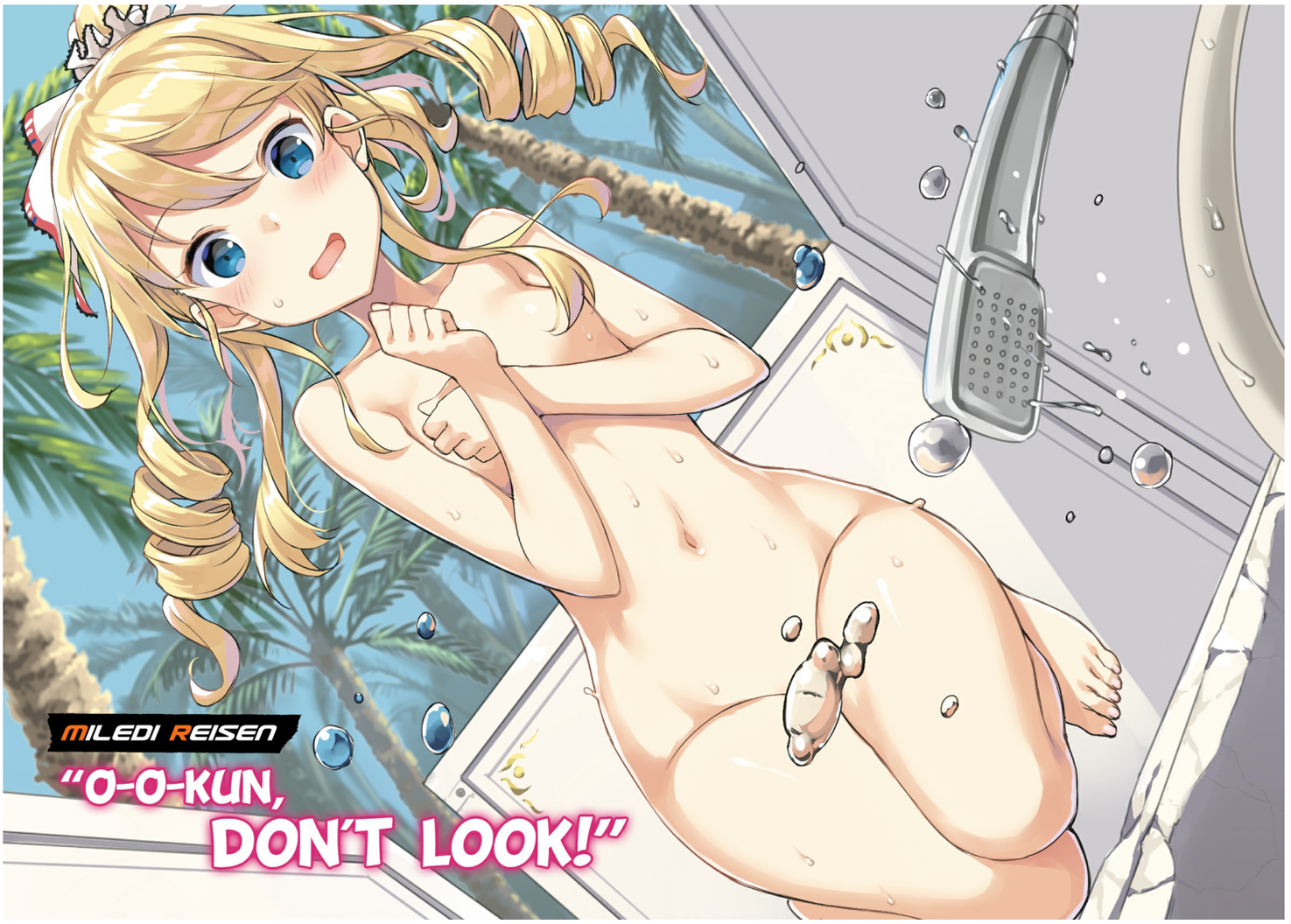

#1
ryo shirakome
takayaki
ARIFURETA:
ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU ZERO
FROM COMMONPLACE TO WORLD'S STRONGEST
ZERO

#1



ARIFURETA ZERO: FROM COMMONPLACE TO WORLD'S STRONGEST

ryo shirakome takayaki


MILEDI REISEN
"O-O-KUN,
DON'T LOOK!"


OSCAR ORCUS
"I'M JUST YOUR AVERAGE SYNERGIST."

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Prologue

A figure lazed in the center of a pure white room.

One could tell from a glance that there was something odd about them. For one thing, they were wearing a bizarre mask with a smiley-face drawn on its cover. For another, the arms and legs poking out of their milky-white robe, while artfully crafted, were clearly made out of metal.

It was a golem that was lying there in the center of the room.

“Ugh, I finally managed to finish my repairs. Damn that little boy. How dare he leave some explosives there at the end!” The voice that spoke sounded youthful and feminine. Its owner, the golem lying in the center of the room, was Miledi Reisen. She was the creator of the Reisen Gorge, one of the Seven Great Labyrinths, and a Liberator.

She stared up at the sky and screamed.

“The next time I see him, I’ll teach that brat a lesson!” She looked like a child throwing a tantrum, thrashing about on the floor.

Her robe flapped wildly around her, and her mask’s expression morphed.

Upon closer inspection, one could see that her robe was charred at the edges and covered in soot. There was a small crack in her mask as well.

Hajime was the cause of her current distress, and the reason she was in such a sorry state. He was the first to have cleared the labyrinth she’d created. And the first thing he’d done after defeating her was to demand she give him all of her possessions.

She’d planned on giving him everything but the items she absolutely needed to maintain the labyrinth, but he’d insisted on taking even those.

He was no conqueror, just a thief. No good person would ever demand that a labyrinth master hand over all her possessions. That was the act of a common brigand.

Naturally, Miledi had refused. Half in jest, she'd tested out her toilet shortcut and flushed them out of her labyrinth. However, just before they'd been washed away, the boy had thrown some grenades her way as a final parting gift.

His grenades had blown up not just the deepest chamber in the labyrinth, but a good portion of her private resting quarters as well. In tears, Miledi had set about the task of repairing her precious labyrinth. She'd only just finished.

She cursed at Hajime for a while longer, complaining about the unfair retribution she'd received for the harmless prank she'd played on him. Objectively speaking, it was pretty hard to feel sympathetic toward someone who'd flushed people out of her home.

Once she was done, complete silence returned to the room.

Miledi was this labyrinth's only resident. It sat deep underground, at the bottom of a gorge everyone avoided. A dark place where the light of the sun never reached.

Without Miledi's cursing, there was no noise at all. As she was a golem, there wasn't even the sound of her breathing or heartbeat.

After a few moments of silence, Miledi raised her hand up to the ceiling.

Had there been any light, her metallic hand would have gleamed brightly. This golem was something someone very precious to her had made. The crystallization of all their hard work. This inorganic hand of hers was very unlike the actual hand she'd had back when she was alive.

"To think... someone who could clear our trials really appeared..." She balled her outstretched hand into a fist. The reality of it was finally hitting her. Then, she glanced over at a corner.

The room she was in now was her bedroom. Meaning her personal possessions were all stored there.

There was a bookshelf in the corner she'd looked at, a number of picture frames lining the shelves. Long ago, an exceptionally skilled Synergist had invented a device that could perfectly record all the details in a scene and copy them. The pictures he'd taken with it had been his gift to Miledi, and her

greatest treasure.

Miledi walked up to the pictures and examined each one in turn, starting from the end. She'd done the same thing hundreds, no, thousands of times, but a different emotion welled up within her this time around.

"How long has it been since that day... The day that we were defeated. The day we swore to carry on, to create a light of hope for those who would come after. It's... definitely been more than a few centuries at least. A thousand years? Two thousand? Ahaha, I don't even remember anymore..."

Most of the pictures were of a young girl. There was one of her standing in the middle of a city, another of her surrounded by nature, and yet another with her in the rugged wilderness. In all of them she was smiling, the people in the background all smiling alongside her.

The person who'd taken these photos had known how to capture her radiance better than anyone.

Miledi's gaze stopped at one of the pictures. It was a picture of seven people standing atop a hill, the sunrise at their backs.

One of them was a blonde girl. She was pulling a bespectacled, flustered man closer to her. Next to her stood a stoic, but gentle-looking man, a seductively smiling dryad woman, a stern, balding old man, a Dagon woman who was smiling triumphantly, and lastly, a demon man who was staring at the blonde girl with a look of mild disapproval.

"Guys... it's finally happening. Time's moving forward again. It's not a dream. The path we chose... it really did pave the way for those who came after us."

Had Miledi retained her human form, she would have been crying. Her voice trembled and broke.

Her fingers lightly brushed against the image of the bespectacled boy.

"O-kun. Can you believe it? Those kids cleared your labyrinth first. It was supposed to be the hardest one, the one everyone was supposed to do last. And you know what else? Their leader is a Synergist, just like you. What an amazing coincidence." Miledi chuckled.

“His personality’s the complete opposite of yours, though. Still, he’s amazing. Those artifacts of his are crazy. He must have made them using the techniques you left behind.” She continued talking until she ran out of words. Overcome with emotion, she brought a hand to her chest.

Finally, she turned her gaze to the final picture. This one was special. It had been created by combining Oscar’s wondrous invention with the regeneration powers another one of her comrades had held. Together, they had created a picture of the past. It depicted a smiling young woman with red hair. She was wearing a maid uniform, and standing next to her was the same blonde girl that was in the other pictures, except she looked younger. There was a look of confusion on her face.

“It all started with you. The journey I inherited from you is finally coming to a close.”

Miledi didn’t have much strength left. She probably had enough power stored for one last fight at full strength, but that was more than enough. She’d been prepared for this for millennia.

Miledi looked back up at the ceiling. She was thinking of the young boy who’d conquered her labyrinth. *Finally.*

Quietly, she prayed.

“May the people finally be free...” It was a lone, silent wish.

Chapter I: The Meeting That Started It All

The Kingdom of Velka — Capital Velnika.

Velka sat in the southwestern portion of the Northern Continent. A vast network of tunnels ran directly beneath its capital city.

The tunnels were filled with abundant amounts of green glowstone, which had earned them the name “The Greenway.”

Monsters and cutthroats prowled their depths, so it was by no means a safe way to travel. However, because of the rare ore that could be mined there, the tunnels were still popular.

Velka itself could trace its origins back to The Greenway. The kingdom had started out as a mining town that had sprouted up to harvest its ore. Merchants and craftsmen had then flocked to the town, which eventually grew into a flourishing city. That flourishing city then grew into a small country, until it eventually became the mighty kingdom it was now.

The country manufactured all of its own weapons, its tools, and even magical artifacts. Velka was known to the rest of the world as the kingdom of inventors and craftsmen. They were more than a little jealous of its wealth of natural resources and talented citizens.

The engineers and craftsmen of the kingdom were always competing with each other, and there were a few exceptionally talented guilds whose names had become famous.

One of those was the Orcus Workshop. It allowed only the most talented Synergists to join. Its fame was so great that even nobles considered it an honor to be accepted for an apprenticeship there. Their primary focus was on weaponsmithing. And thanks to the current political climate, they were in rather high demand.

The Orcus Workshop’s headquarters dwarfed the surrounding buildings. Today too, the workshop was filled with the sounds of Synergists chanting and

master craftsmen chastising their apprentices.

Like with all Orcus Workshop buildings, the headquarters was partitioned into sections, with each section housing a different specialty. One could usually guess what each section's specialty was by looking at the tools and materials used.

Most craftsmen were surrounded by weapons, armor, and the materials needed to make them. Others were buried in piles of everyday goods.

As the Orcus Workshop's main business was weapons, it made sense for most sections to be dedicated to that. One's standing in the workshop was determined by the quality of goods they could produce.

However, there was one craftsman who was surrounded by something else. His section was radically different from the rest of the workshop.

The young man working that station had gentle, feminine features and a long, slender build.

He wore black-rimmed spectacles and had his shoulder-length black hair tied up in a ponytail.

He wore an apron over his simple blue shirt and off-white trousers. Gadgets of dubious function stuck out of the numerous pockets his apron had.

His intelligent eyes were staring earnestly at a magic circle and the materials contained within it. Then, he clapped his hands together and the magic circle in front of him began to glow. His mana was a warm, yellowish-white. It was reminiscent of sunlight, the kind one might see on a warm spring day.

His materials coalesced within the circle. The young man's creation had a perfect curve, impeccable balance, and a well-crafted handle that showed his consideration for its wielder.

He stared sharply at what he'd made, seemingly satisfied.

"Perfect. That's a great pot." He seemed proud of his work. Tenderly, he picked up the dull gray pot.

He then carefully placed it inside a box. Said box was already full of pots, frying pans, plates, and other cooking utensils.

Scattered around him were other mundane goods. Lanterns, fancy desks, building tools, scissors, stationery, and other everyday goods littered his workplace.

There was not a single weapon in sight, despite this being a workshop specializing in weapons.

There were technically some sharp implements, but none of them could be considered weapons.

They were all cooking knives. Knives for chopping vegetables, knives for cutting meat, even knives for cutting bread. And they were all of exceptional quality.

However, they were all still cooking utensils. While all the other craftsmen were trying their hardest to create exemplary weapons, this young man was just making mundane items. Naturally, this made him stand out. Not in a good way, either.

Everyone hated him, especially because the Orcus Workshop treated him favorably despite his obvious shortcomings.

“Tch...”

“Hmph.”

People scoffed.

The young man turned around to see two elderly masters staring down at his work. They wore disapproving glares.

He smiled awkwardly in response and returned to his own work, trying to ignore them.

While the craftsmen all hated him, most of them didn’t do much to get in his way. After all, they were too busy focusing on their own work.

But in every group, there was always a small minority that refused to conform. The same was true here. While most people were content to leave the young man alone, some felt compelled to make his life miserable.

The young man scattered wood chips around the pots, cushioning his creations. It was then that someone walked up, looking for trouble.

“Hey, loser. How long are you going to keep making junk like this? What happened to the stuff I asked you to make?” This new voice was derisive and unpleasant.

The newcomer was short and fat, and he was surrounded by two lackeys. One was tall and lanky, while the other had eyes that looked like they were bulging out of their sockets. All three of them were smiling wickedly.

“Hello there, Waress-san. I’ve already finished what you asked for.”

Ping Waress was the third son of the noble Waress family. The young man turned to the duke and bowed his head respectfully, despite Waress’ condescending attitude.

The “stuff Waress had asked him to make” had actually been Ping’s work quota for today. He’d just been too lazy to do it himself. The young man picked up a nearby box and held it out.

“What, already? Hey, you better not have half-assed this! Earl Holden requested me specifically for this job. I asked you to help to give you a chance to polish your skills, so you better not be repaying my good will by spitting in my face!”

The earl hadn’t actually made any such personal request. He’d brought some armor to be repaired, but he’d asked the workshop as a whole, not any individual craftsman.

In fact, most of the repairs had been handed off to more senior craftsmen. Ping had only been in charge of fixing the straps.

In other words, he’d just happened to have been assigned that task.

The young man knew that as well, but he disliked conflict, so instead of arguing, he just furrowed his brows. He’d had a lot of practice placating people.

Before he could even say “Take a look for yourself,” one of Ping’s lackeys spoke up.

“Come on, Ping-san. Don’t you think loser is a bit much, even for him? The least you could do is call him a former prodigy.”

Torpa Parson, the man who’d spoken, was the second son of Baron Parson.

The bug-eyed man was Raul Streya, fourth son of Baron Streya. He backed up Torpa, gesticulating like a buffoon.

“Now now, Torpa-kun. We should drop the ‘former’ bit, too. After all, he is an orphan the Master scouted out personally. Sure, he can’t make a weapon to save his life and spends all his time crafting junk, but he’s still a genius. After all, he gets paid for all that junk he makes! We should applaud him. Come on, don’t you think you should show us those skills that impressed the master so much? Don’t tell me age made you rusty, you’re still young. You’ve still got it, right Oscar-kun?”

Nearby onlookers sniggered at that.

The other craftsmen didn’t have any personal issue with Oscar like Ping did, but they too were annoyed that an orphan would be given special treatment. Especially as they’d never seen the genius he had supposedly been taken in for.

People continued needling Oscar, but he just smiled and bowed his head. He quietly held out the box that had the clasp Ping had asked for.

“Why won’t you say anything, huh?” Ping opened the box and frowned. Despite the fact that Oscar had done as he’d asked, he seemed displeased.

“It’s as you say. I’m still an inexperienced craftsman, taking advantage of the master’s generosity.”

