew the whistle and the train creaked into motion. The moment it began to move, Sui let out a relieved sigh.

“Phew. Talk about a close call. They better let me use the suite for a year after this.”

She then shamelessly dived headfirst into the cushy seats and started waving her legs in the air. That caused her skirt to raise, revealing her slender legs and risque underwear.

“Ah!” Sharm and Reinheit exclaimed, looking away awkwardly. The two of them were true gentlemen. Laus, on the other hand, remained wholly unperturbed.

“Please explain what’s going on,” he said calmly, moving Sui’s legs off the bench and sitting down next to her. Sharm and Reinheit looked at Laus with newfound respect and sat down across from him.

“Why did you make contact with us?” Laus asked.

Sui slipped off her headband and replied, “If you’d kept going with your original plan, you would’ve been caught for sure.”

“By the Heretic’s Stained Goblet?”

“Maybe? All I know is no matter how hard you try to hide, Laus-san, they have some artifact that can find you as long as they’re within a few dozen meters of you.”

As her headband came off, Sui’s hair turned dark blue and her drooping bunny ears flickered into existence. This was Sharm’s first time seeing a rabbitman, so he stared at her ears intently.

“Laus-sama, does the church truly possess such an artifact?”

“No, at least not one I’ve heard of... But I suppose they may have found some way to amplify the Heretic’s Stained Goblet’s power.”

“Well, now that we’ve left the station, we’re safe,” Sui said cheerfully as she took off her shoes.

As she lifted her legs to remove her shoes, Sharm and Reinheit once again caught a glimpse of her extremely risque underwear, and they hurriedly turned to each other to protect her modesty.

“But the citizens’ safety should have been your first priority. Is there any

other reason you felt it necessary to meet me?”

“Hmm, well...” Sui trailed off awkwardly.

She kept her tone light though, making it hard for Laus to gauge anything from her words. As she began taking off her knee socks, she finally said, “If I had to say, it’s because our branch chief ordered us to do it. There’s something he found worrying enough that he thought it was worth the risk of contacting you.”

“I see...”

So the squad sent to assassinate me is that dangerous... Laus mused, stroking his chin.

Once she was done with her socks, Sui untied the ribbon on her blouse and began unbuttoning it.

“W-W-W-W-Wait a second! What are you doing?!” Reinheit shouted, grabbing her wrists to stop her from disrobing any further.

“Hyaaaaaahn!”

She’d already undressed enough that one shoulder was bare and her cleavage clearly visible. Naturally, her thighs were also in full view.

Incidentally, it wasn’t Sui who had screamed when he grabbed her, but Sharm. Blushing, the young boy covered his face and retreated into a corner of the room. He had almost no experience with women, so this was a little too stimulating for him. However, his curiosity was stronger than his embarrassment, so he occasionally peeked through his fingers at Sui.

“Why are you stripping?” Laus asked bluntly. Depending on her answer, he was prepared to hit her with a soul shock wave. He could forgive a lot of things, but he wouldn’t stand idly by if his son’s chastity was in danger.

“I’m changing into my combat uniform in case something happens. Isn’t that obvious?”

Surprisingly, Sui had a proper response lined up. Indeed, it was important to be prepared for battle in case of an emergency. Plus, she would stand out dressed like a trendy Esperado teenager in the Uldian Dukedom.

“Well, you don’t have to strip in front of us!” Reinheit shouted, blushing. He had a point.

“You can’t look so...immodest in front of a man! Aren’t you embarrassed?!”

“Huh? You’re just seeing me in my underwear. It’s no big deal... Actually, wait. Hmmm. Oho?”

“Wh-What is it?” Reinheit asked cautiously as Sui started grinning.

“Oh, it’s just, I thought people from the church didn’t consider rabbitmen people, so I figured you wouldn’t be interested in me as a woman.”

“W-Well, there definitely are a lot of people in the capital who probably think that way, but...”

“But not you. You’re lusting after this hot bod,” Sui teased.

“L-Lusting?! Absolutely not! I’m just saying you should be more modest!”

“How cruel... I guess you just think of me as a lowly beast like everyone else...”

“Not at all! I think you’re a very cute girl and—”

“Well, if you think I’m a cute girl, then you better man up and take responsibility for seeing me in my underwear!”

“R-Responsibility?!”

This was the first time anyone had ever said anything of the sort to Reinheit. He’d normally been so focused on work that he’d never had any time for romance, so Sui’s joking remarks hit him hard. He staggered backward, and the train changed directions slightly, causing a ray of sunlight to shine into the car.

Outside, the picturesque streets were bathed in a dazzling sunset. But within, the sunlight simply illuminated a half-naked bunny girl facing off against a trembling young man who was too pure for this world.

Meanwhile, Sharm’s gaze was transfixed on Sui’s seductive thighs. Laus, on the other hand, simply looked out the window, seemingly giving up on everything.

Just then, a newcomer entered the chaotic scene.

“Don’t mind me... Oh, sorry about our resident pervert.”

Leonard walked into the room, shooting Laus a sympathetic glance after he saw Sui half-naked.

“And you are?”

“Oh yes, where are my manners? I’m Leonard Avan, a member of the Liberators’ main forces who has been tasked with rescuing you.”

“I see. Thank you for your assistance. I imagine you already know, but I’m Laus Barn. Do you think you could do something about your companion?”

“I’m sorry...”

Laus looked truly exhausted from dealing with Sui, and Leonard smacked her on the head after apologizing to him.

After she’d finished changing, Sui returned to lazing about and Laus and Leonard both ignored her completely as they began exchanging information.

Leonard started by explaining the escape plan they’d drafted for Laus, as well as which members of the Liberators were on board with them. He then went on to explain Miledi’s condition, and that he’d sent her a messenger bird five days ago when he’d learned about the existence of the assassination squad. If they were lucky, Naiz and the others would be arriving today or tomorrow.

Once Leonard was done, Laus explained what had happened in the capital and his current condition. When he told them that there was one perfectly healthy apostle still at the capital and that there might be multiple of them, Leonard and Sui nearly fainted.

It took a while for them to pull themselves together, and by the time Laus had finished explaining why Sharm was the only family member he’d brought with him, over an hour had passed.

“I see. So we’ve still gotta save your wife and kids, then,” Leonard said, which made Laus crack a smile.

While his other two sons were just twelve and ten—and thus too young to be set in their ways—Ricolis and Debra were loyal citizens of the theocracy. It was hard to imagine they could ever lead a life outside the influence of the church,

or that they would want to even if they could.

Leonard must have realized that as well, but his first concern still appeared to be their safety. He made it clear that Ricolis and Debra's plight wasn't just Laus's problem, but an issue the Liberators had to deal with.

It was important to consider how the citizens of the theocracy would live once Ehit's evil had been revealed to the world and the church destroyed. Would they be able to move on? For the people of the theocracy, the truth might bring them nothing but pain. It was entirely possible they were happy living out their lives as the gods' playthings.

If that's truly the case, then I'll be destroying Ricolis's happiness... But while that thought did cross Laus's mind, he just shook his head.

Sitting in front of him was a man whose determination could be seen clear as day just by looking into his eyes. Everyone here knew that they had to change the world, even if it meant upturning some people's joyous lives. They were more than ready to shoulder that burden.

Leonard and Laus smiled resolutely at each other. But then a second later, Leonard frowned as he remembered something.

"Oh, but..."

"Hm?" Laus asked.

Leonard opened his mouth to speak, but then he sensed Sui staring at him and promptly shut up. He turned to look at her, and the two exchanged silent glances. At the end of it, Leonard seemed to change his mind, and he pulled a cigar out of his pocket. Out of consideration for Sharm, though, he didn't light it and simply chewed on it instead.

Curious, Laus attempted to press Leonard on the matter, but before he could, the Liberator changed the topic.

"Anyway, what you need now is rest. Once we make it to headquarters, you'll be able to take as long as you need to recuperate."

"Thank you. That's much appreciated."

Laus was curious what Leonard was hiding from him, but he agreed that rest

was his top priority at present.

“By the way, can we truly trust that lad you brought with you?” Leonard asked as he motioned toward Reinheit.

“Do you suspect he’s a spy?”

“It just sounds too good to be true that a Templar Knight who isn’t even related to you wants to fight against the world out of loyalty and the goodness of his heart.”

Leonard had heard that Reinheit had risked his life to protect Sharm. However, he still found it hard to believe that a mere Templar Knight could have stood up to the Paladin Commander.

As Leonard had only heard the basic gist of what had happened, it seemed plausible to him that Reinheit and Darrion were in cahoots.

“Hold on! Reinheit’s trustworthy! He—” Sharm rushed to Reinheit’s defense, but Laus held out a hand to stop him.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to get off-topic, so I’d planned to bring this up later, but...” Laus explained.

“Oh? Do tell.”

“During the battle, Reinheit was chosen by the Holy Sword.”

“Come again?”

“He’s this era’s hero.”

“...”

Leonard’s eyes widened to the size of dinner plates. He’d been expecting a practical explanation, but heroes were the stuff of fairy tales.

Leonard turned to look at the sword on Reinheit’s lap, his neck creaking like a badly oiled door. As if to offer proof, the Holy Sword began to glow faintly.

Slowly, Leonard looked up at Reinheit.

“Yeah, I guess I am,” Reinheit said awkwardly.

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!” Leonard shouted after a brief pause.

Annoyed, Sui swiftly clapped her hands over her ears.

Leonard had to admit that if Laus had explained that earlier when he'd been telling the story of how he escaped the capital, they would have gotten off-topic for sure.

"Heh heh, do you get it now, Leonard-san? Reinheit's the greatest knight ever! If he isn't trustworthy, then no one is!"

"Sh-Sharm-sama, you're overselling me," Reinheit said, embarrassed, as Sharm puffed his chest out proudly. He still didn't understand why the Holy Sword had chosen him, so he didn't feel like he truly deserved any praise. However, his humble attitude endeared him to Leonard.

"Ha ha ha... We came here to pick up the final ancient magic user, but who knew we'd be getting such a huge bonus along with him? Really makes you wonder."

"What do you mean?" Laus asked, cocking his head to one side.

Leonard folded his arms and sucked in a deep breath before saying, "Wonder if maybe this is fate. It feels like destiny's finally on the Liberators' side."

"It does indeed," Laus replied with a conspiratorial smile.

Leonard held out his hand to Reinheit and said, "Anyway, welcome aboard, Hero."

"Just call me Reinheit, Leonard-dono."

"Hah, in that case, you better drop the honorifics too."

"Oh, but you can address me as Sui-sama," Sui interjected.

"You shut up," Leonard said dismissively.

The group relaxed a little, then began talking about less serious matters. Meanwhile, the train barreled onward...and eventually, the burning sun began to dip below the mountains.

Once night fell, lamps hissed to life within the train car, bringing light to the dim room. That caused a natural break in the conversation and Leonard said, "Well, all that's left now is to head to Obius and wait for Naiz and the others. If

you'd like, how about—?"

"If you'd like, how about we get some dinner?" was what Leonard was about to say, but before he could, Sharm suddenly exclaimed, "Ah! Father, something's coming!"

Something had clearly tripped the young boy's danger sense.

Upon hearing the panic in his voice, Reinheit was the first to act. He spotted a shooting star hurtling toward their train, so he drew his sword and shouted, "Hallowed Ground!"

Laus grabbed Sharm and held him close, while Sui and Leonard piled on top of Laus to protect him.

There was a blinding flash of light, a deafening boom, and a bone-shattering impact. Then, everyone fell unconscious as the world spun around them.

"Ngh, what *was* that?" Laus groaned as he got to his feet, his ears still ringing. Luckily, he'd only blacked out for a few seconds.

Sharm was resting in his arms, unconscious but unhurt. He let out a sigh of relief, then began appraising the situation.

"Unbelievable... They actually attacked the train."

The broken window was directly above him, the seats were now the walls, and the door became the floor... In other words, the train car had been tipped over.

"Laus-sama, Sharm-sama, are you all right?!"

"Ngh, what nooooooooooow?"

"Motherfuckers... They hit us as soon as we cleared the city."

Reinheit and the others appeared unhurt as well.

Leonard took a small jewel—a communication artifact—out of his pocket. He then talked into it, making sure all the other Liberators that had been riding the train were safe.

"Tch, aside from the engine car, this is the only one they hit? I get it now, they

must have waited until the lights turned on to make it easier to aim.”

“Wait, doesn’t that mean they figured out we boarded the train to Obius?”

“Reinheit, don’t dispel your Hallowed Ground!”

“Understood!”

A second later, another impact hit the train car. The floor, which was now the wall, was made of exceptionally sturdy metal, but a beam of light shot through it like it was paper. The first attack had been a wide-area barrage, and now that they were pinned down, the sniping attacks were coming.

Even though the shot’s power was reduced as it drilled through the train, it was still strong enough to crack Reinheit’s Hallowed Ground. By all rights, Reinheit shouldn’t have been able to cast the strongest defensive spell in existence. It was only possible because he was borrowing the Holy Sword’s power, and he still wasn’t used to controlling it. He put his faith in the sword and poured all of his mana into it, but after another two shots, Reinheit began to groan from the exertion.

“Judging by the range and the power of the shots... Leonard, tell our allies we might be up against the Divine Bow!”

“Seriously? Fuck! You’re telling me the commander of the Paragons of Light was one of those white-robed figures? You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“What should we do, Leo-san? If they’ve stopped the train, they might be willing to hurt civilians.”

“If they have a way of altering their memories, they probably don’t care what happens to them. Worst case, they might just slaughter everyone here.”

If the assassins had been able to snipe Laus without showing themselves, they could easily have pinned the attack on terrorists...or the Liberators, even. However, Sharm’s Ultra Instinct and Reinheit’s fast reflexes had protected Laus from the enemy’s surprise attack.

If they could keep their defenses up, the assassins would get tired of waiting them out and bring the fight to them.

“Ugh... Father, they’re coming,” Sharm said, stirring.

Sui carefully poked her head out of the window, which was now the ceiling, and said, “Five wyverns incoming. The attacks are coming from one of them!”

“Damn they’re fast! They probably tipped the car over to delay our response!”

The wall of the train car had so many holes in it now that it looked like Swiss cheese. The enemy was clearly focusing their attacks on just this car. There likely weren’t any passengers curious enough to poke their heads out of the windows, so the church was confident there would be zero witnesses.

Leonard spent only a moment thinking. Fortunately, they were still within the Dark Gate’s range.

“We’ve got no other choice. Sui, make the jump!”

“What about you guys?”

“We can’t just abandon the passengers.”

“But do you even stand a chance against those guys?”

“We don’t have to beat them. If we can just buy some time, I’ll be able to use my Dark Key to warp everyone to safety. The one good thing about all of this is that none of the passengers have seen the attackers!”

Since the assassins had a way to locate Laus just by being within a few dozen meters of him, they’d likely just flown over all the carriages instead of physically checking each one. And in that case, if Laus vanished, they’d probably focus their efforts on searching for him instead of massacring civilians who didn’t even know what was going on.

“Got it. Is Plan Two good?”

“Fine by me! I’m counting on you, Sui!”

Sui fished the Dark Key out of her pocket.

“Then I’m getting us out of here!”

“But... No, you’re right. I’m sorry about this, Leonard.”

“Hah, instead of apologizing, how about thanking me? Oh, but save it for when we meet up later.”

Laus felt bad about getting innocents involved in his mess, and he felt even worse about just abandoning them like this. However, he also realized staying here would only put them in more danger. Thus, he told himself this was the right thing to do as he scooped Sharm up in one arm.

Sui twisted the key, making the space in front of them shimmer and warp, turning it into a curtain.

“All right, I’ll see you later!” Leonard shouted, giving the group a thumbs-up before running out into the corridor.

“Laus-sama, you go first!”

Reinheit offered to serve as the rear guard, since he was the one maintaining their barrier.

Laus nodded, but before he stepped through the gate, he decided to at least check on the souls of everyone he’d seen at the station who wasn’t part of the assassination squad.

“Wha—? That can’t be!”

His expression stiffened as he saw something that shouldn’t have been possible. And a moment later, a familiar voice reverberated in his head, saying, “You wavered, didn’t you?”

Confused, he turned to look outside and make sure he wasn’t just hearing things. But before he could—

“Ugh, come on, quit dawdling!” an annoyed Sui yelled as she tackled him. He lost his balance and fell into the portal alongside her.

Reinheit followed immediately afterward, taking his Hallowed Ground with him.

A second later, an exceptionally powerful shot slammed into their train car, blasting it to pieces.

“Haaah... Haaah... Where are we?” Reinheit asked, panting. He was exhausted from having to keep Hallowed Ground active for so long.

“We’re about a hundred kilometers out from Esperado,” Sui replied.

The group was in the mountains, near a stream that wound its way through numerous boulders of varying sizes, while a dense copse of trees surrounded them.

Naiz had set up two Dark Gates leading out of Esperado in case the branch members there needed to evacuate. One was to just get them out of the city, while the other was much further out to bring them somewhere safe. Sui had taken the group to the second of those gates.

“So we’re halfway to Obius, then?”

“Yep. Incidentally, our friends were supposed to set up another one of these in Obius, and if they have, we’ll be able to teleport to it once we’re in range. Meaning we really only have about fifty kilometers to go.”

The distance from Esperado to Obius was about two hundred kilometers. Originally, the plan had been to spirit Laus away from the theocracy to the dukedom, so there had been several Dark Gates placed on that route as well. However, five days ago it had become clear they wouldn’t be needed.

Rigan had sent out messenger birds telling everyone what the new plan had become, but there was a limit to how fast the Dark Gates could be moved.

“If the gates had already been relocated, we wouldn’t even have needed to take the train.”

“No point in pining after what we don’t have. More importantly, our pursuers must know we’re heading for Obius. That’s our biggest problem right now,” Reinheit said as he sheathed his sword.

“They’ll be after us before long. Or, since they have wyverns, they’ll just head us off and wait to ambush us at Obius.”

“But if we manage to reach Obius before they do, there’s another Dark Gate in the dukedom, so we’ll be able to teleport there and gain some more distance.”

The setting sun was just barely visible through the foliage. It wouldn’t be long before it was night.

Reinheit turned to Laus, who was hidden in shadow, and said, “I’m worried

about Leonard-san and the others. Should we wait here?”

However, he heard no response. Laus was still holding Sharm tight, and it looked like he was deep in thought. In fact, it looked like he hadn’t even heard Reinheit’s question.

“Umm...Laus-sama?” Reinheit asked hesitantly.

From the looks of it, Sharm seemed confused by Laus’s sudden silence as well. The young boy turned to Reinheit, seemingly at a loss for what to do. It appeared Laus and Sharm had held a short conversation while Sui and Reinheit had been talking.

“Laus-saaaaaan? You listening? Is this some special technique where you sleep while standing?”

None of Sui’s words registered with Laus, but he did turn to look up at her.

“Sui.”

“Oh, good, you finally said something. I—”

“What are you hiding?”

“Hwuh?” Sui asked, dumbfounded.

Laus shot her a sharp glare, and the slight glow of his eyes made it clear he was looking at her soul to judge whether or not her confusion was an act.

“You and Leonard seemed awfully reluctant to broach a certain subject when we were talking earlier. Is there something you aren’t telling me about the assassins?”

“Err, umm, well...”

“Lies won’t work on me.”

Sui scratched her cheek awkwardly.

“I’m not trying to lie to you. It’s just, there’s something we think might be going on...and considering the state you’re in, we figured it was best not to tell you.”

“You think? So you’re not sure?”

Reinheit and Sharm couldn't make heads or tails of Laus and Sui's conversation. But they could tell a glimmer of hope appeared in Laus's eyes when he asked whether or not Sui was sure, as if he was praying her prediction was false.

"Yeah. All I know is that..." Sui trailed off for a second as she glanced over to Sharm. "...two members of the assassin squad are pretty short."

"I see..." Laus muttered.

Sui hadn't really gotten the chance to look under the assassins' hoods when she'd snuck into the church, which was part of the reason why she hadn't known ahead of time that one of them was using the Divine Bow. And frankly, Laus couldn't really fault her for that.

"Is the reason you're asking because you confirmed it for yourself?"

Laus looked down at Sharm, then sighed. After that, he let the boy down and shook his head.

"No, I wasn't able to."

"I see..." Sui mumbled as she stared coldly at Laus. She was sizing up his mental state, as well as how helpful he'd be in a fight, as objectively as she could without letting her emotions sway her.

"I understand now... You guys were trying to be considerate. I'm sorry for interrogating you."

"It's fine, I don't mind. But..."

Realistically speaking, the thing Laus and Sui were worried about should have been impossible, especially considering the strong glow of the soul he'd fought and the strength of that sniper.

Laus wanted to tell Sui not to underestimate him, that he wouldn't be rendered powerless so easily, but he understood her concerns. After all, he was badly shaken right now...and Sui could tell. He even let his breath out in a long hiss.

"You don't need to worry about me."

"I sure hope so..." Sui replied, still unsure.

Laus knew what his duty was. He had to survive no matter what happened. If he didn't find a place to rest and heal, he wouldn't be able to fulfill a single one of his goals. Thus, this was no time to be trapped by his own doubt. If he began second-guessing his choices, he'd just be dancing on Ehit's palm. It was his cruelty that was causing these doubts in the first place.

"Umm, father? What exactly are you two talking about?"

"Laus-sama, are you okay?"

Sharm and Reinheit shot Laus worried looks, but he simply smiled at them.

"I'm fine, sorry."

Neither of them seemed too convinced by his response, but he changed the topic before they could say more. Sharm's concern had seemingly helped Laus bury his fears.

"I think we should push forward, but what do you say, Sui?"

"Definitely. That way even if our pursuers catch up to us, we'll be able to teleport back here to throw them off. If we have to, we can even teleport all the way back to Esperado."

"Hmm. What about Leonard and the others?"

"They'll probably try to slip away unnoticed, but there are monsters in that region, so..."

"They can't afford to abandon the passengers?"

"Yep, that's just how they are."

"Judging by your conversation earlier, you have some kind of plan in place to meet back up with them?"

"Obviously."

"Then it's decided."

The party started trekking toward Obius. The trees hid them well, and they decided to keep going northeast until it was too dark to see. They were able to walk for an hour before the curtain of night fell and stars started twinkling in the sky. Visibility was limited, but the sound of the flowing river helped guide

them.

“Oh yeah, we didn’t get a chance to eat on the train,” Sui said as her stomach rumbled. It would have been a cute noise, but the way she patted her stomach and smacked her lips ruined the effect.

A second later, Sharm’s stomach rumbled as well. Blushing, he tried to make it stop by clenching his abdomen. He was far more embarrassed about it than Sui, clearly.

“We had to leave our luggage behind, unfortunately,” Reinheit said with a frown.

“No worries, I’ve got it covered,” Sui replied before holding her right hand out with a flourish. A plain ring rested on her thumb.

“That’s Oscar Orcus’s signature artifact, I take it?”

“He calls them Treasure Troves.”

The one Oscar had made for Sui had been crafted on short notice, so it was limited in capacity. It could fit about two to three suitcases worth of stuff at most. But for a master assassin like Sui, even that was a godsend. And naturally, she’d packed some rations in there as well.

“So, how much will you pay for these?” Sui asked with a wicked grin. Even in these dire straits, she was trying to make a quick buck.

Reinheit gave her a look of utter disappointment. This was the first time in his life that the kindhearted man had been this disillusioned with someone, but Sui was just that bad. Laus was giving her a similar look, and with a sigh, he nodded. Realizing he had no other choice, Reinheit pulled out his nearly empty wallet. However, it seemed they wouldn’t even have time to eat in peace.

“Something’s coming!” Sharm shouted, his instincts saving the party yet again.

A twinkling star of pure malice hurtled toward the group.

“Reinheit!”

“I know! Hallowed Ground!”

Reinheit immediately borrowed the Holy Sword's power to erect a barrier...and a second later, something slammed into it.

"Ugh, how did they know we were heeeeeere?" Sui whined as she whipped out her Dark Key.

Unfortunately, she didn't get a chance to activate it.

"Longinus Mk II activate—Divine Wrath-Focus Fire."

Another flash of light sped toward them from above. Acting on instinct, Sui dived forward without even taking the time to look up. Her prompt reaction had saved her life. A second after she leaped out of the way, a pillar of light about as thick as a person rained down on the spot she'd been standing. The attack had pierced through Reinheit's Hallowed Ground with worrying ease.

"Longinus?! So Darrion wasn't dead after all?!" Laus shouted, looking up.

But before he could see who'd attacked them, the pillar of light vanished and a young voice shouted, "Longinus Mk II activate—Celestial Flash!"

A curved arc of light flew toward the group. This Celestial Flash was much larger and stronger than one fired by an average Templar Knight.

"Father!"

"Sharm!"

Sharm's panicked voice made it clear to Laus that Reinheit's Hallowed Ground wouldn't be able to withstand the attack. And so, he picked Sharm up and forced body strengthening magic through his bruised and battered limbs. He needed to get away as fast as possible.

The sound of shattering glass heralded the end of Reinheit's Hallowed Ground, and pieces of broken barrier flew through the air. The Celestial Flash had hit the ground so hard it gouged furrows into the earth. Reinheit was blown to the opposite shore, Sui was sent upstream, and Laus and Sharm were blasted to the middle of the knee-deep river.

The three of them had barely managed to stay on their feet and looked up at their assailants.

The attackers' boots crunched on the ground as they landed from the sky.

There were six of them, and they split off to pincer Sui, Laus, and Reinheit in pairs.

Their white robes were gone now, and none of them were knights Laus recognized. He saw no sign of Mulm, the wielder of the Divine Bow, or Darrion, the wielder of Longinus.

Laus had thought he'd recognize the people sent to kill him, since they'd have to be the strongest members of the church. But all of these knights were complete nobodies, and yet all of them were wearing armor that looked like perfect replicas of one of the Seven Sacred Treasures, the Consecrated Plate. And that wasn't the half of it either. Laus recognized all of their weapons as well.

"Th-That's impossible..." Reinheit muttered.

It was hardly surprising, considering the man and woman flanking him both carried swords that looked identical to his own Holy Sword.

The ones pincering Sui wielded Longinus and the Divine Bow, while of the two surrounding Laus, one had Longinus and the Sanctified Shield, while the other had Laus's warhammer, which should have been broken.

Together, they possessed all of the church's strongest relics. Not only that, but some were wielding duplicates. However, the sight was more confusing than awe-inspiring. Also, that wasn't what Laus was focused on...because two more souls dropped down from the wyverns circling above. He'd spotted those two when they'd attacked the train as well, but then he'd convinced himself he'd mistaken their glow.

The two of them landed on a nearby boulder. They were both short in stature, though one of them was slightly taller than the other. However, even the taller of them only came up to the chests of any of the other assassins.

They both looked down at Laus and said in cold voices, "Laus Barn, you are a disgrace to the family name, but now we've finally caught you. Prepare yourself. You'll pay for shaming us with your death."

They pushed back their hoods, revealing themselves to Laus.

"Wha—?! It can't be..." Sharm whispered, shocked. But Laus was shaken as

well, so he wasn't able to offer any words of comfort to his son.

He looked up at the sky, where the four wyverns who'd transported these assassins were circling. Above them, the crescent moon glimmered, its hateful light illuminating everything. In that moment, it looked like God's wicked smile to Laus.

"Shit, the branch commander's hunch was right," Sui said.

"Is the church truly so depraved?" Reinheit whispered with a grimace. Their voices seemed unbelievably far away to Laus, and he looked down at the reality he could no longer deny. This was far crueler than anything he'd suffered.

"Kaime, Selm..."

Laus's own sons had come to kill him. He checked their souls, and they were indeed the two children he'd raised. Though they glowed with far more might than he remembered, there was another, more obvious change they'd undergone as well.

"What happened to your hair?"

Unlike Sharm, Kaime and Selm had been blond like their mother. While Kaime's parted hairstyle and Selm's mushroom cut were the same as what Laus had remembered, the color of their hair was totally different.

"You two have gotten so much taller too."

They still looked like children, of course, but they were both a good ten centimeters taller than when Laus had sent them off to the church.

His voice was trembling, both out of worry for them and because he still held a vain hope that they were doppelgangers instead of his real sons. Either way, the things he was saying were at odds with the gravity of the situation. He sounded like a father who was returning from a business trip and had found his sons had grown while he was gone.

"Do you not repent your actions at all, heretic?"

"To think those would be the first words out of your mouth. You're truly beyond salvation."

Kaime and Selm were incensed. They looked far angrier than Laus had ever

seen them. Their faces warped with hatred and humiliation.

“Kaime-nii-san! Selm-nii-san! What did that apostle do to you?!” Sharm shouted. His brothers’ eyes held such intensity that it felt like you’d go insane just from staring too long into them, but it was precisely because they were so warped that Sharm called out to them.

While they’d been mad at Laus, when they turned to Sharm, Kaime and Selm’s gazes held nothing but contempt. At the same time, though, they seemed ecstatic about something.

“You’re forgetting the proper honorifics, you failure. It’s because you’re like this that you’ll never receive the special ‘blessing’ like we did.”

“Our patron was kind enough to provide us a chance to clear the Barn family’s name, even.”

Kaime and Selm then began shaping their mana. Two massive pillars of energy soon shot up toward the heavens. The quantity of their mana was unnatural, but so was their color. Everyone in the Barn family historically had some shade of black as their mana color, but Kaime and Selm’s mana was now a shimmering white. Moreover, the two of them sprouted wings made of the same color as their mana. They looked frighteningly similar to an apostle.

“Those monsters...”

Laus was enraged. His two precious sons had been tinkered with like lab rats. However, Kaime and Selm mistook Laus’s anger for terror. Grinning wickedly, they looked down at their father and younger brother.

“Do you understand now? We’ve been granted the right to eventually become apostles.”

“So long as we exterminate you and recover the Holy Sword, we will be able to ascend. The Barn family’s prestige will be safe, the Holy Templar Knights’ reputation won’t be tarnished, and to top it all off, we’ll be apostles.”

Laus had been sentenced to death by the church. No matter how hard they tried to hide it, eventually the world would notice the Holy Templar Knights’ commander was absent. It appeared this was the church’s solution to that problem. The old commander’s two sons, who had ascended to apostles, would

be the new face of the Holy Templar Knights. They'd make up some story of how Laus had died a martyr while fighting in Ehit's name. It would make for a sensational story that the masses would eat up...and they would surely sympathize with the two orphans who'd taken up their father's mantle.

They've gotten the script all written out...

Reinheit was trying to shuffle closer to Laus, but the two knights pincering him kept stymieing him. Sui was on one knee, looking for an opening to do anything the whole time. The knights surrounding both of them were eerily quiet. Their faces were expressionless as well. You couldn't even see a fanatical believer's fervor in their eyes. But they were strong, that much was clear. They showed no openings, and they kept Laus and the others in check with mechanical precision.

Can I overpower them?

Laus would have to somehow defeat the knights, then render Kaime and Selm powerless without harming them.

Would it even be possible to transport them if I could?

Even if his sons had turned their backs on him, forgotten their love for Sharm, and had devoted their lives to the service of Ehit, Laus couldn't help but try to think of a way to save them. He pushed his anger and his sorrow to the side, instead choosing to focus solely on the problem at hand. Reinheit and Sui looked ready to fight to the bitter end as well, which made Kaime snort derisively.

"Cease your futile struggling. His Eminence the Pope has granted us a boon which is sure to destroy you."

Kaime brandished his sword, which was a perfect copy of Reinheit's Holy Sword. It, just like the other sacred relic replicas in the other knights' hands, seemed to emanate an ominous aura. Laus suspected those weapons were the boon Kaime was referring to.

"Despair, for no one escapes Lord Ehit's judgment!" Selm exclaimed as he hefted his staff, which looked like a perfect copy of the Divine Rod.

Even though they were up against the man who'd once been known as the

church's strongest knight, the assassins seemed sure of their victory. As one, they prepared to strike. But just before they began their charge—

"I'll tell you everything I know about the Liberators!" Sui shouted, kneeling in the water. She'd picked the perfect moment and completely ruined the tense atmosphere that had been building. She looked up at the knights with pleading eyes, looking more pathetic than ever. The weak grin she was giving them wasn't doing her image any favors either.

Kaime gave her a disgusted look.

"Shut your mouth, you disgusting half—"

"There are tons of Liberators who've infiltrated the area near the capital! They're all high-ranking members with special magic! I know where all of their bases are, so I can tell you everything!" Sui added before Kaime could shut her down. He stared at her, flabbergasted.

"What?! Sui-san, how could you do—?"

"Shaddup! I don't wanna die! There's no way an exhausted old fart and a newbie hero can beat these guys!"

Reinheit was speechless. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Stiff-faced, Selm said, "That's not nearly enough intel to exchange for your life."

"Hey, Selm, don't tell me you're seriously planning on negotiating with a half-breed? Don't let her fool you."

"But, brother, this mongrel is the Haltina general we heard about in our reports, isn't she? Our orders were to kill the three members of Laus Barn's party, not some worthless half-breed. It wouldn't be against orders to bring her back for questioning."

"That's besides the point! You can't trust anything these godless beasts say!"

"I don't. But if we keep her alive, we have ways of dragging the truth out."

"But..."

"We need as many advantages as we can get right now. Mother's,

grandmother's, and the Barn family's fates are resting on our shoulders."

"It's true that we need to win His Eminence's trust as soon as possible to free mother from house arrest, but..."

The other knights remained on standby as Kaime and Selm discussed their options. Laus said nothing either, as he wanted to know more about Ricolis and Debra's current conditions. However, right now Sui had most of his attention. He couldn't believe that she'd betrayed them. Laus, Reinheit, and Sharm all looked at her, but her head was bowed low so they couldn't see her expression.

Reinheit, however, could see the corner of her lips...and he could tell that she was grinning. It was almost as if Kaime and Selm arguing was exactly what she'd wanted, as if she'd only said what she had to buy time. Shuddering, he averted his gaze. Sui's acting ability was terrifying.

Reinheit's reaction caused Sharm's Ultra Instinct to activate, and he surreptitiously squeezed Laus's collar to let him know what he'd learned. Laus looked down at his son, and then nodded when he saw the look in Sharm's eyes. He then stealthily began preparing to fight. He bound Sharm to his chest with chains of light, freeing his one arm.

By the time he was done, Kaime and Selm had finished their discussion and turned to Sui.

"Precisely, brother. We might be able to learn more about Miledi Reisen and the republic's schemes..."

"Hmph, very well. Hey, mongrel. We're taking you back with us. You better tell us everything you know or you're a dead half-breed."

"Aww, can't you just let me go here?"

"Either you come quietly or we chop your ears, arms, and legs off and take you with us."

"Awawawa! Fiiiiiine. Ugh, I should've known information on who's infiltrated the capital wouldn't be enough. Figures."

Sui looked up, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her act was so perfect none of the knights seemed to realize this was her way of fighting.

“Obviously. Basic information like that is—”

“Yeah, you guys must already know it all!”

“Huh?”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, come on, don’t play dumb. If you can track Laus-san when he’s capable of hiding from the Heretic’s Stained Goblet, there’s no way you haven’t also found all of our bases in the capital!”

Considering the time and distance involved, the only way Kaime and Selm would have been able to catch up to Laus and the others this fast was if they’d made a beeline straight here...which meant Laus was being tracked, even if he was able to deceive the goblet. So many earth-shattering revelations had happened in such a short time that Laus hadn’t realized that. He looked up in shock, then berated himself for missing such an important detail.

Meanwhile, Sui’s silver tongue was moving nonstop.

“If you’ve got artifacts that are that good at smoking people out, there’s no way you’d miss heretics hiding in your own city! You guys are probably just letting them move around for now to see what other information they’ll lead you to! Such smart thinking! I’d expect nothing less from the heirs of the Barn family!”

Sui’s trap was so obvious that there was no way Kaime and Selm didn’t realize it for what it was. If they admitted they hadn’t actually discovered the Liberator bases in the capital, they’d be admitting their own incompetence. Both Kaime and Selm had too much pride for that. But because of that, they fell into Sui’s actual trap. Their hesitation made it clear to her that she had them hook, line, and sinker.

How exactly are you tracking Laus? What’s the range on whatever it is? And are there any restrictions to its activation?

Sui needed to wring that information out of them at all costs. Otherwise, even if they managed to escape this predicament, they’d just be caught again. And they wouldn’t be able to go to any Liberator bases, since they’d be leading the knights straight to them.

Kaime and Selm's reactions had given Sui two important pieces of information. First, they were indeed using a power unrelated to the Heretic's Stained Goblet, and it was a power unique to either Kaime or Selm. Second, since they'd actually been interested in her intel on Liberator bases, they couldn't use it to track just anything.

There was one other assumption Sui believed she could safely make. Seeing how fruitless their search at the station had been, it was almost certain whatever power they had hadn't been activated until after they'd attacked the train. And with all that in mind, Sui thought desperately about how she could tease even more information out of the brothers. But before she could say anything, Sharm jumped in to offer his assistance.

"Liar! There's no way my brothers could have the power to track father!"

"What did you say?!"

"Don't get cocky, you failure!"

Good work, kid! You really know how to rile them up! Keep it going!

Still prostrated, Sui smiled to herself. Though Sharm's words sounded like the pouting of a petulant child, he was actually using his sharp instincts to help Sui with her plan.

"I bet you just found a way to make the Heretic's Stained Goblet work once you got close enough to father to see him! There's no way you'd be better than father at anything!"

It seemed Sharm was also a natural master at pushing people's buttons. Even though Laus and Reinheit knew why he was doing it, they couldn't help but be taken aback by Sharm's hidden vicious streak.

Naturally, Kaime and Selm were incensed. Kaime especially, since he was never good at resisting taunts.

"Hah, fool! Say whatever you want, but it's *my* power that's tracking Laus Barn. It's the special magic I awoke to once I began my ascension to an apostle. And the reason it worked through Laus Barn's spirit magic is because of his failure to—"

“Captain,” one of the knights said, interrupting Kaime. It was the one with the spear and shield standing directly in front of Laus. This was the first time any of them had spoken.

“It’s time to begin the cleansing.”

His voice wasn’t as mechanical as an apostle’s, but it was still cold enough to chill Laus’s bones. Kaime’s anger and humiliation vanished in an instant. Despite ostensibly being this team’s captain, it seemed like he was the one taking orders.

“You’re right.”

Kaime changed gears so fast that it felt uncanny. Selm was the same. Sensing the change in atmosphere, Laus realized they wouldn’t be able to buy any more time.

Kaime leveled his sword at Laus and said, “Repent with your death, heretic.”

“Behold, Lord Ehit, as we cleanse the Barn family name.”

There was no avoiding a fight now.

“Reinheit, Sui!” Laus shouted.

“Just focus on surviving!” Sui commanded.

“R-Roger!” Reinheit replied.

A second later, there was a deafening explosion. Then, Kaime appeared inches away from Laus and swung his sword down in an overhead vertical stroke, aiming directly for Laus’s skull.

“Ngh... Kaime! Come back to your senses! Soul’s Repose!”