“If you know that, then you should just get the hell out of here. You’re a disgrace to the Orcus name! The fact that you bear it is an insult!”

Even an apology wasn’t enough to pacify Ping. In fact, it only seemed to make him more irate. His angry screams turned him into the center of attention instead of Oscar.

Not only was Ping short and fat, he was petty. He was the kind of person to insult others behind their backs and bully anyone weaker than him.

Still, he rarely lost his temper, at least not enough to shout.

Looks like the worm’s even angrier than usual today... Did he mess up something else earlier or something? Still smiling outwardly, Oscar desperately thought of a way to calm Ping down. However, before he could, Ping continued.

“Seriously, I can’t believe the master called *you* a genius. I guess he can make mistakes sometimes too.”

Ping was so worked up that he didn’t notice insulting the Master had made everyone’s attitudes shift. The other craftsmen’s scorn was now directed at Ping, not Oscar. Even his two cronies were grimacing as they whispered to each other.

Oscar knew he had to defuse the situation before the craftsmen lynched Ping. The current head of the Orcus Workshop was well-respected by everyone, and they wouldn’t stand to see him slandered.

However, before he could do anything—

“Oh, you think I’m going senile, do you? Do you mean to tell me that I, Orcus, have made a mistake, Ping? Someone seems awfully full of themselves.”

“Hiii!?” Ping squealed like a stuck pig.

Orcus’ voice wasn’t particularly angry, but Ping shrunk back anyway. His face was pale with fear. Torpa and Raul looked even worse.

Orcus was a hulking bear of a man. Not only was he massive, but his entire body was covered in thick hair. His thighs were large enough to crush a man’s skull between them.

In fact, he was often mistaken as a bearman warrior from the Haltina Commonwealth, though he was human through and through. He didn’t have bear ears or a tail.

Ping smiled guiltily and tried to smooth over his mistake.

“M-Master... Wh-What are you doing here?”

“It’s my workshop. What’s wrong with me being here?”

“U-Umm, nothing! It’s just, I heard you had business at the palace today.”

Topp Karg D. Orcus, the current head of the Orcus Workshop, harrumphed and peered into Oscar’s box. He didn’t bother to answer Ping’s question.

Then, he plucked something out of it and examined it carefully.

The silence that followed was so oppressive that the other craftsmen stopped

working and waited with bated breath.

Once he finished looking, he glanced back at Ping.

“This was supposed to be your job, Ping... Why is Oscar the one who made it?”

“Th-This is a misunderstanding, Chief. He was spending all his time making junk, so I thought if he was free he could help me a little. I’m still the one who made it.” Ping prostrated himself before Karg.

However, Karg didn’t even bother listening to his reply and turned back to Oscar. Oscar was wearing the same awkward smile as always, and didn’t say anything.

Karg sighed and addressed Ping.

“I see. I suppose that means I can expect this level of quality from your next work as well?”

“Huh? What?”

Karg smirked and showed Ping the object in his hand.

“This armor clasp’s exceptionally well done. It’s pliable in all the right places, so it absorbs impacts well. Also, it’s been crafted in such a way that a Synergist could easily repair it if it broke in battle.”

“I-I see...”

The other craftsmen all turned toward Oscar in surprise. Their expressions were difficult to read.

It was only Ping who failed to grasp the implication behind Karg’s words. He couldn’t understand why everyone was looking at Oscar.

Seeing his confusion, Karg put it more plainly.

“Rather than trying to show off your own skill, you crafted this clasp to perfectly suit the needs of its wielder. It may look plain, but it’s clearly a first-rate clasp. So I’m asking you, Ping, can I expect this kind of high-quality work from you in the future? Well?”

“.....” Cold sweat poured down Ping’s back. Karg was asking for more than he

could possibly deliver. He didn't possess the skills to expertly craft things like that clasp.

"I-I'm honored by your praise, Chief. However, even I'm surprised by how well this turned out. To be honest, uh, I can't say with confidence that I can do it again. Besides, putting so much effort into every one of my projects would slow me down too much..."

"I see. In that case, do your own jobs. Work hard until you're good enough that you can make these kinds of quality goods regularly, instead of wasting your time chatting away."

Karg's glare was so intense that even a dragon would have withered beneath it.

"Hiii!? Y-Yes sir! I'm sorry, sir!" Ping accepted the box Oscar gave him and nearly tripped over himself in his haste to escape. Torpa and Raul hurriedly followed after him. The other craftsmen lost interest in the commotion and returned to their work.

"Umm... Chief? Thanks for helpin—"

"Come to my office." Karg turned on his heel and stalked off. He indicated with nod of his head that he wanted Oscar to follow him.

Sighing, Oscar chased after Karg. His awkward smile still hadn't left his face.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Oscar?" The moment they got into Karg's office, he started yelling at Oscar.

Karg flopped onto the ancient sofa in his room. The springs creaked under his massive bulk.

"I'm not sure what exactly you mean, sir..."

"We're the only ones in here, so spare me the niceties. And wipe that moronic smile off your face. It disgusts me."

"That's pretty mean, old man." Oscar dropped his nice guy act, but he didn't stop smiling. He'd gotten so used to using it to get out of unpleasant situations that he had a hard time dropping the expression.

“I remember you saying before that you’d only cause trouble if you stayed at the workshop. I also distinctly remember telling you to stay anyway. I didn’t work so hard to keep you here so you could spend your time doing that viscount’s idiot son’s work for him.”

“I know. Still, I can finish something like that in between breaks. If that’s all it takes to keep Waress-san quiet, then I don’t mind being his gofer.”

“Fool. Guys like him won’t ever be satisfied. If you give in to them once, they’ll just keep coming back for more. If he’s causing you that much of a problem, then I can have him expelled.”

Ping, Torpa, and Raul had all gotten into the Orcus Workshop because of the connections Ping’s family had. Though all three of them were Synergists, they weren’t at all qualified to be a part of the esteemed Orcus Workshop. Karg had initially let them join only because he didn’t want to deal with insulting a bunch of petty nobles, but—

“I’ll say it as many times as I have to. Oscar, you’re going to be the next generation’s Orcus, so—”

“Gramps.” Oscar’s voice was quiet but firm.

Karg sighed, realizing Oscar still hadn’t changed his mind. Inheriting the name of Orcus meant becoming the leader of the Orcus Workshop.

It was tradition that the current Orcus would pass down his or her title once they found someone who surpassed them in ability.

The fact that Karg wanted Oscar to be the next Orcus meant he accepted Oscar was a more skilled Synergist than him.

“You’re already a better craftsman than me. Hell, you left me in the dust years ago. Your skills are on a completely different level.”

“.....” Oscar wasn’t sure how to reply to that. After all, everything Karg had said was true.

“When I first met you at the Moorin orphanage, I knew you were special. The toys you made for the other kids were far better than some of the best work my workshop’s put out... To be honest, I couldn’t believe it at first.”

Oscar had been dumped in front of the Moorin Orphanage when he was a baby. Though there had been no large-scale wars in the past few decades, small border skirmishes happened on almost a daily basis. The political instability within the human kingdoms exacerbated the problem further. The constant fighting had left the land full of orphans, and many new orphanages had popped up to care for them.

It had reached the point where the country wasn't able to fund them all anymore. Karg had already become the head of the Orcus Workshop when the orphanages started appearing. He'd been a friend of Moorin, so when he'd heard her orphanage was struggling, he decided to help fund it.

The day he'd met Oscar had been like any other. He'd gone to drop off some money at the orphanage and see how Moorin and her kids were doing.

When he'd looked around the orphanage, he'd noticed there were a lot more toys than there had been before.

He'd asked Moorin if she'd gotten another sponsor, and got an answer that he wasn't expecting.

Oscar, who'd just turned ten at the time, had been the one to make all those toys.

Karg had assumed Moorin had found a rich sponsor, so he was shocked to learn that the toys had actually been transmuted by a young boy. The toys were of such masterwork quality that he had been certain she must have bought them.

The building blocks fit together seamlessly. The dolls were so accurately crafted that Karg almost mistook them for real children. The toy swords were perfectly balanced. Even the fake dishes he'd made for the girls to play house with were good enough to cook with.

All of those works of art were created by a ten-year-old boy. Karg couldn't believe it. He brought Oscar over and asked him to do a live demonstration. When Oscar had crafted one of those toys right in front of him, Karg had had no choice but to accept reality. At ten years old, he had already been as skilled as the country's finest Synergists.

When Karg had asked where Oscar had learned his Synergist skills from, this was what he had said:

“When I saw you fix that pot the last time you came, I thought I might be able to do it too, so I just tried.”

Karg had remembered that incident. He had indeed come by a month prior to fix a broken pot. And thinking back on it, Oscar had been watching with keen interest.

Karg froze. He felt a sudden chill, as if someone had just slipped an ice cube down his back.

After watching him transmute just once, he’d mastered it himself? And in just one month? He’d reached the level of a master craftsman through trial and error? If that was true, then how much better could he get given proper instruction? Karg was both excited and terrified at the prospect.

He decided then and there... that he would make Oscar into the next Orcus.

After tutoring him personally for three years, Karg admitted him into the Orcus Workshop.

“It’s been a long time since you first joined the workshop. By all rights, you should have inherited the name of Orcus years ago. But you know, Oscar, I don’t want to force you. I stopped you last time when you said you wanted to quit doing Synergist work, but if you still think this isn’t for you, you’re welcome to leave. Believe it or not, I don’t want to make you suffer.”

“I’m... really grateful to you, Gramps. I know the other craftsmen don’t like me, but there’s nothing I can do about that. I’ve already accepted it. Working here isn’t that bad, really.”

“But still...”

Karg grimaced, but Oscar kept going.

“I like being a Synergist. I get to help everyone in the city with my work, and I can send money back to the orphanage, too... What more could I ask for?”

“Why, Oscar? Why do you hide how talented you really are? If they knew, they’d agree that even the title of Orcus doesn’t do your abilities justice. Is it

that you don’t like making weapons? Or what, you don’t think you’re fit to be a leader? It’s probably both, actually. Still, you know, Oscar, don’t underestimate me. I can tell there’s another reason you don’t want to take the title. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

“.....” Oscar just smiled his usual smile. The smile that said “I’m not going to argue, so just say what you want.”

“I know this might be a bit presumptuous of me, but... I think of you as my own son. I just want you to come into your own and show people what you truly are. But I guess that’s not what you want, is it?”

Oscar had known Karg for a long time, so he understood Karg’s feelings.

Oscar would never admit it to him, but he’d started calling Karg “Gramps” instead of “Karg-san” because he thought of Karg as his real father too.

Honestly, Oscar was happy that Karg had such high expectations for him.

It pained him that he couldn’t tell Karg the real reason why he hid his talents.

But even so—

“Gramps... You said my skills were on a completely different level, but that’s not true.”

“There’s no need to act humble with me. I know how good you really—”

“They’re not on a different level... They’re completely abnormal.”

“.....” Karg fell silent. Oscar’s choice of words had given Karg an inkling of the real reason why Oscar hid his abilities.

He’d never seen Oscar look like this before. He had a dark expression on his face and was looking off into the distance. It was as if he was gazing into the future that awaited him were he to reveal his skills.

Karg knew too, it wouldn’t be as wonderful as he’d described. He didn’t know what he should say, but he knew he had to do something. But before he could, Oscar continued.

“Anyway, I enjoy the work I’m doing now. Don’t pretend like you don’t know. All of the tools and furniture I’ve made have been well-received by the

townspeople. In a way, I'm still helping increase the Orcus Workshop's fame." Oscar spoke cheerfully, trying to dispel the gloom that had settled into the room.

Karg realized this was as far as he'd get with today's conversation and nodded with a sigh.

"Haaah... You're right. Neither the Limster Workshop nor the Vagone Workshop even bother making things for the average citizen. Even though it's their hard work that lets us focus solely on our craft. They're the ones who provide us with the ore we use and the food we eat." The workshops Karg had named were the other two big workshops in Velnika. Both of them only took orders from nobles, royalty, and rich merchants.

As that was what they'd chosen to specialize in, no one could blame them too much. Still, that didn't mean the townspeople liked it. In fact, most of them were quite angry with the other workshops. While everyone else helped each other out, they only looked to make a profit.

On the other hand, the Orcus Workshop had no restrictions on who could place an order. As a matter of principle they were forced to prioritize the nobles' requests, but if there were craftsmen free, they were put on orders from regular citizens. Furthermore, the current Orcus had begun donating the workshop's excess funds to various orphanages.

Most importantly, though, the workshop now had a craftsman whose sole task was to handle the citizens' requests. Because of that, the Orcus Workshop was well-respected among the peasants.

That craftsman was, of course, Oscar. He was known for being fast, skilled, and able to adapt to the needs of any request. Thanks to that, the townspeople often helped out the workshop during crunch times. They'd bring the craftsmen food, sell them raw materials at discounted rates, give them priority for wholesale deals on supplies they were low on, and even bring them spare uniforms and blankets.

Though Oscar's work didn't stand out, he was doing a lot to help the workshop. In fact, it was precisely because it didn't stand out that so few people appreciated it.

“Gramps, I still need to deliver my orders.”

“Alright, alright. My lecture’s over. Go deliver your stuff... Actually, wait. There is one thing.”

“Huh?”

Karg stopped Oscar, suddenly remembering something.

“You’ve heard the reports of people going missing from the less prosperous parts of town in the past few months, right?”

“Yeah, I have.”

“Try and keep an eye on the kids at the orphanage. Most of the people who’ve gone missing were very young. They were all from the slums, so people are saying they likely went off and tried to strike it rich somewhere, only to end up dead in a ditch.”

Karg had a feeling it was much worse than that. His serious warning reflected his foreboding.

“You can take the rest of the day off. Go see how everyone is at the orphanage.”

“That’s what I was planning on doing anyway. I’ll be careful. Alright, see you later, Gramps.” Oscar bowed to Karg and left the room. He felt bad for always making Karg worry about him.

“If you have to keep up that fake smile all the time here, you should just go off and do something you actually like. Dumb kid...” Karg muttered those words to himself, quietly enough that they couldn’t be heard on the other side of the door.

Once he finished delivering the day’s orders, Oscar headed back to the orphanage. It was located on the outskirts of the capital, so it was a long walk from the workshop.

Oscar was already an independent adult, and he had his own place closer to the center of the capital. For him, a trip to the orphanage took quite a bit of time. However, he still considered the orphanage his home. Oscar was just as

worried as Karg about the recent disappearances, and he'd been coming back to the orphanage more often these past few months.

The outskirts of the capital wasn't a very safe place to begin with. Many of the buildings were dilapidated and abandoned. In a word, his orphanage was in the slums.

The orphanage housed a lot of children, so it was bigger than all the surrounding houses. Still, it wasn't in much better shape than any of them. A run-down wooden house like this wouldn't even be allowed to exist in the capital's center.

Fortunately, it was much sturdier than it looked. By the time Oscar arrived it was already evening. The setting sun cast deep shadows among the alleyways.

He stood in front of the building for a few minutes, then circled around to the back.

"Looks like the alarm's working." Oscar placed his hand on the ground as he said that. After a few seconds he took it off. He walked around to every corner of the building and did the same thing. Finally, he closed his eyes and placed his hand against the building itself.

"The strengthening's... holding up pretty well. The barrier and mana accumulator are working just fine, too." Oscar breathed a sigh of relief.

Though his actions seemed random, whatever he had discovered appeared to relieve him.

Pleased that his security measures were working, he walked back up to the entrance and knocked on the door.

Moorin had told him the orphanage would always be his home and that he didn't need to be so formal, but since he'd moved out, he felt it was still better to knock.

"Hmm...?" Normally, one of the kids would have answered the door, but nobody came.

Maybe I knocked too lightly? Oscar tried again.

Still no response. He couldn't even hear the sound of the kids playing.

“Ah!?” Oscar had a very bad feeling about the situation. Something must have happened. To him, the orphanage and the people in it were more important than anything else.

“Mom! Guys!”

Some small, rational part of his mind told him he needed to calm down and assess the situation. However, his body moved on its own. Every second mattered.

He wrenched open the front door and rushed into the living room.

“Dylan! Corrin! Ruth! Katy! Mom! Anyone!” He yelled the kids’ names as he barreled toward the dining room. It was around their usual time for dinner.

His heart lurched when he heard no reply and he practically ripped the dining room door off its hinges. Inside, he found—

“Welcome back, dear~ Would you like dinner, a bath, or... me, Miledi-tan?” A girl he didn’t recognize. She was wearing a frilly apron and looked to be around maybe fourteen or fifteen years old.

Her long blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail, and it almost seemed to defy gravity as it swished back and forth. She had slender legs that were covered by knee-length socks. She had one leg bent back at a cute angle and was standing on one foot. Underneath the apron she wore a sleeveless shirt, and in one hand she carried a cooking ladle. She made a peace sign with her free hand and winked at Oscar.

He could have sworn a star flew off from that wink.



The pose was so perfect that it annoyed him. Faced with this unexpected sight, Oscar reacted the only way he could.

“Sorry, looks like I’ve got the wrong house.” He closed the dining room door and backed away.

I must actually have gotten the wrong house. Haha, maybe I’m tired from working so much.

However, this mysterious and oddly cheerful girl had no intention of letting Oscar escape.

“Wait, don’t just leave! I can’t believe you closed the door on me! An extremely beautiful girl just offered herself to you, so shouldn’t you be moved to tears right now! I know you want to gaze upon these perfect legs! There’s just the right amount of skin showing between my skirt and my kneesocks. I know you can’t resist them. We both know you’re a huge pervert, O-kun!”

Oh, just shut up. Quit acting like we’re best friends when I don’t even know you. Besides, you’re obviously crazy.

In a second, Oscar had already made his judgment on what kind of person this girl was.

He adjusted his glasses and spoke as calmly as he could.

“You said your name was Miledi, right? It seems you’ve wandered into the wrong house. It’s getting late. Surely you should be getting back to your own home. On the off chance you came here on purpose, that would mean you’re trespassing. In Velka, trespassing is a serious crime. If you don’t leave within the next three seconds, I’ll have to arrest you.” Oscar grinned as he shot Miledi a thinly-veiled threat.

“That’s not a thinly-veiled threat at all! You obviously want me gone! How mean! I’ll have you know it was my destiny to meet you, O-kun—”

“Alright, your three seconds are up. Put your hands in the air.”

Oscar pulled a small object out of his pocket. It was a transceiver. Its range was limited to the capital, but it was still a valuable piece of equipment that usually only nobles were rich enough to afford. Naturally, he’d made this one

himself.

The girl recognized it as well, and she began to panic. Just then, a bunch of kids jumped to her defense.

“Waaaaaaaaah! Onii-san, wait!”

“She’s not a suspiciou— Okay, she’s pretty suspicious, but she’s our guest!”

“Onii-chan, please forgive her. I’ll apologize too! I’m sorry she’s so annoying.”

“I’m innocent, Onii! It’s all that noisy lady’s fault!”

Children crawled out of various hiding places within the dining room. The reason Oscar had been able to handle Miledi so calmly was because he’d spotted the kids peeking out of their hiding places when she had opened the door again.

“H-Hearing them insult me so nonchalantly kind of hurts...” Miledi muttered and sunk to the floor. Oscar sighed and turned to an older lady who had just walked into the dining room.

“I can’t believe even you were in on this, Mom...”

“I’m sorry. But Miledi-san seemed so excited about playing this prank. And I’ve never seen you surprised by anything, so I thought it’d be fun.”

“Fun, huh...? Well, it wasn’t very fun for me. I was really worried about you guys.” Oscar sighed again.

Moorin, the orphanage manager and everyone’s surrogate mother, smiled at him. She was nearing her seventies, but she barely looked a day over thirty when she smiled.

Once everyone had settled down, Oscar sat down with the kids for dinner. The girl, who’d said her name was Miledi, joined them too. It appeared she’d come here because she had business with Oscar. Oscar had asked her what she came for, but apparently it was a long story, so at Moorin’s suggestion they’d decided to have dinner first.

The refined way in which she ate suggested that Miledi was of noble upbringing. The two seven-year-old girls who were sitting next to her, Corrin

and Katy, began whispering to each other.

They both blushed, glanced at Oscar, then squealed at each other. He doubted they were saying anything nice about him. He glared suspiciously at Miledi, but she only smiled at him.

God, she's annoying. Oscar desperately wanted to say that to her face. But he didn't. He didn't want to set a bad example for his cute little sisters.

Corrin had tied her red hair back into a ponytail in the same style as Oscar's. Out of all of the children in the orphanage, she was the shyest. Her puppy dog look could also make instant slaves out of anyone who wasn't part of her family. They were already used to it.

Katy, on the other hand, kept her chestnut brown hair in pigtails and was the most distrustful of all the children. Aside from Oscar and the other children in the orphanage, she didn't trust anyone.

The fact that those two girls were willing to relax around her meant that while she might have been annoying, and perhaps a little touched in the head, she wasn't a bad person.

Because of that, Oscar didn't think it would be right to insult her.

"I see, I see. So O-kun's a kind and reliable big brother."

"Y-Yep! Onii-chan can do anything!" Corrin smiled and proudly puffed out her chest. Oscar smiled in return.

Miledi grinned. Oscar frowned in return.

The children forgot about their food and began explaining to Miledi just how amazing Oscar was.

"That's right, Miledi-san. All the toys and stuff in the house were made by Onii-san. And he made them all when he was my age!"

The oldest kid in the orphanage, Dylan, boasted about Oscar's accomplishments. He was the mediator between all of the other kids. Like Corrin, he had his brown hair up in the same kind of ponytail Oscar had.

"Did you know? Onii works at the Orcus Workshop! The chief guy said he wanted him! Isn't that amazing!?" Katy's eyes sparkled as she spoke.

“Onii-chan gave us all something to show that we’re related.” Corrin held out the small coin dangling from her neck. The other children all pulled out their coins as well. They didn’t look valuable at all, so no one would even bother stealing them.

Still, Miledi didn’t make fun of them for treasuring those coins.

“Wow, you guys are all really close, huh!?” She seemed honestly impressed. The kids all smiled proudly and continued regaling Miledi with tales of Oscar’s awesomeness.

“G-Guys. Come on, give it a re—” Embarrassed, Oscar tried to get them to stop. Before he could, however, Miledi cut in.

“Tell me more, Onii-chan! I want to hear about how wonderful you are, Onii-chan! I knew I was right to pick you, Onii-chan! Don’t you think so too, Onii-chan? Hey, Onii-ch—”

“Call me Onii-chan one more time and I will end you.” Though he was smiling, there was murder in Oscar’s eyes. He’d tried to act civil so as to set a good example for his little siblings, but he couldn’t take it any longer.

“Oh my, you’ve got a surprisingly wild side to you, O-kun...” For some reason, Miledi was blushing.

“Please don’t call me O-kun, either.” He managed to reign in his emotions and sound calm again. He didn’t want to act rude in front of his family, after all. Though internally, he still thought *Call me O-kun one more time and I’ll strangle you.*

Miledi stared at him for a moment before responding.

“Don’t wanna!” she exclaimed, a smile on her face all the while.

There was a loud crack as Oscar snapped the fork he was holding.

Dylan and the others turned to look at Oscar’s hand. By the time they did, it looked as good as new.

He’d repaired it with his transmutation. The children tilted their head in confusion.

“Wow, that was amazing! I’ve never seen anything like it!” Oscar had even

gone so far as to hide the glow of his mana to repair it in secret, but Miledi just had to go and blow his cover.

A cold voice that sounded more irritated than Oscar felt punctured the silence that followed.

“Aren’t you just a loser right now?” Dylan and the others turned around in surprise.

The person who’d spoken was Ruth. He was looking down at his plate. Ruth had spiky black hair, and had recently turned eleven.

“Hey, Ruth!” Dylan yelled at Ruth. However, Ruth looked up from his plate and glared at Dylan.

“It’s the truth! Even though he works at the Orcus Workshop he doesn’t make any weapons. He’s just a loser who only takes requests from regular citizens! Everyone knows it!” Ruth pointedly avoided looking at Oscar.

Like Oscar, Ruth was a Synergist.

Among the orphans, he was the one who had looked up to Oscar the most. When Oscar had still lived at the orphanage, Ruth had followed him around everywhere. They both had the same striking black hair, and people had often thought them to be actual siblings.

“Ruth, apologize to Oscar. That was uncalled for.” Moorin had been smiling the whole time until now, but Ruth’s words made her frown. Her tone was soft, but firm.

Ruth hesitated for a second, but then he stubbornly repeated himself.

“But it’s true! If he’s not a loser, then he should show it to everyone! If he showed them how strong he really was, then all those dumb people would shut up, but he doesn’t do anything! And you know what, it’s because he can’t! He just grins like an idiot all the time and doesn’t say anything! He’s just a weakling who doesn’t want to fight back!” It was like a dam had burst inside him. Once the words started flowing out, he couldn’t stop.

It had felt like a betrayal, seeing the man he’d idolized so much end up like this.

Oscar understood that as well, so he didn't say anything. He just smiled his usual smile. If he really was that great, he should show it. If he wasn't, then it'd just hurt Ruth even more.

Ruth had wanted Oscar to argue back, to say it wasn't true. Instead he got Oscar's smile, which only annoyed him further. Ruth stood up, unable to bear staying in the room any longer.

"That's not true!" A cheery voice stopped him.

"You think O-kun's amazing too, don't you, Ruth-kun? I can tell."

"I-I do not!"

"Yes you do~ My special Miledi eyes can see through everything! I know exaaactly how you feel~ You actually think O-kun's amazing, I know!" Miledi said smugly.

Everyone stared at Miledi in surprise, even Oscar. Her tone was as cheerful as always, but her words had a strange weight to them.

"This is why I wanted to see O-kun. I've spent so long searching for someone like you." She turned to face Oscar, her gaze piercing through him.

She spoke again, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I've finally found you." She closed her eyes and smiled.

She looked sincerely happy that she'd been able to meet him.

Oscar felt his heart skip a beat. *What on earth does she even know about me?*

Yes, surely his heart must have skipped a beat because he was worried how she knew so much about him. Definitely not for any other reason. At least, that was what Oscar kept telling himself. He adjusted his glasses to hide his expression.

Unfortunately for him, Miledi's eyes really could see through everything.

"Oh my, doth mine eyes deceive me? O-kun, did your heart just skip a beat? Was my smile that captivating? Well, was it? Come on, say it~"

"Shut up, you're annoying." At that moment at least, that was how he truly felt.

Miledi and Oscar's exchange dispelled the strained mood that had fallen over the dining table and everyone returned to their dinner.

Even Ruth sat back down and returned to staring sullenly at his plate.

However, Miledi's words still swirled around in the back of Oscar's mind.

He didn't know what she'd come to him for, but he could tell it was extremely important to her.

Her declaration had almost sounded like a profession of love. Corrin and Katy certainly seemed to think that was what it had been, at least. They kept on looking back and forth between Miledi and Oscar.

"Ahem... Miledi-san, now that everyone's eaten, I think it's time you tell us why you've come."

"Come on, don't be so formal. We're friends, right, O-kun? You don't have to act so distant!"

"What do you mean, friends? I just met you today. More importantly, why—"

"Not telling! Not unless you call me Miledi-tan. And put some feeling behind it, okay?"

"H-Haha... You're an interesting one. Anyway, enough with the jokes—" Oscar's patience was running out. Sadly, Miledi didn't seem to care.

"Wait, don't tell me the reason you're being so cold to me is because... you already have someone you promised your heart to!?"

"What!?"

"I see... I understand now. My superior intelligence has deduced the truth. I should have expected O-kun would want to make Corrin-chan and Katy-chan his wives!"

"If you don't shut up, I'll sew your big mouth shut for you." Unable to contain himself anymore, Oscar lashed out at Miledi. At the same time, Corrin and Katy gasped.

He turned and saw Corrin was blushing furiously. Katy, on the other hand, wouldn't meet his gaze.

“Onii-chan, do you really want to marry me?”

“W-Well, I don’t want to marry him! B-But if Onii insisted, then maybe...”

They’d taken Miledi’s words seriously. Meanwhile, his brothers looked at him in disgust.

“Onii-san, I respect you, but this is a little too much...”

“Tch... I should have known the loser was a pervert too.”

They’d taken Miledi’s words seriously as well. Dylan and Ruth edged away from him.

Then, Miledi delivered the finishing blow.

“Oh, O-kun... you’re such a pedo!”

Oscar adjusted his glasses again, losing control of his temper entirely.

“That’s it. You’re coming with me, you fucking bitch!”

Oscar grabbed Miledi by the collar and started dragging her outside.

The moon’s pale light shone through the gaps in the clouds. Oscar and Miledi stared at each other in the orphanage’s backyard, underneath the beautiful half-moon that would surely become a crucial part of the memory of their first meeting...

Though Oscar had tossed her out of the door, she’d seemingly ignored gravity and lightly landed on her feet.

“O-kun, you monster! I can’t believe you’d throw someone out of your house like that! You’re not human!”

“Says the girl who just ignored gravity.”

Oscar sighed. He knew that if he let himself be led along by this girl their conversation would never get anywhere. He glared sharply at Miledi, displaying a grim expression that he’d never shown to the kids.

“So what do you really want with me? I played along with your dumb game. It’s about time you came clean.”

Throughout the meal, Oscar had worried she might try to take the kids hostage.

Moorin and the kids had both taken a liking to her, which meant she probably wasn't someone evil.

However, she knew things she shouldn't. She claimed she'd come to meet Oscar, but instead of going to his house she'd headed straight for the orphanage.

Intentionally or not, she'd basically said "I can get to your family any time I want to."

And that was why he'd changed tactics.

If the kids had been wrong about her and she *did* mean them harm, then he'd eliminate her without a second thought.

"Don't glare at me like that~ Didn't anyone ever teach you to treat girls nicely?"

"....." Oscar's only response was to glare harder. He didn't look anything like the loser everyone thought him to be.

"Ahaha, I guess I should probably get serious, huh? Anyway, sorry about that. I didn't mean to cause a misunderstanding. Look, I promise I don't want to hurt your family. I mean it. I don't lie."

Oscar had a hard time believing that, but he nodded anyway.

"The reason I came to meet your family first was because I wanted to learn more about you, O-kun. I went around asking the townspeople about you too."

"So it's not like you knew about this place beforehand?"

"I came here on a wild goose chase, really. I'd been told that there was a genius orphan somewhere. I visited so many different countries, checking all the orphanages I could find. I was searching for a genius. Though now that I think about it, there was no guarantee the genius orphan had to be a kid."

Oscar nodded in understanding.

Even when she'd been joking around, Miledi's gestures had been refined.

He'd guessed that she'd grown up in a noble family, or as the servants of one. Her story further cemented that assumption. It had become somewhat of a fad among nobles to seek out highly talented individuals and bring them into their household.

Miledi turned around and looked up at the moon. After a few seconds, she glanced back at Oscar over her shoulder.

"It was only after I talked to those kids that I learned about your abilities."

Oscar narrowed his eyes. There was a dangerous glint in them.

"My abilities? I'm just a failure of a Synergist who can only make household goods."

"Ahaha, you're such a jester, O-kun. No failure could make those magic items of yours. In fact, it's so good that you might as well call it an artifact."

Oscar's eyes opened wide in surprise. He'd expected Miledi to have heard the rumors about how he'd been a prodigy or that he was secretly hiding his talents, and that was why she thought he was skilled.

To think she'd figured out what the alarms I set around this house really are... Oscar eyed her warily.

"Seriously, quit glaring at me like that! I'm standing here even knowing what it can do, so can't you trust me a little?"

"Well..."

The traps Oscar had set around the orphanage were lethal. With one word, he could engulf his target in a hail of lightning, wind, ice, and fire.

Furthermore, once it had expelled the intruders it would deploy a five-layer barrier and start ringing a loud alarm.

If the intruders somehow managed to get past his barrier, his trap would resummon it. On top of that, all entrances to the building had been reinforced with the hardest material Oscar could find.

It looked run-down at first glance, but Oscar had transformed the house into a fortress with walls harder than steel.

Any attempt to break the walls would result in a lightning counterattack as well. Oscar had transformed them all into reactive armor.

This was the real extent of Oscar's skills. He wasn't just a genius Synergist, he could imbue magic into ore. Create artifacts, in other words.

He could use magic from the age of the gods. The magic that, according to legend, the gods had used when they still walked the earth. The only people who could use it now were Atavists, who had inherited the gods' blood.

There was a reason he'd told Karg his abilities were abnormal. On top of everything else, he could freely control his own mana, and didn't need magic circles or chants to use magic. The things master craftsmen took years to accomplish were mere child's play to Oscar. That was how huge the difference was between his abilities and normal people's.

"Honestly, this orphanage is better defended than even the royal palace. No simple Synergist could have made an artifact-class defense mechanism." Miledi had seen through it all somehow. Oscar really couldn't let his guard down around her. There was more to her than her frivolous attitude suggested.