Despite Kaime’s inhuman speed, Laus was still able to safely jump out of the way. The sword passed a hair’s breadth in front of him, and Laus could tell Kaime truly meant to kill him. Even though he’d dodged the attack, Kaime’s hatred sliced through his heart. The pain of knowing his son wanted him dead was far greater than any physical wound. But he hadn’t worked his way up to being the church’s top knight by being sentimental, and he was able to put his feelings aside and counterattack with spirit magic. However—

“Fool! Your petty tricks can’t shake my faith!”

“What?!”

To Laus’s surprise, Soul’s Repose did not affect Kaime whatsoever. That meant Kaime wasn’t under the effects of any brainwashing or mind control magic. Either that...or the brainwashing was so powerful Laus’s magic wouldn’t easily be able to counteract it.

Regardless, Laus didn’t have much time to think about it. The hammer-wielding knight and the spear-wielding knight flanked him from both sides. One knight swung his hammer at Laus’s head, while the other stabbed at his stomach with his spear. The two were in perfect sync.

“Ngh— Sacred Shields!” Laus shouted as he summoned a palm-sized barrier in front of him to parry the spear while he ducked under the hammer.

Kaime raised his sword and thrust it forward, this time aiming for Sharm. Or rather, aiming to stab through both Sharm and Laus at once.

Forcing his battered body to the limit, Laus drew the dagger at his waist. He moved to parry the blade away instead of blocking it directly, but—

“You’re like an open book to me!” Kaime shouted, shifting the angle of his attack as if he’d known beforehand what Laus was going to do.

“What?!” Laus exclaimed as he twisted out of the way. However, he couldn’t evade the thrust entirely, so Kaime stabbed him through the arm. Blood spurted out of the newly opened wound, and Laus lost his footing.

His instincts, honed from years of battle, warned him that a follow-up attack was coming. Acting purely on reflex, he tried to unleash a barrage of Light Bursts to temporarily blind his attackers. But his consciousness dulled, so he wasn’t able to concentrate on the spell. He turned around to face Kaime, who’d run behind him, and saw that his son was smiling.

He must have done something to me to stop the spell.

But Laus didn’t have time to dwell on what was going on, as the two knights were bearing down on him once more. He rolled to the side, kicking up water to make as much of a smokescreen as he could. At the same time, he threw his

only weapon, his dagger. It shot out of the spray of water aimed right at the spear-knight's head.

Of course, Laus knew it wouldn't hit, but it did stop the knight for a second as he raised his shield to block. That messed up their combo attack timing, allowing Laus to roll away from the hammer. The hammer slammed into the ground with unbelievable force, and rocks pelted Laus's back as he got to his feet. The shock wave knocked the breath out of him, and he could hardly feel his back, but Sharm was unhurt, and that was what mattered.

More importantly, he finally had a chance to counterattack now. As the spear-knight thrust at him, Laus fired off his favorite spell, Soul Shock, in a circle around him. The effort of casting it nearly knocked him unconscious, but it caused Kaime and the two knights to stagger backward. Laus wanted to take this opportunity to incapacitate at least one of the knights, but before he could take a single step—

"Father!" Sharm shouted.

"Huh?!"

He stopped dead in his tracks...and a second later, an arrow of light flew through where his head would've been if he'd kept going. Turning, Laus saw the bow-knight that had been engaged with Sui aiming at him. Sui herself had her hands full evading the spear-knight chasing her.

By turning around, Laus left himself open for a brief instant, and his enemies took advantage of that.

"Second Sanctified Shield, activate—Blast Wave!"

The spear-knight rushed at Laus with his tower shield. If it had been a normal shield, Laus would have been able to backstep away from the shield bash, but the shock waves radiating out from it made evasion impossible. All Laus could do was cover Sharm and try to make himself as small as possible.

The shield slammed into him with the force of a galloping warhorse, and Laus coughed up blood as he was sent flying. He bounced over the surface of the water like a skipping stone before crashing into a boulder a short distance away from Sui.

“Laus-sama!” Reinheit screamed as the boulder shattered and a massive pillar of water sprayed upward. He tried to hurry to his master’s side, but was prevented by the two knights surrounding him.

“I’m coming to save— Goddammit, get out of my way!”

Their endless stream of attacks kept Reinheit pinned where he was. The Holy Sword showed Reinheit how to move to avoid his enemy’s attacks, and his swordsmanship was evolving by the minute. It was only thanks to his exceptionally fast growth that he was able to keep up with the knights attacking him.

However, keeping up was the most he could manage. The knights he was fighting were perfectly coordinated and highly skilled. Their sword styles were polar opposites as well, making things even harder for Reinheit. The guy had solid, powerful swings, while the woman used feints and parries to keep him guessing. It was like being assailed by a tornado and a flowing river at the same time. Reinheit started panting before long, but the despair was just beginning.

“Ajeen, Seys, help those two out. Pathetic as he might be, that man is still a hero. Don’t let your guard down around him,” Kaime said calmly.

“Roger,” the two knights who’d been fighting Laus said before they went to assist their comrades. Laus’s exhaustion was so great that Kaime had decided he could take him on himself. Or perhaps he simply wanted to best Laus in a one-on-one duel.

I can’t take them all! Reinheit thought. And due to his momentary distraction, the female knight scored a tiny cut on his side.

Ajeen, the spear-wielding knight, held his weapon aloft as it began to glow, while Seys, the hammer user, started chanting a spell. Time seemed to slow to a crawl, and Reinheit could see everything on the battlefield clearly. This was no time to be holding back. If he didn’t go all-out, he would die here.

“Give me strength, Holy Sword! Limit Break!”

Pure white light spiraled up from Reinheit. The wyverns circling up above squawked in surprise and flew out of the way.

“Celestial Flash-Bloom!” Reinheit shouted, casting a variation on Celestial

Flash that the hero before him had devised, which the Holy Sword had taught him. He pivoted on one foot, swinging his sword in a circular arc.

The male swordsman jumped over the attack, while the female swordsman ducked under it. Seys blocked it with his warhammer and Ajeen blocked it with his shield while also thrusting with his lance.

They can counter even while blocking that?!

Reinheit's enemies were unharmed, while he didn't even manage to fully dodge the counterattack and had his shoulder gouged.

"Celestial Break!" he shouted, launching numerous slashes of light in all directions. This was a spell the hero three generations ago had come up with, and it was enough to halt the knights' assault for a second.

In that brief reprieve, Reinheit shouted, "Sui-san! Please get Laus-sama—"

"Agh!"

Reinheit had been hoping Sui could use her powers to help Laus escape while he bought time, but a pained groan from Sui dashed those hopes. The spear-knight's sideswipe caught Sui in the armpit, and she was sent flying. An arrow of light flew out right after, going right for the boulder Sui had slammed into.

Fortunately, her years serving as one of Haltina's top generals gave her the reflexes necessary to instinctively dodge out of the way. But while she managed to avoid being shot through the heart, the arrow still hit her in the shoulder. It went straight through her flesh and stuck into the boulder, pinning Sui in place.

"Ngyaaaaaah?"

"Ngh..."

As she screamed in pain, Laus also groaned. Looking over, Reinheit saw that Laus was just barely managing to protect Sharm from Kaime's furious assault.

Kaime's newfound strength was impressive, but his real advantage was that he could seemingly read all of Laus's movements ahead of time. And to make matters worse, Laus's movements were dulling by the minute. His face was getting paler as well. Turning back, Reinheit noticed Sui was quite pale too. It wasn't from pain either, since it looked like something was making the two of

them ill.

“Damn you— Celestial Flash-Doubler!” Reinheit shouted as he cartwheeled through the air, firing off two Celestial Flashes. One was aimed at the boulder pinning Sui, while the other went straight for Kaime’s legs.

The female knight’s sword gouged his shoulder as he passed, Ajeen’s spear cut his cheek, and as he landed, Seys’s hammer hit him square in the torso. The impact cracked his ribs, and the world spun around him as he flew through the air.

He only realized he’d been sent flying when he crashed into a tree on the side of the stream. With a heavy creak, the tree collapsed, and Reinheit’s field of vision went blurry. He coughed up blood as he fell to the ground, but ultimately, the price he’d paid had been worth it. Sui had been freed just in time to avoid being speared to death, while Laus had been granted a brief respite from Kaime’s assault.

“Sui! Hide!”

Sui was an assassin. Her skills were so great that she’d been able to fight on even footing with Zebal, the commander of the Templar Knights’ third division. Moreover, she’d managed to assassinate Cardinal Baran Distark, who’d been heavily protected. It was strange that she’d chosen to fight head-on during this battle instead of using her usual tricks. Reinheit didn’t understand why she wasn’t going into stealth either, but her reply cleared that up for him.

“Fuck, what is this shit? I can’t activate my special magic...and my body won’t move right either.”

A second later, Sharm shouted, “Reinheit, you have to stop Selm-nii-san!”

Laus was too preoccupied to say anything, so Sharm served as the battlefield messenger.

“How irksome. It seems my power doesn’t work on the hero after all,” Selm muttered, tapping his staff against a rock.

Reinheit turned to look at him. He hadn’t forgotten about Selm, but amidst the chaos of the battle, he hadn’t had a chance to search for him. To Reinheit’s surprise, he hadn’t moved an inch. Mana was rolling off of him in waves, and

looking closely, he could see tiny particles of light suffusing the battlefield. They looked like dust in the light.

“Still, it’s quite enjoyable being able to torture a mongrel and a sinner with my powers.”

Selm’s special magic was called Forbidden Command. He’d awoken to it when he’d become half-apostle, and it allowed him to prevent the activation of the person he specified’s special magic.

“Suffer and despair. Second Divine Rod activate—Sinner’s Punishment!”

More light burst out of Selm’s staff like a fountain. Laus and Sui staggered as it hit them.

“Ngh, debuff magic!”

The Divine Rod’s abilities revolved around buffing and debuffing. If Selm’s copy had the same powers, then he could do a lot of damage with his half-apostle levels of mana.

Reinheit finally realized why Sui and Laus’s movements had seemed so dull. If anything, it was amazing Laus had managed to hold out this long despite being weakened to such an extent. However, he was nearing his limits.

Laus had never even dreamed that the church had a means of creating more sacred relics. A shiver of panic ran through him. There was no way the knights wielding such powerful artifacts were no-name grunts. Their souls were so warped that had Laus ever seen them before, he definitely wouldn’t have forgotten them. As the former Holy Templar Knight commander, he should have known all notable knights with any measure of power.

He’d had to push himself to the absolute limit to keep up with Kaime while being weakened by Selm’s magic, and that had weakened him even further. But though his consciousness was growing dim, he still managed to puzzle out what was going on.

“Haaah... Haaah... You guys are Paladins, aren’t you?”

“How insightful of you,” Selm replied with a casual shrug.

Only Darrion Kaus, the commander of the Paladins, was known to the public.

The regiments' members were a secret, even from the other two commanders of the Three Pillars of Radiance. They answered only to the pope, and their only mission was to protect him, which explained why Laus didn't know any of them. He'd heard that each of their members was as strong as a Templar Knight division commander, and he could see now that was true.

Grinning, Selm and Kaime said in a rapt voice, "The Holy Sword was the base from which the other six Sacred Treasures were crafted. As you know, those seven weapons came to be known as the Seven Sacred Treasures. And these second-generation Seven Sacred Treasures are just as powerful as the originals."

Each artifact granted the wielder powerful body strengthening magic, a perfect affinity for light magic, an increase in the efficiency of their spellcasting, and various effects unique to each of them...and they were currently in the hands of the church's strongest knights. Plus, since they were members of the Paladins, it was all but guaranteed each of the knights had their own special magic.

"Oh, and if you're expecting reinforcements, give up," Selm said, turning to Sui.

"You guys have some kind of teleportation artifact, don't you? Well, just so you know, we left two knights behind at the train to stop your friends from joining up with you."

So Leonard and the others are still fighting, then...

Or perhaps they'd managed to escape with all the passengers. Whatever the case, Sui could only pray that they were safe.

"I guess it's too late to negotiate my safety in exchange for information?" Sui asked, sweat pouring profusely down her forehead. Her previous attempt at negotiation had been interrupted by the start of the battle, and everyone was covered in wounds now. If the knights decided to start round two, their party was toast.

In her head, Sui thought, *Please, please, please, please, please, please, please hurry up. If I die because of your slow asses, I'm gonna come back as a ghost and haunt you to death. Please, I'll do anything, so please just show up already.*

But she didn’t let any of her true thoughts show, and instead continued to play the part of the traitorous Liberator willing to sell her friends out for safety. However, she was unable to buy any time with that act.

“There’s no need for that, Captain,” Ajeen said flatly.

Selm nodded in agreement and replied, “Of course. The church has no need for any information a mongrel can give us. You’re absolutely right.”

“Now then, it looks like Selm’s weakening magic has taken full effect. Are you despairing yet?” Kaime taunted.

“Carve this into your dirty little skulls.”

“The church, and the god we serve—”

“Are absolute,” the two finished in unison.

The two looked like fanatics, but they didn’t look like fanatics who were being mind-controlled. The reason they’d talked this long was because they’d wanted Laus to fall into despair before killing him. The other Paladins likely felt the same, which was why they’d held off on attacking until Kaime and Selm had gotten their taunts in. Though honestly, it was entirely possible they’d just been ordered not to attack until the two were done. Either way, Laus and the others found themselves in a desperate situation.

Laus grit his teeth. His vision was already blurring, and he could feel his body start to grow cold. Reinheit was slowly recovering thanks to the powers of the Holy Sword—which both absorbed mana from the wielder’s surroundings and healed him slowly—but with how much mana he was burning to keep Limit Break active, he wouldn’t last for too long either. Sui was completely powerless. Her one trump card had been sealed, and her opponents wouldn’t even give her a chance to activate the Dark Key. In fact, she’d been weakened so much by Selm’s magic that her legs were trembling.

Everyone was at their limit. And at best, they’d managed to buy maybe ten minutes. But even so, no one was ready to give up.

“Is there anything in this world that’s truly absolute, I wonder?” Laus mused with a small smile.

“We’ll never fall into despair!” Sharm shouted.

“That’s right! We’ll never give up!” Reinheit declared.

“Oh, is this the part where we talk shit? All right, count me in! Ahem, prepare yourselves, you fucking brats, because your genes mean you’re *absolutely* doomed to go bald!” Sui taunted.

All of them were ready to fight until the bitter end, though Sui didn’t seem as interested in refuting the absolute might of the church as everyone else on their side. In fact, she’d twisted the word absolute to make her taunt sting more. That also had the side effect of pissing Laus off, and it looked like he was about to start yelling at her instead.

“Tch... I’ve had enough of you!”

“In the end, they’re all still heretics who betrayed the church.”

Laus and the others had only been able to buy ten or so minutes, but those few minutes had made all the difference...

“Guess we made it just in time,” a voice said from behind Selm.

“Wha—?!”

Ultimately, it was their will to keep on resisting that paved the way to the future.

Turning around, Selm saw Naiz standing right behind him and yelled, “You’re the Liberator, Naiz Gru—!”

“Time for good little boys to go to sleep,” Naiz said, cutting him off and gently laying his hand on Selm’s forehead.

A loud clap resounded, and Selm’s eyes rolled into the back of his head. His staff slipped out of his hands and he crumpled to the ground.

Naiz had concussed him. No matter how much someone strengthened their body, it was impossible to defend against a spatial shock wave delivered directly to the skull.

“Tch. Besshu!” Kaime shouted, which prompted the knight with the bow to take aim. However, Naiz had already disappeared.

A second later, there was a loud howl far above, and a moonbeam fell onto the battlefield. A wave of cold then washed over everyone, and a blistering wind filled with shards of ice forced Kaime and the others to cover their faces. Eventually, as the wind cleared, five figures fell from the sky.

“What now?!” Kaime shouted as he and a few of his knights leaped back. A second later, numerous creatures splashed into the river.

They were the four wyverns Kaime and the other knights had ridden. And right after that, the fifth figure alighted onto the battlefield.

“We’ve finally found you, Laus Barn,” a massive ice dragon said, holding its head up proudly. But as Laus watched, the dragon shrunk...and in a burst of light, it transformed into Vandre.

“You’re finally here! Hell yeah, we won! You cut it way too close, you idiots!”

“Glad to know she’s as annoying as ever,” Vandre muttered before whistling loudly.

Beasts leaped out of the forest on his signal, surrounding the knights. They were led by Kuou, his strongest wolf familiar, and Uruluk, his trusty wyvern. Uruluk unleashed a gout of blazing breath at the knights surrounding Reinheit, while Kuou fired a storm of ice spears at the knights around Sui, running to her rescue all the while.

Since Kaime was busy dealing with all these new threats, Naiz reappeared next to Laus.

“You look like hell,” he said with a smile.

“Please, I can do this all day,” Laus replied.

As the two of them bantered, Kaime launched another attack.

“Damn you! Celestial Flash-Overload!”

By the time he’d unleashed his attack, though, Naiz, Laus, and Sharm were no longer in its path. Instead of hitting them, the huge shock wave created by the white light sliced through the river, dividing its flow in two for a brief moment.

Naiz reappeared next to Sui with Laus and Sharm.

“Laus-san, did you figure out how they’re tracking us?!” Sui shouted, gingerly covering her battered arm with her good one. She’d have loved nothing more than to have Naiz teleport them all to safety immediately, but they couldn’t return to base unless they first figured out how to disable Kaime’s tracking ability. If they couldn’t figure out how Kaime was doing it, they’d have to knock him unconscious and take him along.

“I’ve pinpointed the spell. I can disable it at any time.”

Laus was gasping for breath, but he’d still somehow managed to analyze and counter Kaime’s magic. And that brief exchange was enough for Naiz to figure out what the situation was like. So, he touched Sui’s shoulder and asked, “Are we good to go?”

“Sure are! Let’s skedaddle!”

The knights’ wyverns had all been slain. Vandre could easily recover Reinheit and outrun the knights, which meant Naiz could teleport away and come back for him later.

Laus turned back to Kaime and Selm, but only for an instant. He realized they weren’t in any position to neutralize his sons and safely take them as well. Gritting his teeth, he nodded to Naiz. Unfortunately, his brief moment of hesitation cost the party dearly.

“Sone, don’t let them escape!”

“Roger.”

The swordsman wielding the Holy Sword copy who’d been fighting Reinheit turned around and dashed toward Naiz.

It soon became clear why Kaime had asked Sone to stop Naiz instead of the archer, or using his own offensive magic.

“I can’t activate my teleportation?!” Naiz shouted, confused. That was Sone’s special magic, Purge Territory. It caused mana around him to dissipate, much like it did in the Reisen Gorge. He could extend his power as far as ten meters out from him.

Sone charged at Naiz, swinging his sword horizontally as he got into range. To

Naiz's surprise, there was a blade of light jutting out from the tip of the sword, extending its length considerably. It appeared Sone could control the boundaries of his mana-dispersal zone perfectly, leaving himself out of it.

So he seals his opponent's magic while still getting to use his own? What a pain! Naiz thought as he stepped out of the way, drawing the twin curved swords at his waist.

The moment they realized Naiz could no longer teleport, Laus and Sui jumped back to give him room.

"It's a shame, but since other ancient magic users have arrived, we can't afford to drag them to the depths of despair before killing them! All knights, you are free to use your special magic! Besshu, don't let that mongrel out of your sight!"

Now that Selm was unconscious, Sui could use her special magic. The moment she'd leaped back, she'd started melding into the scenery, but the moment Besshu, the wielder of the bow stared at her, she screamed.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Sui yelled out in pain as her entire body trembled as though she'd been struck by lightning...and then, she crumpled to the ground.

That was Besshu's special magic, Seraphic Eye. So long as he could see someone, he could paralyze them, make them see or hear things, block their senses, including touch, or make them suffer phantom pains. It was far worse than knocking someone unconscious, since they were tortured by their own senses for as long as he continued to stare at them.

Naturally, once Sui was down, he fired an arrow to finish her off.

"Awoooooo!"

However, just before the arrow reached her, Kuou leaped in front of her and crushed the arrow in his jaws. He then fired a barrage of ice pillars to block Besshu's barrage of light arrows. Somehow, despite the fierce back and forth, Besshu kept his gaze focused solidly on Sui. He leaped around the battlefield, using his considerable skill to prevent Kuou from gaining any ground on him.

Laus was struggling as well.

“No, father! You can’t take that hit!”

“Nrgh!”

A knight’s spear shot out toward Laus. It was wreathed in a strange magical light, so even without Sharm’s warning, Laus didn’t like the look of it. He whipped off his coat and threw it at the knight, while desperately rolling to the side. It was far from graceful, but if he cared about his pride as a warrior, he wouldn’t live long.

Sharm coughed as water sprayed up around them as the spear tore through Laus’s coat.

“Corrosion powers?” Laus muttered as he watched his coat turn black and crumble into nothingness.

That was the knight Torres’s special magic, Angelic Death. It corroded anything he touched with it. If he wanted to, he could expand his mana, causing everything in an area around him to wither and die. The only reason he didn’t was because Kaime had jumped in for a follow-up attack.

“Die, Laus Barn!”

It seemed the Paladins were intent on letting son kill father.

Gritting his teeth, Laus held Sharm close. He was too exhausted to keep moving, but he at least wanted to protect who he could.

“Not so fast!” Naiz shouted, jumping in at the very last second. Sone followed him a second later. He blocked Kaime’s sword, and though he couldn’t use magic, he still managed to take on two—no, three, if you included Torres—knights at once with just his swords.

“Outta my way!”

“You’re not stopping us.”

“If you’re so eager to die, you can go with him— Sacred Way!”

“Ngh?! What’s this?!”

Sacred Way was a special magic that allowed the user to synchronize with someone’s soul to figure out where they were, read their surface-level

thoughts, and misdirect them. Kaime had used it to synchronize with the information on Laus's soul that had been stored in the Heretic's Stained Goblet, then amplified its powers so it could sense Laus if he was within a few dozen meters of him. The reason he'd attacked the train and revealed himself was to throw Laus off for a second, giving him a chance to synchronize with the real Laus's soul and track him perfectly. That was the strange feeling Laus had been sensing throughout the fight.

Once Kaime had synchronized with a soul, only a spirit magic user could undo his magic. And while Laus could cancel it out, he was weakened enough that Kaime could just cast it again.

Still, Laus dredged what mana he could to help Naiz.

"I'll dispel it for you—Soul's Repose."

The moment he cast the spell, he felt the last of his strength leave his body.

"Father!" Sharm shouted, but Laus could barely hear him. His vision faded to black and white. Having truly reached his limit, Laus fell to the ground.

Naiz stood protectively in front of him and let out a short breath. He stopped thinking about how to defeat his foes. Not because he'd given up, of course. But because his priority was protecting Laus and Sharm, not killing his enemies.

He had faith that his friend would take care of the rest. He had faith in Vandre.

At the moment, Vandre was fighting back to back with Reinheit, creating weapons of ice to deal with the various tricks the knights had up their sleeves.

He was facing off against the female swordswoman and the spear and shield user, Ajeen.

"Tch, what a pain."

"I knew it. Be careful! That woman's attacks prevent healing!"

Unfortunately, Ajeen and the woman fought with the kind of coordination that spoke of years of practice, while Reinheit and Vandre had only met a few seconds prior. To Vandre, it felt like they were fighting a single creature with two bodies. The knights' special magics were making things more difficult as

well. Ajeen possessed the special magic Sanctify, while the female swordsman had Stigmata. Dealing with one would have been bad enough, but both in conjunction spelled real trouble.

Sanctify was a relatively simple magic that boosted Ajeen's abilities. However, it strengthened him to such a degree that it felt like he was using Limit Break. In fact, it felt even stronger than that. He was stronger than a gorilla, and he moved so fast that his form blurred. Naturally, he was able to cast spells without chanting incantations as well. And to top it all off, he had abnormally fast regeneration and could absorb mana from his surroundings.

Meanwhile, the female knight Fira's magic made it so any wound she caused couldn't be healed. It worked on both living beings and objects, and the only thing that could reverse the damage it caused was restoration magic. Even the Holy Sword's automatic regeneration couldn't stand against it. Reinheit had already lost a lot of blood, so with every passing second, he drew closer to dying from blood loss. Honestly, Reinheit and Vandre weren't so much a tag team as Vandre was just protecting Reinheit from the knights' attacks.

Uruluk couldn't help either, since he was stuck fighting Seys, the knight with the warhammer. Seys's special magic was Invisible Judgment. He could make his attacks cross through space—though only up to a limited distance—which let him attack from unsuspecting angles. He could also change direction during the crossing. He could, for example, swing down with his hammer, but it would come out as a sideswipe.

Uruluk was having a hard time finding an opening to fight back. He was sturdy enough that he could weather the blows for a time, but eventually, he'd fall. It was only a matter of time.

"Vandre-dono, at this rate, we'll be overwhelmed!"

"Don't worry. I've gotten used to them now."

"Huh?"

Vandre kicked Reinheit, who'd momentarily spaced out. The young hero went flying, which saved him from being decapitated by Fira. Vandre then met Fira's sword with his own ice blade, while also parrying Ajeen's perfectly timed thrust with his empty palm.

Fira and Ajeen passed harmlessly by either side of Vandre, but they immediately turned around and launched follow-up attacks. Fira sliced at his neck, while Ajeen aimed for his heart. However, Vandre was no longer there.

“Ah?!”

He’d read the flow of the battle, and in the very moments that they’d breathed, he’d ducked, making it look like he’d vanished. His overwhelming martial skill had made the two knights, who were veterans of a thousand battles, lose sight of him.

A second later, Vandre stepped forward with such force that it felt like an earthquake had struck. He struck with fists encased in gauntlets of ice.

“Haaah!”

With a battle cry, he hit Fira in the stomach, knocking the wind out of her.

“Gah!”

The force of the blow was perfectly transferred to her inner organs, so she didn’t go flying. Instead, she fell to her knees and slumped to the ground.

In that moment, Ajeen ran forward, his shield held up in front of him. The mana swirling around it made it clear he planned to hit Vandre with a shock wave. With his enhanced stats, he was a one-man battering ram. But Vandre blocked the attack with a shield of ice he made on the spot, using it to absorb the mana shock waves as well. He then pivoted around the shield and easily slipped past Ajeen like a matador slipping past a bull.

Eyes widening in surprise, Ajeen used his inhuman strength to forcibly kill his inertia and turn around to stab at Vandre with his spear. A blade of light erupted from its tip to grant him extra reach as well. However, Vandre easily parried that as well with a spear he made out of ice.

Right as he blocked, though, Vandre’s spear turned into a three-section staff. He redirected the force of the blow along the staff’s joints, swinging it around in a perfect counter.

Ajeen couldn’t dodge in time, so the butt of Vandre’s staff slammed into his nose. It was far from a crippling blow, but it did cause Ajeen to stagger

backward for a moment.

“You finally gave me an opening,” Vandre said with a triumphant smile. He then relinquished the three-section staff and forged two daggers out of ice. Slipping past Ajeen’s shield, he stabbed through the gaps in the knight’s armor.

“That’s not enough to stop you though, is it?”

Vandre had gained the upper hand, but he didn’t let his guard down for a second, nor did he underestimate his foe. As he’d expected, Ajeen ignored the pain and tried to sweep Vandre away with his tower shield.

Vandre read the attack, however, and sidestepped out of the way, throwing his daggers as he disengaged. One of them hit Ajeen in the eye, while the other sliced through Fira’s outstretched fingers. She’d recovered enough that she’d been trying to reach for her sword.

“Ngh!” she grunted in pain as her middle and ring fingers were sliced off. It was then that Reinheit finally made his move.

“Celestial Flash!”

Fira had managed to grab her sword with her other hand, but now she had to use it as a shield to guard against Reinheit’s attack. Even with the replica Holy Sword to defend her, she was sent flying into the forest.

Unconcerned about his comrade, Ajeen charged forward once more, hoping to end Vandre’s life. Vandre used a myriad of weapons—a sword, gauntlets, chakrams, and even a halberd—to parry Ajeen’s spear, keep him off-balance, and keep his shield at bay. At first the sound of weapons clashing and ice shattering echoed across the battlefield, but before long, Ajeen’s attacks stopped hitting at all, so Vandre didn’t even need to block.

Meanwhile, Vandre’s attacks grew more accurate...and soon, Ajeen was covered in small wounds.

“You’re a monster...” the taciturn knight muttered, shivering.

Vandre’s unmatched martial skill, coupled with his ancient magic and perfect mastery of ice magic, made him a formidable foe. Plus, he had dragon blood running through his veins, which meant he could transform into an ice dragon

at a moment's notice.

But while these were all exceptional abilities, they were not what made Vandre Schnee a truly terrifying opponent. His true strength was his mastery of every single martial art. Vandre had trained incessantly, and then further honed those skills in the crucible of battle. The fact that he continued to practice religiously on top of having a natural talent for art was what made Vandre so strong. With the effort he'd put into his training, it was inevitable that Vandre would be able to fully analyze Ajeen's fighting style given enough time.

By the time Ajeen realized he was being read like a book, his shield had been pinned to the ground by chains of ice and his spear had been knocked out of his hands by Vandre's pinpoint offense.

"Have you ever tasted dragonbreath?" Vandre muttered, slamming his palm against Ajeen's breastplate. The force of the blow rattled Ajeen's rib cage, messing with his heartbeat, and caused him to stiffen up for a second.

While he was momentarily frozen, a beam of light shot out of Vandre's palm. He'd unleashed his compressed dragonbreath at point-blank range.

"Oh, f—" Ajeen didn't even have time to curse his own carelessness. The beam of frozen light ripped through him, freezing his blood in his veins and sending him flying into the forest. The light then coalesced around Vandre, and he transformed into a dragon.

"Get on or get left behind!" he shouted.

"G-Got it!" Reinheit replied, scrambling onto Vandre's back. Vandre launched another blast of icy light at Seys, the knight fighting Uruluk.

Realizing he couldn't defend against that much firepower, Seys wisely elected to dodge. But that freed Uruluk from his relentless assault, so the wyvern shot into the sky, firing its breath at Besshu, who was still keeping Sui pinned down.

Besshu bounded backward, evading the attack while keeping his gaze firmly fixed on Sui. Still, he was forced to stop attacking while he danced away from Uruluk's blazing hot breath, giving Kuou a chance to go on the offensive.

The domino effect continued and Kuou charged at Sone, who was keeping Naiz's powers sealed.

“Torres, stop them!” Kaime shouted in a panic.

“Roger.”

Torres jumped between Sone and Kuou and erected an impassable corrosive barrier.

Instinctively realizing that he couldn’t jump through it, Kuou activated Aerodynamic to change direction mid-leap.

Fortunately, the wolf had already done enough. This was the moment Naiz had been waiting for all along as he’d dutifully protected Laus and Sharm from the knights.

“There’s a reason you save your trump card for last,” Naiz muttered, throwing one of his swords at Sone and the other at Kaime. Both of them batted the swords away with ease, but it gave Naiz time to pull a pair of glasses out of his pocket and put them on.

“Take this, Glasses Beam!” he shouted, activating his best friend’s ultimate(?) technique.

A dazzling flash of light blinded Kaime and Sone.

“Aaaaaah, my eyes!” Kaime screamed.

“Ngh!” Sone grunted in pain, raising an arm to cover his eyes.

But of course, only a third-rate warrior relied on just their eyes to track their foe. Both Kaime and Sone were still able to track Naiz perfectly, so they moved in to counterattack.

“It’s not over yet,” Naiz said, and there was a loud boom that deafened the two assailants. The two of them couldn’t hear anything except a ringing in their ears. Not only that, but there was a pungent smell wiping away all other scents. They tried not to breathe it in, but by the time they noticed, it was too late. There was no defense against a smell this atrocious, so they reflexively gagged.

“Gaaaaaah, my eyes, my nose, my mouth! Blaaaaaagh!”

“C-C-C-Curse you. *Cough!*”

Tears streamed down Kaime and Sone’s eyes, snot dribbled down their noses,

and they coughed and sputtered due to the spicy, disgusting, sickly sweet taste in their mouths. A certain four-eyes had paid a large sum to a certain extremely annoying rabbit to get her pepper spray recipe, then revamped it to be even more potent and combined it with a noise grenade to create the perfect sensory assault weapon.

“Ngh...”

But despite the debilitating power of the pepper spray, Sone managed to locate Kaime, tackle him to the ground, and cast a wind spell to blow the cloud of noxious gas away. Coughing, with his eyes still closed, he also managed to deploy a Hallowed Ground without an incantation.

He waited a few seconds, then after determining that no attacks were coming their way, he cracked his eyes open. His vision was still blurry, but he could see a little now.

“They got away...”

His comrades were standing in the same places they had been before, but Naiz and the others were nowhere to be found. The moment Naiz had gotten out of Sone’s zone of control, he’d likely teleported everyone away.

“Grr, we’ve been had! Shit, they even dispelled my Sacred Way! I can’t believe I messed up this bad!”

Thanks to his half-apostle body, Kaime had already recovered from the pepper spray, so he was angrily stomping his foot on the ground.

As he dispelled his barrier, Sone gave Kaime a cold look, then stared up at the sky as the other knights gathered around him.

“Was this dramatic confrontation between father and son to your liking, My Lord?” he muttered quietly.

For a moment, it seemed like the crescent moon glittering in the night sky was Ehit’s wicked grin.

Chapter III: Spirits of the Lake

Some time had passed since Laus and the others had escaped from the assassins led by Kaime.

It had been close to a month since the church had claimed victory over the beastmen, but the theocracy's capital was still in a celebratory mood. The city sat at the foot of the Divine Mountain, which was said to be the seat of God, so the people tended to be more austere and subdued in their festivities. There were no parties in the streets or anything, but you could still tell the people were more lively than usual. They gossiped in the streets and praised the glory of Ehit more frequently than usual.

Lilith Arkind looked down at the gaiety below with a frown on her face. Though she was only twenty-seven, she was the commander of the church's Templar Knights. She was well aware of the heavy responsibility that rested on her shoulders, and she held herself to a strict standard. Lilith made sure that she was impeccably dressed and ready for battle at all times. She was keenly aware that many young women in the theocracy looked up to her as a role model, so she conducted herself with as much dignity and propriety she could muster at all times. But right now her beautiful blonde hair was disheveled and her deep green eyes were clouded over with melancholy.

"Those fools, if only they knew..." she muttered, but her tone was more resigned than acerbic. However, they were dangerous words that went against the church's official statement and could have been taken as heresy if heard by the wrong person. Thankfully, she was in one of the abandoned walkways that connected the towers of the pure white palace on the Divine Mountain.

Lilith leaned against the railing, her head drooping. Her bangs fell forward, hiding her face.

"Why...? Why would you...?" she muttered in a voice soft enough to be drowned out by the wind. In contrast to how weak her voice sounded, she grit her teeth and gripped the railing with enough force to crack the stone. Despair,

confusion, doubt, and anger all whirled inside of her.

“Come on, what did the poor railing ever do to you, Commander Lilith? Ease up a little.”

“Oh, Commander Allridge,” Lilith replied with a start, looking up.

Mulm Allridge stood at the other end of the corridor with his trademark monocle and parted black hair. He gave her a light wave and walked over.

“What’s happened to your usual poise?” he asked.

“My apologies. I showed you an unsightly side of me.”

“That was a joke,” Mulm responded with a shrug. He then leaned against the railing next to Lilith and looked up at the sky.

“You’re just like him. You’re too straight-laced to understand jokes.”

“Ack... Please don’t mention Laus Barn to me! Especially not to compare him to me! He’s a traitor whose name doesn’t even deserve to be—”

“But you’ve been thinking about him too, haven’t you?”

“W-Well—”

The fact that she didn’t immediately deny it was admission enough. Indeed, the primary reason for Lilith’s melancholy was Laus’s betrayal.

Embarrassed that she’d let herself get so preoccupied with a heretic, Lilith blushed and looked away. Mulm gave her a wry smile and said with a sigh, “Don’t worry, I have too. Every single day, in fact.”

For a while, there was silence. Lilith couldn’t figure out how to express the conflicting feelings inside of her. Had any other knight defected, she would have been able to say with conviction that the heretic deserved to die. She would have had nothing but hatred and disdain for such a traitor. And she would have crushed them the same way she crushed cockroaches she occasionally saw skittering around the palace. Everything would be clear-cut. But despite her deep faith, she still couldn’t fully come to terms with the fact that Laus Barn had deserted them. His betrayal had just been too much of a shock. And Mulm had known Laus for even longer than Lilith. They were close in age, and Mulm had even considered Laus a friend. He was undoubtedly even more conflicted about

Laus's betrayal than Lilith.

Lilith's expression softened and she gave Mulm a sympathetic look.

"How's restructuring the Templar Knights going? Sorry I had to take so many of your skilled members, but the Paragons of Light were running dangerously low on members... So...are you managing?"

It seemed the main reason Mulm had come all the way to this abandoned section of the palace was to discuss recruitment with her.

Relieved that the topic had moved away from Laus, she straightened her back and shook her head.

"There's no need to worry. I know how difficult it is to train up new members for the Paragons of Light, and you lost your vice-captain and the Sacred Wolf in that last battle. If anything, you probably have it worse than I do, Commander Allridge."

"Thank you for being so considerate," Mulm shrugged his shoulders as he said that. Then he asked, "Oh yeah...is our sword saint going to be Zebal's successor?"

"Yes, I already asked Sensei."

"Wonderful, then there's nothing to worry about."

Zebal, the commander of the Templar Knights' third division, had been martyred during the war against Haltina. Lilith had decided his successor would be the current Templar Knights' swordsmanship instructor, as the old man had once held her post before retiring. He'd retired to the position of instructor due to his age, but despite pushing eighty, he was still unbelievably spry. If anything, his technique had only improved during his time in retirement.

Lilith had been forced to call him back into active duty because the Three Pillars of Radiance had been replenishing most of their losses from the ranks of the Templar Knights, and there were few people left with the necessary ability to serve as division captains. It didn't help that Cardinal Baran Distark, who'd served as the supreme commander for the invading army, had been martyred during the battle as well. For now, Archbishop Kimaris Sintail was filling his post while still handling his original duties.

“All that’s left is to decide what to do about the Holy Templar Knights,” Mulm said.

“Yes...” Lilith mumbled, furrowing her brow as he brought up the one topic she’d wished to avoid.

Mulm glanced at her for a second, but by the time she turned to look at him, he was staring at the sky again.

“The neighboring nations are starting to get nosy. They’re sending in spies to check on the current state of the theocracy, claiming they’re just sending over congratulatory gifts for our victory.”

“Do you think they plot treachery?”

“No, I think they just want to get a true assessment of where we stand. But if we don’t show them that God’s might remains unshakable, some morons might start spreading unsavory rumors.”

Mulm was worried people would begin to think that the church, and by extension Ehit, weren’t absolute, so there was no reason to serve them.

“How foolish.”

“Indeed. I suspect the apostle will be making a public appearance soon to quell such rumors.”

The main reason other nations were beginning to doubt the absolute might of the church was because God’s Apostle had been struck down. It had been impossible to silence all the soldiers of the Odion Federation and Grandort Empire that had seen the apostle fall, so knowledge of her defeat had spread.

However, it would be easy for the church to prove the falsehood of those claims...because God’s Apostle was still alive and well. Lilith and Mulm had been surprised when they returned home and found the apostle they thought had perished coming out of the cathedral to greet them.

All the knights and priests had been beating themselves up over the fact that they hadn’t been able to avenge their apostle, but there she was, looking no worse for the wear. Everyone had been shocked. Her appearance had reaffirmed to them that God was indeed absolute and that his apostle hadn’t

been defeated by some heretic. It had deepened their faith tenfold.

“I cannot wait to see the despair on the Liberators’ faces when they realize their struggle was futile,” Lilith said with a wicked sneer.

Her eyes burned with a dark, roiling hatred, and her muscles tensed up in anger. She didn’t hate them because they were heretics, or because they’d interfered with the church’s holy war. She hated them because they’d been the cause of Laus’s betrayal. If they had never come into contact with Laus, he would never have abandoned the church. Her hatred was so strong that she didn’t realize Mulm was staring quietly at her, appraising her. There was a cold gleam in his eyes, but when he spoke his voice was lighthearted.

“That being said, the apostle’s true role is to be Ehit’s oracle. It’s pathetic that we needed to rely on her on the battlefield, and that we’ll need to rely on her once more to restore the theocracy’s dignity.”

“You’re right.”

“If only Araym had been willing to serve as interim commander, we could have reorganized the Holy Templar Knights by now.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Araym doesn’t have what it takes to lead the Holy Templar Knights.”

Araym Orcman, the vice-captain of the Holy Templar Knights, had been impacted harder than anyone when he’d heard the news of Laus’s betrayal. He’d grit his teeth and glared at everyone with bloodshot eyes, his entire body trembling.

During that same meeting, he’d asked to be relieved of his post so he could chase Laus down personally. For some time now, he’d doubted Laus’s faith, but hadn’t reported his suspicions to anyone because he’d believed the man who served as a symbol of God’s radiance couldn’t possibly be a heretic. And as a result, he’d let Laus escape.

In order to atone for his sins, he wanted to be the one to bring justice to the heretic, and then kill himself in penance once Laus was put down. He’d been so emphatic in his pleas that it had honestly scared Lilith a little.

“Well, Araym did idolize Laus. It’s entirely possible he wanted to take charge

of the subjugation team so he could join Laus.”

More than a few members of the church suspected that was Araym’s true motive. Now that Laus, the one person everyone believed was wholeheartedly devoted to the church, had turned traitor, the priests and knights were suspicious of everyone. Who knew who might defect next?

Naturally, Pope Lucifer had been forced to deny Araym’s request. Instead, he’d given Laus’s sons the power of demi-apostles and granted them an opportunity to clear the Barn family’s name.

When Araym had heard he’d been passed over in favor of Laus’s own children, he’d been so furious he’d gone insane.

“Is there any chance he’ll be reinstated?” Lilith asked. She was still struggling with her own problems, so she hadn’t had time to check up on Araym, who was in a different chain of command anyway. The last time she’d seen him, he was being forcibly dragged away to the dungeons by a pair of guards.

“He’s already been released, thanks to the mercy of His Eminence. But now he’s staying holed up in the martyr’s chamber.”

“So he still intends to die?”

The martyr’s chamber was a laboratory located in one corner of the palace. Those who had failed in their duty to the church but still wished to be of some use offered their lives to be used in horrific and inhumane experiments conducted at that lab.

However, Mulm shook his head and replied, “He offered to be the test subject for a novel strengthening procedure. He has the right aptitude, so if it succeeds, he’ll gain enormous strength.”

“And he wants to use that power to...slay Laus Barn?”

“Assuming Kaime’s squad fails, yes.”

“Will the procedure really make him that much stronger?”

“I’m not well-versed in the details, but if it succeeds, he’ll be the subjugation squad’s rear guard. It must give him at least as much strength as demi-apostleification does, if not more.”

“Hmm...”

The previous war had taught Lilith how sorely lacking in power she was. She didn’t think she was worthy of something as divine as demi-apostleification, but if the church had come up with some alternate method of strengthening its warriors, she was willing to volunteer to undergo the experiment.

“The procedure is still in the experimental stage. It’s not the kind of thing the commander of the Templar Knights should participate in,” Mulm said.

Lilith pouted at having been seen right through.

After a brief silence, Mulm added in a cold voice, “Though I guess it’ll all be the same in the end.”

“What?”

“Neither Kaime nor Araym will be able to defeat Laus,” Mulm’s voice dripped with conviction. Lilith gave him a scrutinizing look.

It was true that Laus was strong. Indeed, he was the strongest knight the church had. But Kaime and his squad had been granted exceptional power by the pope.

“I suppose it’s possible they won’t be able to match Laus, but...”

“Sorry, let me rephrase that. As if I’ll allow them to defeat Laus.”

“What?!”

Mulm turned to look out over the railing and gripped it as hard as Lilith had earlier. She couldn’t make out his expression, and she stared at his profile in shock.

“It’s unacceptable. Don’t you agree, Commander Lilith?”

“Commander Allridge?” Lilith asked, confused. Was he really saying that Laus shouldn’t be killed?

She couldn’t believe it. Saying the pope’s plan should fail was tantamount to heresy. But at the same time, she realized it was possible Mulm still considered Laus a friend. In fact, she found herself almost hoping that he did.

Unfortunately, those hopes were soon dashed.

“Laus cannot be brainwashed. Such spells don’t work on him. In other words, the Liberators didn’t brainwash him. From the very start, Laus has been carrying the seeds of heresy with him. He feigned piety while trampling all over Lord Ehit’s eminence. When he was talking to me, when we fought together on the battlefield, he was always plotting this betrayal! It’s despicable. I won’t ever forgive him for it! This whole time, we respected and befriended a heretic! How could he do something so cruel to us?! We were always dancing on Laus Barn’s palm! Isn’t that right, Commander Lilith?!” Mulm’s voice raised in volume as he spoke, and by the end, he was shouting.

Lilith gulped involuntarily when she looked into his eyes. They were bloodshot, and there was deep darkness within his pupils that made them look like portals to hell. His mouth was twisted in a vicious snarl. It was then that Lilith realized Mulm didn’t share her feelings at all. He wasn’t conflicted about whether or not Laus was truly evil. Oh no, it was quite the opposite.

There was no hesitation in Mulm Allridge’s mind. He wasn’t feeling depressed over his inability to accept Laus’s betrayal for what it was. He just felt humiliated, angry, and hateful. He wanted to crush Laus Barn with his own two hands, even if it meant going against the pope’s direct orders. There was nothing but rage left in Mulm now.

The reason he’d come to speak with Lilith wasn’t to share his doubts, but to see whether or not she felt the same as him.

“What do you think?”

“About...what?”

“Don’t you want to slaughter Laus Barn with your own two hands?”

“Calm down, Commander Allridge. You need to think this throu—”

“I am calm. And I have taken your measure.”

“What do you mean? Depending on your answer, I may have to—”

“You admired Laus, didn’t you?”

“Wh-What?!”

Lilith could feel the blood rushing to her face, though whether from anger or

embarrassment, she wasn't sure.

Ignoring her reaction, Mulm said, "Back when he was still a bachelor, you tried to become his fiancée, didn't you?"

"Wh-What?"

"When you turned ten and it became time for you to decide your future husband, you wanted him. So much so that when your father told you the difference in status between your house and his was far too great, you gave such a heated speech that he reconsidered."

"..." Lilith was at a loss for words. She was having trouble keeping her cool.

Everything Mulm said was true. Lilith's house was one of the theocracy's great noble houses, and when she was young, she'd often met Laus at social events. He'd already distinguished himself even from a young age, and she was smitten with him.

However, as an ancient magic user, Laus had gotten marriage proposals from every noble house in the theocracy, and ultimately, he'd ended up choosing someone else over Lilith.

Of course, none of this was secret information, so a little digging would have told Mulm all of that. But her debate with her father had been a private affair. Most members of the Arkind family didn't even remember that episode, so why was it that Mulm knew of it?

Cold sweat dripped down Lilith's forehead. She realized now that Mulm truly had come to size her up after thoroughly investigating her background.

"You've worked hard. Reaching the position of Templar Knight Commander at such a young age is quite a feat."

"What are you getting at?"

"Your special magic, Thunderclap, is rather strong. But lightning-aspected special magic isn't all that rare. A captain-class mage could replicate your ability with ordinary spells."

Mulm was correct. Lilith's special magic wasn't all that special. Of course, it used less mana and activated faster than a spell of similar strength would, but

that was all. It had taken an inordinate amount of effort to polish her magic up to the level needed to serve as Templar Knight Commander, and she'd also spent ages mastering all the practical applications of her ability.

Everyone believed the reason she'd put in that much effort was because of her devotion to Ehit and her desire to be useful to the church, but Mulm thought differently.

"If your house lacked the prestige needed to marry Laus, then the only logical course of action was to achieve a high enough station to grant you that prestige instead. You're such a diligent girl. Debra-dono wished for Laus to take in a few more wives too, didn't she? That would have been your chance. Could it be that you're secretly hoping the subjugation squad fails as well so that you can—"

There was a flash of light, and Lilith's twin blades were resting against Mulm's neck.

"You may be the commander of the Paragons of Light, but that gives you no right to question my faith. Say another word and you'll pay with your life."

Lilith's voice dripped with hostility.

Mulm looked into Lilith's eyes, appraising her once more. His gaze was cold, lifeless, and seemed to sap the vitality of anything it touched.

Meanwhile, Lilith's eyes burned with righteous indignation. The situation was tense, the slightest move could spark a full-blown battle between the two of them. But after what seemed like an eternity, a voice interrupted the two of them.

"What are you two doing?"

"Ah!" Mulm and Lilith turned around in surprise.

A man stood next to them, though it should have been impossible for him to sneak up on them.

"What business does the commander of the Paladins have with us?" Mulm asked warily. The newcomer was indeed the Paladins' commander, Darrion Kaus.

Lilith gave him a searching look.

The pair's suspicion was understandable. Until just a few days ago, there had been another man that they'd thought of as Darrion. The old Darrion had been an unassuming man with short brown hair. But this Darrion had white hair, red eyes, and was much younger.

Of course, everyone knew what had happened to the old Darrion. He'd been martyred during his fight with Laus. However, during their meeting with the pope, he'd told everyone that the church's strongest knight, Darrion Kaus, was still alive and well. He'd waved toward the back door, and this Darrion had walked in. The pope had insisted that this was the real Darrion, and the Darrion everyone had known was just a regular member of the Paladins who'd been his body double.

Naturally, everyone had been confused at first. But when the pope pointed out that it wouldn't have made sense for the commander of the division whose *sole* job was to protect him to go out and chase a heretic, everyone had nodded along in understanding.

It made more sense that Darrion had simply lost his right-hand man than that Laus had managed to slay the Paladins' commander.

Afterward, the pope had organized a subjugation squad made up of thirty Paladins and granted them replicas of the Seven Sacred Treasures. That, Araym's subsequent bout of insanity, and Kaime and Selm turning into demi-apostles had been such a crazy sequence of events that everyone had kind of just accepted the new Darrion was the real Darrion and put him out of their mind. But now that things had calmed down somewhat, Lilith had to admit it was strange.

First off, the real Darrion looked to be even younger than her; far too young to be commanding the Paladins. Second, he resembled his dead body double far too much. While their appearances were nothing alike, this Darrion's mannerisms were so similar to the last one's that it seemed only natural that he was the commander of the Paladins. That in and of itself was odd. It was for these two reasons that Lilith and Mulm were so wary of him.

They couldn't tell if he was aware of their suspicions or not, but Darrion said in the same flat voice, "I'll ask again. What are you two doing?"

His question was directed at both Lilith and Mulm, even though Lilith was the one with swords at the latter's throat.

They could feel an invisible wall of pressure emanating from the man. Not answering was not an option.

"I am demanding an apology from Commander Allridge for the unacceptably rude comments he just made."

"I am doing what is necessary for the knights' and for the church's survival," Mulm said in a definitive tone. Lilith glared at him again, and sparks flew between their eyes.

"Commander Arkind, sheathe your swords. Commander Allridge, retract your statement and apologize."

"But—"

"Wait, this is—"

Lilith and Mulm tried to argue, but Darrion narrowed his gaze and muttered, "How pathetic."

His cutting words silenced both of them.

"Do you understand why I, the man who must stay by His Eminence's side at all times, am here?"

Coming to their senses, Lilith and Mulm backed off. The answer to his question was obvious. Only a select few knights could stop a battle between the Templar Knight Commander and the Commander of the Paragons of Light. Especially now, with the church's strength diminished.

"The lady apostle was saddened when she learned of this matter."

"I-I'm terribly sorry," Lilith said.

"Crap... Instead of improving things, I just made matters worse," Mulm muttered.

Lilith hurriedly sheathed her swords, and Mulm frowned when he heard that the apostle had been aware of their conversation.

He took a deep breath, calmed himself, and turned to Lilith. Some of the color

had returned to his hate-filled eyes and he gave Lilith an apologetic smile.

“I retract my accusation. I said it out of misplaced anger, nothing more. Please forgive me, Commander Lilith.”

He bowed to her, and after a brief moment of surprise, Lilith returned to her usual stony expression and said, “I understand. Your apology is accepted.”

“I truly am sorry, it just felt like I had to check.”

“You don’t want more Reinheit Ashes showing up, right? It galls me that you would even consider that I might be one, but with the Holy Templar Knight Commander’s seat empty, you are our army’s de facto leader. I understand how taxing such a position must be.”

“Ha ha. Well, I won’t deny that. Thank you for your magnanimity.”

Laus’s influence on the knights had been enormous. Many of them had worshipped him almost as much as they worshipped Ehit. Only the church’s top brass knew of his defection, but rumors couldn’t be contained, and people were beginning to talk. The church needed to stay on guard and suspect its own members. As someone who knew Lilith’s background, it was only natural for him to thoroughly vet her.

After the two shook hands, Darrion nodded and said, “We’ve been summoned.”

“I’m terribly sorry you had to serve as our messenger,” Lilith said, bowing her head.

“Yeah, sorry about that, Commander Darrion. So, what’s this meeting about?” Mulm asked, following after Darrion, who’d already started on his way back.

Darrion turned over his shoulder and said, “The subjugation squad has returned. They failed in their mission.”

Lilith’s eyes widened in surprise, while the corners of Mulm’s lips tugged up into a smile.

At around the same time, three figures lounged on the terrace of the throne room, which was six hundred meters above sea level.

“What should their punishment be?” Pope Lucifer asked, his white hair and beard fluttering in the wind. He gazed down at a landing platform jutting out from one of the cathedral’s aerial walkways. The wyverns carrying the subjugation squad were landing there right now.

“Grant them another chance,” a beautiful but emotionless, inflectionless voice said. It was the silver-haired apostle, Hearst.

“Then our lord enjoyed the familial drama?”

“Yes. The Barn family are exquisite pieces. My master is quite pleased with them.”

“Splendid,” Lucifer said in a delighted voice. His eyelids opened a little, and his gray eyes sparkled with joy.

“In the end, it seems letting him escape was the correct choice.”

The original plan had been to force Miledi Reisen and Laus Barn to kill each other.

Lucifer had planned to take Laus’s family hostage and use them as leverage to force Laus to fight. To make him choose between his own family and the girl who reminded him so much of Belta Lievre, the priestess whose life he’d once saved.

“Not ‘in the end.’ You make it sound as though this was unplanned,” Hearst said, turning to Lucifer.

“Either outcome would have been acceptable.”

In other words, Ehit didn’t care whether Laus sided with the church or with the Liberators. Laus was always destined to either kill his own feelings and become a pawn of the church or cling to hope and join the Liberators. Regardless of which path he chose, Ehit would enjoy watching him squirm. After all, Ehit was the one who’d sowed these seeds in the first place.

“The reason I allowed Belta Lievre to live and chose not to punish Laus Barn for his transgression was to help alleviate our lord’s boredom.”

From the moment Laus Barn had been born as an ancient magic user, from the moment Belta Lievre had entered the church as a priestess and saw too

much of the truth, this age's game had begun.

After bringing ruin to the previous era, Ehit had restructured civilization and set the stage for a new era to bloom. Then, he'd waited for the pieces to gather so that his games could begin anew. His primary pawns created yet more pawns for him to play with, and together they danced on the stage he'd made for them. The climax of this era's play was about to begin.

Hearst explained all of this to Lucifer in an emotionless voice.

Impressed, Lucifer nodded while stroking his beard and replied, "Then I suppose I will be able to offer what's left of my life to God's great game. There could be no greater honor."

"Indeed. They will eventually make their way here. You must stand against them as the church's pope. Oppose them until your dying breath."

"With pleasure," Lucifer responded, tears streaming down his face. Hearst then turned from him to the final figure, a member of the Paladins who was standing a short distance away. She had messy ultramarine hair, matching eyes, and a slender build.

The entire time, she'd been silently guarding the pope like a shadow.

"The subjugation squad is hereby disbanded," Hearst told her. "Recall the knights stationed at the dukedom's borders. I have a new mission for them."

"Very well. I shall inform them at once. What is our new mission?"

"Bring these people to me."

Hearst brought her face closer to the knight's and stared into her eyes.

A second later, the knight staggered backward. It appeared Hearst had entered the information directly into her brain.

Shaking her head, the knight said, "Understood. Do you want them dead or alive?"

"Alive. They are of no use to me dead."

"They're not?"

"Correct."

Hearst looked out over the balcony again. Staring at the lands in the distance, she muttered, “If we take too long to prepare, my lord will grow bored.”

“I see. You want these people so you can dictate the start of the final game yourself.”

Hearst nodded in response.

“Avoid attracting attention. We don’t want to rush things. Make sure your timing lines up.”

“As you wish. I see now why you assigned us this mission instead of the other divisions.”

“It has taken quite a lot of time, but you’ve become a good pawn.”

“You honor me.”

Once the orders were given, Hearst faced forward and closed her mouth, looking like nothing more than a doll.

The female knight went quiet as well, putting a finger to her temple and looking off into the distance. She was using a form of communication available only to the Paladins.

“Lord Apostle, it is almost time for the meeting, so I must leave you now,” Lucifer said, then bowed deeply to Hearst and turned on his heel.

Still relaying orders, the paladin followed after him.

Lucifer held out a hand to stop her and said, “No need to guard me. Focus on the mission you were granted by the apostle, Darrion.”

The knight nodded and said, “As you command, Your Eminence.”

“Where’s my fooooooooood?” Sui moaned, banging her knife and fork on the table.

The party was in a small village called Horuo, which was to the northeast of Obius, Entris’s biggest city in the northeast. Specifically, they were in one of the village’s inns.

Sui was covered from head to foot in bandages, as only half a day had passed

since they'd made their escape from Kaime. The morning sun was almost blinding after a night spent on the run, and Sui was cranky enough to beg for her breakfast like a spoiled child. Though there were no other guests in the inn at present, she was still being a nuisance.

"Oh, shut up!" another girl with bunny ears shouted in response. She appeared to be the one cooking the aforementioned breakfast.

Unlike Sui, she was dark-skinned, and she looked far more affable and energetic than Sui ever did. In fact, she looked like the polar opposite of Sui, the queen of slacking.

This bunny girl who had no business running an inn in the middle of a human settlement was none other than Kiara. The very same half-rabbitman half-human Kiara who'd become friends with Miledi at Andika and had later joined the Liberators.

Unsurprisingly, this inn was called Wanda's Inn. After joining the Liberator support branch, the Wanda family had settled here in Horuo.

"Wow, what a rude cook! You can't treat your customers like this! After breakfast, I demand you pay reparations for emotional suffering!"

"Don't just throw that in like it's an after-meal dessert!"

Barely three minutes had passed since Kiara had started cooking. And already, Sui had complained that the water was too warm, that she wanted milk instead, and that the chair was too hard. She was the kind of customer who service workers despised.

Luckily, Kiara had plenty of experience with people like this. She had lived in the lawless city of Andika, after all. Customers as annoying as Sui had come by practically every day.

"Here's something to stuff your snotty mouth with!" Kiara shouted, slamming a plate of vegetable sticks down in front of Sui. They were roughly chopped, the kind of thing you would feed barn animals instead of people.

"What an awful attitude. Plus, my room's cramped, there's no room service, and my bed's too stiff."

“You’re the one with an awful attitude! Just so you know, this is pretty upscale for the location we’re in!”

In truth, though the building Wanda’s Inn was located in now had been purchased secondhand, it looked brand new and travelers loved it so much that three out of ten came back this way just to stay at the inn again.

For a secret resistance base, it was doing pretty good business. But Sui didn’t care about any of that.

“Man, I miss my suite in the Lusheina Hotel,” Sui muttered, munching on a vegetable stick, and glaring at Kiara all the while.

“Don’t compare us to them, goddammit!”

Kiara wished she could glare back, but she still had a shred of customer service spirit left in her.

“Good grief. Who do you think’s the one taking care of you?” Kiara muttered.

“Excuse me? It’s the support branch’s *job* to take care of us!”

“Y-You little bitch!”

Kiara was this close to losing it.

I can’t believe I was so worried about her last night!

Things had been quite hectic when Naiz had teleported directly into the common room last night.

Of course, Kiara had been informed ahead of time that they might need to hide in her inn in case of an emergency, so she’d closed it down “for repairs” during the past few days, and no one had seen them come in. The windows had been boarded up and there hadn’t been any guests, but the state of Naiz’s comrades had still sent Kiara into a panic. One had been unconscious and on the verge of death, another had been so weak he could barely stand, the young boy was beside himself with worry for his father, and Sui was covered in wounds and still suffering from the adverse effects of Besshu’s special magic.

Vandre had started healing everyone immediately, while Kiara and the other members of the support branch had hurried to get beds, bandages soaked in healing potions, new clothes, and food for everyone.

Vera and Marcus, Kiara's mother and father, had looked after Laus and Reinheit, while Kiara had nursed Sui back to health. And yet, once Sui had woken up, the first thing she'd done was demand a status report and introduction from Kiara. After that, she'd said, "Kiara? Oh, you're the Kia-chan Miledi-san always talks about. Must be nice, getting to be the poster girl for your inn. You don't have to risk your life, and this massive organization covers all your living expenses. God, I wish that was me."

Her words had been dripping with jealousy.

Kiara had actually admired Sui, since she was a rabbitman the same age as her, but had worked her way up to one of the top generals of the republic. She'd been hoping the two of them could be friends, but Sui's harsh words had crushed any hopes of that.

Of course, the reason Sui was so mean to Kiara was because she was jealous. She envied how bright and cheerful Kiara was, as well as the cushy job she had.

In other words, Sui was just a bitch.

While the two of them argued, Vandre came down the stairs to the common room.

"Do you have to yell so loud this early in the morning, you worthless rabbit?" he said with an exasperated sigh.

"Wow, even he's shit-talking you, Kiara," Sui taunted.

"He's clearly talking about you!"

Vandre simply shook his head and Sharm and Reinheit walked down behind him. Like Sui, Reinheit was covered from head to toe in bandages.

In a worried voice, Kiara asked, "Are you okay, Mr. Knight? Your wounds still haven't closed, have they?"

"No, but the bleeding has stopped, so I'll be fine. Thanks for everything, by the way. I'd like to thank your parents as well, but I don't see them around anywhere..."

"It's fine, we were just doing our jobs! Besides, it's not like we were much help, anyway!" Kiara said in a flustered voice.

She glanced over at Sui, who was glaring daggers at her. Sui clearly thought she was putting on a good girl act to get on Reinheit's good side.

"Mom and dad are cooking breakfast right now."

"I-I see. I suppose I shouldn't disturb them, then. Umm...sorry," Reinheit muttered, glancing over at Sui as he said that. He knew just how annoying she'd be if breakfast got delayed because of him. Plus, he was still weak from using Limit Break, so he really didn't need Sui poisoning his drink or anything.

He staggered over to the table and Sharm pulled a chair out for him to sit down on before bowing to Kiara.

"U-Umm, I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself last night. My name is Sharm Barn. Umm, thank you so much for healing my father."

Laus was still unconscious, but he was recovering. Still, any normal young boy would have been beside themselves with worry. Sharm, however, looked like he was handling it well enough to still remember his manners as he greeted Kiara properly. She found it adorable that he was trying so hard despite still being exhausted from the events of yesterday.

"Oh, come on, a kid like you doesn't need to be worrying about proper manners!"

Kiara ran over and swept Sharm up into a tight hug. Like most female members of the rabbitman tribe, she wore rather revealing clothing, so Sharm blushed as his face was buried in her bosom.

His strict mother had never hugged him like this. It was a warm, gentle embrace.

"You're amazing, you know that? You're so young, but you're still bearing all the pain and worry and doing your best to help everyone. But it's okay now. You're safe. You can relax and leave everything to us adults, okay?" Kiara said softly, patting him on the back. He let the tension drain from his body, and tears welled up in his eyes. But he held them at bay through sheer force of will.

"It's okay to cry, you know?"

"Thank you, Onee-san. But I won't cry."

“You don’t need to force yourself to act tough, you kn—”

“I’m the son of the strongest knight.”

Sharm wasn’t forcing himself for no reason, this was a matter of pride.

Reinheit smiled proudly at him, while Vandre gave him an appraising look. Surprised, Kiara backed off.

“I see, I see. Sorry for treating you like a kid. You’re already a grown man, aren’t you?” Kiara said kindly.

“U-Umm, he he he...” Sharm chuckled, blushed, and scratched his cheek.

“Hey, little miss pedo. Is my food ready yet?”

“Grr, you little gremlin!” Kiara shouted, mad at Sui for ruining the nice mood.

The two looked like they were about to start fighting, but before they could, Vera came in.

“Yes, yes, here’s your breakfast, young lady,” the innkeeper said, gracefully putting a plate down in front of Sui.

There was a steaming pile of buttered potatoes, a crispy golden-brown omelet, thick slices of bacon, and a bowl of vegetable soup. There was also a separate basket containing heaping loaves of bread. The smell was so delectable that everyone’s mouths started watering.

“Hellllll yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Sui shouted, digging into her food like a starving animal. In fairness, she hadn’t eaten anything since yesterday afternoon.

Even Sharm and Reinheit forgot their table manners as they started eating as fast as they could.

“Mmm, this is quite good,” Vandre said with an appreciative nod.

“Glad you like it, Van-nii-san. Miledi and the others really liked our cooking too,” Kiara said proudly.

“Guess I’ll eat too,” she added as she sat down at the table with everyone.

As she brought out more food, Vera asked Vandre, “By the way, Vandre-san. How’s Laus doing? I made some porridge that’s easy on the stomach, but...”

“Thank you. But I’m afraid he won’t be waking up for quite some time.”

After the battle was over and Naiz had teleported everyone away, Laus had used the last of his strength to disable Kaime’s tracking. Once that was done, he’d passed out. Vandre had managed to heal his external injuries, but there was nothing he could do to repair the damage to Laus’s soul that had been caused by repeated uses of Limit Break.

“I’ve done everything I can for him. All that’s left is to get these guys to Meiru as fast as possible.”

“I see... So regular healing magic isn’t enough, then...” Vera mused, looking pained. Her concern for Laus was genuine. But after a few seconds, she shook her head and smiled so brightly at Vandre that it was hard to believe she’d just pulled an all-nighter.

“Well, I can still give Kuou-chan his meal, right?”

“Yeah, please do.”

Kuou was guarding Laus just in case anything happened. The room was a bit cramped for him, and he was probably getting stressed having to sit there for so long. Hopefully, a hearty breakfast would help him relax somewhat. However, Kuou wasn’t especially happy that all the members of the Wanda Inn added -chan to the end of his name, so talking to Vera might just make him more stressed.

“Oh, my husband’s making boxed lunches for all of you. Be sure to take them before you go.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Kiara, once you’re done eating, I need you to go shopping. We’re ostensibly closed for repairs, but if all of us stay cooped up in here forever, people might start getting suspicious. Also, I don’t think anyone saw Naiz come in, but check to see if any rumors are floating around just in case.”

“Got it,” Kiara said through a mouthful of omelet, and Vera affectionately ruffled her hair before heading back into the kitchen.

The meal drew everyone’s attention, and they ate in silence. The sounds of

clacking silverware, birds chirping, neighbors talking, and husband and wife bustling about in the kitchen heralded the start of a peaceful village day.

To Sharm and Reinheit, it almost felt like the harrowing battle they'd taken part in last night had just been a fever dream.

If only it had been just a nightmare... Sharm thought sadly to himself as he ate.

Reinheit gave him a concerned look, then turned to Vandre. It was thanks to the young demon that they'd managed to escape. At a glance, Vandre didn't look much older than Reinheit. But he was so much stronger. Vandre's familiars were stronger than the Paragons of Light's sacred beasts, and he was a better ice mage than anyone Reinheit had ever seen. On top of that, Vandre could transform into a dragon, and in his demon form was a master of all martial arts. But what surprised Reinheit most of all was that Vandre was a demon. He was supposed to be humanity's sworn enemy, yet he was helping a human organization.

Of course, Reinheit had heard the Liberators were an organization that accepted all, regardless of race or creed. But it was one thing to hear stories about it and quite another to see firsthand just how close Naiz and Vandre were, despite their radically different origins. They treated each other like close friends, not comrades who simply happened to share a common goal. It had been surprising, but in a good way. Plus, they also treated Sui and Kiara like equals.

Humans, demons, and beastmen were all sitting together eating breakfast at the same table. Most residents of the theocracy would have said this was heresy.

"What are you staring at me for?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, sorry..."

Vandre frowned, and Reinheit suddenly realized how intently he'd been staring.

"D-Don't tell me..." Kiara exclaimed, her eyes sparkling.

"Wh-What is it, Kiara-san?" Reinheit asked hesitantly. A faint blush spread

across her cheeks, and her ears stood straight up.

“Don’t worry! I understand perfectly, Mr. Knight!”

“What do you understand?!” Reinheit exclaimed. He had a really bad feeling about this. There was no doubt that Kiara had misunderstood something.

“Van-nii-san’s handsome, and he saved you from certain death. It’s only natural that a development like this would happen!”

“What development?!”

“It’s okay, I understand! Everyone loves in different ways! Race and gender are no barriers to love!”

“Seriously, what the heck are you implying?!” he shouted just as Vandre kicked back his chair.

He scooted away from Reinheit, his face pale.

“I see... I didn’t know you swung that way, Reinheit-san.”

“What do you mean, ‘swing that way’?!”

“Now I understand why you told me not to strip on the train. You just don’t have any interest in seeing women in their underwear, huh?” Sui said with a grin.

“No, I think it’s pretty normal to tell someone not to strip in public regardless of their sexual orientation!”

“R-Reinheit?”

“Sh-Sharm-sama? Why are you backing away from me?! This is a misunderstanding! I’m into women, I swear!”

“Mr. Knight, does that mean you’re bi? Haaah... Haaah... Splendid! Even though you’re from the church, you’re more free than the rest of us! I can’t imagine what kinds of depraved orgies you were involved in in the capital... No wonder you’re the hero!”

“I mean, I definitely don’t share the values of the church, but you’re taking this too far! Quit fantasizing about me, you pervert!”



Blood was dripping out of Kiara's nose and her face was as red as a beet. She'd once convinced herself that Miledi had a harem of guys and girls that she slept with each night, so it was hardly surprising she was misunderstanding things about Reinheit now.

Unfortunately, others were convinced her delusions were reality, and Sharm was muttering, "How should I act around Reinheit now...?" to himself.

As far as Reinheit was concerned, this was a far more dangerous situation than the one he'd been in last night.

"It's a misunderstanding! I was only staring because I'm impressed that the Liberators really are an organization where everyone trusts each other regardless of race or creed! I just think it's amazing that everyone trusts you even though you're a demon, Vandre-dono!"

Vandre and Sharm exchanged glances, then nodded to each other. In retrospect, it made sense that a sight like this would seem strange to a knight of the church.

"Yeah, it really is amazing..." Sharm muttered to himself.

Vandre and the others turned to look at him.

Blushing a little, Sharm smiled and added, "At the very least, I like this place more than the capital, where everyone only talks about how great they are, and that they're the chosen people."

Silence fell over the table. But it was a warm, gentle silence.

After a brief moment of contemplation, Kiara squealed, "Oh, you're just so cuuuuuute!" and hugged Sharm again.

Sui muttered, "Damn, he's so pure that his words are exorcising me..."

Reinheit and Vandre chuckled at each other.

Blushing a lot brighter now, Sharm extricated himself from Kiara's cleavage and said in an embarrassed voice, "A-Anyway, is Naiz-san doing okay?!"

"Now that you mention it, I am a little worried..." Reinheit muttered, his brow furrowing.

Naiz wasn't in the inn right now.

Naiz and Vandre's original plan had been to teleport all the way to the Dark Gate sitting outside Esperado. But when they'd reached the gate at the valley where Sui and the others were fighting, they'd seen the pillar of light Reinheit had created when he'd cast Limit Break and hurried over to see what was going on.

Had Reinheit not used it at that exact moment, Naiz and Vandre would never have made it back in time to save them.

Indeed, when Naiz and Vandre had first arrived on the battlefield, they hadn't known that Laus had left Esperado, or that the train had been attacked.

"You don't need to worry about him. If anything, you guys—and especially Laus Barn—should be more worried about yourselves."

"Father...felt bad about getting innocent passengers involved in his troubles."

"He may have abandoned his homeland, but Laus-sama is still a knight."

After the battle, just before he'd passed out, Laus had told Naiz and Vandre about the train attack and asked them to go help the other passengers. He'd even cast a protective barrier on Naiz's soul to make sure he'd be fine in case Naiz ran into Kaime while rescuing the passengers, though pushing himself that hard had nearly killed him.

Naturally, Naiz couldn't refuse such a heartfelt request. Besides, he'd been planning to go help them anyway. That was why after dropping everyone off at the inn, Naiz had immediately headed back to the site of the attack.

But just as everyone started talking about him, he teleported back in.

"Sorry I'm late."

Reinheit, Sharm, and Kiara all breathed sighs of relief.

"Welcome back, Naiz-onii-san! Do you want breakfast?" Kiara asked, getting to her feet. She could tell from Naiz's expression that things had gone well, so she offered her seat to him.

"Yeah, I do..." Naiz replied. He knew they should probably leave right away, but he hadn't had time to rest since leaving the forest. He needed to take at

least a short break or he wouldn't be able to function for much longer.

"There's something I need to tell you guys. I'll eat while I talk."

"Got it!" Kiara said cheerfully and ran back to the kitchen. She wanted to know what was going on as well, but getting Naiz's food took priority.

"Umm, Naiz-san. Where are Leonard-san and his friends?"

"Why aren't they with you? And what happened to the passeng—?"

"Hold your horses. Let him at least drink some water first," Vandre said, offering a glass to Naiz. He took it gratefully and downed it in one gulp.

"Haaah... Thanks, Van."

"Don't mention it. Is Uruluk in the forest outside the city?"

Naiz nodded. Uruluk had been there since last night. He was unfortunately too big to hide inside the inn.

"Okay, so for starters, Leonard and the passengers are safe," Naiz said.

Sharm and Reinheit visibly relaxed, leaning back into their chairs.

"All of them? I figured since we got away, the church's assassins would slaughter all the passengers and torture Leo-san for intel..." Sui muttered, surprised. The future of the Barn family was resting on Kaime and Selm's shoulders, so she figured they would have taken every opportunity they could to raise their reputation.

I can't believe Leo-san managed to escape from those guys... Sui mused as she swiped a slice of bacon off Reinheit's plate.

"They probably would have, but I got there first."

"Heh... We *did* kill all of their wyverns, and even if they could fly with magic, it'd take them at least an hour to get back to where the train was. I guess with Dark Gates in place, you can teleport to most places almost instantly, so that makes sense... Man, I'm jealous," Sui said, buttering a slice of bread all the while. She looked like a predator sharpening her claws in front of her prey. It was kind of unsettling, honestly.

However, Sui's jealousy was understandable. After all, Naiz was able to go

from Horuo to Obius and from there to Esperado in a matter of seconds.

He ignored Sui's jealous glare and continued with his status report, saying, "By the time I got to the train, Leonard had already gotten most of the passengers out."

"So he used the Dark Gate..." Vandre said, his expression grim.

"Yeah. He opened a portal in the train and snuck all the passengers out without ever leaving the train cars."

"I can't believe the passengers all listened to him... Oh, did Jinx-nee-san convince them?" Sui's guess was right on the mark.

Jinx didn't have any special magic or any real combat abilities, but there was a reason she was the head spy of a major branch. Her specialty was disguises and information manipulation. In just minutes, she could disguise herself to look like someone completely different, and she could change the impression she gave off to people at will. Though magic wasn't involved, it almost felt like it should be with how powerful her skills were.

"She perfectly acted the part of a church bishop."

"I see. I guess most people would follow a bishop during times of emergency," Reinheit said with an impressed nod.

Plus, they could handwave away the teleportation portal as the bishop's special magic. Most of the passengers had probably been too glad that a leader like a church bishop had been on board to question the authenticity of whoever was commanding them.

"It helps that Jinx is pretty good at dark magic, especially hypnotism spells. She must have managed to get everything under control before the panic could spread."

"Hmph, I guess that was the optimal solution, but it still pisses me off that people are going to think it's the church who saved them," Vandre spat.

"It'd be pretty hard to convince them the church was the one attacking them and it was the rebels who saved them," Sui replied with a cackle.

Feeling conflicted, Reinheit glanced at Sui before saying, "Two of the assassins

stayed behind to keep an eye on the train, didn't they? It's a good thing you guys weren't spotted."

"Actually, they started getting in Leonard's way halfway through. And they were as strong as the other Paladins we were fighting. If I'd shown up any later, everyone would have been dead."

"What were the last two Paladins like?" Vandre asked, and Naiz smiled ruefully.

"One was a man with a burn scar covering half his face, and the other was a woman with long black hair and a blindfold."

"I take it they were using replicas of the Seven Sacred Treasures as well?"

"The knight with the burn scar had a Holy Sword and a Sanctified Shield, and the blindfold knight had a Divine Rod. Their special magic was pretty annoying too."

Naiz went on to explain that the burn knight could instantly create a golem that repaired itself no matter how badly it was damaged.

On the other hand, the blindfold knight's magic allowed her to compel people with her words. A simple command like "Don't move" was enough to stop everyone in their tracks. People with strong wills like Naiz or Leonard could shake off the compulsion, but it still held them in place for a brief moment.

The noncombatant members of the Liberators barely managed to resist, and the civilians were completely at her mercy.

"Just how powerful are the Paladins..." Reinheit muttered with a shiver. And Naiz and the others looked just as worried as he did.

It felt like they were finally seeing the full extent of the church's power, and they didn't like what they saw. The mood darkened for a moment, but then Kiara appeared with a plate piled high with food.

"Here you go! Wait, why do you guys all look so serious? Did something happen?"

Naiz's stomach grumbled as he breathed in the delectable scent of freshly cooked breakfast. That helped lighten the mood a little and he replied, "We're

fine, don't worry. Thanks for the food."

"Mmm, if you say so. I need to head out into town. Is there anything you guys need?"

"Not really."

"Okay. See you later!" Kiara said with a cheerful wave. She then pulled a necklace out of her pocket and put it on. A second later, her ears vanished and her hair turned blonde. The necklace was a disguise artifact that Miledi had gifted her.