"If you think I can't be trusted, why not activate your fortress and kick me out? But unless you do, I won't leave until you hear me out."

Ah, now I get it. Oscar seemed to have come to a realization.

Miledi really didn't seem to have any shady ulterior motives. She'd found this place by coincidence. However, she'd been amazed at the defenses it had, so she'd asked around about who lived here. From that she'd learned about Oscar, and then decided to wait here until he showed up.

Here, where Oscar had access to his most powerful weapons.

She'd let him haul her to the backyard, but she hadn't left, which would have proved she was at his mercy.

"Why don't you try and act serious, then? That stupid attitude of yours makes you hard to trust." Oscar relaxed slightly. He let the tension drop from his shoulders and stopped glaring.

"I have no idea what you're talking about~ I'm just your ordinary, cheerful,

happy, beautiful girl~" She winked at him again, making the same cliched pose as last time. It annoyed the hell out of Oscar.

It was a wonder anyone could combine frivolity and earnestness the way she did. It seemed he'd caught the eye of a very odd woman. He had a headache just from dealing with her.

"Okay, so what is it you wanted to talk about? Let me guess, you want me to make an artifact for you."

"Nope, you're totally off~ It's up to you if you want to make anything for me. Wait, don't tell me you get off from being ordered around by women? Sorry, I'm not really into that kind of thing..."

"Thunder Snake."

"Abababababababababa!?" Miledi spasmed as Oscar hit her with one of the orphanage's anti-intruder countermeasures. The one he'd activated summoned snake-like electrified wires from underground that wrapped themselves around Miledi.

As the electricity faded, Miledi slumped to the ground.

Oscar adjusted his glasses, then looked down at her.

"I'm not a pervert!" He yelled at her.

"F-First you attack me, now you're yelling at me... Even I didn't expect that..."

Trembling, Miledi rose back to her feet. Plumes of smoke were rising from her clothes.

"Can you say two sentences without having to stick a joke in between them?"

"It's one of the best things about me, I can't just stop. Won't you please accept me for who I am, O-kun?"

Oscar just silently glared at her. After a few seconds of sulking, she straightened up and adopted a serious attitude. Oscar's heart skipped a beat again, and he inwardly cursed at himself.

"I have only one goal. Oscar-kun, I want you."

"You... want me? What do you mean?"

It can’t possibly mean what I think it does, can it?

Miledi looked back up at the moon.

“Have you ever thought... there was something wrong with this world?”

“Ah...” Oscar fell silent. He couldn’t formulate a reply.

“Well, O-kun? You’re a Synergist that’s clearly on a different level than all the others. If you showed the world your skills, you’d probably become the most famous person alive. In fact, you’d probably be remembered by history as a hero. Yet you stubbornly hide your abilities. What is it you’re so scared of?”

Isn’t it obvious? If I did that, all the important people in the world would seek me out.

Sure, he might receive fame and glory. Hell, he might even leave his name in history. But he’d no longer be free. And more than anything—

“Is it the Elbard Theocracy and the church that backs them that you’re afraid of?”

“I should have known you’d figured it out. You know what my abilities are, after all.” Oscar smiled wryly.

Yes, Oscar was afraid of losing his freedom. But even more than that, he was afraid of the church.

The Holy Church of Ehit... They followed a doctrine that stated humans were above all other species, and preached that humans should reign supreme. Almost all the humans on the continent were followers.

Those who were discovered to have the power to use magic from the age of the gods, or special magic that only monsters could use, were considered to be god’s descendents and taken under its protection.

By force, if necessary. Oscar would suffer the same fate if he revealed his talents.

The Holy Church was as powerful as an entire kingdom. In fact, the leader of the Elbard Theocracy was the Holy Church’s Pope. Alone, Oscar would never be able to escape their grasp. Even if he could, there was no telling what they would do to his family.

Miledi gave Oscar a knowing smile.

“Escaping from the Holy Church wouldn’t be easy. No matter where you go, they’re around. In every kingdom, in every village, their taint can be seen.” She practically spat out those last few words.

“Of course you’re scared. I mean, think about it. They’re supposed to be in control of just one country. But look, wherever you go, there are temples all around. Every country takes them in, and they even let them dictate national policy.”

“H-Hey, You can’t just say that out—” Oscar nervously looked around.

Insulting the Holy Church was tantamount to suicide. If anyone had heard Miledi say that, she would have been executed without question.

But Miledi didn’t stop.

“Even when countries are at war, if the Holy Church says something they stop right away. And when there’s peace, a word from them can start a war. We’re too worried about being branded heretics to do what’s right, or even what’s legal. We’re taught that Ehit’s will is supreme and things like love and justice are secondary. In fact, they may as well not matter at all.”

“M-Miledi...kun...”

Miledi turned back to Oscar, her bright blue eyes looking directly at his own. There was a clarity in them, mirroring her own unwavering resolve. Oscar inadvertently gulped.

She gazed at him for a few seconds, then smiled.

“O-kun. You must have realized how twisted this world is. More so than the kings of this world, you fear the so-called righteous Holy Church. That’s why you hid yourself. So that they wouldn’t hurt your family in an attempt to get to you.”

Normally when someone insulted the Holy Church they were instantly decried as a heretic. The reason for that was because if you didn’t, you too would be considered a heretic. Unless you were particularly close to the blasphemer, you had every reason to turn them in.

But Oscar didn’t call her out. Shaken as he was, he didn’t want to stop Miledi. Because she’d said the things Oscar had always thought, but never had the courage to say.

Miledi was overjoyed to finally have met someone who wasn’t a blind believer in Ehit. Emboldened by Oscar’s silence, she continued.

“I belong to a certain organization.”

“Organization?”

“Yes. A world where people live by the law, and by their own morals. A world of order and justice. A world where everyone is free to speak out against injustice. Where people come together to discuss what’s right. Where different opinions and ideas are valued instead of suppressed. A world where people can be free. That’s our organization’s goal.”

“Are you planning on starting a new religion or something?” Oscar only just managed to keep a look of incredulity off his face. He congratulated himself for keeping enough composure to retort with a joke.

Still, her words had shook him to the core. The ideals Miledi’s organization espoused meant that they were basically rebels. A gathering of heretics who denounced the Holy Church’s rule.

This was no joke. She was inviting him to an organization that had effectively made humanity its enemy.

“Do you think we’re a gathering of crackpot terrorists or something... Ahaha, well, I guess you’re not entirely wrong.”

“Please leave.” Oscar responded to Miledi’s lighthearted comment with a flat refusal.

“Sorry, but my answer is no. I promise I won’t tell anyone about this, so please don’t ever come close to me or my family again.”

He spoke quietly, but his expression was dead serious.

Miledi stared at Oscar for a few seconds before quietly replying.

“I see...” She turned on her heel and walked away. Her retreating figure seemed exceptionally small to Oscar.

It was hard to imagine a little girl like her was fighting against the world. *What on earth drove her to make such a suicidal choice? Maybe she's just crazy...* It would be easier for Oscar if that were the case.

That way he could convince himself her words hadn't moved him.

"Oh yeah, could you tell everyone the food was delicious?"

"I will."

Miledi glanced back and smiled at Oscar. Then, without another word, she vanished into the darkness of the night.

It was as if she were nothing more than a spirit.

Oscar clenched his teeth, only just keeping himself from saying something.

They'd never see each other again. *And that's for the best,* he kept telling himself.

The next day...

Miledi showed up at Oscar's workplace.

"Hello, good citizens of the Orcus Workshop! I'm the world renowned idol, Miledi! Where's my cute little O-kun?"

A number of hard-faced craftsmen stared in confusion at the girl who'd just shown up at the back entrance. It seemed she'd forgotten her manners in the womb as Miledi brazenly strode past the confused craftsmen without so much as an "excuse me."

"Wow, I should have expected one of Velka's big three workshops to be this amazing. The country is known for its technology after all. There are master craftsmen everywhere~" Miledi exclaimed in wonder as she looked around the workshop.

At the back of the workshop, Oscar was struck dumb. He'd expected never to see Miledi again. Wanting to avoid being seen, he quickly hid himself.

He was glad there'd been enough orders today that he could hide behind his pile of finished work.

Wh-Wh-What on earth is she doing here!? He adjusted his glasses repeatedly.

The craftsmen looked at each other, wondering who this girl was.

Though she was grinning like a fool, her expensive clothes marked her as a noble, or at least someone rich. Normally, anyone who barged into the workshop like this would be thrown out, but Miledi was so blatant about it that the craftsmen hesitated.

Especially since if she was some noble's daughter, then they couldn't afford to be rude to her.

Just as someone ran off to get the chief, a young man stepped forward. Though he was a noble himself, he wrung his hands like a groveling merchant. Ping was never one to let slip an opportunity to make important connections. He smiled as flatteringly as he could.

"Miss, what is it you need? Perhaps I could be of assistance. Ah, excuse me for not introducing myself sooner. I'm Ping Waress, son of Viscount Waress."

"...Hi! I'm Miledi." Miledi observed Ping carefully for a few seconds, but then broke out into a smile again and introduced herself.

The onlookers could easily tell that this smile was fake, however.

"Miledi, was it? A beautiful name to suit a beautiful person such as yourself. Pardon me for asking, but which family do you hail—"

"Does that really matter?" Miledi was still smiling, but her eyes were cold. Even an idiot noble like Ping got the message.

Ping hurriedly tried to smooth things over and regain her favor.

If she could take that kind of attitude with Ping, a viscount's son, then she must have been a very important noble indeed. Or at least, that was what Ping thought.

"Oh no, not at all. My apologies. Truly, forgive me. Regardless, what is it you needed? I guarantee you that I, heir to the Waress family, can fulfill any order you care to place!" Even then, he still tried to sell his family's name. Torpa and Raul hurried over to Miledi as well, hoping to get into her good graces.

However, before they could reach her, Miledi dropped a bomb on Ping.

“Is O-kun, I mean, Oscar-kun here? I came here to see him...”

“Huh? O-Oscar?” Ping’s eyes widened. Torpa and Raul stopped in their tracks. Even the craftsmen stopped working.

Oscar groaned to himself. *You idiot! My position in this workshop’s already bad enough and now you’ve made it ten times worse!* The other craftsmen couldn’t believe a noble lady would be asking after the least skilled member of the workshop. Even more surprisingly, she’d called him by a nickname.

Everyone turned to look at Oscar’s cubicle.

“Pardon me again for my forwardness, but what business do you have with Oscar? You may not know this, but his skills are, well, lacking... There are many other more skilled craftsmen who would be happy to fulfill your order.”

“Hm? I just wanted to see how O-kun works. I don’t really need anything. Oh, is that where he works? Thanks, Pinwa-san~”

“Umm, my name is Ping War--”

Before he could correct her, Miledi dashed off to Oscar’s workplace. She’d followed the other craftsmen’s gazes to figure out where it was.

Meanwhile, Ping just stood there, dumbfounded.

A high ranking noble lady had come to the Orcus Workshop just to see Oscar work.

She soon spotted Oscar hiding behind his pile of boxes and bounded over to him.

“Ah, there you are, O-kun! It’s me, Miledi-chan! I haven’t seen you since last night!”

Oh great, this is going to cause even more misunderstandings. Oscar’s expression stiffened.

The other craftsmen started muttering to each other about how Oscar had slept with a noble girl.

Ping glared at Oscar, his eyes burning with jealousy and hatred. He rushed over to Miledi and Oscar, trying to act polite as he warned her away from Oscar.

“Miss Miledi. Though he may be a member of the Orcus Workshop, as I said earlier, he’s just a third-rate Synergist. He’s only allowed to work here because the chief took pity on him. Moreover, he’s an orphan. He has no manners and no education. Don’t you think someone as distinguished as yourself should be more careful about choosing the company she keeps? At the very least, I don’t think he is deserving of—”

“Oh, you’re still here, Piress-san? I’m good now, so you can go back to work... Or is it that you don’t have any work to be doing?”

“Pfft...!” A few of the craftsmen couldn’t hold back their laughter. Miledi had been spot-on.

Regardless of whether she’d intended to insult him or had just made a careless comment, she’d hit Ping where it hurt. He blushed in embarrassment, and his fake smile cracked.

“My apologies, but—”

“Umm, Miledi-san! I finished the thing you ordered from me last night. In fact, I was just about to go deliver it right now! Why don’t you join me! And thank you so much for your patronage! I hope you come back to the Orcus Workshop if you need anything else!” Oscar hurriedly cut Ping off.

He wanted to stop this before it turned into a fight. He also emphasized that it was work she’d come to him for to dispel any potential misunderstandings.

Unfortunately, it seemed Miledi didn’t get the hint.

“Huh? Ordered? But O-kun, I didn’t—”

“Come, let’s go!” Oscar loaded his cart with inhuman speed and glared pointedly at Miledi. He was grinning, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes.

Miledi broke out into a cold sweat.

“Crap, I may have gone too far...” she muttered to herself as she followed behind Oscar.

Naturally, his crappy acting did nothing to dispel the suspicions people had.

The craftsmen turned to gossip with one another. No one noticed Ping, who was glaring venomously at Oscar.

“Hey, hey, O-kun. O-kuuun. Stop ignoring me~ Hey, listen to me~”

“.....” Oscar silently trotted down the street, pulling his cart laden with work orders behind him.

Miledi followed behind him, occasionally waving a hand in front of his face to try and get his attention.

As Oscar was the only craftsman who took orders from ordinary citizens, he was pretty well known in the area. People recognized his trademark cart, and often they’d stop and chat for a bit when he passed by.

However, no one greeted him this time around. Despite the fact that he was drawing more attention than usual.

There were two reasons for that. The first was the strange girl bouncing around Oscar. The second was the grim expression on Oscar’s face.

It was doubly frightening because none of them had ever seen Oscar without his customary smile, yet the girl following him wasn’t perturbed at all.

“You mad? Like, really mad? Did you really not want me to come see you at the workshop? Hey, hey, O-kun. All the guys think you’re going out with me now! Things are gonna be pretty rough for you working there! But don’t worry, I’m a responsible young woman! I’ll head back with you and tell everyone what’s really going on! I’ll let them know all I’m actually after is you!”

“Are you trying to ruin my reputation for good!?” Oscar suddenly came to a halt, then smacked Miledi, who’d poked her head out from behind him, on the head.

For some reason, that made her happy. Her ponytail swung happily from side to side, mirroring her emotions.

“Yay. You finally responded, O-kun.”

“Because I realized ignoring you only makes you more annoying. Sheesh, you’re like a walking disaster, you know that?”

“Ehehe, you’re making me blush.”

“That wasn’t a compliment. Seriously, would it kill you to act like a normal person for even five seconds?” Oscar tiredly rubbed his temples.

Miledi was right, going back to the workshop now wouldn’t be pleasant. He wondered if his half-assed acting had done anything to stop the rumors. Probably not.

He knew he’d have to keep this walking incarnation of chaos away from the workshop if he didn’t want them getting any worse, too.

“O-kun, what’s wrong? You look like someone who just got fired.”

“And who’s fault do you think that is? I’m begging you, at least realize what it is you’re doing. Anyway, you broke your promise. I thought you were a more sincere person than that, but I guess I misjudged you.” Oscar started walking again.

“Excuse me! I *always* keep my promises!”

“Not this one. You said last night that you wouldn’t ever come near me or my fami—” Oscar cut his words short, realizing something. When he’d asked her that, all Miledi had said was...

“All I said was ‘I see...’ I didn’t say anything else. You just assumed~”

In other words, she’d just acknowledged that was what Oscar had wanted. She hadn’t actually promised to do anything.

“I-I can’t believe you.” Oscar ground his teeth in frustration. He knew it was his own fault for not squeezing an actual promise out of Miledi, but that didn’t make him any less mad. Especially because she was just rubbing it in now. Still, if he let his emotions get the better of him it’d be over. Oscar adjusted his glasses and did his best to wrest his emotions under control.

“Then I’ll ask you once more. Please don’t ever come near me or my family again. As things are right now, your ideals are too dangerous. Please. Don’t get me, or the people I love, involved.”

Miledi ran up in front of Oscar. She turned to face him and continued walking backward, hands behind her back.

“My ideals aren’t the real danger here. It’s this world. Please, O-kun, don’t

avert your eyes from the truth. Even without me telling you, you already knew how twisted and unfair this world was, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but that's no reason to bring its wrath crashing down on my head. At the very least, we're living in peace right now. As long as I live quietly and don't stand out, there won't be any problems."

"You really are a loser, O-kun."