She went out into the street, greeting the neighbors as she walked past them. She looked so innocuous that no one would ever guess the inn she worked at was secretly an underground resistance base. Indeed, most of the neighbors seemed quite fond of her.

"Tch, this is why normies suck..." Sui muttered darkly.

"You're seriously messed up, you know that?" Reinheit said with a shake of his head.

Sui covered her ears, shutting out his words. Kiara and Sui really were polar opposites. Still, Sui's complaints had helped lighten the serious mood, and Naiz tucked into his breakfast while Vandre changed the topic.

"Anyway, our biggest problem right now is those Dark Gates. I take it that you opened one in Esperado?"

"Yeah."

"Umm...what's the problem with them?" Sharm asked hesitantly. He'd just been listening until now, but his curiosity had been piqued.

It was Sui who answered him. And as she did, she tried to steal the remainder of Sharm's omelet, but Reinheit got between them to keep the young boy's food safe. She clicked her tongue in annoyance, and Naiz gave her half of his omelet with a sigh. Her bunny ears immediately perked up and she started wolfing it down.

"Listen up, kid. Dark Gates don't work the way you think. You can't just teleport anywhere with them. If you're within range, you can teleport to where

a Dark Gate has been set up, but that's it."

"So then... Oh, I see. If there isn't a Dark Gate in Esperado, then you can't teleport to it. And it can't be too far out of the effective range of the one in Esperado's outskirts..."

The train had been derailed about ten kilometers away from the Dark Gate on the outskirts of Esperado. To effectively escape with the Dark Gates, you needed to be able to leapfrog from one to the other quickly, or you wouldn't be able to escape from fast pursuers using wyverns.

Plus, if you wanted to keep the passengers safe, you had to transport them back into a large crowd in the middle of the city and keep them ignorant of who they'd been attacked by.

"Exactly. And it's not like you can just put these things down anywhere, so—"

"You had one set up in one of the Liberator bases in the city? Wait, but doesn't that mean all the passengers know about it now?!"

"That's precisely the problem Vandre-san's worried about. I guess the reason it took you so long to come back was because you got roped into cleaning up that mess?" Sui asked, turning to Naiz.

"Something like that."

In truth, there had been a single Dark Gate in Esperado that had been set up for the express purpose of rescuing people.

Naturally, that meant it wasn't located in the Lusheina Hotel. After all, if an enemy managed to follow them through the portal, it would mean the complete destruction of the Esperado branch. So instead, the Dark Gate had been placed in the safe house where people were brought to be screened on whether or not they'd be allowed to join the support branch there—a clothing store run by an old noblewoman named Melissa. It was the very same shop that Naiz and Kiara had once gone to.

The Dark Gate there was located in one of the changing rooms. And with her special magic, Penmaster, Melissa would be able to confirm whether or not the people teleporting in had been authorized to do so by a member of the Liberators, and people wouldn't really notice if some of the people leaving the

shop had mysteriously never entered it.

However, there had been over a hundred passengers on the train, and people would definitely have noticed that many confused people leaving a store. Someone would have reported it to a member of the church.

“So the reason you returned by yourself is because Leonard and the others are stuck at the branch office? I figure Esperado’s already in an uproar about the train attack. If people saw all the passengers coming out of Melissa’s shop, the church will probably launch an inquiry against her too. Leonard and the others must really have their hands full.”

“Actually, Leonard and the others are hiding out in a safe house somewhere else for now.”

Sui gulped upon hearing that and averted her gaze, but Vandre didn’t seem to notice and he continued questioning Naiz.

“So then, why did it take you so long to... Oh, I know. You probably wanted to make doubly sure you were free of Kaime Barn’s tracking.”

“Unfortunately, only Laus has any way of knowing whether or not our souls have been marked. If Kaime marked Leonard or any of the others during the attack, they can’t return to any of the Liberator branch offices.”

After hearing about what had happened from Naiz, Leonard and the others had also realized it wasn’t safe for them to return home for now.

Sharm’s expression clouded over with worry.

Noticing the change in Sharm’s expression, Reinheit asked, “Naiz-dono, if no one’s gone after them yet, shouldn’t it be safe for them to return home?”

“No, it’s possible Kaime is letting them move about on purpose.”

“Yeah. We can’t be sure until Laus wakes up. But with how hard he pushed himself, I doubt he’ll heal immediately even with Meiru’s magic.”

“Still, his soul will recover faster if his body is in peak condition.”

Naiz and Vandre thought back to Miledi’s current condition.

“Well, either way, our top priority now is getting him back to headquarters

safe and sound,” Naiz said, causing everyone but Sui to nod.

“Umm...” Sui mumbled as she raised a hand into the air, her voice uncharacteristically meek. She refused to meet anyone’s gaze, and sweat poured down her forehead. Everyone could guess that she’d messed something up.

“Spit it out, you worthless rabbit. What did you do?” Vandre asked, a menacing smile on his face. It was moments like this that you remembered he was the younger brother of the Demon Lord.

“U-Umm, well...I’d just like to confirm something first. Naiz-san, what safe house did you send Leo-san and the others to?”

“Hm? I chose the one close to the theocracy’s capital, since I figured they’d be able to keep an eye on—”

“Ah,” Reinheit interrupted as if he’d just remembered something. His expression was stiff.

“Umm, Sui-san. When you were begging for your life, you told my brothers you’d tell them the locations of the safe houses in the theocracy, didn’t you?” Sharm asked hesitantly.

Silence fell over the dining table once more. Naiz and Vandre stared at Sui with eyes devoid of all emotion.



Sui looked away, refusing to meet their gaze. Finally, she shouted, “Okay, yeah, I did, but so what?! It’s not like I had any other choice! I was trying to buy as much time as possible! If anything, it’s your fault for arriving so late!”

She refused to admit she was at fault.

“I can’t believe you...” Vandre muttered, his cheek twitching. Naiz just buried his head in his hands.

“Besides, didn’t we decide to abandon that safe house the moment we learned Laus-san was in Entris?! I didn’t think we’d end up using it again! Plus, I didn’t tell them the exact location or anything! So it’s fine! I did a good job, even! You should be praising me!”

“Please, the very moment you even implied that we had safe houses in the heart of the theocracy, they probably decided to search the capital with a fine-tooth comb. I’ve gotta let Leonard know or he’ll be in trouble.”

“Yeah, just let him know and everything will be fine! It won’t be a problem!”

All right, discussion over! I’m outta here!

Sui got to her feet and ran off to her room on the second floor.

“W-Well, it is true that without her silver tongue, we might have been killed before you arrived...” Reinheit muttered.

“H-He’s right, Naiz-san, Vandre-san! Sui-san definitely didn’t betray us...I think. I’m pretty sure she didn’t, at least...” Sharm said, losing confidence in his own defense as he spoke.

Naiz and Vandre exchanged skeptical glances.

“Oh, we don’t doubt her loyalty at all,” Naiz said.

“It’s true that that safe house was probably the right one to mention if she was trying to buy time. Looks like she’s as good at catching people off-guard as ever,” Vandre added with a shrug of his shoulders. The two of them smiled sadly at each other.

Sharm and Reinheit both let out relieved sighs when they learned Naiz and Vandre’s trust in Sui remained intact.

Afterward, Naiz went into Sui's room, grabbed her by the scruff of the neck, and dragged her back to the common room. They then hurriedly penned a message to Leonard and sent it off via messenger bird and began discussing their next steps. By the time Kiara had returned, the party had already left for the main headquarters.

Two days later, Naiz and the others reached the city that housed the Liberators' headquarters. Damdrak, the capital of Uldia.

It sat on the east bank of Ur Lake, the largest lake in the world, and was known as the City of Water. One might think that was because it bordered the lake, but there was a bit more to it than that. The truth was, half of the city sat on the lake itself.

Centuries ago, men had driven stakes into the relatively shallow segments of the eastern side of the lake and built houses, bridges, and roads right on top of the water. Thus, canals connected much of the city, and most people owned small boats to get around. Damdrak was also considered one of the most beautiful cities in the world thanks to that unique aspect.

Since the lake fed the rivers that watered the fertile fields of the dukedom, everyone took great care not to dirty the lake water, and despite the large number of people who lived on and around the lake, it was still clear enough that you could see the bottom. Even the theocracy admitted that Damdrak was more beautiful than their capital, which said a lot.

Naiz and the others stared at the city from the safety of a dense thicket a short distance away. Sharm let out a gasp of astonishment, and even Reinheit couldn't keep his jaw from dropping open.

"So, uh, how long do we have to wait here?" Sui asked, seemingly unimpressed by the view.

"Someone should come to pick us up soon," Naiz replied, prompting Sui to cock her head.

"Wait, we're getting picked up? Hmm, I guess we're not taking the route through the city, then."

“The canals are too narrow for our party to safely navigate,” Naiz replied, looking over his shoulder at Kuou and Uruluk. It would be impossible to move them through the city unnoticed.

“Can’t we just leave them here and—”

“Graaaaaah!”

“Eeek, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it!” Sui exclaimed and immediately prostrated herself before the two familiars the moment they growled at her.

Vandre, who was carrying Laus on his back, looked disdainfully down at Sui and said, “Uruluk and Kuou were hurt pretty bad in that fight. I need to get them to Meiru as soon as possible, so stop your whining.”

“Okaaay,” Sui responded, tears falling down her cheeks.

Done admiring the city, Sharm and Reinheit turned to look at her.

Trying to hide his disappointment at not being able to tour the city, Sharm asked in a serious voice, “Umm, you mentioned the route through the city... Does that mean the headquarters is in the city?”

“There’s no way...” Reinheit muttered, skeptical that they could hide their main base in a city.

But before Naiz or Vandre could respond, Uruluk and Kuou looked up at the sky.

Naiz and the others looked up as well...and they spotted a mottled black and white cat looking down at them from a nearby tree branch.

“Looks like our welcome party’s here.”

“Huh? This cat’s our welcome party?”

“Oh no, he’s just my guide,” an unfamiliar voice said, which made Sharm and Reinheit reflexively raise their guard.

They then turned to Naiz and Vandre, but the two of them didn’t look worried, just surprised, which helped ease their nervousness a little.

“Hey, Tim.”

“We must really be getting the VIP treatment if the captain of the messenger

corps himself is here to guide us.”

“Please don’t tease me, Naiz-san, Van-san.”

Tim Rocket walked out of the undergrowth, a messenger bag slung over his shoulder and a hunting cap on his head. As he came closer, the cat leaped out of the branches and onto his shoulder.

Reinheit got between him and Sharm just in case and asked, “Umm, who exactly are you?”

“He’s a piece of shit who makes animals do all of his work, takes it easy, and lives the high life,” Sui answered in a contemptuous voice, and the cat hissed at her before leaping onto her head.

“Hey, stop, don’t pull the fur off my ears!” Sui shouted, trying to pull the cat off her. Everyone ignored her, and Naiz introduced Sharm and Reinheit to Tim. Once the introductions were over, they started moving.

“Still, it’s rare to see you here in person,” Naiz mused. “Err, not like how Sui meant it, just...”

“It looks like things are about to come to a head, so I was called back to headquarters.”

As the captain of the messenger corps, it normally made no sense for him to be holed up in headquarters. However, he had been using his special magic, Animal Harmony, to build out a network of animal scouts throughout the city, as well as in the mountains to the north. That was how he’d known almost immediately that Naiz and the others had arrived, and why he’d gone out to collect them.

Tim led the party west with sure steps, moving slowly out of consideration for Laus.

“Umm, we’re heading away from the city, aren’t we?” Sharm asked in a timid voice.

Tim cocked his head in confusion, and Naiz briefly summarized the conversation they’d been having before he’d arrived. Nodding in understanding, he gave Naiz a questioning look, who then signaled that it was

okay to explain. A gust of wind curled around his finger, indicating that he'd used wind magic to keep anyone from overhearing them.

Relieved, Tim turned to Sharm and said, "Sharm-kun, the city only houses a few checkpoints that hide some of the routes into our headquarters."

"So it's a front?"

"Yes. In order to reach our headquarters, you need to contact one of our supporters. Most of them are living normal lives in the city, so it's impossible for an outsider to figure out who they are."

Said supporters worked all sorts of different jobs in various sectors of the city. Some were tour guides, others owned stores, and so on. Every day, headquarters gave all of them a different code and a specialized mark. The codes changed constantly, of course, and whenever a Liberator contacted one of them to go to headquarters, they had to give the correct code and present the correct mark. Once that was done, they were brought to an interim location. There, the Liberator would undergo a second inspection, and if they cleared that, a runner was sent to headquarters for final confirmation. It was only after that was given that the path to headquarters would open for them.

"Right now, we're going to one of those interim locations. The interim locations outside the city change each day, and normally, there would be even more inspections you'd have to go through, but..."

Since Naiz and Vandre were vouching for Reinheit and the others, they were able to skip some of the procedures.

"Y-You guys are really strict about security."

"Yeah, but it makes things really inconvenient. The Pale Forest made for a much nicer base, since Her Majesty Lyutillis could just use the fog to keep outsiders at bay and all," Sui said nonchalantly, and nobody was able to offer a rebuttal.

Indeed, the Liberators had traveled the world, but they'd never seen a fortress as secure as the Pale Forest. However, the church had almost broken through even that, so they were taking as many precautions as they could.

Vandre glared at Sui to prevent her from derailing the conversation, then

added, “Headquarters’s defenses are as good as you can get. For starters, it’s almost impossible to find. But even if you did figure out the location, you’d need an apostle’s strength to reach it without an invitation.”

“It’s that fortified?” Reinheit muttered, gulping. Sharm looked nervous as well.

Just then, Tim came to a halt. This section of the forest didn’t look any different than the rest. There were no landmarks or strange symbols etched into the ground or anything. In fact, it looked almost identical to the place they’d started in, except that it was much closer to the lake. If they took a few more steps, they’d be in the water.

Tim bent down and started shaking a nearby branch in a very specific way. After a few seconds—

“Yo, you guys took forever,” a voice said directly in everyone’s heads. Reinheit and Sharm looked around wildly.

“No need to worry, boy. I’m your inspector.”

There was a ripple on the lake surface, and the owner of the voice popped his head out of the water. Sharm and Reinheit pushed aside some branches to get a better look at him and—

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! An old man’s being eaten by a fiiiiiiiiish!” Sharm shouted.

“I-Is this some new species of monster?!” Reinheit exclaimed.

“Well, it is a pretty novel sight,” Naiz replied with a wry grin. He and Vandre had had a similar experience when they’d first met this creature. After all, it wasn’t every day you saw a fish with the face of an old man. Sharm couldn’t be blamed for thinking some carnivorous fish was eating an old man instead. That was just how nonsensical the creature’s appearance was.

Reinheit clutched the hilt of his sword, and Naiz hurriedly held out a hand to stop him from drawing it.

“Calm down, he really is our inspector.”

“He’s not even human!”

“What in the world is that creature?!”

Of course Sharm and Reinheit knew the Liberators were an organization that transcended species, but they still hadn’t expected to run into a fish with a man’s face.

Seeing their confusion, Vandre explained, “Back when the dukedom was still a kingdom and the people worshipped local spirits instead of the church’s god, this guy was considered a god. People believed his kind was the only spirits mortals could see, and that they were direct descendants of the great lake spirit.”

“What the hell did they think spirits normally looked like?!”

“They thought *this* guy was some great spirit of the lake?”

Unfortunately, Vandre’s explanation only confused them more.

“Hey, you two,” the man-fish said, his deep, pleasing baritone voice commanding Sharm and Reinheit’s attention. They shivered, wondering if they’d angered this great spirit.

“Don’t sweat the small stuff and just take life as it comes,” he said in a calm voice, and Sharm and Reinheit both breathed sighs of relief.

“Am I a man, a spirit, or a monster? Hah, who cares about that crap? What’s the point in quibbling over petty definitions?”

“U-Umm...” Sharm muttered.

“What kind of life have you lived? How will you live your life from here on out? That’s what really matters, isn’t it? Long as you know the answers to those questions, what manner of being you are doesn’t matter one bit.”

Even though they were talking to a weird fish with an old man’s face, Sharm and Reinheit both straightened their backs. They couldn’t help but be moved by the creature’s speech.

“As for me, I’m just some old man who’s taking a shine to these young folk who want to fight against the way of the world.”

He’s so cooooooooool! Sharm and Reinheit thought simultaneously.

“Now then, enough small talk. I’ve got an inspection to complete.”

Dark red mana swirled around the man-fish. It was the same color of mana that all monsters had, and Sharm and Reinheit flinched.

“Don’t worry,” Naiz said. “As Van explained, he’s an inspector. He’s just going to read your thoughts to make sure you don’t hold any ill will toward the Liberators, and that you haven’t been brainwashed by anyone.”

“H-He can read people’s minds?!” Reinheit asked, aghast, and Vandre nodded.

“Just your surface-level thoughts though, apparently. All Seamen can use the special magic Telepathy, and this is apparently one application of it. Though I’ve heard only older Seamen have this power.”

“Seamen?”

“That’s the name of their species. This guy’s name is Lonely Wolf. Everyone just calls him Loman, though.”

“Vandre-dono, am I supposed to be taking this seriously?”

“It’s fine, I know exactly how you’re feeling. I was like that at first too.”

“I recommend not thinking too hard about it. Just pretend that he’s a regular old man who likes to lecture people about crap,” Sui said, and for once Reinheit took her advice.

He’s a spirit of the lake, and the Liberators are all crazy. Works for me.

And with that, Reinheit gave up on thinking about anything. Incidentally, when Sui had first visited the headquarters, Loman had read her thoughts and lectured her on her selfishness and jealous nature.

“All right, you guys are clean. I already contacted headquarters too, Naiz. You can go in whenever you want. It’s three hundred meters northwest and ten meters down. Can you make the jump?”

“Yeah, that’s enough information.”

“Normally, people gotta swim to get in. You guys got it nice. I’ll tell my family to keep an eye out just in case, though.”

“In that case, it’ll be fine even if I teleport everyone into the water. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Loman gave Naiz a friendly smile, then disappeared under the water.

“Naiz-dono, are you taking us underwater?”

Naiz grinned and nodded.

“Why underwater? Are we going into the city from the lake?” Sharm asked, and Naiz chose that moment to drop the bomb.

“The Liberators’ headquarters is...underwater.”

Sharm and Reinheit didn’t even have time to gasp. Naiz teleported them immediately after saying that...and a second later, the group was underwater. Or rather, they were in a sparkling tunnel under the water.

“Is this...a barrier?” Reinheit whispered.

“Reinheit, look! Over there!”

The tunnel was wide enough that Uruluk and Kuou could sit comfortably within it. While Reinheit was examining the glimmering barrier that kept the water out, Sharm tugged on his sleeve and pointed in the distance.

Reinheit looked down in the direction Sharm was pointing and—

“What...? Is that a ship?! Actually, with that shape, I guess it’s a submarine. But still, that thing’s huge!”

Indeed, the tunnel led to a massive ship. The tunnel was about two hundred meters in length, but even from that distance, the ship looked huge. At a rough estimate, it was about three hundred meters long. However, the main thing separating the ship from normal ones was the five-story high palace situated on the main deck. Unlike the tunnel the group was in, the palace and the ship weren’t encased by a glowing barrier, but there was still something keeping the surrounding water out.

“That’s the Liberators’ main headquarters, the underwater submarine palace Lac Elain,” Naiz explained to the dumbfounded group.

Guess that explains why the church never found it... Reinheit thought to

himself.

Locating a mobile underwater base would be pretty hard, especially considering the size of Ur Lake. The lake was around a hundred kilometers in diameter, and about three hundred meters deep on average. The center was far deeper, and though six hundred meters was the deepest official dive on record, the bottom was even deeper than that.

Unless someone was explicitly invited to the Liberators' headquarters, they'd never be able to make their way to it.

"All right, enough gawking. Let's get a move on," Sui said in a bored voice, leading the party down the tunnel. Her shoulders were still in a lot of pain and she wanted Meiru to heal them as soon as possible.

"Hm? Isn't that—? Gulp."

"What's wrong, Reinheit? Did—? Gulp."

As Reinheit started following Sui, he suddenly stopped and stiffened up.

Off in the distance, he could see an entire school of man and woman-faced fish. He instinctively looked away, but he saw enough to notice there were tons of aquatic creatures, including some monsters, swimming together with the school of Seamen.

"Seamen have the power to control other aquatic creatures. It's one of the reasons the locals worshipped them as gods. They're part of the headquarters's defense force."

"It does look like they're quite skilled..."

"D-Does the church not know about the Seamen?"

"When Uldia became a vassal state of the theocracy, the church sent a team to investigate the spirits the locals had been worshipping, but the Seamen had a school of fish distract the investigators while they escaped through an underground current."

"Wow, they're really versatile!"

"This world is filled with so many mysteries..."

The group made their way to the submarine as they discussed the nature of the mystical Seamen.

The tunnel was connected to the bow of the sub, and as they got closer, they realized that the bubble of air around the submarine and palace was spindle shaped. It was like the entire structure was floating in a bulging disc of air anchored underwater...which, of course, meant the ship was capable of aerial flight as well as underwater travel.

There were several entrances on the sides of the ship, and people went in and out regularly.

Still in awe, the party touched down on the main deck. And the moment they did, the tunnel they'd been traveling through disappeared. Loman swam past and waved at everyone with his gills, then went off into the lake.

"This way," Naiz said, leading everyone to one of the doors leading below deck. It opened with a heavy groan, and the awestruck party followed him inside.

"Ah..."

"Whoa..."

They were in the ship's hold, and the massive space was filled with all sorts of goods. Two rows of people extended out from either side of the double doors. At the end of the corridor of bodies was a group of four people. Miledi, Oscar, Meiru, and Lyutillis.

Miledi was still wearing a maid outfit, though it was one of a slightly different design than last time. Oscar had a vast collection of subtly different maid uniforms. Vandre stared at him with undisguised contempt, and Oscar opened his mouth to defend himself.

However, before he could say anything, Reinheit muttered, "B-Beautiful..."

"Reinheit?!" Sharm shouted, looking as shocked as everyone else. Reinheit was staring straight at Miledi, staggering backward as if overwhelmed by her beauty. It was clearly love at first sight.

Oscar's glasses glinted with a dangerous light, and Meiru and Lyutillis grinned

at each other.

“Ahem!” an old man standing behind Miledi cleared his throat with a loud cough, bringing everyone’s attention to him. He had his long white hair tied back in a ponytail, and was wearing a black priest’s robe embroidered in gold. He glared at Reinheit, looking more like a battle-hardened warrior than an old man. In fact, there was so much force in his glare that even Oscar averted his gaze. Returning to his senses, Reinheit blushed and straightened his back.

Meiru and Lyutillis were still grinning, but the old man ignored them and said in a dignified voice, “Welcome to the Liberators’ headquarters.”

The Liberators had really rolled out the red carpet for Laus and his party, it seemed. Probably because he was the last ancient magic user they’d been looking for.

Miledi was hopping from one foot to the other in her excitement.

“Now then, Laus Barn-dono is...where, exactly?” the old man asked, confused. It was at that point that everyone else also noticed Laus wasn’t standing with Naiz and the others.

Everyone thought the tattered lump lying on Uruluk’s back was a bag or something, not realizing he was the man they’d all been waiting for. Sui walked over to Laus and pulled his hood back, revealing the bruised and battered former captain of the Holy Templar Knights. He didn’t so much as twitch when Sui touched him. At a glance, it even looked like he might be dead.

“What?!” Oscar, Miledi, Meiru, and Lyutillis yelled, running over to Laus.

“A-Ahhh,” Miledi wailed, lightly slapping Laus’s bald head.

“Calm down, Miledi. He’s just in the same state you were. He overtaxed himself and is sleeping off the exhaustion,” Vandre explained with a smile, and Miledi gave him a searching look.

“Really?”

“Really. So yeah, stop smacking his head. He clearly doesn’t like it, judging by the way he’s moaning.”

Of course, the reason Laus didn’t like it was because even in his unconscious

state, it brought back memories of the time Miledi had made fun of his baldness. Regardless, he was, if not okay, at least alive and safe.

Miledi stepped back, relieved. The other Liberators looked visibly relieved as well. They started crowding around Reinheit and Sharm, pelting the two with questions.

“Is he really okay?!”

“What happened to you guys?!”

“Holy crap, his left arm is missing!”

“My, you’re such a cute boy!”

Sharm shrunk back, scared by the older ladies who seemed to have an inordinate amount of interest in him, while Reinheit tried to politely deflect their inquiries.

“All right, out of the way, you guys. I need to take care of our new patient!” Meiru exclaimed, parting the crowd.

“Meiru-nee-san. I’m suuuuuuper tired. Can’t you give me some restoration magic too?”

“Hey! You can’t talk to Onee-sama like that, Sui. It’s—”

“Save it for later, Your Majesty. I don’t have the energy to deal with you right now.”

“Is it just me or are you treating me with even less respect than usual?!”

“You can fantasize about that somewhere else, Lyu. Get out of my way so I can work.”

The moment Meiru said that, the crowd picked Lyutillis up and began passing her along, away from Laus.

“Stop! I command you, stop this instant!” Lyutillis shouted, but she sounded so happy no one actually believed she wanted them to stop. She hadn’t even tried to hide her masochism at the Liberators’ headquarters, so everyone present already knew she was a massive pervert.



At this point, they didn't even try to pretend to treat her with respect. However, they were all quite fond of her. But if the beastmen ever found out their beloved queen was treated like a pet, they'd weep.

"I'm impressed you're selfish enough to ask for healing first when there's someone who clearly needs it more. Don't worry, though, I'll get all of you at once," Meiru said, getting ready to cast restoration magic. But before she could start, Naiz interrupted her.

"Meiru, don't regenerate Laus's arm."

"Huh? But it's not like it'll take me any extra time to fix it or anything."

"I know. But...he's the one who wants to keep it that way."

Laus had told Naiz that just before passing out.

"In his words, 'I lack strength. I want Oscar Orcus to craft me a replacement for my missing left arm.'"

At that, the room went silent. Everyone turned to look at Laus. Next to him, Sharm grit his teeth in frustration.

Despite the sorry state he was in, despite the fact that half of his family had turned against him, it was clear to everyone that Laus's will remained unbroken. He was prepared to turn even his own weakness into strength to get his family back from Ehit's clutches.

"I'll craft the perfect arm for him. In fact, I'll make it stronger than any weapon I've ever made," Oscar stated without hesitation, nodding resolutely.

"Umm...thank you," Sharm muttered.

"We're counting on you, Oscar-dono," Reinheit added with a low bow.

Meiru finished casting restoration magic on everyone, and eventually, the group dispersed. Laus was carted off to a hospital bed, while Naiz and Vandre went into a separate room to catch Miledi and the others up to speed.

"Now then, I suppose some introductions are in order. This meeting will go much smoother if we know each other's names, I imagine."

The group sat on leather sofas surrounding an antique table, while a small fire crackled in the fireplace—much to Sharm and Reinheit's surprise, since this room was in a ship that was underwater.

Aside from Miledi and her friends, the two of them, the old man with the white ponytail and sharp glare who'd just spoken, and a young woman sitting next to him, were the only ones in the room. There was a space prepared for Sui as well, but she'd escaped at the first chance she'd gotten.

"My name is Salus. Salus Gaistrih. As you can see, I'm a strapping young lad of eighty-eight."

Reinheit and Sharm tried their best to not visibly cringe at the awful joke. A second later there was a loud bang, and the two of them leaped to their feet, exclaiming, "What the—?!"

"Commander, didn't you promise to limit yourself to one joke a day? You aren't going senile, are you?" the woman sitting to the left of Salus said, her hand raised over the back of the old man's head. She'd hit him with enough force to kill a normal man, and indeed, Salus was sprawled out over the table, seemingly unconscious.

The woman left him there and explained, "My apologies. Despite his antiquated antics, he is the de facto commander of the Liberators. And this girl here in the maid outfit is Miledi Reisen, our true leader. Unfortunately, right now her emotions and expressions are more muted than usual."

"Ah, I see."

"W-Will she be okay?"

"Once Laus-dono wakes up, she will be. I'll explain what happened to her later; it's a long story."

The lady went on to introduce Oscar and the others, her voice perfectly level the entire time. Her slit-like eyes pierced Reinheit and Sharm, as if seeing through them. Her dark blonde hair was in a tidy bob cut, and her blouse and skirt had not a single wrinkle on them. She wore black gloves and black stockings, leaving nothing below her neck exposed. But what made Sharm and Reinheit uncomfortable wasn't her intimidating aura or piercing glare, but the

single fox ear on her head.

“Lastly, I am Cloris Gaistrih, aide to the commander and leader of headquarters’s third combat division. As you might have guessed from my last name, I’m this old geezer’s adopted daughter.”

Cloris went on to explain that her primary duties were guarding Salus and the headquarters. She finished off by saying, “To spare you the awkwardness of asking, I’ll tell you now that I lost my other ear to the church. A Templar Knight cut it off. Thanks to that worthless, shitty god of theirs, I went through quite a painful experience.”

“O-Oh,” Sharm said awkwardly, averting his gaze.

Reinheit quietly muttered, “I-I’m sorry...”

“No need to apologize. You’ve already turned your backs on God, haven’t you? In that case, I hold no grudge against you.”

Her voice was as level as ever, but that was exactly what scared Reinheit and Sharm. They couldn’t tell if she really didn’t mind, or if she secretly hated them.

Miledi turned to Cloris and mumbled, “Clo-chan, don’t bully them too much, okay?”

Reinheit looked up at her and muttered, “My goddess...” in a small voice.

“She’s nothing like how you described her, father...” Sharm whispered, moved by her kindness.

“If you say so, Mi-chan,” Cloris replied, looking down. It was clear from the way they addressed each other that the two women were rather close. Reinheit also found it cute how Cloris’s single ear drooped when Miledi scolded her.

“No, bully them more! That man is trying to make a move on my cute, precious Miledi!” Salus shouted, lifting himself off the table.

“I-I am not—”

“Silence, whelp! First we had that four-eyes with his fake gentleman persona and now you! Why are there so many disgusting pests hovering around my pure Miledi?”

Oscar looked away, which surprised Reinheit. Naiz and Vandre just sighed, while Meiru and Lyutillis grinned.

“I’ve still got enough strength left in these old bones to destroy anyone who dares defile— Gyaaah!”

“Shut up, Uncle Sal,” Miledi muttered angrily, using gravity magic to smack him against the table. This wasn’t the first or even the hundredth time Salus had felt the hard wooden table’s unyielding caress.

The young girl he doted on like his own granddaughter had spent almost all her time with Oscar, the man he—mistakenly or not—believed to be a womanizer who put on gentlemanly airs just to seduce girls. It was only natural that he’d take umbrage with Oscar’s existence, but then, it was only natural that Miledi wouldn’t like that either. And recently, Miledi’s “warnings” had been growing a lot more violent. It was only a matter of time before she accidentally killed him. Though, it didn’t seem like any of the other Liberators cared if she did.

“U-Umm, Miledi-san! I swear on my honor that I wasn’t—”

“Reinheit, please be quiet. You’ll only make things worse.”

“Sharm-sama?! I-I’m sorry...”

Reinheit tried to defend himself, but to his utter shock, Sharm was the one who reprimanded him.

“Oh my. Looks like you’ve got a rival in love, Oscar-kun,” Meiru teased.

“Isn’t this exciting, Onee-sama?! I can’t wait to see which of these young men manages to win Miledi-tan’s heart!”

“Meiru, Lyu, please stop teasing me, I really don’t like it,” Oscar said with an exasperated sigh. He then turned and saw Miledi staring intently at him, but she quickly turned to Reinheit, then back to Oscar.

“I see,” she muttered as she looked at Reinheit.

“M-Miledi?”

“Are you trying to make a move on me too, O-kun?”

“I’m not!”

“...”

“Hey, wait, don’t get depressed about that!”

“Ahem. Oscar-dono, I realize this is a rather intrusive question, but what kind of relationship do you have with Miledi-san, exactly?”

“Reinheit, please regain your senses!” Sharm’s pleas grew more desperate as he watched the knight he respected so much make a fool of himself over love at first sight.

“Haaah, everything is falling apart already. I should have skipped out on the meeting like Sui did...” Van muttered.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Van. You can’t just leave me to deal with these guys alone,” Naiz said.

Unsurprisingly, everyone had long since forgotten the original purpose of this meeting.

Incidentally, Salus and Cloris hadn’t derailed the conversation out of spite. The Esperado branch had sent over a message telling everyone at headquarters that a Templar Knight was traveling with Laus, so people had had time to come to terms with that already. However, they were still hesitant to trust any knight other than Laus Barn without at least speaking to them first.

Reinheit had been allowed into headquarters because Naiz had vouched for him and Loman had confirmed that he held no ill will toward the Liberators, but people were still uncertain of his motives. It was entirely possible Reinheit was a highly skilled assassin who’d bypassed all the checks the Liberators had put in place.

In order to make sure that he wasn’t, Cloris had purposely insulted his god and Salus had poked fun at him to see what kind of reaction they’d get.

Was Reinheit truly their ally or not? It was hard for them to believe an average Templar Knight would be willing to betray the church, considering how thorough the church’s brainwashing was. Fortunately, Sharm was here to vouch for Reinheit.

“Umm, allow me to introduce myself. I’m Sharm, Laus Barn’s youngest son. And this is the Barn mansion’s guard, Reinheit Ashe. He’s this generation’s hero.”

“Oho...” Salus muttered, his gaze suddenly turning sharp.

Oscar and the others turned to Reinheit as well.

“I see. May I see the sword at your waist?” Salus asked.

“Of course,” Reinheit said, drawing the blade, which glittered in the lamplight.

A second later, Lyutillis grabbed Oscar’s arm and exclaimed, “O-chan-san, look at this!”

Her Guardian Rod was oscillating and emitting a pale, white light. Judging by how surprised she looked, she wasn’t making it do that.

“Are the two artifacts...resonating with each other?” Oscar muttered, looking between the sword and the wand.

“Commander, isn’t this...?”

“Yes, there’s no doubt about it.”

“Do you understand now? There’s no need to doubt Reinheit’s loyalties!” Sharm said emphatically, which was more than enough to convince everyone present that the boy trusted him completely.

However, Sharm’s trust wasn’t enough. The look in Salus’s eyes made that clear.

Unlike Leonard, he wasn’t convinced with just that. He looked appraisingly over Reinheit, then said in a cold voice, “History has shown that the hero has always been pure of heart. But that does not mean they have always fought alongside those who resist the will of this world.”

“Huh?”

“Heroes are mortal, just like everyone else, meaning they fight the people whose beliefs contradict their own. There is no such thing as a hero who’s on everyone’s side. You may be a hero, but that does not automatically make you our ally.”

“But...” Sharm trailed off. Salus’s logic was sound, so he couldn’t think of a convincing counterargument. He grit his teeth, his shoulders trembling.

Seeing Sharm’s struggle, Reinheit smiled. No virtuous knight could remain unmoved when seeing a child fight on their behalf. Ready to undergo any trial to prove his trustworthiness, Reinheit stared resolutely at Salus. But before he could say anything, Miledi cut in.

“Stop being naughty, Uncle Salus.”

“Mmmmmmmmmgh?! Miledi, are you trying to kill me?” Salus shouted as she once again pressed down on him with gravity magic.

“Laus Barn trusts him. That should be enough for us.”

After all, Miledi trusted Laus.

Seeing how decisively she said that, Reinheit understood for the first time why she was the leader of the Liberators. She had a strength to her that the others didn’t.

“Well, we trust you, Miledi, so if you say that’s good enough, then that’s good enough,” Oscar replied with a smile, and Naiz and the others nodded. Even Cloris smiled for the first time that Reinheit could recall.

“Come on, it’s not fair to make me look like the bad guy. Don’t be mean to your elders,” Salus said.

“Don’t worry, I know you’re just doing your job,” Miledi said reassuringly.

The Seamen’s ability to detect animosity was unparalleled. Though they could only pick up surface-level thoughts, they had a sixth sense that alerted them to malice, even malice that had been temporarily removed through magic or hypnotism. However, their senses weren’t perfect. After all, there were people capable of hurting others without any animosity or ill will, emotionless dolls like apostles or psychopaths to whom violence was as natural as breathing.

Though it was unlikely the Holy Sword would ever choose a psychopath as its wielder, there was always a chance. Plus, to Salus and many others, it felt too good to be true that the final ancient magic user just happened to bring the hero along with him. You could call it fate, but Salus hadn’t lived this long by

believing in fate.

“Miledi...I’m so happy... Actually, wait...if you knew all along, why did you crush me against the table?”

“Tee hee...”

“Ngh, how cruel! But you’re cute, so I forgive you! For cuteness is everything!”

Sharm relaxed, glad that Reinheit had been accepted. He let out a long sigh and looked up at his most trusted knight.

Reinheit blushed while muttering, “She really is cute enough to forgive anything...”

I guess love can really change someone... That realization brought Sharm one step closer to adulthood.

“Anyway, let’s get back on topic. Since Naiz and Van are back, I assume everything’s fine, but I still want to know why Leonard’s group isn’t with them,” Oscar said, turning to Sharm. He took great care not to meet Meiru’s or Lyutillis’s gazes. Not humoring their teasing was the best way to make it stop, or so he’d learned. He also ignored Salus’s glare, Miledi’s intense stare, and Reinheit’s look of frustration, since meeting any of their gazes would have been bad as well.

“Yes, let’s. There’s a lot to talk about,” Sharm replied, picking up on Oscar’s intention. He very well may have been the most mature person in the room at that point.

The information exchange happened mostly through Oscar and Sharm, with Naiz and Vandre chiming in to clarify a few things. Though the events of the past few days had been unbelievable from Sharm’s perspective, Oscar and the others didn’t seem too surprised. Not even the fact that the apostle was still alive fazed them. They’d been fully prepared to fight her again if she was immortal, or more of her if there were more. If anything, it was what happened to Kaime and Selm that elicited the harshest reaction. They looked enraged when they learned Ehit was trying to make father and son fight each other to the death.

In order to calm them down, Salus said, “Regardless, our top priority right now is healing Laus-dono.”

It was only after Laus was healed that he could heal Miledi. And without their leader at full strength, the Liberators couldn’t make a move. Or so Salus thought, anyway.

“There is something we can do,” Miledi stated, her voice arresting everyone’s attention. “Something we should do.”

Her voice had the same fleeting quality it had since she’d woken up, but everyone still sat up straighter, waiting for her next words. Their reactions surprised Sharm and Reinheit.

“But, Leader, how exactly should we do this?” he asked. Though he’d been joking around with Miledi earlier, he addressed her with her proper title now, in a voice full of respect.

“Tell everyone that the time has come.”

Those were the words that would summon every like-minded individual to Miledi’s side. At long last, the Liberators would emerge from the shadows and bare their fangs at the world.

“Heh... Now that gets the blood boiling,” Salus said with a feral grin.

“I’ll make final adjustments to Operation Revolution Tolls and put it into motion as soon as possible,” Cloris said, her grin almost a perfect match to Salus’s. In that moment, it was hard to believe they weren’t blood-related.

Miledi turned to Sharm, and the young boy saw himself reflected in those sky-blue eyes.

“We’ll grant your wish.”

“Th-Thank you very much.”

“You have our thanks, Miledi-san.”

Sharm just wanted to live peacefully with his family. It was a very ordinary wish, but one that was extremely difficult to achieve. However, Miledi had agreed to help grant it without hesitation, and Sharm and Reinheit teared up. Her aid would be invaluable in retrieving Kaime and Selm.

Finally, Miledi looked over Oscar and her other friends. With utter conviction, she said, “Let’s grow stronger, together.”

Oscar and the others grinned, confidence welling up within them.

“Of course. You won’t have to fight alone anymore,” Oscar said.

“You’ve already proven that the leader of the Liberators can take down an Apostle of God, which means the rest are *our* prey. Heh heh hee,” Meiru said.

“My, your sadism is inspirational!” Lyutillis said with a tiny moan.

“Hmph. I don’t know how many apostles are left, but I won’t let you one-up me again,” Vandre said.

“Yeah. There’s still time before everyone gathers. We’ll reach the same heights as Miledi before they do, you can count on it,” Naiz said.

The air shimmered as if heated by everyone’s determination. For a time, everyone had been lost and uncertain of what to do, but now their path was clear. They’d found their guiding light once more.

This was the power of Miledi Reisen, the leader of those who defied God. She burned like a blazing sun, and at long last, Sharm and Reinheit understood how Laus had been converted by her.

Miledi truly possessed the power to change even the world’s most stubborn man.

“We’ll help too! Actually, that’s not quite right. Please let us join the Liberators! We’ll fight by your side as comrades!”

“I feel the same way as Sharm-sama. I’ve already dedicated my life and my sword to Laus-sama and Sharm-sama, but thanks to a strange twist of fate, it would appear I’m this generation’s hero. In which case, I should do everything I can to help change the world.”

“Okay. We’ll carve out a new future together,” Miledi stated with a nod.

No one knew just how many apostles there were. They didn’t know how strong the Paladins were either, or how many people had been “demi-apostleified” or had clones of the Seven Sacred Treasures. Still, they weren’t worried in the slightest.

They weren’t making light of the problems they faced, but their determination was unflappable. It was the kind of determination only humans —only “people”—could have, the kind of determination that didn’t waver even in the face of death.

“A future where people can live freely,” Miledi said, wrapping up her speech.

Everyone cheered, their voices echoing loudly throughout the ship.

Chapter IV: Liberators Assemble

In the capital of the Grandort Empire, Dustool, there were many publicly and privately funded research institutions. It was a country known for its magical prowess, and the capital was the center of magic theory on the continent. One of these research institutes was run by Baron Lackman's family, which was known for being obsessed with studying magic, even by the standards of other Grandortians, who were all assumed to be obsessed academics by foreigners.

Their research focused on replicating the effects of ancient magic with ordinary elemental magic, and they had pioneered many different fusion spells as a result. Their contributions to the empire were great, but the current head of the family, Adel Lackman, was known as the "Explosion Meister." True to his name, he blew up some part of his research lab at least once a week, and people—both commoners and other nobles alike—naturally kept their distance from him.

He was a true mad scientist, and he hadn't even cared when the empire had confiscated his lands to the north because he'd neglected to manage them.

In fact, four years ago, right after the incident that had destroyed the Reisen family and revealed that there were heretics among the nobles' ranks, an inquiry of all the empire's nobles had been conducted. And the only thing the investigators had written in their report on Baron Lackman was, "This guy's insane. I can't spend another minute with this research-crazed weirdo." It took someone considerably odd to make a church inquisitor say something like that.

Moreover, Adel had just turned sixty this year. His once black hair was now speckled with white, and he was never seen without his thick, blast-proof goggles. He didn't look anything like a noble.

His appearance was a big part of why people tended to avoid him. Well, most people, anyway. Magic academics and fellow weirdos flocked to the man. The only other people who ever talked to him were soldiers who had to because of their jobs.

Today, a middle-aged commander with a retinue of ten soldiers had come to visit the Lackman Research Lab. From the outside, it looked like a normal three-story building with neatly painted white walls.

“Welcome to the Lackman Research Lab. What business do you have with us?” a well-mannered man in his early fifties asked through the closed gate. He was Adel’s butler, Henriette Lodge.

“Err, I’m leading the third investigation into the ‘White Terrorists’ who’ve been causing a stir in the capital recently.”

“My condolences,” Henriette said, sounding like he meant it, which made the captain flinch.

The White Terrorists were a group that had appeared just before the empire had been called on by the theocracy to aid in the war effort against the Haltina Republic. They had surged out of nowhere like phantoms, wore white robes, and ravaged the capital with a band of monsters.

As soon as the war ended, they’d scaled down their activity, but with the empire’s air force in tatters and the confusion following their defeat, even their scaled-down attacks were quite a threat.

Fortunately, no civilians, or even imperial soldiers, had died in any of their attacks. Still, they had and were continuing to destroy army facilities and equipment, which was causing a lot of grief to the empire. Plus, to make matters worse, a few nobles’ estates had even been ransacked, and their riches distributed to the poor.

At first everyone had been afraid of these strange new terrorists, but now many of the locals secretly praised the White Terrorists as chivalrous thieves. However, the fact that they were a thorn in the nobles’ side meant the military had been mobilized, and now soldiers were investigating everywhere, including dangerous research labs like this one. Of course, no one *wanted* to go, so the captains had drawn lots and this poor man had drawn the short straw.

“A-At any rate, we’ve received numerous reports of people saying they’ve seen suspicious figures moving about behind the research lab’s windows. We’ve also heard that an unnaturally large number of messenger birds have been flying in and out of the building.”

“Oh my. It’s true that we’ve been communicating more frequently with our fellow research labs as of late, but...I can’t imagine who these suspicious figures might be. That sounds awfully worrying.”

“Doesn’t it? I’m sorry to impose, but could we please search—” before the commander could finish his sentence, there was a massive explosion and a corner room on the top floor of the building went flying. Smoke billowed out of what had once been a room, and people started screaming in the distance.

“Eeeeeek! That’s the third one this week!”

“Fucking Lackman again!”

“Thank God I had the glass windows changed out for crystal ones!”

A man could be seen in the wreckage of the exploded room.

“Hya ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! At long last, I’ve done it! This is the dawn of a new eraaaaaaaaaaaa! Gah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah!”

He was covered in soot and his clothes were badly singed. Heedless of the fact that the floor was collapsing around him, he spread his arms wide and cackled maniacally. This was Baron Adel.

A group of men and women who were presumably his assistants crawled out from the rubble and shouted, “Chief, you have to stop the spell! Everything’s burning!”

“Oh no, the other magic circles are causing a chain reaction!”

The assistants grabbed Adel and dragged him back into another room, presumably in order to stop a bigger explosion.

“By all means, feel free to search the premises,” Henriette said after a short pause.

“Huh?!”

The commander and the soldiers stared at Henriette in shock. The explosion had knocked them off their feet, and they hadn’t bothered to get up yet. Henriette, on the other hand, looked unfazed by the explosion and hadn’t even staggered when the shock wave had hit him.

“My master has ordered me to comply fully with the government to help catch these nefarious terrorists. Go on, search the lab to your heart’s content.”

“...”

The commander glanced back at his men, and they all shook their heads vigorously. They were understandably unwilling to walk into a lab filled with death traps.

The commander got to his feet, dusted his uniform off, straightened his collar and said, “Actually, you seem rather busy, so I think we’ll come back another time. Excuse us!”

The commander then turned on his heel and walked off, his men hurrying behind him.

Henriette saw them off with the same placid smile, but once they were gone, he sighed and said, “Haaah, thank goodness they left... I suppose it’s about time we abandoned this base.”

He gave his cackling master a sad smile, then walked into the lab, deftly making his way over to the room that had had its walls blown out.

“Henriette-dono,” a woman said, poking her head out of one of the rooms and stopping him in his tracks. She had red and black hair and dark skin.

“Margaretta-dono, I suppose you still haven’t gotten used to him?”

She was, of course, the very same Margaretta who led the Schnee clan’s warriors. This research lab was actually the main base for the Dustool branch of the Liberators, and Adel Lackman was its head. Obviously, Henriette and the assistants the commander had seen earlier were all Liberators as well.

Margaretta and her warriors had been using this as their base of operations while sneaking about the city, sabotaging military installations, and stealing from the rich and giving to the poor.

She wasn’t at all that used to Adel’s eccentricities, so she nodded in response to Henriette’s question.

“Y-Yes. I don’t understand why he insists on blowing things up so often... It’s honestly hard to tell whether we’re getting attacked or not sometimes.”

“Your familiars seem to have gotten used to it faster than you have.”

“That’s because Van-sama made them. They can instinctively tell whether or not someone means them harm,” Margaretta said, puffing her chest out proudly, happy for an opportunity to talk Vandre up.

Just then, uneven footsteps could be heard from the hallway and Adel came tottering over to them.

“Oh, perfect timing, you two! Are the other Schnee kids in your room? Splendid. I must share this joyous news with all of you,” he shouted, still covered in soot. There was a crumpled letter in his hands.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to call us the ‘Schnee kids’?”

“Forget about that for now!” Adel roared. He was the kind of man who never really listened to others, which was one thing Margaretta had learned over the past two months.

Adel barged into Margaretta’s room, which looked more or less like a classroom. There were six blackboards in a 2x3 pattern on the far right wall, and under normal circumstances, a specific set of magic circles would need to be drawn in a specific order on them to open the door to the secret passage leading to the true Liberator base, but Adel didn’t have time for that.

“Agh, what are you slowpokes doing?! Schnee kids, get out here!” he shouted, punching the blackboards with his bare fists. It didn’t take nearly as much effort to come out as it did to go in, and it seemed Adel didn’t want to bother unlocking the door.

Henriette gave him an exasperated look while the wall behind the blackboards creaked and the door swung open.

“I-Is it okay to ignore protocol like this, Onee-sama?” a young girl asked, poking her head out. She looked like a tiny Margaretta. Her name was Tordretta Schnee, and while she shared no blood relation with Margaretta, she admired her so much she’d copied her look. Also, while she looked like she was only ten, she was actually sixteen.

“The chief’s saying it is. Go get everyone.”

A group of demons with a bit of beastman blood mixed in filed into the room, followed by their wolf familiars. A few seconds later, the Liberators pretending to be the lab's assistants rushed into the room as well. It seemed Adel had called everyone together.

Once all members of the branch were present, Adel cleared his throat and said, "Look, it's a letter!"

That much was obvious to everyone, but Adel ignored his people's exasperated glares and cackled madly to himself before continuing.

"It's from headquarters! They've secured Laus Barn!"

At that, everyone started whispering excitedly to themselves. But Adel's mad scientist act wasn't an act, he really didn't care about anything except his research. It was strange for him to be getting this excited just over Laus's safe return. The people who'd known him the longest realized that, and then realized what it was that had actually gotten him so elated.

"Adel-sama, could the time finally have come?!" Henriette asked, his voice uncharacteristically heated. At that, Margaretta and the others realized what was going on too. They gulped, looking expectantly toward Adel.

"That's right, it has! It's time to challenge that wicked god who stymies mankind's progress!"

Eyes gleaming with manic intensity, Adel swept his gaze over everyone.

"Lady Miledi's sent out the order!"

"The time has come. Assemble," as Adel read out their leader's words, the Liberators of the Dustool branch shrieked in excitement.

Normally, a group of soldiers would have come to check on the commotion, but this was the mad scientist Adel Lackman's explosive research lab. The noise just made the passing soldiers and civilians hurry away from the place, lest they get caught up in an explosion.

Some distance from Dustool was the city of Mord, which was the largest city in what had once been the Reisen family's domain. Now, the place was known

as the land of tragedy, where the noble executioners had perished. People still remembered the night when the powerful family that had served as a buffer against demon invasions had been obliterated.

After the Reisen family had perished, the lord of the neighboring lands, Archduke Belfauna, had taken over managing the region. However, the shadow of tragedy hung over the land, so many good people left while scoundrels started making the city their home.

Belfauna was already busy managing his own lands, so he didn't have much time to deal with the affairs of Mord. After appointing a provincial governor, he'd more or less ignored the place. Thus, the Liberators hadn't had a hard time at all establishing a base in the city.

The base there masqueraded as a gambling hall and prostitution house. It turned out that even the most tight-lipped nobles were willing to spill their hearts to a prostitute after a night of steamy sex, which made it a perfect place for gathering intel.

Mord was basically a city of outlaws, where people who lacked magical talent and had been ostracized from Grandortian society, as well as nobles who wanted to dabble in shady business, gathered.

An angry voice could be heard echoing through the Liberator base in Mord.

"Oh, shut up! I told you I don't do that kinda work!"

It belonged to Shushu, the gray-haired wolf beastman who used to be part of the Reisen Gorge branch of the Liberators. She was glaring daggers at a beautiful young woman dressed in a seductive ultramarine dress.

The young woman smacked her glossy lips and replied, "But, Shushu-chan. You haven't been going on any missions recently, have you? We can't just keep feeding you for free..."

"That's because Margaretta went overboard!"

"And so, you have no work left? Don't be stupid. If you're out of work, you need to find something new to do."

"I'm guarding the place, aren't I?!"

“You know that’s the excuse NEETs use, right?”

“D-Don’t you dare call me that! It stings every time you say that word!”

Mord was a violent city, and a brothel-cum-gambling house definitely needed its fair share of guards. Shushu was as capable a bodyguard as they came, so her argument seemed sound. However—

“We already have more than enough guards,” the woman said.

Indeed, the Mord branch had its own combat unit attached to it. A few of the people who masqueraded as card dealers and prostitutes were capable fighters as well. In fact, all the men and women who’d come to watch the argument in the lounge could take care of themselves in a brawl. Incidentally, the seductive young woman arguing with Shushu was none other than the chief of the Mord branch, Madame Jacqueline. Wind magic was her specialty. She, along with most of the other prostitutes, had originally been a certain church priest’s sex slaves until they’d been saved by a certain man. That man had gone and joined the Liberators, so they all had too.

That same man walked into the room and growled, “What are you fools arguing about now?”

He wore an eyepatch over one eye, was missing one arm, and had three long scars on his face. It was Howzer Almeda, the former chief of the Angriff branch.

Jacqueline turned to Howzer and said in a coquettish voice, “Howzer, can you believe it? This girl...”

Two men followed in after Howzer—Tony and Abe. They’d been part of the Reisen Gorge branch just like Shushu, and they seemed just as surprised by Madame Jacqueline’s sudden transformation.

“Shushu, what’d you do this time?” Tony asked.

“Can’t you give it a rest? You’ve been getting worse recently,” Abe added.

“Shut up, you two! Don’t just assume I’m the one at fault here!” Shushu replied with a low growl.

Howzer sighed and said, “Let me guess, you told her to go solicit customers since she doesn’t have any missions right now. Stop rehashing the same

pointless discussion.”

Shushu didn’t particularly look down on sex work, and Madame Jacqueline didn’t think she did either, so that wasn’t the problem. After all, this place wasn’t a brothel because of orders from up high, Jacqueline had made it that way because she’d thought it was the most effective way to gather information, which it was.

Jacqueline didn’t really intend to force Shushu to be a prostitute; she was just teasing the young girl because she found Shushu’s reactions adorable. So when Howzer told her to back off, she did so quite easily. Shushu knew she was being toyed with too, but that only made her feel more annoyed.

“And, Shushu, quit sulking. I know you don’t like the republic, but you’re not a kid anymore. Get over your petty prejudices.”

“I know, I know! I’m doing what you asked, aren’t I?! Even if that means saving those fucks from the forest,” Shushu replied with a glare. Tony and Abe gave her a sympathetic look. They understood exactly how she felt.

Shushu had been born in the republic, but then she’d been kidnapped by the church and her family had been slain. After that, she’d been brainwashed and sent back to the forest to attack her brethren. Somewhere deep in her heart, she’d believed her countrymen would save her when she went back, but reality had been cruel.

The law of the forest was absolute. In order to ensure there weren’t even more victims, anyone who left the forest either willingly or not was considered dead to the republic. Even if someone managed to return to the forest, there was no telling if they’d been turned into double agents.

Shushu understood why the republic had reacted like that. The laws put in place by the republic were necessary to protect the last remaining sanctuary of the beastmen. But even so, she’d wanted her brethren to save her.

What she’d endured had been so unbelievably, heartrendingly painful, and being forced to attack her countrymen against her will had almost driven her mad with grief. It was only natural that she’d beg for salvation from her homeland. Which was why, while she understood logically why the republic had barred its doors to her, she still couldn’t get over the feelings of betrayal that

simmered within her. It was why she couldn't accept that her beloved Miledi had gone to save the republic and that the republic had joined hands with the Liberators.

Finding out that the queen of the republic was an ancient magic user like Miledi had only made everything worse. After learning that fact, she couldn't help but think, *If you're as powerful as Miledi, why didn't you save me like she did? I'm part of your family, aren't I? I'm one of you.*

"Simply doing as you're told isn't enough," Howzer said in a low growl, making Shushu shiver. It felt like he'd physically punched her out of her negativity spiral.

Despite his gruff appearance, Howzer took good care of everyone under his wing. But right now, he was glaring at Shushu with such intensity that all of his friends shrunk back in fear.

"Look. It's from headquarters," he said, holding up a letter. His lips then curled up into a feral grin.

"Operation Revolution Tolls has begun."

Everyone gulped.

"No longer will we hide in the shadows. Prepare yourselves, boys! Our time has come!"

An electric tingle ran through everyone present as they realized what this meant.

Shandra, the capital of the Sharod Federation, was located next to the largest oasis in the Crimson Desert.

"All right, if you can breathe, you're not dying. Move your hands for me, please," a woman said, her gentle tone a mismatch for her harsh words.

She was the head of the Shandra branch of the Liberators, Nadia Piscott. Nadia had dark skin and was wearing a flowing white dress. The lower half of her face was covered by an ornately embroidered veil, but it did nothing to hide her beauty. It was hard to judge her age, as based on appearances, she could

have been anywhere from her late teens to her early fifties.

“Oh, hello there, Doctor. Are you looking after another patient?” a passing man asked.

Nadia was indeed a doctor who ran the rather large Piscott Hospital. She had a harsh tongue, but many patients actually enjoyed being debased by her, so she was famous within the city.

“Yes, of course. There are so many half-dead deadbeats in this city that I never get a moment’s rest.”

“Ha ha, that’s ’cause we don’t have enough healers. And most of the ones here only see the rich.”

“But that means they’re leaving the poor to die.”

“Those other doctors don’t have any respect for their profession, they only care about money. We’re really grateful to you, Doc, for sticking out here with us.”

“If you’d like to make a donation, I’ll gladly accept. I’ll even throw in a smile for you,” Nadia said as she smiled at the merchant, but he averted his gaze. Everyone knew Nadia squeezed people for everything they were worth.

“Oh yeah, I’ve noticed you’re heading out with a large crowd this time. Is something up?” the merchant asked, forcibly changing the topic. It was something he’d been curious about, though.

Nadia often went out to visit patients who couldn’t make it to her hospital. It made for a good cover story so she could head to the various hidden Liberator villages in the country without suspicion. But normally, she didn’t take too many people with her. Sometimes, it was just the adventurer party she’d contracted to guard her on her excursions, and she even occasionally went alone. However, she had a big group with her today. Close to half the hospital’s staff was loading luggage onto wagons and hitching Iraks.

The merchant wondered if the hospital would even be able to stay open if this many people left.

“Yes, I’ve received a request from a very important person. I’ll need more

assistants than usual to ensure they get the care they need."

"Oh?" the merchant asked, curious.

Nadia's smile was softer than usual, and it sounded like this "very important person" was exceptionally dear to her.

Could some handsome bachelor in a neighboring city be after our precious Nadia? the merchant wondered to himself.

"Could it be the fated person you've talked about before?"

"Yes, indeed."

Taken aback, the merchant tried to grill Nadia for more details, but before he could, he was interrupted.

"Director, we've gotten replies from all the other towns!"

A slim man with spiky brown hair walked over to Nadia.

"You took far too long, Solas. This is why your head looks like a hedgehog's."

"How are those two things related in the slightest?! Anyway, stop spouting garbage and get on. We need to go!"

The man was Solas Benji. He was twenty-nine years old, and Nadia's best disciple.

"Hey, we're done packing! Let's get moving!"

"I'm the one who gives orders around here, Bakara. Don't be so hasty, blockhead."

"Can you say five words without fucking insulting someone?"

Bakara Bart was the leader of the adventurer party that served as Nadia's personal guard when she went out on trips. Both Bakara and Solas were normally quite soft-spoken, but whenever they talked with Nadia, they started cursing more than usual.

As Nadia moved toward the wagons, a flock of ten birds flew off from the hospital's roof. They were all Isoniol eagles, the messenger birds everyone on the continent used.

“Why are...?” the merchant had fallen silent after Solas’s interruption, but seeing the birds had rekindled his curiosity and made him mumble those words.

“Oh, I’m just sending messages to some friends.”

“Wait, is this sickness so bad that you need the help of doctors from other cities?”

The merchant began to wonder if the friend who’d asked for Nadia’s help had gotten caught up in some natural disaster or a plague or something of the sort, but Nadia declined to answer.

The Piscott Hospital did keep in contact with doctors all around the Sharod Federation, but this time around, Nadia had sent messages to a very different group. They were still her friends, but these were the friends who were going to help her fight against the world. In other words, she’d sent messages to the other Liberator branches.

Nadia walked over to her Irak and mounted it gracefully.

“Don’t worry about the hospital. The assistant director will take care of it in my absence,” she told the merchant.

“U-Uhhh, okay. Thanks. Umm, be careful, Doctor.”

“Thank you very much. You’ll be sure to give us a generous donation upon my return, won’t you?”

“Huh?!”

Nadia ignored the man’s surprised shout and gave the order to depart.

“Now then, I hope you’ve been good, my dear Miledi-chan,” she muttered to herself, naming the very important person the merchant had been extremely curious about.

There was a hidden Liberator village in the rust-colored wasteland near the Crimson Desert. The former residents of Andika lived there, and the code name for the region among the Liberators was “The Fertile Land.”

Originally, this region in the northwestern part of the continent had been a barren land of rocks and cold sea gusts, but Meiru had brought fertile soil up

from the bottom of the ocean and transformed it into lush farmland.

From the air, though, the farms were invisible.

“Nuaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

That was all thanks to the efforts of Snowbell, the Liberator in a frilly dress who’d just let out a bloodcurdling scream.

Their special magic, Mirage, let them camouflage a large area with illusion magic. Had anyone heard Snowbell screaming in the city and seen them flexing their massive muscles, they would have almost certainly called the guard down on them. But here, in this hidden Liberator village, the response was much milder.

“Oh, shut up. How many times do I have to tell you to stop screaming like a banshee anytime something happens, you freak?!” the agitated voice that answered Snowbell sounded used to hearing their screams.

“What was that?! Who called me a hideous monster who even Ehit would run from?! Sounds like someone needs a hug!”

“Are you trying to kill me?!”

The man who was talking was Kipson, a former guardsman in Andika. He had close-cropped blond hair and was now the captain of the guard in the Fertile Land.

“Why so scared? We’ve pressed our bodies together countless times over these past few months, haven’t we?”

“Don’t phrase it in a way that’ll cause misunderstandings!”

Kipson had lived in a lawless city for most of his life, and a normal person would easily be cowed by his bluster. But right now, he was the one cowering from Snowbell. The reason for that was because Snowbell was his combat instructor. Everyone from Andika who could fight had trained day and night in this village to grow stronger, and Snowbell had been the one training them all. Thus, Kipson knew from experience that Snowbell’s strength was unfathomable.

None of the fighters in the village had managed to escape Snowbell’s hug of

death. Every night they went to sleep and had nightmares about Snowbell's hugs, swore to themselves they'd never let themselves get hugged again, trained until they puked, and then...ended up getting hugged again. The endless loop had toughened them up though, and they'd gone from barely being able to buy time against a Templar Knight to being able to take on two or three of them at once. However, their biggest gains had been in defense, not offense. They could withstand blows even from the captains of the Holy Templar Knights at this point.

That was how hard they'd had to struggle to protect their dignity as men. And still, they were terrified of the human known as Snowbell.

Kipson knew if this conversation kept going for much longer, Snowbell really would come in for a hug and he'd be forced to fight for his life again.

"Wait, this isn't the time for hugs! I just remembered what I came here for!" Snowbell exclaimed.

"Yeah, you're a pervert who's beyond help, but I don't really wanna get into that right now..."

"I can still deliver my message while giving you a back hug, you know?"

"I'm sorry. Please continue."

Kipson knew the dangers of angering Snowbell. The past few months had taught him restraint.

"Everyoneeeeee, come over here please! We've received a message from headquarters! Everyone assembleeeeee!" Snowbell exclaimed, their deep voice echoing throughout the village.

Kipson ducked behind a nearby wall and covered his ears, while people started trickling out of their houses to head over to Snowbell's location.

"So, what exactly is this message, Snowbell? You didn't call us all here just to tell us the names of the newest people coming to the village, did you?"

"No, not this time." The tone of Snowbell's voice shifted, and their expression became inscrutable.

No one had ever seen Snowbell look like this before. They looked at once

overjoyed, sad at the loss of a loved one, and angry at something no one could really figure out.

“All combat units are being recalled to HQ.”

“What? All of them? Hang on, who’s going to defend this place, then? I know your camouflage is keeping this place hidden, but our leader put us here in case someone—”

“This is an order from that very same leader. It’s time to put the Liberators’ final plan into motion.”

“Final? Hey, wait, you mean...”

Snowbell gave Kipson a feral, yet noble smile.

“There won’t be anyone left to harm this village...because we’re going to go kill Ehit.”

A tense silence fell over the village. And after a few seconds, the import of Snowbell’s words finally sunk in.

The people here had been branded heretics, chased off the continent, and forced to live on a tiny, isolated island. They’d accepted their lot in life, saying they were at least free on that island. But then a girl as bright as the sun had come and told them to stand up once more.

Their will to resist had been reignited by Miledi, and those revitalized soldiers now smiled in anticipation.

“All members of every combat squad will make their way to HQ. Get ready, everyone, we leave at first light tomorrow!”

At Snowbell’s command, the men who had once been defeated outlaws turned into invincible warriors.

Far out in the western ocean was a lone boulder jutting out of the water. It stood ten meters tall and thirty meters wide and was shaped like a jagged tooth. A single bird was perched on the tip of the rock. It had a pouch on its back, as well as a ring on its leg that showed it was a Liberator messenger bird. The bird flapped its wings, stretching them out after a long flight.

For a few hours, the bird simply basked in the pleasant sea breeze and the gentle roar of the waves. Just as it was about to doze off—

“Oh, I see it! Over there!” a girl shouted, and the bird snapped alert with a start. It then launched into the air and saw a large boat had made its way over to the boulder.

The boat was the Melusine Pirates’ ship, the place it needed to deliver its message. And hopping excitedly up and down by the railing was Diene, Meiru’s half-sister.



“Hey, Diene, don’t lean out too far or you’ll fall off again,” Acting Captain Chris said, walking over to her. The white-haired cat beastman, Kyaty, the bearded Ned, and the demon Mania all came over as well, grinning at Diene.

“Ah?! Chris-san, is it okay for you to be out here? Also, how many times do I have to tell you? I didn’t fall, I jumped. I’m a dagon, so I’m fine with the sea.”

“You jumped off, even though we were going full speed?”

“Y-Yeah, dagons can do that kind of thing.”

“So you just *happened* to get really excited about the whale swimming alongside us and jumped in there on purpose, even though you were blubbering like a baby when Mania pulled you—”

“I’ll tell Nee-sama you were bullying me if you keep that up, Chris-san.”

“Ack!” Chris squealed and quickly shut his mouth. In the beginning, Diene had been a polite, obedient girl, but she’d quickly learned how to live among pirates.

“I guess they really are sisters. You can tell they’ve got the same dirty way of dealing with their problems,” Kyaty said, scratching her head.

Ned and Mania exchanged nervous glances.

“You’ve really ended up just like her. Guess that means you’ve grown? I just hope Captain Meiru won’t yell at me for this when we see her again.”

“She’s a hopeless siscon. I guarantee you she’ll be happy with Diene-kun no matter how she turns out.”

Diene cleared her throat and hurriedly changed the topic.

“Look, it’s a letter from Nee-sama!”

The messenger bird hopped onto the railing so Diene could take the letter off its back.

This boulder was actually the landmark the Melusine Pirates always sailed by to check for correspondence from the Liberators. Though the Liberators’ Isoniol eagles were exceptionally talented, they couldn’t search the entire ocean for the Melusine Pirates’ ship, so this boulder had become a makeshift post office

of sorts. And this time around, the pirates had happened to arrive at nearly the same time the eagle had.

Diene pulled out the letter, held it close to her chest for a minute, then excitedly opened the seal. She was just as much of a siscon as Meiru was. Chris and the others smiled warmly at Diene as she began reading the letter. However, their smiles didn't last long.

As Diene kept reading, her eyes widened in surprise, and then her expression grew serious. She had the same fire in her eyes she had the day she'd fought against the Holy Templar Knights to save Andika.

"Hey, Diene, what's going on? Did something happen to Meiru?" Kyaty asked in a concerned voice.

Diene looked up, and everyone involuntarily stepped back due to the determination in her eyes.

"Looks like the time's come to show the world our mettle," Diene said as she handed the letter over to Chris.

Surprised, Chris read the letter aloud to everyone. At first, Kyaty and the others looked surprised, like Diene had, but then they smiled fearlessly.

"Nee-sama, our captain, needs her crew back," Diene said, her powerful voice carrying over the roar of the sea.

"Weigh anchor, lads! Raise the sails! Our captain's calling us!" Diene ordered.

"As our captain commands!" the crew shouted in unison.

Preparations to set sail were made immediately, and the Melusine started toward land. It cut through the waves, taking its crew to the future they all desired.

Diene stood at the ship's prow, looking off at the distance. With her emerald-green hair—which was the same color as Meiru's—flowing behind her, she looked like a miniature version of the captain.

Just then, Chris muttered, "Umm, guys...I'm supposed to be the acting captain right now..."

Everyone suddenly came to their senses and realized they'd been following

Diene's orders instead.

"Wh-Whoops," Diene muttered, trembling in embarrassment. Cold sweat poured down her forehead.

"I-I'm sorry, Chris-san."

"It's fine... Don't worry about it. Everyone's moving faster than when I give the orders, so... Ha ha ha..."

"Ha wa wa..." Diene babbled incoherently and looked up at Chris, unsure of how to comfort him. The rest of the crew felt extremely awkward as well, and they focused on their work, pointedly not looking at Chris. No one mentioned the glimmering drops at the corner of his eyes as he took the wheel.

Sighing, Kyaty walked over to Chris and Diene—who was de facto acting captain at this point—and gave them both a slap on the back to cheer them up.

Entris's capital city of Esperado was still reeling from the train attack, which was the very first of its kind in the nation's history.

Rigan, the Liberator branch chief, stood on the roof of Hotel Lusheina and looked down at the hubbub of the city.

"Father," a voice called out to him. He didn't need to turn around to know who it was.

"Shirley."

His beloved daughter walked over to stand next to him.

"What were you looking at?" she asked. Shirley spoke to most people politely, since she'd worked as the receptionist for a first-class hotel for so long, but with her dad, she returned to her old, far more casual, style of speech.

"Nothing."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I was just reminiscing."

"About mom?"

Rigan's silence was all the affirmation she needed. She waited silently for him

to say something, but no words came. Sighing, she decided to give her report.

“We’ve gotten messages from all the other branches in Entris. The security checks at the train stations have gotten a lot stricter, so they’ll be coming here by horse.”

“What about from the kingdom?”

“I’ve yet to receive a reply from them, though I suspect their birds will arrive sometime today.”

Almost all the correspondence heading westward from headquarters passed through the Esperado branch. Over large distances, it made sense to change messenger birds halfway, and Esperado was a good central location.

Also, whenever headquarters had to send a message to every branch, what they actually did was send messages out to each nation’s capital and have those branches disseminate the message to the rest of the bases and villages and individuals in those nations. Of course, if headquarters needed something from a specific branch immediately, they sent a message to them directly.

The birds that had been coming out of headquarters the past few days had been the same as usual, but they’d been strengthened to an inordinate degree.

Lyutillis had used evolution magic on both Tim and his birds before he’d used his own special magic, making them far faster and tougher than usual. They were also wearing cuff-shaped artifacts that were enchanted with evolution and restoration magic.

They could travel farther than normal, on top of being much faster. Moreover, they were given special, nutrient-dense feed upon reaching Esperado, as well as an extra dose of healing magic, so they were as good as fresh upon leaving the city. They could go to and from the kingdom in a mere two to three days.

“What about Leonard and his men?”

“I’ve already talked to them. They’re going to stay hidden in the southern part of the dukedom until Laus-san wakes up. Jinx-san and Arsel-san didn’t sound too happy about it, but it is what it is. They really wanted to meet you at least once before the final battle.”

“Only the combat units have been recalled to headquarters.”

“I know. It’s why I’m staying here even though I really want to go join them. But you’re one of our oldest members, so they were hoping for some words of encouragement from you.”

Operation Revolution Tolls had existed since the founding of the Liberators, and successive generations of leaders had been waiting for the moment where they could finally put it into action. It would risk the entire organization, so the current leader had to be absolutely sure they could win the decisive battle, since it meant calling in every single member capable of fighting for one big push against Ehit. At the same time, however, this was the moment every Liberator had been waiting for since they’d joined the organization.

Naturally, the members of the support branch who had no combat capabilities would remain on standby. Their job was complete, so all they could do was wait to see which way the dice fell. They could only pray for their comrades’ success as they saw them head off for the final battle.

Shirley had known from the start that it had to be like this, but it was only now, after the moment had arrived, that she understood just how painful it was being able to do nothing except watch.

Seeing his daughter grit her teeth in frustration, Rigan said quietly, “Even after we change the world, life will go on.”

“I know...”

Those weren’t words from one Liberator to another, they were words from father to daughter.

“I’m sure many of us wish we could leave our weapons behind and live peaceful lives.”

“Yeah.”

“The support branch’s work isn’t done yet. They’ll need to stay so they can support the futures of those who fought for them,” Rigan said, then paused for a minute before adding, “But you should choose the path you want.”

“What do you mean?” Shirley asked, narrowing her eyes.

Rigan met her gaze and replied, “You were born into a family of Liberators.”

Rigan had been a revolutionary since long before he’d joined the Liberators. Even as a youth, he’d recklessly fought against the world as a heretic. Luckily, he’d survived long enough to meet his wife, Holly, and raise his daughter, Shirley. But he’d chosen this path, while Shirley had been forced into the life of a revolutionary due to the circumstances of her birth. She’d never had the chance to live a normal childhood.

“This thorny path has stolen a regular, everyday life from you. It even took your mother from you.”

But even after Holly had died, Rigan hadn’t cut his ties with Shirley and had dragged her along on his crusade. He considered that his greatest failure as a father.

“I’m so—”

“Hmph!” Shirley yelled, punching him in the stomach. Rigan doubled over, the wind knocked out of him.

“I’m a Liberator,” Shirley stated flatly. She was here of her own free will. That realization shocked Rigan even more than the punch had.

“Sheesh! Look, I know it’s a big day and all, but don’t get all sentimental on me! I came up to check on you because I was worried. I can’t believe you were thinking of all this pointless crap. Man, what a waste of time!”

“Shirley...”

Shirley held out a hand to help Rigan up and grinned. It was such a pure smile that it blew away any doubts he had.

“Neither I nor mom regret choosing this path. So what if it’s a thorny one?”

“I see... I should have known.”

I’ve gotten old... Rigan thought to himself with a rueful smile.

Shirley snuggled up to her father and the two of them gazed up at the sky, imagining the future they would help bring about.

Velnika, the capital of the Velka Kingdom, was the holy land of engineers and blacksmiths. Miners plumbed the depths of The Greenway to procure the ore the craftsmen needed. They mined every ore and mineral under the sun, refined it, and sold it.

The Mercride Mining Company was one such venture. It had opened its doors about five years ago, but had quickly earned a reputation for having a large variety of high-quality ore for sale at all times. The largest workshops had exclusive deals with companies they already trusted, but Mercride had quickly become the go-to for a lot of the smaller and mid-sized outfits.

The company was still doing well, and today, the shopkeeper could be heard grumbling to herself, saying, “Maan, he was such a hottie. I should have married him.”

She had unkempt indigo-blue hair, sunken eyes, and lips that were perpetually drawn into a frown. Her name was Eevee Mercride...and her favorite thing to say was, “I wish I could get married to a rich young hottie.” She also happened to be the chief of the Velnika branch of the Liberators.

“Quit daydreaming and get ready,” a bald old man with a stooped back said as he scribbled out letters as fast as he could. His name was Odio Straff, and at a glance, you might think a stiff breeze would be enough to knock him over. However, he was actually this branch’s strongest fighter. There was no one else as skilled at using lighting magic as him.

“Don’t call them dreaaaaaams! I’ve still got a chance!”

“Haaah... You know we’ve been ordered to gather at headquarters, right? The final operation will soon begin. We hafta contact all the other support branches and hidden villages in this country ASAP, but here you are bemoaning your love life.”

“I’m going to be thirty next year. I can’t just let my last chance slip me by! If I can just steal him away, I... Heh heh heh...”

“Look in a mirror and face reality.”

“That’s so meaaan. When’d you become such a stubborn old geezer?”

“It’s been fifteen years since the Liberators were founded, but I’ve been

waiting fifty years for this day. Our ultimate goal is finally in sight, so pull it together."

Odio had been with the Liberators since its founding. But like Rigan, he'd been fighting against the church for far longer than that. Eevee had as well, of course. Despite her sulky attitude, she was secretly burning with excitement.

That adorable, annoying gremlin of a leader had finally called them together to change the world. The final battle was drawing near.

The flames of hatred that had been smoldering within her since her family had been killed were now burning brighter than ever.

"I knoooooow. Let's get these preparations over with so we can go to headquarters."

"Mmm. I bet that little brat'll be back soon too. I heard he's gonna personally escort his old man over, and bring us all some shiny new artifacts to boot. We better get ready so we don't make him wait when he gets here."

"You think he'll move that fast? This is his first time home in a while, isn't it? Don't you think he'll want to spend some time here first? If anything, we should go get him if he takes too long..."

"Are you really still trying to flirt with him? Cut it out, he won't even give you the time of day."

"Why are you so meaaaaaan?!"

The other members of this branch sighed as they watched the two of them bicker like grandfather and granddaughter. Though, in a way, their usual arguing helped take the nervous edge off of the others.

They got back to work while the two top-ranking members of their branch kept hurling insults at each other. There was a lot to do to ensure the members of all the other branches could make it to headquarters without being noticed by the church, but everyone worked twice as hard, so the work went by quickly.

The large workshop was filled with the sounds of synergists crafting. Once, it had been called the Orcus Workshop. It was still as busy as ever, but now it

went by the name Verand Workshop.