"No I'm not. I'm just realistic. Anyway, will you please—"

"Absolutely not!"

"Want me to turn you over to the inquisitors?" Oscar's eyebrow twitched dangerously, but Miledi just smiled and let out a scream.

"Nooo! Don't abandon me, O-kun! I'll do anything for you!"

"Damn you, Miledi! You purposely screamed that in a street full of people!" Oscar finally lost his calm as Miledi clung to him and started begging.

Many of the onlooking housewives shook their heads sadly. "Oh my, I can't believe Oscar-kun would make a girl cry. What a brute," one of them said. The other pedestrians, too, were hanging on to every word.

The street's attention was focused on Oscar and Miledi. At this rate, the inquisitors would come for him first.

"Fuck," Oscar muttered, as he dragged Miledi away.

"How long are you planning on following me?"

"Until you agree to join me, I guess?"

"Then you'll be following me for the rest of your life... Anyway, I need to deliver these orders to my customers. Can you at least promise you won't say anything misleading to them? Or rather, can you promise you won't say anything at all? If not, I really will turn you over to the inquisitors."

"Okaaaaaay! Hehe..."

Despite Oscar's cold attitude, Miledi seemed happy. He glared at her suspiciously.

“Is it really that fun watching my reactions?”

“Not really? I was just thinking that even though you keep saying I’m dangerous and that you don’t want to be seen near me, you’re not actually reporting me to the inquisitors.”

“Don’t mistake it for goodwill. I just don’t want to have to deal with the trouble that will come with reporting you. I still wish you’d go away.”

“Hmm...” Miledi smiled, her expression making it clear she didn’t believe Oscar. Oscar shook his head and tried his best to ignore her.

That lasted all of a second.

“Hey, O-kun. Last night, when I was leaving, were you thinking of saying something to me?”

“Wh-What?” Oscar was taken aback. He hadn’t expected her to see through even that. But even though this was a perfect opportunity for her to tease him further, her expression was serious.

Because of her usual frivolity, the moments she was serious stood out even more. Oscar found himself being drawn into her piercing, bottomless gaze.

“I won’t leave until you tell me what it was you were going to say.”

“There wasn’t anything. Maybe I might have said ‘Hurry up and get out of my sight’ or something, but that’s all.”

He pulled himself away from those eyes with some difficulty, then gave a scathing reply.

“I see,” was all she said in return. After that, she returned to her usual, cheerful persona.

“Hey, hey, O-kun. What kind of things are you delivering?”

“We’re almost to my first customer. The owner of that restaurant over there ordered dishes.”

Miledi nodded and peeked curiously into the boxes inside Oscar’s cart. Oscar once again reminded Miledi not to say anything misleading before knocking on the restaurant’s backdoor.

A well-built woman answered the door.

“Oh my, if it isn’t Oscar. Welcome! If you’re knocking at the back entrance, then it must mean you have a delivery.”

“Yep. Here you go, Daisy-san. I brought the butcher’s knives and frying pan you asked for. Are the goods to your satisfaction?”

Oscar handed over the box filled with cookware to Daisy. She looked inside the box and nodded in approval.

“As always, you work fast. I asked for these the day before yesterday and you’re already finished. Thank you so... hm? Who’s this?”

Daisy looked at Miledi, who was poking out from behind Oscar, curiously.

Oscar cursed inwardly. He put on his best fake smile and quickly came up with a good cover story. Before he could say anything, though, Miledi opened her mouth.

“Hello! I’m O-kun’s friend, Miledi! I’m here today to see what his work’s like.” Oscar let out a sigh of relief when he heard Miledi give a proper introduction. He tried to signal Miledi to leave, but Daisy’s interest was piqued now.

“Oh my, I never knew Oscar had such cute friends. How long have you two known each other?”

“Since yesterday! When I first met O-kun, I felt, like, a spark. You know what I mean, Miss?”

“Oh, but of course! When I first met my husband, I felt like I’d been struck by lightning! I see now, so that’s how it is. Good for you, Oscar. We were all worried about you. You’re handsome and great at your job, but you’ve never even flirted with a girl before. Me and the other housewives were starting to think I should try and set you up with my daughter if you didn’t find anyone soon!” Oscar knew girls got friendly with each other easily, but he hadn’t expected Daisy and Miledi to hit it off so well so quickly. They kept on talking, mostly saying embarrassing things about Oscar.

It got more and more awkward for him by the minute. He wished he could crawl in a hole somewhere and die.

The housewives' rumor mill was something to be feared. He didn't have time to spare thinking about their secret meetings where they discussed finding him a wife though, as he had to do something about Miledi not-so-subtly hinting that she was trying to marry him herself.

The only saving grace to this situation was that Daisy was unlikely to guess the truth. Namely that Miledi had meant "I thought this guy would be perfect for my anarchist society" when she'd said she'd felt a spark upon meeting him.

"Daisy-san! Sorry for interrupting, but can I explain what my goods do yet?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. Sorry, Oscar. I got a little carried away there. She's a really nice girl, though. You treat her well, you hear?"

Oscar replied with his usual smile. He could see Miledi grinning out of the corner of his eye, but he ignored her.

"Umm, so these butcher's knives have serrated edges. That'll help keep them from getting stuck when you're cutting through particularly tough meat. Though I haven't really tested them too much myself, so could you tell me how they're holding up after a month or so?"

Both Daisy and Miledi examined the knives appreciatively.

Oscar continued, explaining how things wouldn't stick to the frying pan even if Daisy didn't use oil. One of the main reasons Oscar was so popular among the common folk was because he put extra touches like these on his goods.

"You always pay attention to the little details like this. Alright, I'll let my husband know too. And whenever I get a chance, I'll drop by to let you know how it feels to use. By the way, did you carve some weird name on this one too?"

Daisy examined the knives and the frying pan suspiciously.

Miledi tilted her head in confusion as Oscar sighed.

"No, as you requested, I didn't mark these with my brand. Why don't you like it, anyway?"

Daisy replied with another question.

"Out of curiosity, what exactly did you name these knives and this frying

pan?”

Oscar puffed his chest out proudly.

“Glad you asked. The knives are called Meat Shredder Mk. III, while the frying pan’s named Slide Master Alpha. What do you think? Cool, right? If you want, I can still engrave the names—”

“No thanks.” Daisy shot him down before he could finish.

“Why...?” Oscar muttered quietly.

“O-kun... You’ve got a terrible naming sense.”

“What do you mean, terrible!? Shouldn’t you have my back here!?” Oscar cried out. Daisy nodded in agreement with Miledi’s statement, leaving him with no one to turn to.

Though Oscar was beloved by the citizens, they all unanimously thought the names he engraved into his goods were terrible.

Though it had pained him to do it, he’d begun complying with his customers’ requests to stop engraving them. He was careful to keep them plain in the workshop’s ledger as well. All craftsmen of the Orcus Workshop were required to record their transactions.

That way, he didn’t have to listen to people telling him how his naming sense was terrible.

Oscar took his money from Daisy, then quickly moved on to the next customer. He was still a little sulky about the names.

The rest of his deliveries went by smoothly enough, but each conversation left him a little more mentally drained. At every delivery, Miledi would hit it off with the customers and cause some sort of misunderstanding that Oscar would desperately try and rectify.

By the time they finished the last one, Oscar was exhausted.

“O-kun, O-kun. You look reallllly tired.”

“And who’s fault do you think that is?”

“Wow, it’s already past noon. What’s a good place to eat around here? I’m

starving.”

“Listen when people are talking to— Oh, I give up! I need some food myself or I’ll collapse.” Grumbling to himself, Oscar led Miledi to a nearby restaurant. It was run by an acquaintance of his.

Since it was still lunchtime, there were quite a few people inside. Though it was in a seedier part of the city, the restaurant itself was impeccably clean. There were pictures of its menu stationed outside, too.

Fortunately, there was still one empty table left in the corner, so Oscar claimed it. Miledi sat down next to him.

“Hm? Is it just me or are people staring at us?” Miledi looked around the room.

Oscar looked around and saw some residents, a few adventurers, and even a table full of local girls sitting at the nearby tables. The restaurant attracted all manner of customers, so that wasn’t too unusual. What was unusual was that each and every one of them were staring at him.

Oscar knew Miledi was probably the reason, so he ignored them and called for a waiter.

“Hello~ Ah, Oscar-san, wel...come?” A bright teenage girl came over to take their order. The clean white apron she was wearing suited her nicely.

“Good afternoon, Aisha-san. Could we get two of the daily special?” Oscar ordered for Miledi as well. He didn’t want to ask her what she wanted, since that would’ve given her an excuse to say something.

However, the way he so casually ordered for Miledi seemed to crush Aisha. She glanced from Oscar to Miledi before suddenly bursting into tears.

Oscar was completely taken aback. Miledi smiled wryly, realizing what was going on. The diners watched on with interest, wondering how Oscar had made her cry.

“O-Oscar-san. I-I-I-I didn’t realize you had a lover...”

“Huh? Oh, no, I don’t. This girl’s just—”

“This girl!? You’re always so polite to everyone, but you’re so close to her that

you refer to her so casually... I-I can't believe it." Aisha stumbled backward, one hand over her mouth. Miledi didn't chime in with her usual teasing this time. Even she didn't want to crush a pure little girl's heart.

"Umm, I think you're misunderstanding something here. O-kun and I—"

"O-kun!? You call him O-kun!? Even I've never used such a casual nickname with him!"

"Err, well, umm..." Before Miledi could say anything else, Aisha turned and ran.

"Waaaaaaaaah, I thought I had a chaaaaaance! Daaaaaaaaad, two daily specials!" She disappeared into the restaurant's kitchen. An elderly man's voice rang out through from the back.

"Two dailies, coming right up! Thanks for coming!"

Even when her heart was broken, Aisha still did her job properly. And it said something about her dad's dedication to his own job that he took the order without batting an eyelid. Like father like daughter.

Wails of lamentation could be heard in another corner of the room.

Oscar turned and saw a group of local girls slumped over at their table. The cause of their despair was evident if you thought about what had just happened.

"You're pretty popular, O-kun."

"No comment."

Objectively speaking, it made sense. Oscar was well-respected, came from a distinguished workshop, was rather handsome, and even had an amiable personality to boot. And because everyone knew he was a bachelor, the girls all thought they had a chance.

Oscar adjusted his glasses to cover his expression.

Two of the adventurers stood up and walked over to him. They were grinning.

"Yo, Oscar. Looks like you've finally found yourself a girl."

"Nice going, kid. You always turned us down when we offered to introduce

you to someone. We were so scared you might be into men that we stopped putting in orders for a while. Thank Ehit we don't have to worry about that."

The two adventurers patted Oscar on the back. They hadn't ordered weapons and armor from Oscar before, but rather miscellaneous traveling equipment.

Things like lanterns, cookware, tents, and other things that every adventurer needed. Oscar's items were always sturdier and easier to use than those of other craftsmen, so he was popular with adventurers too. Most of the adventurers who made this city their base carried around items made by Oscar.

"Umm, guys. She's not actually—"

"Hey Missy, how'd you get this stubborn fool to fall for you?"

Oscar tried to fix the misunderstanding, but before he could they turned to Miledi.

It dawned on Miledi that basically all of the diners here knew Oscar, and they all loved him.

She thought back to poor Aisha and the girls despairing a few tables over, then decided to answer honestly.

"The truth is, I haven't yet. I'm still trying to make him mine."

The girls jolted upright. They stared at Oscar, a fierce determination burning in their eyes. Aisha, too, came running out of the kitchen. She hid behind a pillar and stared at Oscar.

"Miledi... Why do you keep adding fuel to the fire? First you had to go and make my workplace hell, now you're destroying all the places I visit... How much do you have to ruin before you're satisfied?" Oscar massaged his temples.

Seeing his reaction, the two adventurers realized what kind of relationship Oscar and Miledi really had. They smiled sadly and patted Oscar kindly on the back.

Though they looked scary, the two of them were actually quite soft-hearted.

They cast about for a different topic, hoping to distract themselves and Oscar from the girls now staring at him like he was a choice cut of meat.

“Oh yeah, speaking of your workplace. You know that shitty noble brat that’s always getting in your way?”

“Err, you mean Ping-san?”

“Yeah, that fool. I’ve seen him and his cronies skulking around here recently. It’s always at night, too.”

“Ping-san comes here at night?”

Ping was basically a walking bundle of pride.

He held as much contempt for the residential areas of the city as he did for Oscar himself.

He wouldn’t ever come down here for fun, nor would he willingly associate with any of the people living here. Like he’d said to Miledi, he only associated with nobles.

“Yeah. Weird, right? I dunno what that little brat’s up to, but be careful. You’re the only reason I can think of for them to come down here.”

“Yeah, exactly. And the streets have been dangerous lately...”

“You’re referring to the missing people?”

“Mhm... That too. But the templar knights have been poking around the mine shafts as well. There’s no way those elite soldiers are there just to chat it up with the miners. Word among the adventurers is that there’s an insanely strong monster hiding somewhere down below. None of us are willing to go too deep, just in case.”

“I see...”

Fortunately, the serious topic managed to calm the horde of hormone-crazed girls.

Just then, Oscar and Miledi’s food arrived. The adventurers said their goodbyes and returned to their table.

Oscar eagerly dug into his food. After a few bites, he finally noticed Miledi wasn’t touching her food even though she’d said she was starving. He looked up at her.

“Miledi?”

“Hm? Oh! This looks great! Time to eat!” Miledi stuffed her face full of food.

Oscar felt a sense of foreboding. He hadn’t liked that thoughtful expression on Miledi’s face one bit.

Once they finished eating, Oscar was instantly on guard again. *She isn’t really going to follow me back to the workshop, is she?*

“Thanks so much for hanging out with me today! Can I come back again tomorrow?”

Well, I didn’t see that one coming.

He wanted to refuse, but instead he found himself saying something else.

“Even if I say no, you’ll come anyway, won’t you?” That was basically the same as implicitly giving her permission.

“Ehehe. See you tomorrow, then!” He realized too late what he’d done. Before he could call out to her, Miledi slipped into the crowds and vanished from sight.

Oscar scratched his head and began walking back to the workshop. He still needed to figure out what kind of excuse he was going to give his coworkers.

A week had passed since then.

Though she came and went as she pleased, Miledi had spent most of her time hanging around Oscar. At this point, all of the common citizens knew her.

Oscar spent most of his time with her complaining, but the others just took this as a sign of their closeness. After all, he was reserved and polite to everyone else.

And in fact, the two of them had talked quite a bit over the past week.

Most of it had been Miledi going on about something, but as time passed Oscar found himself replying to more and more of her questions as well. Though the conversations were never serious, Oscar still found himself learning more about Miledi. At the same time, he found himself opening up to her more as well. Slowly, he found himself giving up on getting her to leave.

Oscar walked down the twilit street, heading toward the orphanage. He made sure to check up on everyone at least once a week.

The pale orange sunlight cast long shadows on the ground, and the cries of crows echoed in the distance. For some reason, the sight made Oscar feel empty.

This was his first time coming back to the orphanage since meeting Miledi. The reason for that was because he was still a little wary. Though he may have opened up to Miledi, she was still a heretic. If the Holy Church found her, they'd kill not only her, but the people she'd been in contact with.

Still, if he'd really wanted Miledi gone, Oscar could have used his artifacts to chase her away whenever. At that point, even he didn't fully understand why he hadn't.

She's no ordinary person, that's for sure. There's no guarantee I can beat her even with my artifacts, so it's better not to poke the hornet's nest. That's right, I'm just being careful here. I'm just being cautious about how I handle her, that's all. Oscar tried to convince himself that was the reason he hadn't done anything more than yell at her over this past week.

However, things couldn't continue for much longer. Miledi had already become rather well-known among the citizens. If she got herself arrested now, Oscar's involvement with her would almost certainly come to light. He needed to put an end to their relationship once and for all.

"Sheesh, she's such a handful..." Oscar surprised himself by muttering that. He hadn't said it in his usual annoyed tone. No, in fact, he'd sounded almost happy.

No matter what he said or did, Miledi was always smiling. Though he'd said a few truly hurtful things, for some reason, she never lost any of her cheerfulness. It was infectious. Even Oscar couldn't help but loosen up a little around her.

"What the hell's wrong with me." Oscar smiled to himself and shook his head.

Tomorrow. I'll cut my ties with her for good tomorrow.

If he had to, he'd use his artifacts to force her out. Though she was pushy and always fooling around, if Oscar really put his foot down she'd listen. He hoped.

With that, his strange days with this odd girl would finally be over.