The Orcus Workshop that had been one of the three great workshops of the kingdom no longer existed. However, the people who worked there were the exact same as the ones who had when it had been called the Orcus Workshop. And their boss was the same too.

“Hmph, things have finally calmed down,” a large man with more muscles than a soldier—Karg—said, nodding in satisfaction as he looked around his workshop.

There had been quite a stir in the city when he’d changed the workshop’s name, since it was one of the most popular ones. The citizens had reacted with surprise and worry, while many of the larger companies the workshop had a contract with started asking probing questions to see what was really going on.

Well, the name was changed on His Majesty’s direct orders. It’s not like I did anything shady, so I figured people would stop snooping around eventually... Karg thought to himself. There was one simple reason why the king had ordered Karg to change the workshop’s name. The church no longer approved of the name Orcus.

Karg thought back to the day the young man he’d thought of as his own son had left the workshop. And then, he remembered the inquisitors who’d come half a year ago asking all those questions.

They hadn’t said much, but Karg had at least learned that a synergist calling himself “Orcus” had attacked the church on the western seas.

“You really have been doing whatever the hell you want, haven’t you, kid? I like it.”

Chuckling to himself, Karg turned around and headed upstairs to his office.

Guess I’ll get some more paperwork outta the way... he thought to himself as he pushed open the door.

“Sup, old man? Long time no see.”

“Huh?!”

The same young man he’d been thinking about was lounging on his sofa. Karg

wanted to pat himself on the back for managing not to scream.

“O-Oscar?! What are you—?!”

“I did soundproof the room just in case, but keep it quiet please,” Oscar said nonchalantly, prompting Karg to silently open and close his mouth a few times.

Finally, Karg drew in a deep breath and said, “Seems you’ve grown impudent in the few years you’ve been gone.”

“I am *the* Oscar Orcus who even knights of the church fear, after all.”

The two of them stared at each other for a few seconds, but then Karg quickly burst into laughter.

“I’m glad you’re back, you stupid kid.”

“Yeah, I’m finally home, dad.”

Both of them blushed a little, and Karg plopped down on the sofa next to Oscar. The ring on Oscar’s finger glowed, and a second later, two steaming cups of tea were on the table in front of him.

“Looks like you had fun on your journey,” Karg said with a grin. He could tell Oscar was trying to show off the fancy new artifacts he’d made.

“You bet. I got to do whatever the hell I wanted.”

“All for the sake of the woman you love?”

“Ahem! Please don’t tease me, old man. I don’t have that kind of relationship with Miledi.”

“Hey now, I never mentioned Miledi.”

Oscar adjusted his glasses to hide his annoyance. Everyone had been teasing him about Miledi recently...and frankly, he was getting tired of it.

Karg sipped his tea, satisfied that he’d gotten Oscar back for surprising him.

After a brief silence, Oscar said, “I figured you’d have to, but I see you really did change your workshop’s name.”

He sounded a little sad about it.

“Yep. But hey, that means now my original last name is being used for the

kingdom’s best workshop.”

“Yeah, it does sound better than Orcus,” there was an apologetic tinge to Oscar’s voice as he said that.

Karg narrowed his eyes at him and replied, “Don’t give me that look, you moron. We always have been, and always will be, Orcus craftsmen.”

Even if the workshop’s name had changed, it was still the same workshop that everyone respected and counted on. And no matter what happened, Karg considered Oscar Orcus the workshop’s central pillar. Oscar smiled as he realized the meaning behind Karg’s words.

“The church’s inspectors came, didn’t they? I told the Holy Templar Knights my name back when we fought them on the western seas.”

“Yep.”

“Are they the ones who did that to your eye?”

“Yep.”

Oscar looked sad as he gazed up at the eyepatch covering one of Karg’s eyes.

The moment Oscar had given his full name, he’d known the church would investigate the Orcus workshop. He’d also known the inquisitors would be harsh with their questioning.

“Don’t worry about it, idiot.”

“How can I not worry?!”

“Because I’m telling you to!”

Karg got up and smacked Oscar on the head.

“I knew what would happen when I gave the Orcus name to you. And I told you, this was the will of every craftsman in the workshop! You inherited the name knowing that, knowing the burdens you’d have to bear! Don’t get all weak-kneed on me now!”

Karg and Oscar stared at each other for a few seconds.

“The Liberators have helped us out a lot,” Karg said suddenly, sitting back down.

“You’re the one who asked them to look out for us, aren’t you?”

In fact, the Liberators had even once invited Karg and his workers to join them.

Everyone knew that since Oscar had inherited the Orcus name, church inquisitors would eventually come knocking on the workshop door. Plus, since Karg had sheltered the kids who’d been impacted by the bishop’s soldier creation plan, there was a chance he’d be investigated on that front. The bishop himself had hidden all traces of the plan, since he’d started it without the church’s permission, but the truth of that would eventually come out too.

However, despite all that, Karg and the other workers had refused the invitation.

They were craftsmen through and through, and their calling in life was to make tools for people to use. No matter what happened, they wouldn’t stop.

Crafting was their pride, their way of life, and indeed their very lives. Living in hiding would’ve meant being deprived of their raison d’être. They could’ve tried to keep making things in secret, but people would always be able to pick out Orcus Workshop quality goods. Their work was simply on a different level than everyone else’s. Plus, if they went into hiding, they would be branded heretics for sure.

The Liberators respected the choices and free will of others, so they had, of course, understood and accepted Karg’s answer. But that hadn’t stopped them from trying to protect Karg and his people.

“When they took the kids you asked me to hide, they said they’d protect us no matter what happened. They also let me know how Moorin and the others are getting on.”

After Karg had refused their invitation, no one who called themself a Liberator had shown up at his doorstep. But every now and then, he found a letter sitting in his study.

“You guys sure are principled. Even though you’re a secret organization dedicated to fighting against Ehit, you’ve still got time to send letters to your folks.”

The Liberators had helped out when the inquisitors had come too. Karg had gotten a letter informing him that they were coming a few days before they did, and they'd even offered him a way to escape if he wanted it. The letter had even said that if he chose not to run, he was free to tell them everything he knew about the Liberators.

"But I mean, the only people I know who are part of your organization are you, Missy Miledi, and that youngster who asked if I wanted to join them. Not a whole lot to tell them, really."

All Karg had been able to remember about the guy who'd invited him was that he went all over the continent and wouldn't be staying in Velnika for long. Oh, and that he'd worn a hunting cap and messenger bag and had called himself Tim Rocket.

"But still, even an idiot would figure out you guys have a base in the city if I told them all that. Aren't you being a bit too nice to everyone?"

"We're not doing it to be nice. This is the path that they...no, that we believe in."

Fortunately, thanks to the Liberators' creed, neither Karg nor any of his men had been killed. He had indeed spilled the beans the moment the inquisitors had arrived. He'd also told them that he'd rejected the Liberators' invitation...and that he was the one who'd given Oscar the Orcus name. Not because he'd agreed with the heretic's ideals, but because he had accepted Oscar as the workshop's best craftsman. Of course, he'd also told them that Oscar had gone on a journey and would return eventually, but not anytime soon.

Lastly, he'd told them that even if Oscar was a heretic now, he would never rescind the name he had bequeathed to him, even if he died. The other craftsmen of the workshop all followed the same craftsmen's creed and had said much the same.

After telling the inquisitor all he knew, he'd stared into the man's eyes, daring him to kill him. In the end, it was his honesty that had convinced the church he wasn't a heretic.

"Or so I say, but honestly, they probably just let me go to see if you would

show up again," Karg muttered.

"Even the church knows they'd lose out on valuable craftsmen if they executed you guys. They probably didn't want to act without concrete proof. Especially now that there's a group out there who can beat the church's strongest knights. They'll need all the craftsmen they can get to make high-quality weapons for them. Plus, they just got done fighting a war with the republic, so they're going to need to replenish all their equipment."

"Sounds like a win for true craftsmen everywhere."

Grinning, Karg downed his cup and returned it to Oscar.

"I can tell you're about to undertake the greatest project of the century, kid," Karg said, his smile turning fatherly. "I wouldn't be a man if I got in the way of it, now would I?"

Karg had seen right through Oscar. He knew that Oscar hadn't risked coming here just to meet up for old times' sake before the final battle.

All the capable fighters in Velnika were headed to the Liberators' headquarters, which left the workshop defenseless. Oscar obviously wanted to get his stubborn old man somewhere safe in case the worst happened. He knew he was the only one who even had a chance of persuading Karg, which was why he'd come. But that was also precisely why Karg laughed him off.

You don't need to worry about me, kid. No matter what happens, I'll be fine, so go do what you set out to do. We all prepared ourselves for the worst the moment I handed the title of Orcus to you.

"Isn't that right, Craftsman Orcus?"

You're the greatest Orcus in all history, kid. The pride of the Orcus Workshop.

Oscar looked up at the ceiling, struggling to keep himself from crying. After a few seconds, he adjusted his glasses, got to his feet, and pulled a black crystal key out of his pocket. He activated it, and a portal appeared in the middle of the room.

Miraculously, Karg didn't even spare the wondrous artifact a second glance. He instead kept his gaze fixed on the man he'd raised like his own son.

“I like the look in your eyes. You’ve finally become a real man, kid.”

“Of course I have. I had the greatest man in the world as my role model.”

With that, Oscar walked toward the gate. But just before stepping through it, he turned back and said, “All right, dad, I’m gonna go change the world.”

“You better. I’m proud of you, son.”

Their parting was anticlimactic. One second Oscar was there, the next he was gone, and the portal disappeared with him.

In the silence that followed, Karg leaned back against the back of the sofa and looked up at the ceiling.

“Hmph. You’re the best son anyone could have asked for,” he said, his voice shaking with pride and happiness.

On a balcony in the Demon Lord’s castle in Igdol, an old man puffed on his pipe while looking down at the city below. His face was a mess of wrinkles and his short red hair was speckled with gray. A long scar that went from temple to cheek marred the old man’s—Elga Insut’s—face. He was the third great general of the demon army.

The spot he was sitting at still bore the scars of the momentous battle that had occurred half a year prior. An unbelievably large sword had cut through the castle walls, and the damage was still being repaired even now.

“My back hurts,” he grumbled, shifting on the rubble he was using as a chair and blowing a smoke ring into the air.

During the battle, he’d been knocked unconscious when the Reisen girl had shown up out of nowhere and blasted him out of the throne room. It was only later that he’d learned that the Demon Lord had tried to use the empire’s secret annihilation weapon on his own capital city. And when that had failed, he’d used an even greater power to rain down destruction on his people, whom he was supposed to love and protect.

“Hmm...” he groaned, thinking about what had happened during the meetings of the Imperial Council.

Elga had awoken in a hospital bed just a few hours after the battle had ended. During that time, Rasul had done what a proper Demon Lord should. He'd dispatched soldiers into the city to help the people and made a public appearance to reassure everyone. Not content with just that, he'd even pacified the panic within the palace and reorganized the army, recovering and treating the wounded while rebuilding the capital's defense network. He'd also summoned the various nobles and lords for an emergency meeting.

The fact that he'd managed to do all that while covered in wounds and right after a crisis that had threatened the heart of the demon empire proved that he was a capable ruler. And as far as Elga could tell, this Rasul was a totally different person from the sadistic ruler he'd known before.

That hadn't actually been too far from the truth, as Elga had learned later. At the meeting of the Imperial Council, Rasul had told everyone the truth about what had happened to him. He had explained that the Demon Lord was never really the true Demon Lord and that Rasul had ceased to be himself the moment he'd put the crown on his head. He'd been taken over by a god who sided with Ehit, the Supreme God of the Holy Church. Furthermore, he'd explained that the conflict between demons and humans was something spurred on by Ehit to relieve his boredom. He then finished his speech by saying that Miledi Reisen and her comrades, the Liberators, had freed him from the control of Ehit's partner.

Naturally, that had caused an uproar. To the demons, the Demon Lord was meant to be a living god. The citizens all worshiped Rasul. No one was ready to believe the god that occupied the Demon Lord's body was actually antagonistic to his own people, and in cahoots with their mortal foe to boot. Even though they were the Demon Lord's own words, the other nobles couldn't accept the truth. They began to wonder if Miledi Reisen and her comrades had brainwashed Rasul somehow. Or perhaps the truth was that he'd been normal before and *now* some evil creature had possessed him.

However, when they'd questioned him, he'd simply said, "Who was it that tried to bring the light of destruction down on his own people, his own country? Do not avert your eyes from reality. Face the truth head-on. Who was it that tried to destroy this city and those who wished to protect it? You all saw what

happened, so tell me what you saw, truly, with your own two eyes."

In the end, no one had been able to argue after hearing that.

"'I love all demons,' huh? I can't even imagine a demon saying such an embarrassing line, much less the heir to the Reisen family. Heh..."

I can't believe I was unconscious for that.

Learning that everyone had clearly heard Miledi say that had perhaps been the most shocking thing for Elga when he'd woken up.

"The question is, will His Majesty's words be able to sway these stubborn fools?" Elga mused as he blew out another smoke ring. He looked like an old man sitting on his porch, sipping tea, rather than one of the empire's strongest generals. If any of his subordinates saw him, they'd think something was wrong with him.

A visitor jumped up onto the balcony from below, but this newcomer didn't seem confused at all by Elga's laid-back attitude.

"Elga-dono," she said simply.

"General Lestina."

Lestina Ascion, another of the empire's three generals, walked over to Elga and narrowed her eyes at him, her long braid swaying in the wind all the while.

"What are you doing up here?"

Her voice had a musical timbre to it. Though her expression was inscrutable, Elga had lived long enough that he could still read her like a book.

"I was gazing out at our country. It's beautiful, don't you think? You could just stare at the scenery forever, yes?"

"Absolutely. But that's no excuse for shirking your duties. Shouldn't you be by His Majesty's side right now?"

Elga was old enough to be Lestina's grandfather, and he'd served the Demon Lord's family for generations, but Lestina showed him none of the respect his seniority demanded. Still, all three generals were ostensibly equal in rank, and

Elga himself had told Lestina not to stand on ceremony with him, so it wasn't as if he was surprised by her casual demeanor. No, it was actually the barbed wariness in her words that was new to him.

But of course, Elga knew why she was feeling so irritated as well. Looking back down at the city, he quietly mumbled to himself, "We'll find a way to coexist with humans."

"..."

"I won't ask you to change your minds immediately, but at least think about it. Who is our true enemy? What does demonkind truly need to do in order to build a prosperous future?"

Those were the words Rasul had spoken at the meeting of the Imperial Council. They had reminded Elga of the idealistic person Rasul had been before he took the crown. And they were undoubtedly the true feelings of his Demon Lord.

"Ha ha, the nobles are still reeling from the shock of His Majesty's proclamation. If we're not careful, the hardline hawks might actually start a civil war. I must say, it's gotten rather tiring being on high alert for months on end," Elga said, then kneaded his back, making a point to show how badly he needed a break. However, Lestina simply glared at him in response.

"This is no laughing matter! Popular opinion is so split that even the civilians have started fighting amongst themselves!"

Rasul's words and the truth everyone had seen the day Miledi fought him had given rise to several factions within the demon empire.

There was the Demon Lord faction, which agreed with Rasul and wanted to, if not necessarily work together with humans, at least coexist peacefully with them.

Then there was the orthodox faction that still believed demons were the superior race, and that humans should be exterminated. They'd suffered far too much at human hands to be willing to accept them as equal partners. They considered Rasul's words an affront to the rich history of the demon race.

Finally, there was the neutral faction. They loved their country and their

people, but they weren't sure they could trust Rasul anymore. If he wasn't an absolutely perfect ruler, who was to say he wasn't being controlled by someone who meant them ill? The members of this faction wanted to be loyal to both Rasul and their country, but they also didn't want to harm their people by blindly following their leader's words. From their perspective, Rasul couldn't be completely trusted, so they were waiting for a sign to see if he really was worth following or not.

The neutral faction was the largest, followed by the orthodox faction. The Demon Lord faction was by far the smallest. This factional split went all the way down the social ladder, from the nobles to the commoners. Rasul had ignored the urging of his advisors and publicly announced what he'd told the nobles during the Imperial Council. As a result, the entire empire was in chaos.

The truth was unfortunately a bitter pill to swallow.

"Worst of all, Angol's part of the neutral faction, while our prime minister has the gall to publicly declare for the orthodox faction! The only reason there hasn't been a coup is because the two of us came out on the side of the Demon Lord faction. But at this rate—"

"Oh, so you thought I might have switched sides because I wasn't with His Majesty? My apologies for worrying you."

"I-I wasn't worried!" Lestina shouted, blushing. She glared at Elga even harder than before, but that only made her worry more obvious.

She couldn't be blamed for being on edge, though. Rasul's regime was far from stable right now. And though the three generals were ostensibly equal to the prime minister, Elga's words often carried more weight within the empire. Some of the more powerful nobles may have looked down on Lestina due to her youth, but no one dared disrespect Elga. In fact, the only reason the orthodox faction hadn't tried something so far was because Elga was part of the Demon Lord faction.

"Fear not. No matter what happens, these old bones shall remain by His Majesty's side."

"Do you truly mean that? Can I trust you on this...Commander General?" Lestina asked, returning to the form of address she used to use back when

she'd been a regular soldier under Elga's command.

He simply smiled at her, nodded, and said, "I truly am pathetic, aren't I?"

"Sir? Oh...I see. Yes," Lestina replied, nodding in understanding. She felt much the same about herself. She wasn't loyal to Rasul because he was the Demon Lord. She'd pledged herself to him back when he'd just been a prince, long before he'd taken the crown. She'd been moved by his kindness, his wisdom, and his desire to build a better future for his people.

Though her personal beliefs were closer to those of the orthodox faction's, her faith in Rasul meant more to her, which was why she couldn't forgive herself for failing to notice how unnaturally Rasul changed after taking the crown.

She'd obviously realized that he'd started acting differently after becoming Demon Lord. But she'd thought he was just playing the part, acting that way because it was expected of him by the nobles. She hadn't even suspected that someone might have taken over his body.

However, Elga's guilt stemmed not from loyalty, but from a sense that he'd failed in his responsibilities as a general. It was for that reason that he'd pledged himself anew to Rasul when he'd learned the truth. He was determined to watch over his master like a hawk, ensuring that nothing ever controlled him like that crown had again. He was even prepared to give his life to make up for his past failures.

"Do you believe the man we thought to be His Majesty until now was actually a servant of our most hated foe, Lestina?"

"As strange as it sounds, that explanation makes the most sense to me. After that battle, Rasul-sama returned to his old self."

A measure of relief crept into Lestina's voice now that she was certain Elga wouldn't betray Rasul.

I wonder if it's more than just loyalty that's made her so devoted to His Majesty? She does seem quite enamored with him... Elga thought to himself with a smile.

"Hm?"

A second later, he looked down and saw a commotion at the castle gates. Lestina noticed it as well and narrowed her gaze.

As they watched, a burst of moonlight erupted from the gates.

“What?! Isn’t that—?”

“How on...”

The light faded to reveal an ice dragon hovering in the air. The dragon swept its gaze over the soldiers, then turned to Elga and Lestina.

“Are we under attack?!”

“Now hold on just one minute, General Lestina. Hey, I said wait!”

Elga held out a hand to keep Lestina from activating her special magic—Inflame—and rose to his feet. He then walked over to the edge of the balcony, prompting the dragon to fly over to him.

“I am Sasrika Schnee’s son, Vandre Schnee! I have come bearing a message from the Liberators and demand an audience with the Demon Lord!” Vandre yelled in a voice loud enough to echo throughout the capital.

Nobles stood on either side of the red carpet in the restored throne room of the Demon Lord. Even those of lesser rank, who rarely visited the palace, were present. With the faction power struggle going on, no one wanted to return to their territory.

Sitting on the throne was Demon Lord Rasul. His face looked a little haggard, but his eyes glimmered with happiness.

The soldiers outside announced the arrival of a guest and threw the double doors open. Vandre casually strolled down the red carpet, seemingly unconcerned by the various looks the nobles gave him. He stopped in front of the throne and knelt with genuine respect.

“I didn’t think we’d meet again so soon, Van.”

“Neither did I, Your Majesty.”

Rasul’s face fell and he said in a sad voice, “Oh please, don’t stand on

ceremony. You're my beloved little brother. Plus, you saved my life. Come on, raise your head."

Vandre furrowed his brows, conflicted. He'd played the part of a humble messenger due to all the people watching, but Rasul apparently wanted none of that. Even though Vandre had specifically avoided naming himself as the Demon Lord's brother because of what he'd learned about the situation in the empire, it had all come to naught. Unsurprisingly, the nobles began glaring at him with unbridled hostility.

"Look, Van. I've managed to grow my hair out enough to tie another braid. We match again."

"Brother..." Vandre mumbled, covering his forehead with one hand as if nursing a headache

The nobles started openly hurling insults at him, calling him a filthy half-breed and one of Reisen's dogs. It looked like they might attack him at any minute.

Lestina grit her teeth and muttered, "If this is what you wish, Rasul-sama," keeping a wary eye on the nobles. Angol kept his face perfectly neutral, while Elga smiled ruefully.

"Heh, sorry. I've been awaiting our reunion for so long that I got ahead of myself. Are Lady Reisen and your friends well?"

"I appreciate your concern, Your Majesty. Fortunately, my comrades are all _"

"I said no formalities," Rasul said with an impish grin, making Vandre groan.

Do you not realize how volatile the situation is right now, brother?!

"Your Majesty! Please stop this foolishness!" Karm Tranlit—the prime minister—shouted. He was the leader of the orthodox faction, meaning he'd been suspicious of Rasul to begin with, but the Demon Lord's current actions all but condemned him in Karm's mind. "Not only did you invite this disgusting half-breed into the throne room, but you're treating him like family! This is not how the Demon Lord of the great Igdol Empire should be acting!"

The prime minister's words prompted everyone from the orthodox faction to

start voicing their complaints as well. The members of the neutral faction mostly looked surprised, though a few joined in on the insults.

Despite the commotion, Rasul remained smiling. He simply raised his hand and spoke a single word to quell their complaints.

“Silence.”

He didn’t raise his voice, nor did he brandish his mana to intimidate the nobles. And yet, that lone word alone was enough to bring the throne room to a standstill.

“I understand your dissatisfaction, your mistrust, and your complaints. But for now...” Rasul paused there for a moment, his smile deepening. The nobles felt like their hearts were being squeezed. “I am your ruler.”

No self-respecting ruler would let his retainers interrupt a conversation between him and an official messenger, and Rasul was no different.

His words washed over the gathered nobles, and before they knew it, they were all kneeling before him. The members of the orthodox faction stared at themselves in shock when they realized what they were doing, then grit their teeth in frustration.

Rasul’s authority was still absolute. In fact, now that he was no longer possessed, he projected more regal dignity than ever. But then he turned to Vandre with a smile, and his imposing aura immediately vanished like it had never even existed in the first place.

What kind of magic was that? Vandre thought to himself.

“All right, well, I honestly would love to chat more, but we’re all interested to hear what the Liberators have been up to since you left. Let’s not leave them hanging any longer, Van.”

“Please don’t say that like *I’m* the one getting us off-track, brother,” Vandre said, then cleared his throat and went on to deliver his message. “The Liberators are going to launch their attack on the theocracy.”

The nobles looked shocked, while Elga and the other generals gave Vandre an appraising look.

“Hm...I have received a few reports of what’s going on in the north, including the fact that you and the Haltina Republic pushed back their armies at the Pale Forest. Have the Liberators and the republic formed an alliance, then?”

“We have, brother. The commander of the Holy Templar Knights and the final ancient magic user—Laus Barn—has joined our cause as well.”

“Impossible! That can’t be!”

Everyone was so shocked that no one even knew who it was who’d yelled that.

The Holy Templar Knights were the demons’ greatest enemy. Throughout history, time and time again, it had been the Holy Templar Knights that had brought the most grief to the empire. The fact that their leader had defected to join an organization of heretics came as more of a shock to the demons than even hearing that their leader had been possessed by a god who worked for their sworn foe.

“Ha ha ha ha ha!” Rasul burst out laughing, bringing the nobles back to their senses.

“R-Rasul-sama?” Lestina said in a confused voice. Instead of replying, however, Rasul kept laughing, slapping his knees as tears streamed out of his eyes.

“Vandre Schnee! What did you do to Rasul-sama?!” Lestina yelled as she pointed a glare at Vandre, looking oddly jealous.

“You really haven’t changed, huh? You still think I’m the cause of every strange thing my brother does.”

Hang on... It’s kind of late to be realizing this, but is the reason Lestina’s always angry with me because my brother only smiles when he’s around me and she’s jealous? God, what a pain.

“Oh, he didn’t do anything. It’s just perfect, don’t you think, Lestina?”

“H-Huh? Ummm...”

“The heretic princess managed to turn even the leader of the church’s knights. Their reputation must be in shambles! This is just too good!”

“I-I suppose that is something to celebrate, yes, but...”

Elga started laughing as well upon hearing that.

“Ha ha ha, you’re absolutely right, Your Majesty. It seems the princess’s charms work on even the church’s strongest knight. It’s truly a shame that you let such a perfect bride slip through your fingers.”

“I was thinking the exact same thing, Elga. Well, I probably wouldn’t have been able to woo her either way, since she already has her knight in shining armor!”

“The Reisen heir is truly terrifying.”

“Does she know how to use seduction magic or something?”

“She even managed to seduce His Majesty, so maybe?”

The nobles started whispering amongst each other. It seemed they all considered her an evil temptress.

Lestina glared at Vandre, seemingly blaming him for letting Rasul fall for anyone other than her. Vandre averted his gaze, not wanting to get into an argument.

“So, Van, if you’re here as a messenger, I take it you wish to forge an alliance with Igdol? Are you hoping we’ll join in your fight?”

“If you’re willing to, we’d love that. The world the Liberators are aiming to create is one where race is no longer used as a barrier to divide people. However!” Vandre added before any of the nobles could start yelling about how it was wrong for humans and demons to join forces. “That’s not what I’m here for today. I know we can’t ask for that just yet. We respect the demons’ beliefs and customs, and will take the time to properly understand your society once we’ve changed the world.”

“Hmm...so you don’t want us to fight with you?”

“Correct.”

So then, what did you come here to do? the nobles thought.

Vandre turned to face them.

“Our battle against the church is not meant to be an invasion of the theocracy. If demons get involved, it will be seen as another race war between humans and demons. That cannot be allowed to happen.”

It was then that everyone understood. Vandre hadn’t come here to recruit soldiers. He’d actually come here to do the exact opposite. He wished to make sure the demon empire didn’t use the Liberators’ assault as an excuse to begin their own invasion.

Of course, the nobles rankled at being told what to do. But before they could complain, Vandre added, “Of course, I trust the empire. I know the proud, noble demons would never take advantage of a situation like this to achieve their long-held desire. After all, it means nothing unless you earn supremacy with your own two hands, right?”

The demons joining the battle between the Liberators and the theocracy would’ve caused a massive political issue, which was why Vandre had come here to make doubly sure they didn’t.

“All I ask is that you wait here for our bells of revolution to toll across the land.”

Vandre was clearly trying to tell the empire what to do, but when he phrased it like that, the nobles had a hard time thinking of a way to argue back without looking petty. Plus, since the Liberators’ target was the church, not even the orthodox faction had any reason to stop them. They were too proud to sweep in and claim the continent for themselves while the Liberators fought their battle, and honestly, letting it play out was in their best interests. Even if the Liberators won, they’d take some casualties in the fight, and if they and the church took each other out, the demons would easily be able to conquer the continent after that. Frankly, there was nothing but positives for the empire in this situation.

“A most disgusting proposal. I’m afraid I’ll have to say no,” Rasul replied with a cheerful grin, and for a moment, it felt like time had stopped in the throne room.

“B-Brother?”

“You’re trying to shut us out of playing a part in changing the world? Come

on, Van, that's far too cruel."

"Um, brother. Didn't you hear what I—?"

"Oh, I heard you loud and clear. You want the historians of the future to write: The Liberators freed the world from the grip of its evil god, but the demon race didn't do a single thing to help. Sorry, but I'm not having it. If you're trying to keep us out of the action, we'll barge in whether you like it or not!"

"Calm down, brother!"

Rasul sounded like a kid throwing a tantrum about being excluded from his friend group. He'd always loved messing with people, but Vandre hadn't expected him to tease him in the middle of a serious discussion.

"Your Majesty, what are you saying?!" Karm asked.

"Please speak clearly!" another one of the orthodox nobles said, prompting the others to start shouting as well. They were so flustered they forgot to remain in line and began crowding around the throne.

Still smiling, Rasul cast his gaze over all of them and stated, "If we refuse to be present during the battle to slay our most hated foe, during the battle to change the world, how can we call ourselves demons?"

"But—"

"Of course I understand the Liberators' reasoning. But if the republic is already participating, it won't make much more of a difference if the empire does as well, right? We just have to fight the right way."

"What do you mean by that, Rasul-sama?" Lestina asked.

His words reverberating with all the majesty of the Demon Lord, Rasul replied, "Save the people of the capital. Protect those who might get caught up in the battle between the Liberators and the church. Do everything in our power to make sure the Liberators can focus their full attention on their battle. Protect every single human who doesn't belong to Ehit's accursed armies. It's a fitting way to fight, considering we're trying to build a new world and all, wouldn't you say?"

The demons would protect humans—no, people of every race—from Ehit's scourge. And the Demon Lord himself would lead the charge.

"Brother..." Vandre mumbled, tears forming in the corner of his eyes. He hadn't expected a response like that at all.

Shock rippled through the nobles, and it was the members of the orthodox faction who recovered the fastest.

"Your Majesty, please take back that declaration. We cannot stoop so low as to help humans!" Karm shouted, doing his best to keep his emotions in check.

"Fear not. Those who disagree with my ideology need not accompany us. Whether you wish to help in this endeavor or not is entirely up to you."

"Your Majesty?"

"I will leave running the nation to you in my absence. If I die, do not feel obligated to find the closest blood relative to take over the throne. You are welcome to choose the next Demon Lord amongst yourselves as you see fit."

"Your Majesty, wait!" Lestina shouted. However, Rasul ignored her.

"If our revolution fails, it means my ideals were nothing more than an empty dream. I will step down from the throne voluntarily. If you feel it necessary, you may even have me executed. I will not name a successor. You are welcome to choose the next Demon Lord, the same as if I had died in battle."

Rasul was determined to give his full, unwavering support to the Liberators, even if it meant throwing the empire into further chaos in order to do so. He wanted to make the dream Miledi had shown him into a reality.

It was at this point that the nobles realized how serious he was. And that the reason he'd spread the truth immediately was because he'd expected this day to come soon. He'd known there wouldn't be time to slowly shift the demons' values, as the Liberators wouldn't wait long before challenging god. Thus, he'd purposely made himself look fallible so that when the day to fight Ehit came, his people wouldn't blindly follow him while thinking he was a reincarnated god on Tortus, but would be free to choose their path based on their own beliefs. That way, even if he died and his revolution ended in failure, the demons back home, and even the members of the orthodox faction, wouldn't be led astray by

another god pretending to have their best interests at heart.

The throne room once again fell silent as everyone realized just how much Rasul loved his country and his people. Everyone waited with bated breath to hear his next words.

“But if we do indeed manage to change the world, then please entrust the future of the demon race to my hands,” Rasul cast his gaze over the room after saying that, and this time not even Karm argued back. After all, just like with Vandre’s proposal, Rasul’s proposal had no drawbacks for him. Though, even if it had, the Demon Lord’s resolve was too strong to argue against.

“Now then, is there anyone who wishes to change history with me?” Rasul asked, his tone making it clear he’d go even if he was alone.

The nobles exchanged uneasy glances, waiting to see if any among them would step forward.

“Of course I’ll be joining you.”

Unsurprisingly, Elga was the first to step forward. He was the oldest of the empire’s generals, and the fact that he’d agreed to join without hesitation caused a stir among the nobles.

“R-Rasul-sama! I’ll come too!” Lestina shouted hurriedly, not wanting to be left out. “Honestly, I think making peace with the humans is a fucking stupid idea, but...no demon who cares about the future of their people would miss this chance to change the course of history.”

Thanks to her speech, even Angol was moved to join...and after that came a flood of applicants. All the members of the Demon Lord faction and even a few from the neutral faction volunteered to join Rasul.

“Thank you. But it would be far too dangerous for all three of the empire’s great generals to leave the nation at the same time. I’m sorry, Angol, but I’ll have to ask you to stay behind.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty. I shall protect this empire until the course of history, and the future of the demon race, is decided.”

Angol’s words were directed more toward the gathered nobles than to Rasul.

He was making it clear he wouldn't allow civil war to break out while the Demon Lord was away. That was his way of showing his loyalty.

Looking as though he'd just swallowed a cockroach, Karm stepped forward and stated, "I don't understand. I can't see the future that you do, Your Majesty."

"That's because I'm an oddball, while you're a fervent believer of demon supremacy. Moreover, the majority of demons share your beliefs."

"Yes, I am absolutely certain that it is demons who deserve to rule all of Tortus. However..." Karm trailed off as he looked back at the members of his orthodox faction. Eventually, he turned to face Rasul with a conflicted look on his face before continuing. "It isn't as though any of us *want* war."

"Yes, I know. You understand the pain of losing those dearest to you better than most."

"I'm afraid I cannot agree with your ideals, Your Majesty. I shall not be joining you. However, I do respect your resolve. I know that you're doing what you believe is best for us, so I shall wait. So long as you stay true to the path you believe in, you will continue to remain our beloved Demon Lord."

"Thank you," Rasul replied, watching as the members of the orthodox faction swallowed their protests. Though their beliefs were diametrically opposed, Rasul and Karm were comrades who fought to protect the future of their empire together.

Rasul then turned back to Vandre, who'd been watching this all unfold with an idle look, and said, "There you have it, Van."

"You really are something else, brother. You always manage to surprise me," he replied. Then, sighing, Vandre flashed his brother a big smile.

Afterward, Elga explained the situation to the soldiers, telling them that only those who wished to aid humans should come on this expedition. Everyone hurriedly made preparations for the Demon Lord to sortie with his small band of followers while Vandre was treated like a guest of honor and given a room in the palace. He spent his time strengthening the messenger birds he'd brought along and sending off letters to headquarters explaining everything that had

happened in Igdol and telling the members of the Schnee clan to bring his wyverns to transport Rasul and his men. He also managed to find time to catch up with Rasul, so the two managed to have a long talk for the first time since they'd been children.

Vandre hadn't thought he'd have time to spend with his brother before the final battle, but he was extremely grateful that he did. With Rasul by his side, Vandre felt like he could accomplish anything, including beat an apostle. The only thing that bothered him was Lestina's jealous glare that followed him around whenever he spoke to Rasul. Happy as he was, it slowly ate away at his mental fortitude.

Half a month had passed since Miledi had sent out the order for the Liberators to gather.

"Ngh..." a pained groan echoed through the sickroom.

Laus's vision was blurry, his hearing was muffled, his limbs felt like lead, and a haze of exhaustion covered his mind. However, his heart was still beating.

I'm alive... he thought as he took a deep breath.

"Where am I?" Laus asked, his hoarse voice reminding him of just how thirsty he felt. He then looked around the room and saw an unfamiliar ceiling made of metal. There were no windows, and just one door. It was a plain room, but clean.

There was a pitcher of water and a cup resting on his bedside table. He reached out for the pitcher as soon as he saw it, and drank straight from it, too thirsty to take the time to pour himself a cup. The water was lukewarm, but pure and refreshing.

"Pwah! Haaah... Haaah, I feel alive again," as he said that, he realized he meant it rather literally.

His senses were still dull and his body still sluggish, but that pitcher of water had cleared his mind. He put the empty pitcher back, realizing that whoever had put him here must have put the side table on his right side out of consideration for his missing arm.

“If the last thing I remember is anything to go by, this is probably the Liberators’ main base, but...”

There was a loud ringing noise in Laus’s ears, which sounded almost like the keening of some animal. In order to get his ears back in working order, he continued muttering to himself as he took stock of his situation.

I know this is a windowless room made of metal, but I doubt this is a church prison... Laus thought as he ran his fingers over the sheets. They were spotlessly clean. It was clear someone had been taking good care of him.

“Yeah this is definitely not the church,” Laus muttered, sure of that fact now. He didn’t see Sharm or Reinheit anywhere, but there likely wasn’t any reason to worry.

He lifted himself into a sitting position and swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

“Mmmmmmmmmmmh!”

“...”

What’s this? I feel something soft underneath my feet. That ringing—keening—whatever noise is getting more distinct too. Also, now it sounds like someone moaning.

Worried about what he might see, Laus cast his gaze downward.

“Mmmmmmnhre!”

The queen of the Haltina Republic was lying under his feet. She was bound hand and foot, as well as gagged, and was lying on her back. Laus’s two feet were resting on her face and her bosom. But for some reason, the elven queen’s ears were twitching with happiness. He could feel her hot, excited breath tickling the soles of his foot. In fact, that last moan had almost sounded like she was saying “More.”

“Oh, this is just a nightmare,” Laus said calmly, bringing his feet back onto the bed and lying down.

I must still be unconscious. This has to be some kind of dream. I hope I wake up soon.

He waited a minute, then two, but the moaning didn't vanish. If anything, it got stronger, as if she was urging Laus to step on her again. Eventually, Lyutillis started tackling the bed to try to get him to move. And when that happened, he got up and let his feet down on the opposite side. He gave the elven queen a wide berth as he circled around to the door.

I didn't see anything. I didn't hear anything. Nothing happened.

Laus had a hard time accepting what he'd seen as reality. It was just way too out there.

There's no way the republic's queen is a pervert!

A little scared, Laus hurriedly opened the door and found another shocking sight.

"Miledi-san, I'll gladly give you anything you desire! Here, it's yours!"

"Reinheit?! Stop, Miledi-san just said she wanted to see it, not take it. Hey, Miledi-san, please stop hugging me, it—"

"Mrrr... I told you to call me Onee-chan, remember?"

"O-Onee-chan...this is embarrassing. Please stop..."

"Well done, Sharm-sama. You had all the Liberator women dancing in your palm, and now you've even managed to seduce Miledi-san... Your devilish charm is amazing!"

"Please stop making things worse!"

What in the world is this?

Laus's trusted guard was trying to woo the world's most annoying girl by offering his sword—the Holy Sword—to her. The sword itself was glowing faintly, as if protesting being given up to Miledi.

Meanwhile, his beloved son was being hugged by that same girl, and he seemed to enjoy being her plaything.

"Oh, I guess I'm still in the same nightmare."

I should go back to sleep. I'm clearly still tired. I need to get some more rest so I can stop hallucinating.

But just as Laus tried to close the door—

“Mmmmmmmmmmmmnnnr!” the elven queen grunted loudly and flopped up behind him like a fish out of water, cutting off his path of retreat. There was nowhere left for him to go.

“This world is hell,” Laus muttered, looking up at the ceiling. He’d woken up in some strange parallel world, surely. That was the only explanation that made sense.

“Oh? You’re finally awake, Laus-kun! Thank goodness.”

“Who do you think you’re calling Laus-*kun*?” Laus asked as he turned to see the pirate captain he’d fought back on the western seas.

“Meiru Melusine,” he said flatly.

“Yep, it’s everyone’s kind older sister, Meiru-onee-san.”

Her tone irked Laus, but she was practically a goddess compared to the insane people around him.

“Can you please tell me what’s going on here? I feel like I’m going crazy.”

“Oh my.”

Lyutillis tried to squeeze out from behind Laus and ended up headbutting the metal door. She was squirming in joy now that Meiru was here.

Yeah, I can see why he’d think he’s going crazy after seeing that, Meiru thought as she looked down at Lyutillis. *Though, I suppose I’m the one who tied her up...*

Meiru had gotten tired of Lyutillis bugging her whenever she went to go cast restoration magic on Laus, so she’d tied her up and left her in his room.

This isn’t my fault, though! It’s not my problem!

As always, Meiru decided to shirk responsibility for her actions. She started by declining to explain what was going on. Fortunately for Laus, it was then that Miledi and the others noticed his presence.

Sharm and Reinheit stared at him in surprise, then ran over.

“Father!”

“Laus-sama!”

“H-Hey, Sharm, Reinheit. Are you guys...okay?” he asked, meaning mostly in the mental department, but neither of them picked up on that.

“Yep, I’m perfectly fine!” Sharm exclaimed as he jumped into Laus’s arms and rubbed his face against his father’s chest.

“I’ve been waiting eagerly for you to awaken!” Reinheit said, dropping to one knee with tears of happiness in his eyes.

I’m glad you’re both fine, but someone please explain what the heck was going on just now!

“Laus Barn,” Miledi said quietly.

“Mmm... Miledi Reisen.”

Why is she wearing a maid outfit? And how is she able to keep a straight face while wearing it? Wait, is this all part of some elaborate ploy to tease me? Laus suddenly raised his guard after thinking that, but it proved unnecessary.

“Thank God...you’re safe...” Miledi mumbled, then took Laus’s right hand and rubbed her cheek against it. She looked relieved from the bottom of her heart.

“Who the hell are you?!” Laus shouted, and had Sharm not been clinging to him, he would have scurried backward as fast as humanly possible.

“How mean. I was so worried about you.”

Tears of sadness pooled in Miledi’s clear, sky-blue eyes.

“Father...” Sharm muttered.

Reinheit gave him a reproachful look and said, “Laus-sama, you shouldn’t be so mean to Miledi.”

I have no allies left! That crafty woman stole my son and my best guard away from me!

“Oh, come now, Laus-kun. No matter how you look at it, that’s clearly Miledi-chan.”

“No matter how I look at it, that’s definitely not the same annoying brat who called me bald.”

“Y-You really took that one to heart, huh?” Meiru said, casually stepping on Lyutillis.

Laus rubbed his temples in exasperation. He’d spent a lot of time thinking about what he’d first say after arriving at the Liberators’ headquarters. Considering what he’d done to Meiru’s family, the Melusine Pirates, he knew he wouldn’t be able to become their comrade just like that. Thus, he’d been fully prepared to let Meiru hit him as much as she wanted for what he’d done. But instead, he’d woken up to this clown show.

While he stood there, at an utter loss for what to do, another person walked into the hallway.

“Did no one tell you about what happened to Miledi?”

“Hm? Oh, it’s you, Oscar Orcus.”

“Oh my. Did you just return, Oscar-kun?” Meiru asked, waving at him.

Working his exhausted brain, Laus started sifting through his recent memories.

“Come to think of it, Leonard did say—” Oscar started speaking, but before he could explain what Leonard had said, Miledi let out a happy gasp and ran over to him.

Reinheit bitterly chewed on his handkerchief as he watched Miledi fawn over Oscar.

“Welcome back, O-kun.”

“Th-Thanks, Miledi.”

“Mmm... Warm.”

Miledi snuggled against Oscar’s chest, looking like the happiest girl alive. Oscar, on the other hand, desperately appeared to be trying to clear his mind of all worldly thoughts.

“Oscar-san, you can’t keep doing this! Miledi-san is a young, unmarried lady! As a man, aren’t you embarrassed about such public displays of affection?!”

“Reinheit, calm down!”

“I will not calm down, Sharm-sama! As a proper gentleman, I cannot forgive Oscar-san’s actions!”

Reinheit stalked over to Oscar, his expression a mixture of jealousy and anger.

What happened to all that worry you had for me a second ago? Laus thought with dead eyes.

“Now then, Miledi-san, please step away from him. I know you love Oscar-san *like a brother*, but it is improper for a lady to act like this where others can see.”

Still hugging Oscar, Miledi glanced back at Reinheit and said, “No.”

“Shit, you’re even cute when you’re refusing me!”

“Reinheit, I’m begging you, please return to your normal self!”

Oscar’s expression stiffened. It looked like he’d been asked to defuse a particularly complicated bomb.

“Umm, Reinheit. I told you this before, but Miledi’s currently in an altered state of mind. Normally, she’d never do something like this, so—”

“And you’re telling me the ‘normal’ her is an extremely annoying girl who always teases people and boasts about being the greatest mage who’s ever lived?”

“Yes.”

“How dare you insult Miledi-san!”

“Do you think I’m lying?!”

“There’s no way this beautiful, kind, and graceful girl would be an annoying brat!”

Love had blinded Reinheit, and he placed a hand over his heart as he extolled Miledi’s virtues. He didn’t even notice that a crowd was gathering around them as he talked about the noble way in which she carried herself, the way she firmly expressed her will in few words, the way her occasional childish mannerisms warmed his heart, her angelic demeanor, and so on.

“Who is he describing?” Laus asked Meiru, nonplussed.

“Miledi-chan.”

“What have you people done to Reinheit?”

“What, you think we brainwash people like the church?” Meiru replied sarcastically, and Laus fell silent. Seeing the guilty look on his face, she shrugged and added, “He fell in love with her at first sight. But the girl he loves already loves another man, so...”

“He took his love to the extreme,” Laus finished, covering his eyes.

Reinheit’s even purer than I thought.

“U-Umm, father. Miledi-san really isn’t all that annoying... If anything, she’s quiet, and nice, and...” Sharm trailed off, looking between Meiru and Laus.

Laus knew he needed to open his son’s eyes to the truth as soon as possible.

“You’re being tricked, son. She’s the furthest thing from a quiet, graceful lady that you can imagine. I wish I could spank some respect into her.”

“Father?!”

Laus peeled a shocked Sharm off of his legs and headed over to Reinheit, who was still talking about how much of an angel Miledi was. The onlookers were shouting things like, “Come on, Oscar, say something back! This is pathetic!” and “I won’t allow you to date my beloved Mi-chan!” and “Die, Oscar!” and “Yeah, knock that four-eyes down a peg!” and “Splash some oil on those fucking glasses of his!” and “Anyone who dares date our leader deserves to die!” and “Let’s stuff both him and Reinheit into the torpedo tube and shoot them outta here!”

“Besides, what is with that short skirt maid uniform? I-It’s indecent!” Reinheit said, switching from praising Miledi to attacking Oscar. “Her legs are completely exposed! Are you trying to show off how she’s your woman by making her wear these kinds of clothes?! You pervert!”

“Don’t you dare put me in the same category as Lyu. Sheesh, I let you go off for a few minutes and you start—”

“But I am O-kun’s woman!”

“Uh, ummmmmm, Miledi, please don’t take his words seriously.”

“So I’m not your woman?”

“Why do you look so sad about that?!”

“How dare you make Miledi-san cry, Oscar!”

“Oh my God, someone please just shut this guy up!” Oscar shouted, looking up at the ceiling.

“On it. Soul’s Repose,” Laus said, enveloping Reinheit in a shroud of pure black mana. The young knight slowly began to calm down as a result.

“L-Laus-sama?”

“Calm down, you imbecile. And take a good, hard look at reality. Heavenbringer.”

Before anyone could ask if he was well enough to be casting spirit magic already, Laus raised a hand toward Miledi and cast a separate spell on her. Black mana surrounded her as well, and the onlookers suddenly stared warily at Laus.

“Don’t worry, I’m curing her,” he explained.

“Can you manage it?” Oscar asked in a hesitant voice.

“Like I said, don’t worry,” Laus stated confidently, and Oscar let out a relieved sigh. Miledi, who was still hugging Oscar, had closed her eyes and it looked like she might fall asleep. He wrapped an arm around her back to support her in case she went limp.

After about five minutes, Miledi—who’d ended up falling asleep in Oscar’s arms at some point—stirred. It was at that same time that Laus’s mana began to disappear.

“She should be good now.”

“Really? Are you okay, Miledi?”

Miledi didn’t respond. She still had her face buried in Oscar’s chest.

“Miledi? Is something wrong? Why are you trembling?”

“Laus-sama, Miledi-san’s neck is bright red! Does she have a fever?!”

The gathered crowd began to worry as well, but Lyutillis and Meiru didn’t look concerned in the slightest.

“Onee-sama. This will be our only chance to see Miledi-tan’s cute side! Get ready to record this!”

“Don’t worry, I’ve already started recording!”

At some point, Lyutillis had managed to escape from her bonds, and she was looking excitedly at Meiru, who had her glasses on and was grinning at Miledi.

“Miledi?” Oscar asked again, and with a timid squeal, Miledi slowly stepped away from Oscar. She kept her gaze fixed on the ground, her expression hidden by her hair.

“Are you okay? Please say something already, Miledi...” Oscar said as he bent down to get a better look at Miledi’s face.

“Whoa!”

There were tears in her eyes, and she was covering her beet-red cheeks with both hands.

Her eyes met Oscar’s and she stammered, “O-O-O...”

“Are you sure you’re okay, Mile—”

“O-kun, you suuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!”



With that, Miledi turned on her heel and sprinted away at the speed of light. She shoved Reinheit out of her way, slipped past Laus, stopped Lyutillis and Meiru from trying to grab her by plastering them to the ceiling with gravity magic, then vanished down the hall.

As she vanished from sight, she shouted, “D-Don’t misunderstand me! I’m not actually like thaaaaaaaaat!”

Noses bleeding, Meiru and Lyutillis gave each other thumbs-ups as they fell from the ceiling.

“M-Miledi-tan was so cute... Guh!”

“O-Oscar-kun, what did you think?” Meiru asked.

“Well, for now, I’m just glad she’s back to normal.”

Satisfied by his answer, Meiru slumped to the ground, unconscious. Miledi had apparently been embarrassed enough that she’d forgotten to hold back. There were two people-shaped dents in the ceiling now.

The onlookers glared at Oscar as if he were a murderer, while Reinheit froze in place due to the shock and Sharm did his best to nurse Meiru and Lyutillis.

Heedless of them all, Oscar turned to Laus and said, “Laus...san? Thank you so much.”

“No need for honorifics. And no need to thank me either. I just couldn’t bear watching Miledi Reisen acting like a normal girl in love, instead of the biggest pain in the ass in the world.”

Is that really the only reason you helped? Oscar thought to himself as he adjusted his glasses.

The phrase “a normal girl in love” kept bouncing around inside his head.

Afterward, Oscar cleared out the onlookers and Laus tasked Reinheit to look after Meiru and Lyutillis to give him a chance to cool his head. Sharm was left to supervise them, while Oscar led Laus around the ship.

“How long did I sleep?” Laus asked, glad to finally have a normal person to talk to.

Oscar gave him a sad smile and replied, “Almost half a month.”

“I see... I’m surprised my body hasn’t atrophied at all, then.”

“Meiru made sure to cast restoration magic on you each day. We were more worried about your soul than your body, honestly. You must have pushed yourself far past your limits.”

“I’m fine. I spent a lot of time building up my soul’s natural recovery rate.”

“I didn’t know you could do that.”

When he’d arrived at headquarters, Laus had been in a deep coma. But apparently, that had been a self-inflicted one to speed up his body and soul’s healing. It sounded simple, but being able to heal your soul in that manner was an unbelievably high-level skill.

A bead of sweat dripped down Oscar’s forehead as he looked up at Laus in awe.

“I’m really glad you managed to make it. Miledi too. If she hadn’t been in the state she was, she would have definitely prepared a welcome party for you.”

“I used to be the commander of the Holy Templar Knights. I don’t deserve such a warm welcome.”

Laus had lost count of how many “heretics” he’d slain over the years. It was true his superhuman strength was a boon for the Liberators, but that didn’t absolve him of his past sins. At the very least, he doubted all of the Liberators would forgive him so easily.

“Sure, and Miledi used to be the heir of the Reisen family.”

“Hrm...”

That gave Laus pause. He hadn’t really thought about it before, but the fact that the former heir of a family of heretic executioners was now their leader meant that she had been forgiven for her past sins as well.

“You’re one of us now, so you don’t need to feel like you owe us anything.”

“I see. Thanks. I guess I should have figured that out, considering how everyone treats Reinheit and Sharm like one of them.”

“Mhm. Sharm-kun’s a good kid. Everyone loves him.”

“Just Sharm, huh? Sorry about that, by the way.”

“Wait, why are you apologizing? Everyone really does like him.”

“Oh no, I’m apologizing on behalf of my guard. I didn’t realize you and Miledi were a couple, but I’m sorry he’s getting in your—”

“That’s a misunderstanding!”

Laus shot a look of disbelief at Oscar. But when he saw him blush and adjust his glasses to hide his eyes, Laus nodded in understanding. He gave Oscar a small smile and said, “If you say so. But as a married man, I have a lot of experience with courtship. If you need any advice, you can always come to me.

“Umm...thanks,” Oscar said, then awkwardly cleared his throat, putting an end to this topic. He went on to tell Laus about what had happened while he was unconscious, starting with the current state of the Liberators, their plans for the future, the things Naiz and Vandre were doing on the outside, the fact that Lenoard and his men were safe, and that they were hoping to get checked over by Laus as soon as possible so they could stop hiding and start helping again.

By the time he finished explaining everything, the two of them had reached their destination. Oscar pulled open the door, and a wall of sound assailed Laus’s ears.

“New report! Prantz’s chief, Brad Lumond, has finished disseminating fake news through the city!”

“Prime Minister Parsha has finished organizing the army that’ll be reinforcing us from the republic.”

“Where the hell is Badd?! That oaf should have made it here by now!”

“New report from the Enedra branch in the Odion Federation! A civil war has broken out at the border, delaying the arrival of the combatants.”

“The Norton, Grista, and Russel branches have made it to Damdrak!”

“The members of the Tolston branch should arrive in a few days. Please send a message saying we’ll rendezvous with them at the safe house and guide them

to headquarters.”

Numerous voices filled the large room, which was made of transparent crystal to allow everyone to see the lake all around them. It was a breathtaking sight.

“What is this place?” Laus asked.

“The bridge.”

No wonder the church never found the Liberators’ headquarters... Laus thought to himself, scratching his head. Looking around, he saw ten or so people sitting down at desks that had white jewels embedded in them, seemingly concentrating on something. In front of him was a U-shaped desk with four chairs, and dozens of palm-sized magic circles embedded into its surface at regular intervals. Two long rectangular partitions were blocking the desk off from the rest of the room, and those partitions had magic circles inscribed on them as well. There was also a barstool on the inside of the desk, but no one was sitting on it.

“Those white jewels are communication devices. They’re connected to the safe houses in Damdrak, as well as the mountains on the north side of the lake, so anyone who receives a messenger bird there can reply to us immediately.”

The desk in front of Laus was the control hub for the entire ship, and the partitions on either side controlled the ship’s weapons.

“I don’t believe it. This is like a weapon from the age of the gods.”

“Not ‘like,’ it is one. The Liberators found it sunken at the bottom of the northern ocean and fixed it up.”

In the center of the room was a raised platform made of circular pedestals that were stacked on top of each other. There was a chair in front of it, which was presumably the captain’s seat. Salus got up from it when he spotted Laus, and Cloris hurried over to his side.

“I suppose I haven’t introduced myself to you yet,” Salus said. “I am the head of the Liberators’ administrative organization, Salus Gaistrih.

“So you’re functionally the supreme commander. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. As you already know, I’m Laus Barn. Thank you for looking after

my son and my guardsman," Laus said, extending his hand and bowing to Saus.

"Ho ho ho! I never thought I'd live to see the day the commander of the Holy Templar Knights would bow to me. I guess miracles do happen," Salus said cheerfully as he shook Laus's hand.

The bridge fell silent as everyone watched the two of them. No one wanted to miss the historic moment when the church's strongest knight and the de facto leader of the Liberators joined hands.

To Laus's surprise, no one gave him disparaging or disgusted looks. He didn't know what they were thinking in the depths of their hearts, but at the very least, it looked like they all accepted him.

The fact that they're keeping their own hatred in check, if they do indeed hate me, shows just how disciplined the Liberators are as an organization. They're better run than the church, even.

As Laus marveled at the Liberators' organization, Salus said, "I'm glad you're here, Laus-dono."

"I'll do my best to prove to you that I'm no spy for the church."

"There's no need for that. Miledi trusts you, and that's enough for the rest of us," Salus replied as he squeezed Laus's hand tighter. It was a friendly squeeze, rather than an intimidating one.

"You're the one who saved Belta's life, aren't you?" Salus asked, his gaze piercing through Laus. The other Liberators in the room gasped in surprise.

"I did that on a whim. Besides, all I did was help her escape. I didn't have the courage to actually protect her. Instead, I gave up on defying God...and killed many of your friends in his name."

Laus looked away, ashamed, but Salus simply shook his head in response.

"But it was that whimsical act of conscience that allowed us to come so far. Like it or not, that's the truth. The Liberators exist because of you."

"Because of me, huh?"

Salus let go of Laus's hand and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Belta Lievre, the former oracle, was the founder of the Liberators. You were the one who rescued her from the shackles of Ehit’s fate, and if she were here today, she would likely call you the very first Liberator.”

“...”

Laus fell silent, overcome by emotion.

“The Liberators welcome you, Laus Barn.”

“Thank you,” Laus replied quietly, his eyes glimmering with determination. He then took a deep breath and said the words he’d wished he could for all these years: “Let’s dedicate our lives to building a world where everyone can live freely.”

“Well said, my friend!” Salus exclaimed, clapping. The other Liberators all started clapping as well. Smiling, Oscar patted Laus on the shoulder.

“You hear that, everyone! From this moment onward, Laus Barn is an official member of the Liberators!” Salus shouted, his voice seemingly echoing throughout the ship.

“Is it just me, or did your voice sound louder than it should have?” Laus asked.

“Oh, uh, sorry I didn’t tell you, Laus. We were broadcasting this conversation throughout the whole ship,” Oscar said sheepishly.

“You...what?”

Laus turned and noticed one of the white jewels was glowing. Salus had wanted to make sure there was no lingering resentment among the Liberators before the final battle, and this was the plan he’d come up with to get rid of it.

Just then, the door to the bridge opened and Miledi, Meiru, Lyutillis, Sharm, and Reinheit walked in. Miledi was back to wearing her usual dress instead of the maid outfit.

Miledi looked straight at Laus, and he met her gaze. The two of them gazed at each other quietly, and a solemn mood settled over the room.

“I came to fulfill my promise,” Laus said finally.

“Yeah, I’ve been waiting,” Miledi replied. Those few words were all they

needed. Their gazes conveyed more than words ever could, after all.

Unfortunately, Miledi was not the kind of person that could keep a serious mood going for long. And so, she spun around to face Sharm and bowed her head.

“I’m sorry, Sharm-kun!”

“Huh? What for, Miledi-san?”

“It’s my fault your dad doesn’t have any hair left on— Gyaaah?!”

Laus brought his fist down on the top of Miledi’s head, cutting her off, and she sprawled to the floor, twitching like a dying cockroach.

“I told you the next time you apologized for that, I’d kill you,” Laus said, referencing the conversation they’d had in Angriff during the church’s crusade against the republic. His gaze was as cold as ice.

“Heeey, what kind of brute raises a hand against a girl? Hey, Sharm-kun, don’t you think your dad’s a bad man for hitting a girl?”

“Huh? Uh, um...”

“You little brat! Don’t get my pure son mixed up in your antics!”

“Waaah, you’re so meaaan, Lau-chan! I thought you were supposed to be a noble knight!”

“Who are you calling Lau-chan... See, Reinheit?! Do you understand now?! This is the true Miledi Reisen! Sharm, now you know not to get involved with her!”

“I-I don’t believe it... I... I...”

“Look, I know it’s a shock, Reinheit, but get a hold of yourself!”

Salus, Cloris, and the other Liberators on the bridge burst out laughing. The conversation was still being broadcast throughout the ship, so there were likely more pockets of laughter elsewhere.

At the same time, everyone was happy to see their usual leader had returned. It was only Meiru and Lyutillis who were grinning for an entirely different reason. They’d noticed that Miledi was pointedly avoiding looking at a certain

someone.

“O-chan-san, isn’t it great that Miledi-tan’s back to normal?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Never thought I’d ever say this, but I missed her annoying antics.”

Miledi’s shoulders twitched when Oscar spoke.

“Oh my, Miledi-chan! Did you hear that? Oscar-kun *missed* you!”

“Meiru, stop twisting people’s words!” Oscar shouted. He suddenly heard someone laughing behind him and whirled around, but Salus and the others were all looking as expressionless as possible.

“Wh-What’s with you guys?” he asked, but no one responded. It was honestly kind of terrifying staring at their stony faces.

Ignoring Oscar completely, Cloris walked over to Miledi, who had her back turned to Oscar, and said, “Mi-chan.”

“Wh-What is it, Clo-chan?”

“I know you were only humoring that perverted four-eyes out of the goodness of your heart.”

“Wh-What?”

“But you don’t need that maid uniform anymore, right? Shouldn’t you return it?”

“Y-Yeah. You’re right! But, well, I guess when all’s said and done, O-kun’s helped me out a lot! You can just think of it as me paying him back for all that! But sorry, O-kun! Now that I’m back to normal, you won’t get any more special treats from me!”

Miledi let out a forced laugh and took all the maid uniforms she’d worn out of her Treasure Trove. Then, with a bit of a struggle, she managed to turn around and walk over to Oscar.

“You’re such a bad boy, O-kun! Taking advantage of me while I’m weak is downright cruel!”

She held out the pile of maid outfits in front of him. The entire time, she

refused to meet Oscar's eyes.

He looked like he wanted to argue back, but he swallowed whatever he was going to say and reached for the clothes. His fingers brushed against Miledi's, and she yelped.

"Hyaaah!"

She threw her hands up in the air as she did, sending the maid uniforms flying everywhere. She nursed the part of her hand Oscar had touched as if he'd burned her, a huge blush spreading across her face.

"M-Miledi?"

"I-It's nothing! Really!"

Miledi backed away, panicking.

This really isn't like her... Oscar thought. *It looks like she's...*

"It's all good, Miledi-chan. You just haven't fully recovered, right?"

"Hweh? Oh, y-yeah! That's exactly right, Meiru-nee!"

Miledi ran over to Meiru and hid behind her. Lyutillis patted Miledi's head, grinning to herself.

"We're going to take Miledi-chan to her room so she can rest. You boys take care of the rest, okay?" Meiru said cheerily.

"I'll be praying for your survival, O-chan-san!" Lyutillis added.

"Th-Thanks."

Meiru and Lyutillis walked out, shepherding Miledi with them.

The moment they were disappeared, everyone stared at Oscar with murder in their eyes.

"Hey, Oscar," Salus said in a threatening voice.

"You better prepare yourself, you perverted four-eyes," Cloris added, her words dripping with malice.

Oscar tried to secure a path of retreat, but the other Liberators boxed him in. He reached into his pocket to pull out a Dark Key, but Cloris grabbed his wrist

before he could. She was blisteringly fast.

Before he knew it, Oscar was surrounded. Even through the communication jewels, he could hear people shouting things like, “I’ll kill you, Oscar, you fucking bastard!” and “Why does Miledi only sound like that when talking to you, fucker?!” and “Get to the bridge! We need to make him pay!” and “Crush that four-eyed eyesore!”

The distant thudding of footsteps told Oscar that they really were coming for him.

“L-Laus, please use your spirit magic to—” Oscar turned to ask for help, but Laus was already gone. He looked back toward the door and saw Laus carrying a depressed Reinheit out of the room, with Sharm following hot on his heels.

“Hey, wait a—”

Laus glanced back, gave Oscar a small smirk, and shut the door on him.

A few seconds later, the bridge shut off their speakers, but Oscar’s screams could still be heard throughout the ship.

A few days of uneventful rest passed, during which Laus did a full check on Leonard and the others’ souls, and more branch members made their way to headquarters. While everyone was preparing for the final battle, Miledi, Oscar, Lyutillis, Laus, and Sharm made their way to the part of the Reisen Gorge that connected to the Pale Forest.

“Are you okay, Oscar-san?” Sharm—who was currently being carried by Laus—asked.

“H-Ha ha... Yeah, I’m fine, Sharm-kun. Thanks for worrying about me. You’re a good kid,” Oscar replied as he stepped over a gnarled root and ruffled Sharm’s hair. The young boy’s concern really did make him feel better.

Sharm looked a little embarrassed about having his hair ruffled, but he also seemed to like it. Oscar had plenty of experience taking care of his younger siblings, and while Sharm did have older brothers, they’d never done anything brotherly for him.

Laus smiled as he watched the two of them talk. Lyutillis didn't seem to find it nearly as wholesome, however.

"This is horrible, Miledi-tan. He's stealing Sharm away from you!" she exclaimed.

"How dare you, O-kun?! Don't think you can steal Sharm-kun away from me that easily! Sharm-kun, watch out for this brocon four-eyes! He does this to every younger kid he meets!"

"Who are you calling a brocon? And stop adding four-eyes to the end of every insult you come up with!"

Miledi had returned to her usual self over the past few days. She was back to teasing Oscar like usual. It was almost as though nothing had changed between them.

Lyutillis found the lack of development between them frustrating and kept trying to poke at them about their relationship, but—"It's been a while since I've seen Ruth and the others. I'm looking forward to this. Oh, this is the right way, right, Lyu-chan?"

"Huh? Oh, yes it is."

Every single time she tried, Miledi steered the conversation away to a different topic.

"Lau-chan, please cure Dylan and the others!"

"I'll try my best. But please stop calling me Lau-chan."

"Not happening. It's such a cute nickname, so it'd be a waste not to use it!" Miledi rubbed Laus's bald head as she said that. She'd fully returned to being as annoying as she had before the battle with the apostle.

Sharm chuckled as he watched his dad yell at her. Though it looked like she was always making Laus mad, Sharm could tell they were getting closer.

But Miledi-tan still hasn't confronted O-chan-san about her feelings... Lyutillis thought to herself as she watched them joke around. She wanted to give the young couple a push, but her beloved Meiru-onee-sama had explicitly ordered her not to interfere. Plus, as far as she could tell, it didn't seem like Oscar was in

any hurry to broach the subject either. In fact, it looked like he was perfectly content to just watch over Miledi. However, while he'd had a few days to sort out his own feelings and calm down as well, Lyutillis could tell there was something new about the way he looked at Miledi.

"Lead the way, Lyu," he said, snapping her out of her musings.

"Oh, yes, of course."

With a wave of her rod, the trees parted, creating a path.

Oscar and the others were currently on their way to Sainttown. The same place where Dylan, Katy, and the other victims of the church's schemes, as well as the demons who'd suffered inhuman experimentations at the hands of the god controlling Rasul, were staying to recuperate.

Naiz and Vandre weren't coming along because they were in Igdol transporting the demons that'd be fighting with Rasul to the Liberators' headquarters. Meiru had gone to help them as well. There was nothing more she could do for Dylan and the others, and her restoration magic dramatically increased the amount of distance Naiz could cover before running out of mana. The reason Sharm was tagging along was because he'd be staying at Sainttown until the battle with the church was over.

Eventually, the party reached an opening in the trees. The clearing still had a lot of plant life, but unlike the depths of the Pale Forest, there was no fog here and sunlight was plentiful.

"Hm, we're surrounded," Laus said calmly.

"Don't worry, they're just Van's familiars. They're here to guard the village."

A pack of wolves appeared from the undergrowth, surrounding the party. They looked wary of Laus, Sharm, and Lyutillis, but they made no move to attack, since Oscar and Miledi were present.

Miledi waved and said, "It's okay!" to one of them, and it nodded its head and led the pack away.

Up ahead, the party could see Sainttown, which was surrounded by a tall metal fence. The guard on duty waved to them when he saw them, and Corrin

ran out of the gate.

“Onii-chan!” she shouted, smiling at Oscar.

Sharm stiffened the moment he laid eyes on her.

“Sh-She’s beautiful...”

“Sharm?!” Laus shouted, looking down at his son. Sharm looked just like Reinheit had when he’d been smitten with Miledi.

Oscar and the others watched in disbelief as Sharm hopped out of Laus’s arms and bowed to Corrin.

“G-Greetings! My name is Sharm Barn. M-May I please hear your name, my lady?”

“L-Lady? Umm, I’m Corrin. Nice to meet you!” Corrin smiled at Sharm as she said that, and he staggered backward upon seeing that, holding his chest like he’d been shot.

In a quiet voice, he muttered, “Reinheit, I’m sorry I yelled at you. I understand what love is like now.”

“H-Hey, Sharm—”

“Corrin-san, you have such a lovely name! Would you—?”

“Ah, Miledi-onee-san! Are you...back to normal?”

Laus was interrupted by Sharm, who was in turn interrupted by Corrin, who had eyes only for Miledi at the moment.

“O-Oh, yeah! I’m all healed up! Sorry for worrying you, Corrin-chan.”

“Miledi-onee-san!” Corrin exclaimed, hugging Miledi with all her might. Sharm glared enviously at Miledi, while Laus massaged his forehead. Miledi just smiled awkwardly. Even she didn’t have the heart to tease a young boy in love.

“Corrin, let me introduce you. That’s Laus Barn, the guy who healed me, and who might be able to heal Dylan and the others.”

Corrin gasped in surprise, and she pulled away from Miledi to look at Laus.

“It’s nice to meet you, Corrin. I brought my son here to stay with you for a

little while, but the main reason I'm here is to heal your friends," Laus said in a kind voice.

"Oh, okay. Please take good care of them," she replied, bowing politely. Her manners were impeccable.

"Sorry, Laus, but I can't give your son my sister," Oscar said warily.

"I didn't say anything," Laus responded evenly.

However, upon hearing that, Sharm whined, "Aww, come on, aren't we friends, *Nii-san*?"

Corrin looked confused by the exchange, but Lyutillis was excited to see more young love bloom.

"You're so popular, Corrin-chan! I can't believe you're receiving proposals already!"

"Hweh?! That was a proposal?!"

Corrin had simply thought Sharm was a strange kid, but now that she knew the reason behind his actions, she was suddenly all flustered.

Sharm looked into her eyes and said, "Corrin-san, I—"

"U-Umm, I'm sorry, but my type is guys like Onii-chan!" Corrin replied hurriedly, coming up with an excuse to forestall his confession. Her face was beet-red. It was honestly adorable. Sharm crumbled, as his one chance slipped away before his eyes.

"Oscar-san, why must you always get in my way?" he said, pouting.

"Calm down, Sharm-kun, I didn't—"

"Why?! You already have Miledi-san, don't you?!"

"Hweh?!" Corrin and Miledi exclaimed in unison. Corrin looked from Miledi to Oscar and back.

"N-No, we're not like that! Not at all!" Miledi said, shaking her hands and her head faster than she ever had before.

Corrin stared at her for a few seconds, then smiled gently at her and said, "It's okay. I understand, Miledi-onee-san."

“What do you understand?!”

“I knew you’d be able to tell, Corrin-chan. No wonder everyone calls you a saint!”

“What can she tell?!” Miledi screamed, her face red as a tomato. Just then, more people came running up to the group.

“Oscar!”

“Naiz-sama! Wait...where’s Naiz-sama?”

“Sue-nee, Naiz-sama isn’t here. There’s no point looking for him. Come on, pull yourself together!”

Ruth, Susha, and Yunfa all filed out of the gate, followed a few seconds later by Moorin. They all crowded around Miledi, congratulating her on her recovery, while Sharm calmed down enough to stay quiet.

Laus quickly cast Soul’s Repose on him, and Sharm visibly relaxed. He sighed as he watched his son return to his senses, then placed a hand on Oscar’s shoulder.

“We’re about to head to the final battle. You better have a good talk with her before then.”

“Yeah, I know,” Oscar replied, a wry smile on his face. He then walked over to Ruth to tell him what was going on.

A few minutes later, Oscar led Laus to the large hospital that held all the patients. Laus stood in front of Dylan and Katie, who were sitting on their beds, and looked them over with shining eyes.

Corrin clung to Oscar’s arm, Ruth clenched his fists, and Susha and Yunfa both placed their hands over their chests, as if praying. Miledi, Lyutillis, Sharm, and Moorin all watched on with bated breath. As did all the other villagers, who were looking in from the windows.

The tense moment stretched on for what seemed like an eternity. But finally, Laus closed his eyes and muttered, “I see.”

He’d finished examining their souls.

“How does it look, Laus?”

“I’ll start with the good news. It’s possible to restore their souls to their normal state.”

Everyone started cheering, embracing each other, and crying tears of happiness. Seeing that the celebrations wouldn’t be dying down anytime soon, Laus raised his voice and shouted, “But there’s a problem!”

The cheers stopped instantly. Oscar’s expression grew grim and he asked, “What kind of problem?”

“It’ll take a lot of time.”

According to Laus, Dylan and the others’ souls had been fused with the souls of ancient warriors. It was possible to split them apart again, and doing so would return the kids to normal. But this would be the most difficult application of spirit magic Laus would have ever attempted. It would be like trying to separate milk tea into milk and tea. He would have to take his time and proceed with caution.

“How long are we talking here?”

“At least a month per person.”

There was no way he’d be able to finish before Miledi ordered the attack on the church. Oscar had been hoping to heal his younger siblings in case the worst happened to them, but it seemed that wouldn’t be possible.

“Even with my help?” Lyutillis asked. Her evolution magic was part of the reason why she’d tagged along.

“That estimate is assuming you’re helping.”

In this world, there was nothing more complex and delicate than a person’s soul.

“There’s one other problem. I’d have to keep treating them indefinitely.”

“Lau-chan, by indefinitely...do you mean even after you heal them?”

“Yes, even after I manage to separate the souls, it’ll be dangerous to try extracting the implanted one. The fusion is too complete. If I don’t regularly

come back to treat them, their souls will start to mix again."

In other words, they'd need Laus's treatment for the rest of their lives. Some people looked despondent, while others seemed glad treatment was possible at all.

"Well, that's not a problem," Ruth said, looking utterly relieved. He then looked up at Oscar with absolute faith in his eyes and continued, "Isn't that right?"

"Oh yeah, you're right, Ruth-kun! O-kun just needs to make an artifact that can do that!" Miledi said in Oscar's stead. She puffed her chest out proudly, as if she were responsible for Oscar's prodigal skill. Everyone turned to look at Oscar while Miledi grinned and added, "'As long as they're alive, I'll find a way to save them! Just you watch! Saving them would mean nothing if you die!' O-kun said that to me way back when, and he's never ever broken a promise, so he'll definitely be able to do it. Isn't that right?"

Oscar had indeed said that to Miledi when forced to choose between saving Miledi or securing Ehit's Eyes. But the way Miledi looked at Oscar with such a gentle, trusting gaze as she repeated his words gave them an entirely new meaning to those present. To the others, she looked like a maiden in love.

"Wait, you really said that, Oscar?" Ruth asked in surprise.

"U-Umm, Corrin, does that mean those two are actually..." Yunfa whispered excitedly, trailing off.

"C-Calm down, Yun-chan. I don't know for sure, but...Onii-chan and Miledi-onee-san have always been close, so probably?"

"The love they fostered is finally beginning to bloom? Hee hee, you're so cute, Miledi-san... I hope Naiz-sama and I can be like that soon..."

Corrin had seen this coming ages ago, but she was still a little sad that her beloved older brother would belong to someone else soon. At the same time, however, she was happy for him. Meanwhile, Susha was thinking up another sinister plot to make Naiz hers. The men outside were all glaring daggers at Oscar, while half of the women were pleasantly surprised and the other half were glad that Miledi and Oscar were finally getting together.

However, what embarrassed Oscar the most was Moorin saying, “I know I can entrust you to Miledi, at least.”

Meanwhile, Sharm honed in on the fact that Corrin was just a little disappointed about Oscar getting with Miledi, and glared angrily at him. Everyone seemed to have forgotten the original reason why they’d come here.

“H-Huh? Why’s everyone looking at me like that?” Miledi asked in confusion.

“It’s because you’re just so adorable, Miledi-tan!” Lyutillis replied.

“What?!” Miledi exclaimed. She wanted to keep feigning confusion, but unfortunately, Lyutillis’s answer had enlightened her. She blushed, trembling with embarrassment.

“Miledi...” Oscar said, trailing off.

“Yesh?!”

“...is absolutely correct. With Laus and Lyutillis’s help, I can definitely make an artifact that will help separate their souls and keep them apart for good.”

Realizing he hadn’t actually been talking to her, Miledi awkwardly cleared her throat with a cough. But everyone had noticed her immediate reaction, and they could tell she wasn’t able to hide her feelings in the slightest. They all wanted to point out how Miledi was so flustered she was forgetting to be annoying, but for the moment, they waited to see what Oscar would say next. Some with murder in their eyes.

He adjusted his glasses and said calmly, “Laus, Lyu. Can you do some simple mental care for the patients here? Afterward, I’ll meet up with you and we can get to work on that artifact.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“We’d be happy to.”

“Mom, it looks like we’ll be staying here for a few days. Think you could let us stay with you?”

“Of course... I’ll be counting on you to heal Dylan and Katie.”

Oscar nodded reassuringly to her, then started giving out orders to everyone

else. They got to work immediately, renewed hope speeding their steps.

“I-I guess I’ll go help out too!” Miledi said, trying to sneak out of the room. However, Oscar wouldn’t let her.

“Miledi,” he said, making her jump. “There’s something I need to tell you. Come to the hill outside the village at sunset.”

Everyone stopped upon hearing that, not just Miledi. Corrin and Yunfa clasped hands, blushing, while Susha gave them an appraising look, as if she wanted to use their romance as inspiration for her next novel.

Her heart was racing, but Miledi tried her best to sound calm as she replied, “Th-There is? What is it? You can just tell me now, you know?”

“No, I’d rather we were alone,” Oscar replied bluntly.

“A-Alone?!” Miledi sputtered, looking everywhere but at Oscar.

“Wh-Why?” she asked, sounding positively terrified.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“N-No.”

“I see. In that case, Miledi...”

“Wh-What? I’m pretty busy, you know? I can’t just—”

“Do you want me to drag you there, or will you walk there on your own two legs? You decide.”

“...Okay, I’ll walk.”

“Good, see you later.”

With that, Oscar walked out with Laus and Lyutillis.

Miledi watched him go, her mind still trying to process what had just happened. She didn’t even notice Corrin and Yunfa squealing to each other, or Susha and the other girls’ teasing.

All too soon, evening came.

Miledi arrived at the appointed spot at the appointed time, her steps jerky

and awkward. She looked up and saw Oscar at the top of the hill, his arms folded as he gazed at the sunset from under the shade of a tree. He heard her approach and turned to look at her. That alone was enough to get Miledi's heart racing.