He'd go back to living simply, hiding his true strength and making basic necessities for the people. He'd be made fun of and insulted again of course.

However, that was a price he was willing to pay. Or at least, he thought it was. Regardless, he knew there wouldn't be any problems with returning to his ordinary life.

"Hey there, O-kun! It's me, Miledi-chan in the evening!"

"Why do you have to go and ruin the mood every single time! What the heck does Miledi in the evening even mean!?"

Miledi popped out of nowhere as always, making Oscar retort as per usual. The tension drained from Oscar's body as he watched Miledi laugh. He'd psyched himself up to finally chase her away, but now this happened.

Miledi looked at Oscar's soot-stained face and said something with a smile.

"I figured since you were heading this way after work, you'd be seeing your family today!"

"Yeah..."

"Hey, hey, O-kun. I want to eat Moorin's food again. It was delicious." Miledi casually invited herself over for dinner. Normally, Oscar would have adjusted his glasses and told her to get out.

That's what Miledi was expecting as well.

However, contrary to expectations, Oscar just looked at Miledi with a serious expression on his face.

He'd steeled his resolve once more.

Miledi could sense it, too. The time had come for them to part ways.

"O-kun, can we talk for a bit?" Miledi's smile faded and she spoke quietly.

Oscar deliberated for a few seconds before nodding.

The two of them silently walked over to a nearby bench and sat down.

The sun sparkled in the evening sky, as if determined not to set. Miledi's

profile was dyed bright orange by the light. Her blue eyes looked off into the distance.

Finally, she began to talk.

“My name is Reisen. Miledi Reisen. Daughter of Earl Reisen, and the last living member of the Reisen family. I come from a long line of executioners. We manage the Reisen Gorge Execution Grounds for the Grandort Empire.”

Oscar whistled in surprise. The Reisen name was so famous that even people in other countries had heard of it. *The whole family supposedly died a few years ago... but I guess one of them survived.* Miledi smiled sadly at Oscar and continued her story.

Her tone was serious throughout the entire tale, which she started from the very beginning.

Chapter II: Reisen and Orcus

To Miledi Reisen, the world was full of absolutes.

The law was absolute. The country that decided the law was absolute. The Holy Church that controlled the country was absolute. The god they worshiped was absolute. His teachings and doctrines were absolute. The conventions of her house were absolute. Everything from the time she had to get up in the morning, to what her tutors told her, to what her father asked of her, to her role in the family, was absolute.

The Grandort Empire's influence was vast. It stretched from the central part of the continent all the way to the east, and within it was the Reisen Gorge. It was the country most well-known for its magical prowess, and though most of its mages weren't as strong as the demons, they were still the strongest the humans had.

As magic was the forte of most citizens, they all considered the Reisen Gorge, which dispersed mana inside of it, an execution ground. Without the aid of their spells, no Grandortian could hope to survive in a place like that, teeming with powerful monsters as it was.

Political prisoners, criminals, witnesses... Anyone who was sent into that hellish crack in the earth never returned. An execution ground was a fitting term for it.

As the gorge was known around the world, the noble family that managed the lands around it was, too.

That was the Reisen family.

They were also known as a family of executioners. The family ran and maintained the massive prison that was the Reisen Gorge. They handled not only criminals the empire sent them, but those from the Holy Church or other countries as well.

The family dated back so many generations that some scholars believed

they'd existed since even before the founding of the Grandort Empire. No one was sure if the gorge got its name from the family that managed it, or if the family that managed it had taken on the name of the gorge.

Regardless, the family was known for being utterly ruthless. They were called a family of executioners not only because of the job they handled, but because of the fear their name struck in the hearts of others.

And Miledi was the daughter of that ruthless and terrifying earl.

Because she could use gravity magic, and control her mana directly without any need for a magic circle, she was hailed as a genius Atavist.

Normally, she would have been taken under the Holy Church's protection and raised as one of Ehit's descendants, but because of the influence the Reisen family held, she had been allowed to remain home. According to history, the very first Reisen had been able to use ancient magic as well. Records claimed that he'd used it to turn the gorge into a magic-sealing execution grounds. Because of that legend as well, Miledi was allowed to remain part of the family.

The only people Miledi had ever seen in her life were her grandfather, her parents, her uncle, her cousin, the doll-like servants, her tutors, her father's soldiers, and the criminals that came to be executed.

She had been completely isolated from the outside world, and spent her days learning how to be an upstanding member of the Reisen family.

That was all that was expected of her, and all that was granted to her. Nothing more, nothing less.

To the outside world, Miledi's family would have seemed cold and inhuman. Whether for good or ill, however, Miledi had nothing else to compare her own situation to, so she didn't see it that way.

Once she turned eight, she began helping out with the family business.

Every time she sat down with a criminal, she was met with cursing, begging, and despair. Still, they were criminals. Someone had to take on the job of executing them. The law was absolute, and the law said that they were to be cast into the gorge.

And so, Miledi did her job. She read out the charges to the condemned, and watched as they were flung into the gorge.

Those that tried to flee died at her hands.

Those that tried to climb their way up were shoved back down.

Over the course of a year, Miledi's face lost all emotion. Their despair, grudges, and lamentations no longer moved her. After all, what did it matter? They were here because they tried to go against an absolute. That they would face retribution for it was also an absolute. Their fates had already been decided.

It was all pointless in the end, so Miledi found it easier not to feel anything at all.

By the age of ten, Miledi had become the perfect Reisen daughter. She was taciturn, expressionless, and emotionless.

One day her father, Colt, summoned her to his office.

"Father, it's Miledi."

"Enter." The same inorganic voice greeted her after she knocked on the door. But she didn't seem to mind, and entered the room.

"This is the next person to be condemned."

"Understood." Miledi took the documents her father handed her.

Inwardly, she was a little confused. Though each criminal was given a chance to plead their defense or repent their sins, that was nothing more than a front the family put on to seem fair. In truth, all who passed through the estate's gates were doomed to be executed, so why was her father bothering to give her the details of one of the condemned?

"Their punishment is death. The execution will proceed at the appointed time. But before it happens, I want you to ask them something."

"What would that be?" Miledi looked down at the documents.

"The condemned is a heretic, but there is a strong possibility they weren't working alone. There may be an organization that they belong to."

“May?”

“It was the Holy Church who captured them. They tried to interrogate the heretic, but learned nothing. It was one of Ehit’s descendants who oversaw the interrogation, so there’s no reason to believe they were deceived by their interrogator. That’s why they are still unsure.”

“.....” Miledi’s lips twitched at the mention of the word “interrogation.” She knew what the Holy Church conducted was no interrogation, but torture. She wondered what kind of state the criminal would come to her in. Colt had been in charge of this particular criminal, so Miledi hadn’t met him before. Chances were he’d be on death’s door already.

“How do you want me to phrase the question?” She didn’t ask why Colt wanted her to do it. An order from her father was absolute. Questioning it wasn’t allowed. She only needed to fulfill her duty as a Reisen.

“As if you were a child.”

Her father’s words were so surprising that Miledi almost laughed. She knew what the servants said about her. She was probably the most adult-like ten-year-old in existence.

All thanks to the Reisen upbringing. *Though acting like a child would be... I suppose I do still look like one. There is certainly a possibility they may be more willing to open up to a child.*

“I am not asking you to pull off a perfect act. Simply do what you can.”

“Yes, sir.” Miledi sharply bowed her head. Manners were also part of the Reisen upbringing.

As she left the room, she put the man she was to execute out of her mind and began thinking about how to act like a child.

That evening, Miledi stood before a man dressed in rags. He was flanked by two guards and standing on the execution platform that overlooked the gorge.

One push, and his fate would be sealed. Without magic, survival was nigh impossible. Even the man’s remains would be eaten by the monsters that lurked below. In practice, execution was simple.

The criminal was lying in a heap on the stand, not even twitching. He was already at death's door. In fact, he was likely to die before Miledi got the chance to push him.

However, work was work. The rules were absolute. Whether the condemned was deceased or not, she would push him into the ravine.

"Davy Consman. You have been charged with heresy. Your crimes include denouncing Ehit's doctrine and attacking a priest. You have rebelled against our lord, and thus will be executed." Miledi spoke emotionlessly, reading from the document she'd been given.

There was no response. Normally, this was when they started hurling curses at Miledi.

She waited for a while, but when it was obvious he wasn't going to say anything she signaled to the two guards.

"You two are dismissed. I'll handle the rest."

"Miledi-sama?"

"What's this about?"

The two guards followed the script to the letter. Miledi curtly replied with "That's an order," and watched them shuffle away.

Then, after a moment of feigned hesitation, Miledi leaned closer to the man.

"Umm, can I ask you something?" Miledi did her best to sound like a child.

There still wasn't much emotion in her voice, but it was a far cry from the inorganic way she'd read the charges.

Davy stirred. Miledi could see empty eyes staring at her from behind his dirty bangs.

"What?" To her surprise, he answered.

"Why did you attack that priest? You should have known what would happen if you did."

What she really wanted to know was what organization he'd been a part of. However, she figured asking that right away would look suspicious, so she

started with something more innocuous.

Davy stared at Miledi. His empty eyes began to glow with a fiery determination.

“How horrible.”

“Hm? You definitely did something horrible. But if you knew that, then why __”

“I can’t believe you’re like this already, at such a young age.”

“What?” Miledi’s surprise wasn’t feigned this time.

Davy smiled at Miledi. He struggled to his knees, coughing up blood.

“Why? It’s simple. Because you’re making a face like that, little girl.” Miledi had no idea what he was talking about. He’d done it because of her expression? That didn’t make any sense chronologically, let alone logically.

Was he messing with her? Or had the torture addled his wits?

Either way, it didn’t seem he was going to open up to her.

In that case, she’d just end it. Like she always did.

Her father had only told her to try it and see what happened, after all. She’d fulfilled those orders.

“What worth is there in a world where children can’t smile?”

“Ah...” He spoke again before Miledi could condemn him.

She didn’t have an answer for him. For once, she was dumbfounded. It felt as though something had stabbed her through the chest. By the time she returned to her senses, Davy had stood up and was standing at the edge of the platform.

How can he stand with wounds that bad?

“Sorry, but I can’t answer what you really want to know.” He tottered unsteadily. One more step and he’d fall into the abyss.

Yet Davy’s eyes burned with life.

“But I believe. One day, the world will be free.”

“Free?” She spoke it hesitantly, like she’d never heard it before. Davy’s words

didn’t make sense to her.

Davy coughed up another mouthful of blood. He was practically dead. And yet... he smiled.

“Hey, little girl. Don’t you want to live your life smiling?”

“Ah—”

Davy leaned backward and fell into the gorge.

He put an end to his own life, as if denying the right to let Miledi execute him.

The wind blew across the empty platform. No one was standing on it now. For a while, Miledi just stood there.

From then on, Miledi often sunk deep into thought. She continued fulfilling her duty, but she would spend just a little more time talking to the condemned, asking questions her job didn’t require her to. She came to learn what kinds of people these criminals were.

Even she wasn’t sure why she did it. As she continued, though, something began building inside of her.

One of the criminals was a man who’d lived by the northern lake. He had loved that lake, and prayed to the creature living inside it every day. That was a sin.

Another criminal was a merchant. He had given medicine to a wounded demon. The demon had been grateful for his aid, and the two had formed a lasting friendship. That was a sin.

Yet another was a mother. She had begged the Holy Church not to take her gifted child, at least not until they’d grown into an adult. That was a sin.

Yet another had been a beastman youth. That was a sin.

Were they really sins, though? Some of the condemned were certainly criminals, and many of them deserved to be punished. But were their crimes truly deserving of death? Miledi couldn’t allow herself to ask such questions. One did not question absolutes. Especially not if they were a Reisen.

Though Miledi kept telling herself that, the doubt that had been planted in her mind that day continued to grow.

One day, a maid walked up to Miledi.

“From today onward, I will be your personal attendant. My name is Belle. It is a pleasure to serve you, Milady.” The maid’s curtsy was perfect. Her red hair was tied neatly behind her back with a ribbon. She was, without a doubt, beautiful.

When Miledi asked why she had been given a maid, Colt answered. According to him, by the age of ten she had acquired most of the knowledge necessary to be considered a full-fledged member of the Reisen family.

In a few years, he would no longer act as an intermediary for her duties. She would be expected to deal with the emperor and the Holy Church on her own.

Belle was the daughter of a nobleman’s mistress, but she had been brought up with a proper noble’s education, so she would act as both Miledi’s maid, and her tutor, filling in the last few remaining gaps in Miledi’s knowledge.

Miledi knew this day would come. She had no right to refuse, nor did she have any reason to. However, she wasn’t the same girl she had been. With all the thinking she’d been doing recently, she found having a maid teaching her proper grace and refinement distracting.

Still, after spending one month with Belle, Miledi had to admit she was an efficient teacher. No matter the situation, Belle never let her facade of elegance fade. Though it made her appear a bit stiff at times, it was still impressive.

In time, Miledi learned to conduct herself in the same manner.

Miledi was grateful for the fact that though Belle was with her at all times, she only spoke when necessary.

However, she could feel that Belle’s eyes were always on her... though maybe that was just because she wanted to do her job as a tutor properly. *After all, it is a teacher’s duty to watch her pupil’s actions closely.*

Though at times it felt like Belle’s gaze had some other meaning behind it. Miledi shook those thoughts off, deciding not to get in the way of Belle’s job.

She had no interest in getting close to her, so there was no reason to think too deeply about Belle's actions.

The day after Miledi came to that decision, something happened. For once, Belle hadn't followed her around all day. After she finished her work, Miledi returned to her room. She casually opened the door to her bedroom and found —

"Oh, welcome back, Miledi-tan~ You sure work hard for someone so small~" Belle was waiting for her.

And she'd greeted Miledi in a ridiculously cutesy way. Belle was sitting on Miledi's table eating some cake.

Did she just call me Miledi...tan?

"....."

"Oh? Oh my, what's wrong, Miledi-tan? It looks like you're wondering why your prim and proper tutor is acting like this."

"....."

Belle grinned at Miledi. This was the first time she had seen her tutor smile. Belle looked satisfied, as if she'd pulled off the biggest prank.

Once the shock had worn off, Miledi found herself...

"Hello? Earth to Miledi-tan? Squishy-cheeked Miledi-tan~ If you're in there, then say something~ You're going to make me cry~"

Disgusted. She found herself disgusted.

Belle wrapped an arm around Miledi's shoulder and pinched her cheeks.

Miledi had never been treated like this before. Though she was irritated, she was at a loss for how to react.

Belle was being exceedingly rude. She was the illegitimate daughter of a noble, while Miledi was a member of the powerful Reisen family.

Someone of Belle's station could be executed for acting so casually, given the difference in status.

"Do you want to die?" It seemed Miledi had been even angrier than she'd

realized. Normally, she would never have retaliated like that.

The threat had a different level of weight when it was muttered by an executioner.

However, Belle didn't seem to mind.

"Come on, don't be so glum. Are you this cranky because your boobs are small?"

"Shut up!" This was the first time Miledi had ever yelled at anyone, and it had been over a stupid jab at her chest size.

Though Belle's breasts were certainly something to envy. They were two mountains of enormous proportions.

Miledi was still a child, so naturally hers hadn't developed yet, but that didn't make the insult sting any less. She was honestly surprised she cared that much about being feminine.

Belle shrank back and stared joyfully at Miledi.

"She got mad... Our Miledi-tan actually got mad!"

Miledi took a deep breath to calm herself down.

"Is this what you're really like?"

"Yep!" Belle grinned mischievously. Miledi did her best to hold in her mounting anger.

"I have no idea what you hoped to achieve by doing this, but do you really think such rudeness will go unpunished?"

"I do!"

Miledi activated her gravity magic, and Belle sunk to the floor. Unfortunately, the floor in this instance was a very luxurious carpet. It probably felt good to lay on it.

"What were you thinking?" Exasperated, Miledi canceled her magic. Belle continued rolling contentedly on the floor, heedless of Miledi's glare.

"I wanted to be your friend, Miledi-tan."

“.....” Miledi blinked in confusion.

“I’ve been watching you for this past month, and I’ve decided I like you quite a bit, so I figured we might as well be friends. What’s so weird about that?”

Am I supposed to laugh at that? I wasn’t taught how to deal with this situation. The teachings of the Reisen family had no wisdom to offer Miledi. Without them to fall back on, she found herself confused.

“Hey, Miledi-tan, say something. Come here. Come on, it feels good.” Belle spread herself out on the carpet and patted it invitingly.