This isn't like me. I'm making such a fool out of myself... Honestly, Miledi was more than a little scared. *God, what kind of leader chokes at the most important moment? Is he disappointed in me? Is he fed up with me?*

She knew that couldn't possibly be the case, but that didn't help alleviate her fears. After all, when she'd been in that state where she'd been acting on instinct, she'd grown aware of her own feelings. Of course, she'd had a vague idea for quite some time, but she'd only read about romance in books, so she hadn't fully understood her own heart.

She knew she couldn't run from this confrontation any longer. She was the Liberators' leader. She couldn't be acting like a besotted little girl. Scolding herself, she forcibly made herself act like her usual, annoying self.

"Sorry for the wait, O-kun."

"Hey, Miledi."

She walked up and leaned back against the tree trunk, next to Oscar, then idly kicked at a pebble next to her feet and said, "Well, I know why you called me out here. Sorry for causing you so much trouble. But don't worry, I'm fine—"

"Miledi," Oscar said in a quiet voice, interrupting her cowardly attempt to deflect away from the issue at hand. He then put his hand over hers, and she jumped. She'd tried her best to remain calm, but her emotions were overflowing. Reflexively, she tried to pull away, but Oscar's grip was too strong.

"O-O-kun? Hey—"

"I felt happy."

Miledi turned to Oscar in surprise and gasped upon seeing the warmth in his eyes.

"When you were in your weakened state, I was the first person you turned to. You might think less of me for this, but that really made me happy."

Oscar flashed her an embarrassed smile, but Miledi just kept on staring. She had no idea what to say, so she waited for him to continue.

“Honestly, it took a lot of self-control not to make a move on you. You were just so cute.”

“Awawa...”

“I’ll never admit it to anyone else, but it pissed me off when the Demon Lord and the hero both proposed to you.”

Oscar was laying his feelings bare before Miledi. He was telling her everything, as if to make up for the fact that she’d inadvertently shown him how she truly felt. It was a little embarrassing, but it also made her happy. So happy that her resolve almost wavered, even. But—

Is this really the time for romance? a voice whispered in the back of her head. It was at once both the cold, emotionless voice of her younger self, back when she’d been part of the Reisen family, and the determined voice of Miledi Reisen, the leader of the Liberators.

Miledi closed her eyes, clamping down on her emotions. She felt bad about leading Oscar on, but since he’d divulged everything to her, she resolved to be honest with him.

“O-kun. You know—?”

“I know what you’re struggling to say.”

“Huh?”

She’d wanted to stop Oscar before he actually confessed, but he interrupted her almost immediately.

“How much time do you think we’ve spent together?”

“Umm...”

“Until we change the world, you need to be the Liberators’ leader. And I’m Oscar Orcus, the Liberator.”

“Ah...”

Oscar wasn’t rejecting Miledi. The opposite, in fact. He was accepting her in

her entirety.

“If there’s any path our lives can take other than being fellow Liberators, it’s one we can only choose after fulfilling the promise we made.”

Let’s change the world, together.

It was only after that goal was accomplished that Miledi would ever allow herself to be a regular girl, which was why neither of them would give voice to the feelings lying deep within their hearts just yet. Because they believed they’d still be able to after they’d made their dreams come true.

“You agree, don’t you?”

Miledi was almost ashamed of how relieved she felt. It was as if Oscar had given her the perfect box to lock her feelings away in for the moment. In response, she let out a long breath, let go of Oscar’s hand, and took a few steps forward before twirling around to face him.

“O-kun, even if we stop being Liberators, I’m still gonna work you to the bone, so you better prepare yourself!” she said, a beaming smile on her face all the while. He returned a gentle smile and walked forward to stand next to her under the light of the setting sun.

They didn’t lean against each other, but instead stared straight ahead at the future they aimed to create.



A few days later, Oscar and the others prepared to leave Sainttown.

“All right, I’m heading out. See you later, Ruth, Corrin, and you two too, Susha and Yunfa. Take care of Dylan and Katie for me,” Oscar said.

“We will. Don’t worry about us, bro,” Ruth replied.

“See you later, Onii-chan,” Corrin said.

“Your family’s in good hands, Oscar-san.”

“Yep. I bet they’ll be back to normal by the time you come back!”

Ruth and Yunfa looked sad to see Oscar and the others go, while Susha put on a strong front to say she’d take care of everyone in their absence. Corrin just gave him a worried look.

Ruth and Yunfa both possessed talents that could’ve been useful on the front lines, but they both knew the battle Oscar and the others were about to fight was more than they could handle. They realized they’d just get in everyone’s way. Hence why they didn’t ask to tag along. They already knew they couldn’t. All they could do for Oscar now was protect Dylan and the others, who were all sleeping because of the effects of the artifacts he’d made.

However, while Laus would have been able to complete the treatment in one month, these artifacts that only needed mana to operate would take half a year to heal the damage to the kids’ souls. Ruth and the others would need to look after them in the meantime. That way, Oscar and the others could focus on the challenges in front of them without worrying about what was happening back home.

Oscar knew how Ruth and the others felt, so he nodded confidently to them.

Moorin gazed at him with pride in her eyes and said, “You’ve grown up into such a fine young man, Oscar... Please come back safely.”

She then turned to Miledi and bowed to her, her white hair falling over her face, and continued, “Please take care of Oscar, Miledi-san.”

“Umm, okay...” Miledi replied bashfully, too embarrassed to ask Moorin what exactly she meant.

A few of the guys in the village were still upset that Oscar had stolen Miledi's heart, but most of them had come to terms with it and were happily sending Oscar and Miledi off. As much as they hated to admit it, Miledi looked brighter than ever, and it was clear to all that the reason for that was Oscar.

"It's cute how you're so bashful even now that you're all grown up, Miledi-tan!"

"Shut up, Lyu-chan!"

"That earring really suits you, though," Lyutillis said, touching the earring Miledi wore on one ear.

"Err...thanks?"

It was a small earring, but it was exquisitely crafted, with a pure sky-blue jewel inset at the center.

Miledi's birthday had come and gone during the Haltina Republic's war with the church. And afterward, she'd been in that semi-stupor, so no one had brought it up, but the night before they'd left for Sainttown, Salus had forcibly made her attend a birthday party in her honor.

Meiru and the others had been shocked and disappointed that they'd never actually tried to learn Miledi's birthday, so they'd hurriedly tried to get presents ready for her in time for the party. Oscar, however, had instead opted to wait and make sure his present was perfect, which was why he'd gifted hers to Miledi while they were in Sainttown.

In Tortus, you were considered an adult when you turned fifteen, so this was the year that Miledi joined the ranks of the grown-ups. Hence why Moorin's earlier comment had brought thoughts of marriage to Miledi's mind. Luckily, while such comments were still embarrassing, she wasn't as shaken by them as she used to be. She'd sorted out her feelings during her conversation with Oscar yesterday, and she knew where they stood.

"Good luck, father. Tell Reinheit I wish him luck as well," Sharm said to Laus.

"Of course. Take care of the villagers while we're gone, Sharm," Laus replied as he gently patted Sharm's head.

This isn't farewell. I'll come back to you, no matter what it takes.

"All right, everyone, let's go!" Miledi declared with a playful grin. She then turned on her heel and walked off, Oscar and the others following close behind her. They could hear the words of encouragement the villagers shouted echo out behind them, and the shouting didn't stop even after they were out of sight.

Miledi used her gravity magic to fly everyone over the forest. She had perfect control over her magic now and could send everyone at a blistering five hundred kilometers per hour while also keeping air resistance down to almost zero. Even after two hours of flying four people, she didn't look the least bit tired. Her speed and endurance had more than doubled, so it didn't look like she'd be running out of mana anytime soon.

Miledi could fly faster than any other living creature, and maneuver as freely as if she were standing on solid ground. No one could cover as much ground as her in a single day.

"Don't you need to rest?" Laus asked.

"Hm? If you're getting tired, I can let you down for a bit," Miledi replied, casually flipping herself around midair. She didn't look the least bit exhausted.

"I thought this when we were coming here too, but you're really on another level," Laus muttered.

"And to think, this is without the help of my evolution magic," Lyutillis said in wonder.

During the war, Miledi had only been able to reach this level of skill with Lyutillis's help, but now things were different. According to Miledi, she'd understood the true nature of her ancient magic, and that was what had given her such a huge power-up. Supposedly, the true nature of gravity magic was the ability to interact with the energy contained within the planet itself. A normal human could only manage to affect the planet's gravity, or its rotational forces, but theoretically gravity magic was also capable of moving the planet's tectonic plates and messing with geothermal and magnetic forces to alter the climate.

Ancient magic was magic capable of altering the fundamental laws of the universe. In Miledi's case, that meant she could absorb mana from Tortus itself in addition to her newfound gravity manipulation skills. Of course, there was a limit to how much her body and soul could withstand, but she could otherwise absorb an infinite amount.

"Everyone's gathered at headquarters, Lau-chan's back to full strength, and we finally have a way to cure Dylan-kun and the others. There's nothing left to worry about! From now on, we focus entirely on training! You guys can't keep eating my dust forever! Unless you just like the taste of dust that much, anyway!"

Back to her usual annoying self, Miledi stuck her tongue out at Oscar and the others. Glad that she was back in top form, Oscar smiled ruefully.

"Yeah, we need to at least get strong enough to take on an apostle by ourselves."

"Who knows how many of them there are."

"Plus, those Paladins might be stronger than we realized."

Their enemies were formidable, but that was just the way the Liberators liked it.

"We're going to smash that pillar on the Divine Mountain and sever Ehit's connection to this world. Oh, and if he comes down to stop us, we'll smash him too! Don't worry, guys, we can do this!" Miledi exclaimed, circling around Oscar and the others all the while.

Emboldened by her certainty, the other Liberators gave her fearless smiles.

"Might as well get a head start on our training," Oscar replied casually. The ancient magic users' job was to make sure they could easily take down apostles. Otherwise, they'd never be able to conquer the Divine Mountain. Salus was taking care of the logistics, so the ancient magic users only needed to think about how to understand the true nature of their own magic.

Miledi took the group deep within the Pale Forest, where they were hidden from the rest of the world, and far enough away that they wouldn't accidentally hurt someone with their training. Vandre, Meiru, and Naiz were set to arrive as

soon as they were done transporting the Demon Lord's army to headquarters.

"It's kind of exciting being this deep in the forest with my friends. It's like a sleepover!" Lyutillis exclaimed.

"But you're the queen of the forest. Shouldn't this be normal for you?" Laus asked.

"Laus, don't question it. Until we came along, the only friends Lyu had were cockroaches and poisonous butterflies," Oscar replied.

Laus turned to Oscar in surprise. He then gave Lyutillis a look of pity before realizing that his situation wasn't much different.

The only person I ever really called a friend was Mulm, and he must be absolutely pissed right now. In fact, he probably wants to kill me more than anyone else. He's pretty devout, after all.

"Lyu. I'm glad you managed to find true friends," Laus said sympathetically.

"Hm? Yes, of course!"

Just then, Miledi floated over, standing upside-down.

"It's okay, Lau-chan, we're your friends too!"

"Don't give me that pitying look!"

Everyone laughed at that, then joked about how quickly they'd all master their magic. Unfortunately, their high spirits didn't last long once the grueling training began.

Ten days had passed since Miledi and the others had entered the deep forest. Naiz, Vandre, and Meiru had finished transporting Rasul's followers and were being led to the training grounds by Uroboros. Meiru walked excitedly through the forest, eager to see Miledi once more.

"Don't tease them too much. The last thing you want is to mess up their relationship before the final battle," Vandre said with an annoyed look on his face.

"No can do! I can't believe Oscar-kun called Miledi-chan out for a romantic

hilltop conversation! As her sort of older sister, I have to ask her all about what happened!”

Vandre, Meiru, and Naiz had stopped by Sainttown on their way over. They’d been camping out in the wild the whole time, and they realized Sainttown was only a short detour from their intended route through the Pale Forest, so they’d stopped by in the hopes of catching Miledi and the others. Unfortunately, Miledi’s party had already left by then, but they’d still managed to hear a few interesting stories.

“Looks to me like you’re just doing this to satisfy your own curiosity.”

“Maybe you need glasses, because I’m clearly doing this out of love for my beloved Miledi-chan.”

Vandre turned to Naiz, looking for backup. However, Naiz didn’t even seem to be paying attention to the conversation.

“Oh, don’t waste your time, Van-kun. Naiz-kun’s still out of it because Susha-chan managed to make him hers.”

“She did not!” Naiz exclaimed, his face beet-red. It seemed he’d snapped out of whatever stupor he’d been in.

“Oh? But she tied you down and stole your first kiss, didn’t she?”

“Don’t say that!”

“I guess in that sense, she definitely ‘made him hers’...”

“Van, please stop. I don’t want to remember it.”

The worst part was that Corrin had been the one who’d distracted him so Susha could tie him up. And Ruth had made the chains for her. Vandre’s familiars had been the ones to tackle him, and when he was on the ground, the sisters had pinned him down and kissed him.

He’d been hunted down and claimed like a prize. Naiz still remembered the guilty looks on Corrin and Ruth’s faces as they saw him tied up and taken home for the slaughter. But one glance from Susha had sent them running. It was clear to him that they’d been threatened into helping with this plan.

Susha and Yunfa had talked about how they wanted to settle things before

the final battle, and that they'd been influenced by Miledi and Oscar's relationship, and that they'd missed him so much while he'd been gone, and that they were worried about him, and they gave all sorts of other reasons for why they'd done what they'd done.

Thankfully, Naiz had managed to escape after one kiss, so technically they hadn't managed to fully devour him.

"Oh, did you really hate it that much?" Meiru said in a teasing voice.

"..." Naiz remained silent and awkwardly averted his gaze.

Even if it had been against his will, he felt guilty that he, a fully grown man who was almost thirty, had kissed two girls aged twelve and eight. He wanted to hate himself for it, but he couldn't.

"Naiz-sama. Isn't it all right to use the Gruen name again?"

After the kiss, Susha had offered a dozen apologies, professed her love for him a thousand times, prayed for his safe return, and then at the end of it all, in an almost reprimanding tone, she'd said that.

"Are you still not proud of yourself?"

Long ago, Naiz had destroyed his home, Gruen Village, and everyone living in it. The guilt he felt over that disaster hadn't lessened at all since joining the Liberators. Naiz was certain he'd carry it with him until the day he died. But at the same time, he'd told Miledi and Oscar that he'd like to reclaim the Gruen name someday.

He truly wished to call himself by his true name, Naiz Gruen, eventually. They'd dragged him outside of hiding, and given him the determination to face forward once more. And not just them, Susha and Yunfa had also been instrumental in rekindling his will to live.

"At the very least, we're proud of you. You're fighting to build a better future for all of us," Susha had said as she'd taken his hand and looked into his eyes. "You're a true warrior of the desert, Naiz-sama."

Her unwavering gaze had pierced through his heart, warming him from the inside out. He still didn't feel like he'd become the kind of warrior his dad had

been. But at the very least, he felt like he could hold his head high in front of these two girls.

“Naiz-kuuun. Are you spacing out again?” Meiru asked, snapping him out of his reverie.

“You should just give up, Naiz. You can’t beat those sisters.”

“Ngh...”

The saddest part was, Naiz couldn’t even refute Vandre. He hastened his steps, trying to get away from Meiru and Vandre’s snickering. Uroboros hopped up onto his shoulder, and he reflexively flinched. Naiz was used to Uroboros’s appearance by now, but he still recoiled on instinct when he was caught by surprise.

Uroboros seemed to be telling him that they’d arrived at the training grounds. Surprised by how quiet it was, Naiz pushed aside a few branches and walked into the clearing.

“What happened?!” he exclaimed. Oscar, Laus, and Lyutillis were lying on the ground, twitching weakly.

Spotting Naiz and the others, Miledi grinned and said, “You’re finally here, Meru-nee! Now we can finally begin training in earnest!”

“What?!” Naiz, Meiru, and Vandre shouted in unison. Even Laus looked half-dead.

What kind of training is Miledi putting them through? Naiz thought, taking a few steps back.

Still grinning, Miledi sidled over to them and continued, “Now I can work them to death in spirit AND body!”

Judging by the state Oscar and the others were in, she probably meant that rather literally. Oscar and Lyutillis’s souls were leaking out of their bodies, and a spirit Laus was trying to wake them up before it was too late.

For whatever reason, Miledi seemed to be trying to actually kill her friends.

“Aren’t you glad, O-kun, Lau-chan, Lyu-chan?! Now you can die without worry!”

Oscar and the others woke up just in time to hear that, making despair color their faces. Even the ultimate masochist, Lyutillis, was reaching out to Meiru for salvation. She looked like a zombie. Oscar, on the other hand, appeared to be having second thoughts about falling in love with Miledi.

“All right, guys, I hope you’re ready to join O-kun and friends!” Miledi said to the newcomers, countless black spheres appearing around her all the while.

“M-Miledi-chan, please calm down. C-Can’t we talk this through?” Meiru replied in a timid voice.

“Sh-She’s a demon,” the brother of the Demon Lord muttered, terrified.

Naiz, however, simply gave up without a fight.

Unsurprisingly, no one managed to escape from Demon Lord Miledi. Three new voices joined the chorus of the damned deep within the Pale Forest.

Everyone was forced to keep using their ancient magic under the effects of Laus’s forced Limit Break, as well as Lyutillis’s evolution magic. On top of that, Miledi kept pouring massive amounts of mana into them, so they were able to train nonstop. Once they reached their physical and mental limits, Miledi used Oscar’s artifact to heal Laus and Meiru just enough that they could heal everyone else, and then she started the process all over again.

It was a fate worse than death, but it was only by pushing themselves to the absolute limits like this that Oscar and the others could awaken to their true power. After half a month of this hellish training, someone showed up at their training grounds.

“Huh? Parsha?”

“It has been a long time, Your Highness.”

Miledi had requested they not be bothered during their training, so Parsha must have had a good reason for coming, especially since she hadn’t used Uroboros or one of Vandre’s familiars to deliver her message. It was clearly urgent as well, since she didn’t comment on Lyutillis’s disheveled clothes or the fact that all the vegetation for hundreds of meters in every direction had been burned to a crisp.

Concerned, Miledi and the others gathered around Parsha.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Please take a look at this, Miledi-dono. These fliers are being distributed throughout every city in every nation.”

Parsha held a piece of paper out to Miledi. She took it and everyone stared down at it. Written in big, bold letters were the words: “The church hereby declares that it shall execute these heretics who belong to the rebel group known as the Liberators.”

The date of the execution was a month from now, and the flier held pictures of the leaders of the supposed heretics. Officially, they’d been captured as war criminals, and it looked like they’d been tortured a fair amount.

“What...? How...?” Miledi mumbled, her face twisting in anguish. Oscar’s eyes widened in surprise as he took in the sight. The pictures were of Karg, Rigan, and Baharl. The list of names included the members of the Orcus Workshop, most of the Esperado branch members, and many of Andika’s citizens.

“Oscar-dono. I have a message from Salus-dono as well. He wants you to activate your Skynet.”

Skynet was an artifact that allowed people to transfer audio and visual messages over long distances. Thanks to the spirit and spatial magic contained within it, its range was massive, and its messages couldn’t be intercepted. It was one of the prototype artifacts Oscar had created during his training. He’d sent all the useful things he’d made back to headquarters.

Still dazed, Naiz pulled a thirty-centimeter-long rectangular crystal out of his Treasure Trove. He then poured some mana into it, and Salus and Cloris appeared on his display.

“Good timing. How’s your training coming along?” Salus asked in a casual tone.

Annoyed by how calm he sounded, Miledi snatched the Skynet out of Naiz’s hands.

“Sal, what the hell is this?! It’s fake news meant to lure us out, right?!” she

asked, half-praying that he'd say it was. But then a third person walked into the screen, dashing her hopes.

"I'm sorry, Miledi, but they raided the Esperado branch."

"Shirley?!"

Shirley Nelson was covered with bandages and needed a cane to support herself, but it was unmistakably her.

"I'm the only one who managed to escape," Shirley said in a sad voice, making Miledi slump in disbelief.

Laus grit his teeth in frustration.

That train attack probably gave them all the clues they needed...

Naiz and Vandre gave Shirley apologetic looks as well.

She shook her head, saying, "It's no one's fault."

"We checked up on the Orcus Workshop—or, well, I guess it's the Verand Workshop now. Anyway, it's been closed down, and we couldn't find any of its employees."

"Hey, Salus. What about...the people from Andika?" Meiru asked fearfully. There were thousands of people living on that island of boats.

Of course, only a hundred or so names were on the list of people on the flier. The ship island that her pirates had used as their base of operations was now just one part of the new city of Andika. Most of the people living there were civilians. Meiru checked over the list again, but none of her pirate family's names were on there.

What if they slaughtered everyone they didn't capture? Meiru thought.

"They're fine. Half of the ships were destroyed, and quite a few people got injured, but Baharl surrendered quickly enough that there weren't any deaths."

"Did they send you messenger birds?"

"Yep, right after the attack. Thank goodness we had some of Tim's eagles stationed there just in case."

"I see... That's some good news at least. Chris and the others...are definitely

still on their way. They have to be."

"I sent a messenger to the dukedom's northern coast, so they should have received the news the moment they landed. I imagine they'll send a reply soon," Cloris explained.

Unfortunately, Meiru couldn't bring herself to be so optimistic.

"This declaration was made under the name of the church's new oracle. They're probably trying to put on a show of strength with this execution," Salus said.

"It's also a provocation against us, naturally," Cloris added.

Oscar grit his teeth and said, "They already knew we were coming. This is their way of telling us not to take too long, or to try protracted guerrilla tactics. They've set the stage for us."

"Yes."

"Those fuckers," Miledi spat, throwing the flier onto the ground. She took a deep breath and said, "We'll head right over at on—"

"No, you can't," Shirley said, interrupting Miledi. She then stared at her with unwavering eyes and added, "The reason I escaped on my own was to deliver my father's message."

The attack on Hotel Lusheina had been sudden. A knight who was able to erode anything he got close to had led the charge. The Liberators had been forced underground almost immediately. Naiz had returned the Dark Key they'd given to Sui, but with how badly concealed the gate was, and how few supplies were waiting there, they had only been able to teleport out one person. That person had, of course, been Shirley.

"This is what Support Branch Chief Rigan had to say: 'Don't do anything rash. Spend every day leading up to the execution preparing as best as you can.'"

It was a warning for Miledi, as well as a declaration of his own resolve.

"Karg and Baharl left messages for you as well."

Karg had known one of the Liberators would investigate his closed-down workshop, and had left a letter, while Baharl had left his message with one of

the citizens who wasn't being arrested.

"'I won't forgive you if you waver because of this, kid!' was Karg's message. 'If you fuck this up and my daughters get hurt because of it, you're dead!' was Baharl's."

Neither of them had much time, so they'd kept their messages brief. Still, it was clear they were as determined as Rigan not to give in.

"Tch... Since when did I become your daughter, you stupid old man? Miledi-chan, we're ignoring these messages, right?" Meiru said with a feral grin.

But despite her words, the look she gave Miledi made it clear she wasn't thinking of doing anything rash.

"O-kun..." Miledi whispered, turning to Oscar. He adjusted his glasses, his fingers trembling with rage. But he, too, kept his cool.

"We have some time until the execution date," he said in a level tone.

"If we rush in now, all our preparations will go to waste. You get that, right, Miledi?" Laus said in an admonishing voice.

"We have to bear with it for now," Lyutillis added.

Miledi closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them back up, she was the Liberators' leader once more.

"We'll continue as planned, then. Give us ten days and we'll be done here. I guarantee it."

"Roger. Unfortunately, I don't think the Liberators on the western edge of the continent will make it in time. Should I have them stand by at whatever branch they're closest to?"

"Please do. We'll pick them up personally."

"I'll send messenger birds to tell everyone of the change in itinerary at once."

"Yeah. Don't worry, O-kun will make sure everyone makes it on time!"

"Of course. He's the linchpin of our operation. If he says he can't do it, we'll smash every pair of glasses he owns," Cloris replied.

"Don't worry, I'll finish on time."

Salus looked at Miledi like he would a respected military general. But then his eyes softened again, and he had the same parental smile he always wore.

“You guys better not let Miledi down,” he said, casting his gentle gaze over Oscar and the others.

Miledi looked over her comrades as well, her trust in them absolute. Their mana spiraled around them, six pillars of varied light burning brighter than ever before.

Chapter V: Tolling the Bells of Revolution

The theocracy's capital was busier than usual.

Today was the day a huge group of heretics would be executed. A day where Ehit's superiority would once again be shown to the world.

No matter how much the people of the capital believed in the church, rumors of their defeat at Haltina still found their way to the citizens' ears. As much as they didn't want to think about it, they'd been forced to contend with the fact that the church wasn't invincible. Fortunately, today's grand execution would once again reaffirm the absolute might of the church, so the people were celebrating.

Of course, the knights and the clergy were even more excited for this day than the commoners.

A massive portrait of a smiling Ehit sat behind the raised throne in the cathedral's throne room. Lucifer, the pope, stepped out from a small door that sat to the right of the throne and looked down at the people gathered below him.

One was Mulm, who wielded the Divine Bow, while the other was Darrion, the user of Longinus and the Sanctified Shield. And behind the two of them were a grand total of ninety-eight Paragons of Light and Paladins, each of whom were armed with a copy of one of the Seven Sacred Relics.

Lilith and her Templar Knights, Kaime and Selm and the Holy Templar Knights, as well as Archbishop Kimaris and the bishops, were present. Lilith and the Templar Knights had all been granted replica relics as well.

Everyone's hair was white now. They'd all been fully apostleified. They still lacked the might of a true apostle, so they had no wings and couldn't use disintegration magic, but they were far stronger than the demi-apostles that Kaime and Selm had originally been.

This power was originally meant to be given only to the chosen hero of the

age, but despite the great honor they'd received, none of the knights looked especially happy. They knew they'd simply been granted the power needed to stand a chance in the coming battle. They also knew today would be the day that decided the fate of Tortus.

Lucifer nodded in satisfaction, then walked down the pure white steps that connected the throne's dais to the rest of the room. He stopped right in front of the first row of knights, then turned to face the throne. Narrowing his eyes slightly, he knelt like everyone else.

"Hearst-sama, we await your arrival."

Before she'd worn the title of oracle, but now everyone knew her for what she truly was. An Apostle of God, as well as a symbol of Ehit's might.

A pillar of light rained down onto the throne, and the apostle materialized before everyone. She spread her silver wings, and a few stray feathers fluttered to the ground. However, she wasn't the only apostle who'd appeared.

Behind her appeared ten others, each with the exact same, inhumanely beautiful face.

The eleven apostles strode forward, the portrait of Ehit at their backs.

"Oooooh..." one of the knights muttered, overcome with emotion.

"Lucifer," Hearst said.

"Allow me to report, Lord Apostle."

The heads of every nation had reached the capital, and the Templar Knights were guarding both the execution square and the city gates. There was also a defensive network that extended a whole seven kilometers above and around the city. And in addition to that, the capital's barrier was fully operational.

Once he started talking, the words poured out of Lucifer in a torrent. He was clearly ready to strike down any and all invaders.

"Good," Hearst said when he finished his report. She then looked over the gathered knights, her pale blue eyes sparkling with inhuman light. The knights' excitement rose to a fever pitch in response.

"Provide our lord with this age's finest show," Hearst demanded, her voice as

flat and emotionless as ever.

“Glory to Lord Ehit,” Lucifer said in a solemn voice, looking like the spitting image of a martyr.

The execution was slated to take place at noon.

The sun neared its zenith, and the central square was filled with people. The square was massive, a perfect circle three hundred meters across in diameter. It was often used for religious ceremonies, and so, the roads leading into it were extremely wide. All the nearby buildings were relatively small, as if to highlight the size of the square. It was the perfect place for a spectacle.

Only the road leading north, to the palace, was blocked off. Everything else had been kept open. And there wasn’t a single inch of space that wasn’t taken up with people. It wasn’t just knights, clergy, and citizens of the capital who were there either. High-ranking members of other countries who had the right to visit the capital were present as well. Frenzied shouts like “Death to heretics!” and “Bring peace to the world!” and “Glory to our lord and savior Ehit!” filled the square. But while the square and its surroundings were packed, the rest of the city was practically deserted. Only the old, the infirm, and families with young children to take care of had stayed home today. It was almost surreal how empty the populated capital looked.

In the center of the main square was a huge stage. Numerous iron cages sat in the middle of the stage. This was the execution platform.

A ring of Templar Knights surrounded the stage, preventing any of the people from getting too close. Airships floated in the sky, guarding against an aerial approach.

If you included the knights guarding the northern street, there were close to three thousand soldiers in the plaza. But there were also knight divisions ten thousand strong guarding the eastern, western, and southern gates. The main gate, which was the southern one, was where Lilith was stationed.

“Can this even be called a guard? They’re out in full force,” one of the foreign nobles’ attendants whispered.

“It’s like *we’re* the ones surrounded,” his companion replied, glancing warily at the knights.

Their master reprimanded them both, but even he looked visibly nervous. Even the kings of various nations looked uneasy.

Time passed, and the sun slowly climbed its way to the apex of its circuit. As it reached its zenith, a bell rang. The time for the execution had come.

The street heading north from the plaza led to a massive gate. Normally, that white gate was thrown wide open, but today it was closed. But as the bell rang, it slowly creaked open.

Beyond the gates was the Divine Mountain, and the marble white palace at its base. Standing on one of the terraces that faced the city was Lucifer and the respective commanders of the Three Pillars of Radiance. Below, on the street itself, was a group of dirty, wounded heretics. They were shackled and chained together, and two rows of knights herded them toward the gallows.

There were two hundred heretics in total. It was extremely rare for such a large group to be executed all at once, and in the theocracy’s capital no less. At the very least, it hadn’t happened even once over the past hundred years.

The crowd’s excitement rose, and the citizens started hurling insults at the heretics. However, their excitement didn’t last.

“Wh-What’s with those guys?” someone muttered, reflecting the feelings of the entire crowd.

The insults started to die down as well. Everyone’s excitement turned to confusion. The heretics’ reactions just didn’t make sense. These people were about to be executed, but none of them were crying or begging for mercy. Their eyes showed neither regret nor resignation. Rather than wallowing in despair, they all stared defiantly at the crowd. Though their steps were slow due to their injuries and exhaustion, they carried themselves proudly.

In the silence that followed, the heretics unhesitatingly made their way up the execution platform. They entered their cages without any prodding, and the knights locked them shut.

A group of figures jumped down from one of the circling airships. They were

all bishops, and they had glimmering wings sprouting from their backs. They gracefully circled around the crowd, then took up positions around the execution platform in groups of three. At the very northern end was a single, older priest, wearing far fancier clothes than the others. He was the leading archbishop, Kimaris Sintail. And after a brief pause, he raised his staff.

"O Ehit, creator of the world! Glory be upon you, great god! Please bring down your hammer of justice on these heretics who dare disturb the world's peace!"

Light began to rise from the plaza floor. The twelve spots where Kimaris and his bishops were standing rose out of the ground, creating iron pillars that were ten meters tall and four meters wide.

Kimaris's words got the crowd worked up again, and they shook off their uncertainty. But just as they started jeering again, the prisoners spoke up.

"Hah! Pathetic."

"*This* is God's will? Don't make me laugh. Did no one ever teach your god manners?"

"They're all just a bunch of brats with more power than they know what to do with. You shouldn't waste your time with them, guys."

Three men who looked even more beat up than the others bantered with each other. Their voices carried through the plaza, and the citizens fell quiet once more.

These men were wearing rags, were covered in wounds, and were about to be executed. And yet, their banter was enough to silence the crowd.

Baharl Devault spat at the ground, while Karg Verand chuckled heartily to himself. Meanwhile, Rigan Nelson gave the pope the middle finger.

All of the other heretics who were about to be executed were just as defiant. They smiled fearlessly at the priests and at the crowd, seeming not to care that they were about to die. The heads of the various nations narrowed their eyes, carefully gauging the church's response.

"You won't be given a chance to repent, you faithless heathens! Prepare

yourselves for Ehit's holy purification!"

The thirty-three bishops who'd been granted the honor of carrying out this execution raised their staves. The lines of light that had been running through the plaza floor joined together, creating a magic circle. The light emanating from the circle was absorbed by the iron pillars, and went from there into the bishops.

High above the pillars, a circle of light formed. The sight was awe-inspiring. A shiver ran down everyone in the crowd's spines. That light was clearly more than strong enough to eradicate the heretics.

The citizens waited with bated breath for the circle to fall. But just then, there was a huge boom, and the sky turned white. Not because of the circle of light, but because of something much higher than it.

Everyone gazed up in shock and saw a massive beam of light bearing down on the capital. It looked like the sun was falling. That was just how bright the light was. It came from the south and slammed into the threefold barrier that protected the capital.

Judging by the angle of the light, it was clear that the shot was aimed at the palace, not the central square. Waves of rainbow light rippled out from the point of impact.

The citizens looked horrified. As they regained their senses, they began to scream.

Before the crowd could fall into a panic, the knights and the priests calmed them, telling them that the ancient artifact that protected the capital was impregnable. There was no way the barrier could fail, the knights told everyone. But just as people started to calm down, they saw something that made them pale.

The rainbow light pulsed harder...and the sound of shattering glass echoed throughout the city. The first layer of the barrier had fallen.

There wasn't even time for the citizens to panic. The light pulsed again, and the second barrier shattered. It then expanded in size as it surged forward...until it looked big enough to swallow the entire palace whole. The

capital's prized barrier, which had never been breached in the history of the theocracy, had just been smashed to bits in seconds. Glittering shards rained on the ground, making it look like sparkling snow was falling.

A second later, there was a tearing of space and a huge black airship slowly made its way out of the dimensional fissure. The lumbering airship was shaped roughly like a whale, and it was stocked full with weapons. Mana rippled across its surface, making the ship glow like the morning sun. It was as if Noah's Ark had appeared in the middle of the sky. The way it presented itself made it almost demand applause from all who saw it, even as it invaded the capital's airspace.

This was the submarine palace Lac Elain, Orcus Edition. And with one earth-shattering blow, it had tolled the bells of revolution loud enough for the world to hear.

Oscar sprawled across Lac Elain's deck.

"Haaah... Haaah, we did it. Haaah... Haaah," he panted.

"Meiru-nee! Lau-chan! Help O-kun before he dies!" Miledi shouted.

"I know I told you to make something that'd take the barrier out in one hit, but this is one hell of a weapon," Laus said, impressed.

"There, there, Oscar-kun. You did good."

Laus and Meiru quickly cast healing magic on Oscar.

"Hmph, look at that. The Paragons of Light are panicking. Their formation is in tatters."

"I can't really blame them. I would be too, if I was in their shoes."

"Onee-sama. If we make it out of this alive, please give me another reward."

The seven ancient magic users lined up at the ship's prow as they joked with each other.

Ten metallic black spheres were revolving around Miledi and three transparent shawls rested on her shoulders as she looked back at her friends.

“Everyone ready?”

Laus thumped his chest with his black, metallic prosthetic left arm, then hefted the warhammer in his right.

Lyutillis was wearing a white hunting dress embroidered with gold leaves and had her platinum-blonde hair in a ponytail. She closed her eyes and touched her forehead with her Guardian Rod.

Meiru lowered her pirate hat, her long coat fluttering in the wind, and took a step forward, her armored boots clanking loudly.

Naiz folded his arms, dressed in the traditional garb of a desert warrior.

Vandre adjusted his muffler, a massive greatsword resting on his shoulder.

Oscar adjusted his glasses with his gauntleted hands.

All six of them had fearless smiles on their faces.

Miledi sucked in a deep breath, smiled fearlessly back at them, and exclaimed, “Let’s go start a revolution!”

Everyone leaped off of the deck without uttering another word.

Afterword

Hello, everyone, it's your resident chuuni lover, Shirakome Ryo, here!

Thank you so much for picking up *Arifureta Zero: Volume 5*.

I'd like to start this off by apologizing. I'm sorry this volume is so long! I imagine most of you could probably tell from how this volume ended, but the next one will be the grand finale of the *Arifureta Zero* series.

This volume was about Laus joining the Liberators and them gathering for the final battle, but the main thing I wanted to do was showcase what kind of people the Liberators were, and to remind everyone about the beliefs they held.

Ultimately, that's what the *Arifureta Zero* series is all about. So when I was thinking of all the things I wanted to get to while writing, I realized there was a lot more than I'd initially realized, and by the time I was done, it had become this massive tome. Also, it was just really fun writing about moe Miledi and deadbeat Sui, so I ended up including more scenes with them than perhaps necessary... But at the end of the day, I still cut out a lot, so I hope you'll forgive me! Incidentally, I made moe Miledi's speech patterns similar to Yue's on purpose. Without Belta's influence, Miledi would have probably turned into a kuudere like Yue.

At any rate, we're almost at the *Arifureta Zero* series finale. If you've been following the main series, you already know how the Liberators' story ends, but I don't think that's too important. What really matters is how they reach that ending, the way they lived their lives up to that point, the struggles they faced, the thoughts they had, and the decisions they made.

I'm going to write as much of that as I can into the next volume, so I hope you'll join me then.

In entirely unrelated news, season two of the anime got announced the day this book went on sale in Japan. The newest key visual and a PV should be out

by now. If you haven't seen it yet, I highly recommend checking out the anime's website or the official Twitter account.

Lastly, it's time for the acknowledgments.

As always, a huge thank you to the illustrator, Takaya-ki-sensei, as well as the artist for the *Arifureta Zero* manga, Kamichi Ataru-sensei, the artist for the main series manga, RoGa-sensei, and the illustrator of *Arifureta: I Heart Isekai*, Mori Misaki-sensei. And, of course, a big thank you to my editor, my proofreader, and everyone else who helped with the publication of the book.

Last, but certainly not least, thank you my dear readers, both those who are buying the published books and those who follow the series on Narou. It's all thanks to you that I've come this far!

Shirakome Ryo


"O-KUN
BELONGS
TO ME."


VANDRE SCHNEE
MEIRU MELUSINE
NAIZ GRUEN
MILEDI REISEN
OSCAR ORCUS
LYUTILLIS HALTINA
LAUS BARN
LIBERATORS ASSEMBLE

Table of Contents

Cover

Chapter I: There’s No Way My Little Miledi Can Be This Cute!

Chapter II: Laus’s Great Escape

Chapter III: Spirits of the Lake

Chapter IV: Liberators Assemble

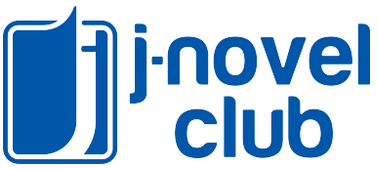
Chapter V: Tolling the Bells of Revolution

Afterword

Color Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Arifureta Zero: Volume 5

by Ryo Shirakome

Translated by Ningen Edited by DxS

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2021 Ryo Shirakome Illustrations by Takaya-ki

Cover illustration by Takaya-ki All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by OVERLAP, Inc.

This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: December 2021