Do you realize how unbecoming it would be for someone of my station to do something so ridiculous? Miledi knew she should report Belle for acting improperly and have her dismissed.

“Hehehe. Welcome, Miledi-tan.”

“Stop calling me that.”

But before she knew it, she’d walked up to Belle. She spread herself over the carpet, her instincts ignoring the voice of reason that was screaming at her to stop.

It was quite fluffy. This was the first time she’d ever lain on it. Sleeping on the floor was something a noble lady should never do, after all. However—

“Well? Comfy, right?” Miledi ignored Belle, who had ruined the moment. She could see Belle grinning again out of the corner of her eye. A strange, indescribable feeling welled up within Miledi.

Miledi pouted and turned away from Belle.

Still, she couldn’t deny what she’d discovered.

Being on the floor like this was exhilarating.



Despite Belle's excessive rudeness, Miledi couldn't bring herself to punish her. In fact, she couldn't even bring herself to get her fired, or even report her. From then on, Miledi's odd relationship with Belle continued.

Around her, Miledi couldn't keep her composure. The emotions she'd locked away for so long escaped their cages when Belle was around.

However, the two only acted like that around each other. In the presence of anyone else, Belle was the perfect maid, while Miledi was the dutiful, obedient daughter.

Even then, though, hints of their true personalities shone through.

One time Colt had been distracted by something when he'd been giving Miledi her instructions for the day. Miledi had taken that opportunity to blow a silent raspberry at him. Belle had given her a thumbs-up for that. Miledi found herself addicted to the thrill of breaking rules and began to incorporate gravity magic into her pranks.

Another time Belle had brought sweets to Miledi's room and they'd stuffed themselves silly. Belle had claimed she'd bought them from somewhere, but they had tasted distinctly like the desserts the Reisen chef made. Miledi had strung up Belle for lying while continuing to wolf down the stolen sweets. The despair on Belle's face as Miledi had eaten through them all had made her week.

As payback, Belle had given Miledi a very special book. She'd told Miledi it was a popular romance novel. She'd kept pestering Miledi to read it until finally she caved in and opened it up... only to discover it was erotic fiction. Very explicit erotic fiction.

Belle had teased Miledi for days afterward about how red she'd gotten.

"Miledi-tan, what did you think of the book? How'd it make you feel? Hey, Miledi-tan, say something. It looked like you were really into it! So, what was it like? Come on, tell me!"

In the end Miledi had snapped and hung Belle from the ceiling for a day.

As those days continued, Miledi realized she was beginning to change. She

couldn’t express it very well, but she felt herself growing, well, looser. Or perhaps softer was a more accurate term. She could feel it.

She became certain of her transformation one day around two months after learning of Belle’s true nature.

Belle was fixing her hair for her, and Miledi caught sight of her face in the mirror.

She had a relaxed expression on her face. That surprised her. Quite a bit, too.

That’s me? Since when did I start looking so lax? Miledi took her eyes off her own face and found Belle smiling at her.

Miledi blushed and looked away, but it had been nice, having someone smile at her.

That feeling would end up changing Miledi’s fate, though she didn’t know it at the time.

Today too, Miledi had been ordered by Colt to interview a criminal.

The condemned was a young man charged with the crime of falling in love with a beastman, which made him a heretic.

“You went against the teachings of Ehit. A crime deserving of death. Do you admit to your crime?” Miledi read out the charges and asked the usual question.

Regardless of his answer, his fate was sealed. As always, he didn’t seem to see the error of his ways and railed at Miledi.

“What do you mean a crime deserving of death? I did nothing wrong!”

“However, you did fall in love with—”

“Is love a sin!?”

“It...” Miledi stopped short. A few months ago, she would have said “it is” without hesitation. But now, after all she’d come to learn, she couldn’t get the words out of her mouth.

“If you deny you ever loved that woman, even if that’s just a lie, it may prove

your devotion to Ehit. Your life may yet be spared.”

“Huh?” Even the young man hadn’t been expecting that reply. He’d yelled at Miledi precisely because he’d known there was no saving him now.

However, the girl standing before him now had a troubled expression on her face. He stared at her in amazement.

“I can put in a request for a retrial, but don’t expect too much. If it goes through, lie like your life depends on it. For her sake, too.”

“Huh? Ah, w-wait!”

Miledi walked away without responding. This was the first time she’d truly broken an absolute.

In the end, her request for a retrial was denied by Colt before it even made it to the Holy Church. She had been expecting that, of course.

The execution was moved up, and the man was dropped into the gorge the same day.

But things no longer continued as always.

Miledi had done something uncharacteristic in asking her father for a retrial.

She had been so efficient at her job that her father had been planning on making her the next head, yet she had covered for a criminal. That wasn’t something Colt could ignore.

Who is it? Who is it that corrupted the future head of the Reisen family? Who put these ideas into her head? Colt poured all of his family’s resources into finding the culprit.

As a result—

“Belle!”

“Miledi-sama...”

Miledi watched as Colt’s soldiers rushed into her room and arrested Belle.

Miledi rounded on Colt, who had followed in after his soldiers.

“Father, what is the meaning of this? She is my—”

“Your what, exactly?”

Miledi flinched. His voice was colder than ice. Colt threw a sheaf of documents at her. As she read their contents, Miledi’s eyes went wide.

“That woman is a member of an anti-church organization. We are currently conducting an investigation into the noble who vouched for her identity. She’s someone to be feared if she truly did manipulate a noble family... Take her away.” At Colt’s command, the soldiers roughly marched Belle away.

“B-Belle!”

“It’s all true, Miledi-tan.” Despite the situation, Belle smiled. Colt and the others assumed her words were a confession. They thought now that her secret had been revealed, she’d decided to admit her deception. However, Miledi knew. She knew what those words really meant.

Belle meant those days they’d spent together and the smiles they’d shared had all been real. They were no lie.

Miledi tried to chase after Belle, but Colt stopped her with a few harsh words.

“Letting yourself be fooled by a heretic was a serious blunder. Compose yourself, Miledi Reisen. This is your last chance. A Reisen who cannot perform their duty is of no value.” Miledi stopped in her tracks.

Colt harrumphed, and with one last disappointed look, he left the room.

An oppressive silence followed. Miledi simply stood there, staring at the door.

That night, Miledi slipped past the guards and headed to the prison. She was going to meet Belle.

“.....” When she reached Belle’s cell, she was speechless. Belle had clearly been tortured. Deep cuts fresh enough to still be bleeding covered her from head to toe. She had been handcuffed to the wall, from which she hung limply.

“Oh? Miledi...tan? You... came?” She spoke slowly, pausing between words. The pain in her voice was evident. Still, Belle lifted her face and grinned at Miledi.

Tears formed in Miledi's eyes. On her way here she'd agonized about what she wanted to say, what she wanted to ask. She hadn't been able to figure it out. But now, with Belle in front of her, the words spilled out on their own.

"Belle... I'll help you somehow, so tell me everything. I'll beg the Holy Church. I'll save your life, I promise!" Miledi figured she might be able to convince the Holy Church to use Belle's knowledge to topple the rest of her organization.

She knew it was a long shot. It was a terrible plan, but it was the best she had. The absolutes she'd grown up with and her lack of knowledge about the outside world weighed her down. As she was, this was all she could come up with.

However, when Belle saw Miledi crying and clinging to the bars, she smiled. The happiness in that smile was genuine.

"No thanks~"

"Huh?" Miledi looked up in surprise. She couldn't believe it.

"Bahaha... What's with that look? You're ruining your good looks with that expression. Well, I guess you always were a hopeless beauty. Hehehee..."

"B-Belle!" This wasn't any time for jokes. Miledi grew angry and yelled at Belle.

Still, Belle just smiled kindly back. As Miledi had asked, she would tell her everything.

"Miledi, let me tell you my real name."

"Belle's not your real name?"

"Yep. My name is Belta Lievre. I was originally a member of the Lievre family. My family's been archbishops of the Holy Church for generations. And I was the divine priestess who'd received Ehit's blessing."

"A divine priestess..." Miledi didn't know what to say.

A divine priestess was someone who had received a revelation directly from Ehit. They were among the highest ranked members of the Holy Church. They held no direct political power, but their influence was as great as the pope's.

"When I was around your age, I also spent my time fulfilling my appointed

duty. I'm an Atavist too, so I can use special magic... Mine's divination. It lets me see the possible paths a person's future can go down."

"The paths a person's future can go down..."

Miledi absently repeated Belta's words. For some reason, they left a deep impression on her.

"Every day, I saw tons of people who wanted to change their fate. There should have been ways for all of them to achieve happiness, but their fates had been distorted by the values, the doctrines, and the principles of the Holy Church. Whether it ended up good or bad for us, everything bent to *His* will."

"His" will. Miledi could guess who Belta meant. Their lord and creator, Ehit.

"But I still believed. I thought Ehit's design would surely lead most of us to happiness eventually. Even as I dealt with the grief and rage of the people, the bishops still told me 'You did well leading the people today,' every time."

It must have felt awful. Belta smiled bitterly at Miledi. *Ah, I understand now.*

"Pretty similar to your own situation, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes..."

"Thought so," Belta said as Miledi nodded.

"Though to be honest, I didn't expect the heir of the ruthless Reisen household to be so kind-hearted."

I didn't expect it either, Miledi thought with a smile.

"Just like with you, I needed to see something shocking before I realized." Before she'd realized how twisted this world truly was.

"One day I saw a certain someone's fate. No, that's not quite right. Rather, I couldn't see it. There was a girl whose future I couldn't read. All I saw ahead of her was darkness. It was as if she was alive, and yet not. She was... She wasn't human!" Belta practically screamed those last words. Miledi realized Belta was shivering, as if she was terrified of the past she was remembering.

"Belle... Belta!"

"Ah." Belta took a few deep breaths to calm herself. Her eyes were focused

on the present again, and she looked at Miledi. *What could have terrified a cheerful girl like her so badly?* “That... That *thing* wearing the Holy Church’s robes was unbelievably beautiful, but it was also not of this world. I was so scared when I saw it that I prayed.”

It was then that she received Ehit’s words.

“You see too much.” When she returned to her senses, there was a shortsword sticking out of her chest.

Still confused, she’d slumped to the ground. It felt like not just her blood, but the very source of her life was flowing out of her. She was almost certainly going to die.

Before she lost consciousness, she asked something in a hoarse voice.

“Lord Ehit, why?” The reply he’d given was beyond her expectations.

“We’re free to do what we want with our toys, no?”

“I definitely died that day. Yet for some reason, I awoke in one of Elbard’s back alleys, even though I should have been dead. All I was wearing was rags.”

“So then...”

“I didn’t know who brought me back or why, but I knew it hadn’t been Ehit’s mercy that saved me. He’s not that kind of god. When I awoke, I heard a kind man’s voice tell me to run.”

From then on Belta lived as an orphan, her only possessions her life, and the knowledge of what Ehit truly was. Her brush with death had divested her of her special magic, and had taken most of her regular magic skills as well. Still, Belta had tried to gather comrades to fight against this unfair world and its hateful gods. Eventually, she’d found enough people to form a proper organization.

“So when you came here...”

“In order to save my comrades, and any prisoners who might join hands with us, I infiltrated the mansion.”

Though, Belta hadn’t expected to meet a girl who reminded her of her old self here... She smiled at the thought.

“Miledi... I decided to fight back of my own free will. That’s something I’m never going to give up, even if it means my death.”

Miledi understood that Belta would never give in. Miledi’s words couldn’t dissuade her from her chosen path.

“I-I can definitely save you.” Miledi sounded like a spoiled child. She couldn’t even meet Belta’s eyes.

“Miledi-tan... Smile.” Instead of replying, that was what Belta said.

How can I smile?

Miledi just mumbled “I know I can save you,” one last time and walked away. She told herself over and over that there had to be a way. However, no solutions came to mind.

She sat on her bed and thought. The question of what to do swirled in her mind, but nothing she came up with seemed likely to work.

She didn’t know how long she sat there. Though eventually, with no other ideas available to her, Miledi decided to beg Colt to spare Belta. She tried not to think of her previous failure as she headed to his room.

My only purpose is to fulfill the duties of the Reisen family. I’m just a cog in the execution machine. That’s all. And that’s absolute. A cold, unfeeling part of her mind whispered that to her and she stopped in her tracks.

But she didn’t want to give up on the person who’d shown her how to feel. She started walking again and before she knew it she was in front of her father’s office. Miledi took a deep breath, her palms slick with nervous sweat.

She steeled her resolve and knocked on the door.

“Huh?” But there was no reply. Normally, her father would still be in his office.

“What’s wrong, Milady?” A passing servant called out to her.

“Where is my father?”

“Were you not informed? He left for the execution grounds just recently.”

Miledi’s veins turned to ice.

“Now?”

“Indeed, Milady. He claimed the heretic was dangerous and needed to be dealt with immediately. Not only did she serve as your maid for months, she was apparently the head of an anti-church organization...”

Miledi dashed off without listening to the rest. The servant yelled after her, but Miledi was long gone.

Cold sweat poured down her back. Sheer desperation lent strength to her legs.

This was too soon. Far too soon. Her father’s interrogation of Belta shouldn’t have finished yet. *So why is he doing this already...*

She finally arrived at the execution platform.

A crescent moon hung in the night sky.

Colt was standing before the platform, together with his soldiers.

Belta was nowhere to be seen. The execution platform was empty.

“Haaah... Haaah... Father. Wh-What happened to Belta?”

Please let me be in time—

“The execution has been completed.” Miledi’s world went silent. Everything grew blurry.

Colt continued talking. Something about how the noble backing Belta had confessed everything, which was why he’d executed her immediately. He hadn’t wanted to give her a chance to negatively influence the Reisen family any further. Miledi started running.

“Miledi! What do you think you’re doing!?” She jumped off the execution platform without hesitation.

The wind whistled past her ears. Casting oneself into this gorge that silenced all magic would normally be suicide, but Miledi had so much mana that she could cast spells dense enough that the gorge couldn’t disperse them.

“Obsidian Vortex.” This was the most basic of gravity spells. It allowed the

caster to create a localized gravitational field and thus adjust their weight.

Miledi decelerated rapidly and landed lightly at the bottom of the ravine.

The moon's light only faintly reached the depths. This dark gorge was where countless sinners had met their end. Miledi found it disconcerting.

She made a ball of light with light magic and examined her surroundings.

"She's not here..." Miledi had prepared herself to see Belta's broken body lying at the bottom of the gorge, but there was nothing there. *Don't tell me monsters already ate her...* Just then, she heard a monster's roar a short distance away.

"It can't be." Miledi dashed off toward the sound.

After rounding a corner, Miledi saw her.

A girl slumped with her back to the wall. It seemed she'd somehow managed to survive the fall and had tried to escape, but now she was surrounded by a few dozen wolf-like monsters. She must have been chased from the very moment she fell.

"Bel!"

"Hm? Mi...ledi...tan?" Her voice was weak. Miledi sent the ball of light ahead of her, illuminating the area around Belta. It was then that she noticed... Belta was sitting in a pool of her own blood. Miledi could tell with a single glance. She'd lost too much.

"Graaaaaah!" The wolves were overjoyed to have more meat to feast on. Their claws and fangs were dripping blood. Belta's blood.

Miledi felt something inside her snap.

"Die." She said that single word in a voice colder than ice.

A second later, the wolves had been crushed flat. The ground underneath them was sunken. They hadn't even had time to scream.

"Ahahaha. You're... amazing, Miledi-tan."

"Bel! Bel, keep it together!" Miledi rushed over to Belta.

When Miledi saw her up close, she grew certain. Belta's wounds were fatal.

Still, she cast healing magic on her anyway. She picked the strongest spell she could cast instantly and used it. However, because of the gorge's special properties, her magic was greatly weakened.

"Shit, shit, shit!" That was the first time in her life she had ever cursed.

Tears in her eyes, Miledi poured even more mana into her healing. She'd burn through it all if she had to. Belta raised a blood-soaked hand and raised it to Miledi's cheek.

"Hey, Miledi. Is working together... a sin?"

"Huh?"

"What about... opening your heart? Or... laughing together? Or... telling the person you love... that you love... them?"

"It's not a sin."

Miledi took Belta's hand into her own.

"Exactly. These aren't... things you can make fun of... and trample over... We are... humans are... not their... toys." Miledi watched as the light slowly dwindled in Belta's eyes.

No matter how much she cried, no matter how much she screamed, she couldn't change fate.

Miledi saw her own tear-stained face reflected in Belta's jade eyes.

"You were like... a little sister to me."

"I thought of you like my big sister, too."

Belta smiled.

"I pray... the time comes... that humans can live... freely. I pray for a world where you can... smile..."

Belta's hand went limp.

A young girl's cries echoed throughout the gorge.

Miledi took Belta's body into her arms and used gravity magic to fly back to

the execution stand.

Colt was waiting for her. Not just him, either. Her mother, her grandfather, her uncle, and her cousin were there too, along with a contingent of soldiers. Behind them was a row of people shackled together.

Colt stared icily at her. He had never really treated Miledi like his daughter, but he had never looked at her like she was trash before, either.

“Do you realize what you’re doing?” Miledi ignored him and looked over the row of prisoners behind him.

They were all disheveled and were watching Miledi in awe. No one had ever come back up out of the gorge. However, what surprised them even more was that the daughter of Earl Reisen had leaped into the gorge to save someone.

When she didn’t reply, Colt threw up his hands and gave Miledi her final warning.

“Dispose of that trash.” Miledi turned back to her father upon hearing his words.

“Trash?” she muttered.

Colt didn’t hear her, and continued.

“This is my final warning. Fulfill your duty as a Reisen. Pass judgment on that heretic’s comrades with your own hands.” To him, that was the only value her life had. Miledi hung her head.

She looked down at Belta’s face, and came to a decision.

“I’m sick of this.”

“Excuse me?” Colt’s eyes twitched, and he pointed a finger at her. The Reisen soldiers unsheathed their weapons. They were planning on fighting her, but Miledi wasn’t fazed at all. She looked up at Colt and declared her new beliefs.

“I am Miledi Reisen. I am my own person. The only one who decides my life’s purpose is me.” Those were words of rebellion. Miledi had just declared she would no longer follow the Reisen family’s orders. After all, to live as an individual meant discarding the family’s ideals.

Colt sighed, then his soldiers began chanting.

“It’s a shame to lose the power your ancient magic offered us, but a rotten branch must be cut off lest it infect the whole tree. Eliminate her.” Up until the very end, Colt had never treated Miledi like his daughter.

Miledi hugged Belta’s corpse and steeled her resolve. Remembering how her friend had always smiled, she grinned at Colt.

It was a forced, misshapen grin, but Colt and the others had never once seen her so much as smile before, and they hesitated.

Miledi looked down and spoke in a tone laden with emotion.

“Eliminate me? I’d like to see you try.” There was no turning back after this.

The sun had long since set, and night blanketed the sky.

After she finished her tale, Miledi fell silent.

“After that, I destroyed the Reisen family and freed Bel’s comrades, the Liberators. They’re the same organization I belong to now. A lot happened, honestly. I had a run-in with a silver-haired nun while trying to find out if the gods really were evil. I barely escaped that encounter with my life. Then, I spent a long time training so I could get my revenge the next time I see her, saved a lot of other Liberators, protected people who came to us, scouted others with the same ideals as us... until at some point I became the leader.”

Miledi laughed and Oscar gave her a sidelong glance. Though she was always acting cheerful, he could tell her resolve was unbreakable. She wouldn’t falter, even if she had to fight Ehit himself. The events that had built up her resolve were so heavy that Oscar didn’t know what to say.

She looked at him, her eyes clear as a mountain spring.

“Bel was telling the truth, so I’ve been searching all this time for comrades who will help me fight against the world. Comrades strong enough to fight on even terms with me.” She repeated the same words she’d said when she first met him.

“And now I’ve finally found you.” Silence. Miledi had laid everything out for

him. All that was left was to wait for Oscar's reply.

Oscar pushed up his glasses, hiding his expression.

"Miledi."

"That's me."

Oscar refused to meet her gaze, as if doing so would weaken his resolve.

He paused for a second.

"I... can't go with you."

"Ah..." He noticed Miledi tightly grip her hands.

"Just like that girl was important to you, my family is important to me. Even if what you say is true, I can't afford to get them wrapped up in this." Oscar stood up, which made Miledi gasp.

"I don't want to be seen with you anymore. Please, try and understand."

Oscar turned his back to Miledi and walked away. A clear rejection.

"Th-Then, can I come see you when there isn't anyone around tomorrow?"

Oscar stopped. He struggled to rein in his emotions and glumly replied to her.

"Please don't come near me ever again." He resumed walking.

He didn't hear footsteps chasing after him, which he'd grown rather used to over the past few days.

Oscar was silent for the remainder of the trip. His footsteps were heavy, and he took a long detour on his way to the orphanage.

Honestly, he just wanted to be alone. He told himself over and over that he'd made the right decision, that keeping his family safe was what mattered most. However, he couldn't banish the voice in his head that kept telling him "You actually wanted to help her, didn't you?"

Don't you actually want to use your powers to the fullest? Don't you really want to help the people who need you with your abilities? Why were you born with this power? So you could live your life hiding it? Can you really bring yourself to abandon her?

“Shut up.” Oscar yelled at the voice in his head.

He continued agonizing over his decision, and before he knew it he was on the same street as his orphanage. He knew he must’ve looked suspicious, mumbling to himself in the dark.

“This was for the best.” Even if the gods were evil, even if humans were just pawns in their twisted board game, it was better to live out his life as an average person than to effectively become a terrorist and fight against them.

If his family was put in harm’s way because of him, he knew he’d regret it forever.

That was why he’d made this choice.

He repeated that to himself over and over, trying to calm himself down.

Starting tomorrow, he’d be back to his usual lifestyle.

He walked up to the orphanage, his stride confident, without knowing that the unfairness of this world had already caught up to him.

After a few more seconds of walking, Oscar found himself in front of the orphanage. Something was off, though. It was long past dinnertime, but there was someone standing in front of the orphanage. It was Moorin. She was looking around uneasily.

The moment she spotted him she dashed over.

“Oscar!”

“H-Hey, Mom. I’m back.”

Oscar felt a rising sense of dread as he watched Moorin run over to him.

“Mom, what’s wrong? Why do you look so panicked?” He suddenly had a very bad premonition.

Moorin glanced about to make sure no one was listening in before leaning close to Oscar.

“Oscar, you wouldn’t happen to know where Dylan is, would you? He and a few of the other kids haven’t come back yet.”

“Dylan? No, I haven’t seen him...”

It seemed that Dylan, Ruth, Corrin, and Katy hadn't returned yet.

Once they were old enough, the orphans started taking on odd jobs at nearby restaurants and workshops. That way, they could support the orphanage and make money to spend on themselves.

Dylan and the others worked relatively close to the orphanage, and they usually returned home together.

As such, they were normally back long before the sun set. If they were going to be late, at least one of them would come back to tell Moorin.

However, none of them had returned. Something suspicious was going on.

Oscar was acutely aware of his heart pounding in his chest. He pushed his glasses up and tried to remain calm.

"Have you told the town guard yet?"

"Of course. But they didn't care. They told me they don't have the soldiers to spare to go looking for a few mangy orphans..."

Moorin bit her lip. Her frustration was evident.

"But, Oscar. They were acting even stranger than normal when I went to them."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean... it was almost as if they knew what was going on and didn't want to get involved. Like this is part of something way bigger than just a few orphans going missing. It was obvious they were turning a blind eye to something."

Moorin was exceptionally perceptive when it came to people. Oscar was inclined to believe her assessment of the guards. There was something bigger going on here.

He thought back to the disappearances that had been plaguing the city recently. The guard must have heard about them as well. And yet they chose not to get involved? *This isn't good... Does that mean someone with enough authority to silence the guards is involved here?* Panic gripped his chest.

This wasn't the time to be worrying about keeping secrets. He pulled a metal

sheet out of his pocket.

It was silver, and about the size of his palm. At a glance it seemed no different from a regular Status Plate, but its function was completely different.

“Activate protocol one. Trace targets Dylan, Ruth, Corrin, and Katy.” Oscar’s activation chant sounded extremely mechanical, completely unlike most spell chants.

The plate began to glow with a faint light. The light coalesced into four distinct points.

This was one of his artifacts, the Silver Slate. It was linked to the coins he’d given all the kids.

Those coins had been crafted with ore he’d enchanted with the light magic “Tracking.” He’d then linked those beacons to his Silver Slate, so he could always know where they were.

Tracking was good for tailing targets or keeping track of one’s allies in situations where visibility was poor. However, in both cases, it required the user to mark their targets beforehand.

Furthermore, if the caster’s mana ran out the spell faded. In other words, the caster was forced to continually maintain their concentration to keep the spell up. Despite its convenience, the spell was difficult to use.

Ore already enchanted with the spell didn’t exist outside of the things Oscar had created, which was why an artifact like his that allowed him to instantly pinpoint someone’s location was so impressive. Though its effects seemed plain, it was a high-class artifact and easily worth a fortune.

“The four of them are all together... and judging from the distance and the direction they’re... in the mine shafts?”

“Oscar?”

Oscar turned toward Moorin. She gasped, surprised by how serious his gaze was.

“Mom, I’ll bring Dylan and the others back. Do you remember how to activate the orphanage’s defenses?”

“Y-Yes. I’ll be fine.”

Oscar nodded and continued.

“Don’t step foot out of the orphanage tonight. I don’t care who comes, don’t answer the door unless it’s someone you absolutely trust. Even if it’s soldiers who show up, chase them away with the defense system. Take care of the other kids for me, too.”

“Okay, I will. But, Oscar... you be careful out there, you hear? I know you’d do anything to protect your family, but take care of yourself, too...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine, Mom.” Oscar smiled reassuringly, but it had no effect on Moorin. She smiled sadly back at him. *I guess I should have expected that.* Moorin knew her children better than they knew themselves. She even knew Oscar had hid his abnormal talents to protect his family.

Long ago he’d been a much more cheerful child, always smiling when the things he’d created made other people happy. But as time went on he’d gotten so accustomed to keeping that false smile plastered on his face that it had become the norm. Moorin watched as the eldest of her children dashed off into the night. He’d grown into a fine young man, but she worried he was sacrificing too much of himself for others.

After leaving the orphanage, Oscar made a quick stop at his house. He wanted to stock up on equipment.

Once he’d grabbed everything, he dressed himself in all black. Black pants, black shirt, black boots, black coat. And, for some reason, a black umbrella. His hair was black as well, so it really looked like every inch of him was covered in darkness.

He blended perfectly into the night. Though with his stylish glasses and umbrella, he looked more like a gentleman out for a stroll than an assassin or a burglar.

“They’re not moving...” Oscar kneeled down. A second later, he leaped a dozen meters into the air and landed atop the roof of a nearby building. After that superhuman jump, he ran across the rooftops with unbelievable speed.

This was another one of his artifacts, Onyx Boots. They increased his leg strength exponentially, and were enchanted with wind magic to aid in his leaps. He could also create mini-barriers beneath his soles, giving him platforms to leap off of in the air.

Oscar dashed through Velnika's rooftops with the speed of a gale. Before long, he'd reached the entrance to the Greenway.

The Greenway was the backbone of Velnika's economy, and many merchants, craftsmen, and even adventurers made their livelihood from it. Because of that, there were restrictions on who could enter, and when.

There weren't many people near the entrance this late at night, though.

No one took any notice of Oscar as he passed through the entrance gates.

He sped through the mine shafts, following the guidance of his Silver Slate. He'd been in here before, but tonight the light of the green glowstone felt eerier than usual.

He reached the end of the first floor. His beacon was nearly overlapping with that of Dylan and the others.

"Shit. I should have designed it to detect elevation as well." At this distance he should have been able to see the kids, but the only thing in front of him was the tunnel wall, which of course meant that Dylan and the others were further below.

The problem was, he didn't know how far below. He hadn't equipped his Silver Slate with the ability to gauge vertical distances.

"Wait, now that I think about it..." Oscar recalled something an adventurer had once told him. Apparently a lot of templar knights had been spotted in the middle floors of the Greenway. What was colloquially referred to as the middle floors was the set of floors from the 50th to the 70th.

Do they have something to do with the kids' disappearance?

"Guess I'll head there first... There's no time to waste, so we'll do things the fast way. Nothing matters more than their safety. Even if someone spots me, it's worth the risk." Oscar concentrated.

A second later, he was surrounded by a swirling halo of mana. It was so bright that it lit the floor up like a sun.

Around the same time, children's sobs echoed throughout the 65th floor.

Inside the complex network of passages that made up the floor was a prison. The jail cells had been carved directly out of the bedrock, with iron bars to cover the front. The children crying inside one of the cells had been given only a single flimsy blanket to ward off the cold. They huddled together, hugging their knees.

Among them, only one boy wasn't crying. Tears welled in his eyes, but he stubbornly refused to let them fall. It was Ruth.

As Oscar had feared, Ruth and the others had been kidnapped on their way home. They'd all been given some kind of magical inspection, and Ruth alone had been separated from the others.

What did they do to everyone else? Why'd they take only me? What's going to happen to me? Those worries swirled around inside Ruth's head, paralyzing him with fear. However...

Ruth looked at all the children crying around him. They were all around the same age as him. When he saw them, he was reminded of his own siblings from the orphanage.

"It's the eldest's job to protect his younger siblings." The words of the guy who he'd used to look up to, the guy who'd betrayed him flashed through his mind.

"I'm nothing like that smiling idiot!" Ruth used his anger to beat back the fear. He made up his mind and walked up to the iron bars.

He made sure there weren't any guards posted outside. After he was sure only the other kids were watching him, he bent down and picked up a stone. He started scratching the ground next to the bars.

He was drawing a simple magic circle. The guy he no longer respected had taught it to him long ago.

“You’re just like me, Ruth.” Like Oscar, Ruth was a Synergist. Oscar’s voice echoed in Ruth’s mind once again. He’d taught Ruth the basics of transmutation long ago.

Back then, Ruth had truly respected him. Oscar was kind, talented, and always worked hard. He could make anything he dreamed of a reality, and had even been scouted by the head of one the city’s best workshops. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say Ruth had worshiped Oscar.

He’d been prouder than anyone of him.

His dream had always been to one day be as good as Oscar, and have his name known across the world.

“I’m not gonna give up! I’m not a loser like you! I’m gonna be the greatest Synergist ever, just you watch! Transmute!” Blood dripping from his fingers, Ruth placed his hands on the ground and breathed life into the magic circle. Bright orange mana illuminated his corner of the cell.

The other kids watched in astonishment. They’d realized Ruth was trying to escape. They watched, glimmers of hope in their eyes. However...

“No... How come?” Ruth’s magic had activated, but neither the iron bars nor the ground had changed. Ruth chanted the spell again. He kept going until he was nearly out of mana. Sweat beaded down his forehead, and his body was shivering.

Unfortunately, reality didn’t care about how much effort you put into something.

“Why!?” Ruth’s mana dissipated. He slumped to his knees and banged his forehead against the bars.

Despite squeezing out enough courage to fight back, he’d been unable to do anything in the end.

“Are we ever going home?” One of the girls whispered. The children’s despair had multiplied after they watched their last glimmer of hope get snuffed out. They’d resigned themselves to their fate.

“Don’t worry, I’m here for you.” If it had been the old Oscar, Ruth might have

even believed those words. If it had been the Oscar who hadn't laughed insults off with that creepy smile of his, he might have believed those words. He would have continued to hope, and maybe share that hope with the other children.

But as it was, he couldn't. All that came to mind when he thought of Oscar was the boy who'd accepted being called a loser. And so, he didn't say anything. Ruth himself was about to give into despair.

Just then, though—

"Hey. What was that?" A suspicious voice called out to him. It didn't sound angry, but the children still shrank back in fear.

One of the guards on patrol had noticed the light from Ruth's transmutation and had come to investigate. The guard was actually a knight. He wore gleaming plate armor, and bore an insignia on his chest. He seemed conspicuously out of place in the Greenway.

The children didn't recognize the insignia, but most adults in the city would have. It was the emblem of the templar knights, the elite group of soldiers who swore loyalty to the Holy Church.

The knight didn't have his helmet on, but he still cut quite the imposing figure in full plate. Little wonder the children were scared of him. His intimidating presence left them all speechless, including Ruth.

He scrambled away from the bars, tripped, and fell on his back.

The knight's gaze fell on Ruth, then from there to what was in front of him... The transmutation circle Ruth had drawn.

"You brat... Were you trying to escape?"

"Hiii..."

A dangerous edge crept into the knight's voice. Ruth trembled, unable to do anything but scream.

"I guess I should have expected as much from one of the Incompatible. You don't even realize what an honor it is to be chosen as one of Ehit's servants... I was told to keep you lot alive, but no one said I couldn't rough you up a bit. Bad kids need to be punished, after all." The knight raised his hand. The magic circle

engraved on his gauntlet began to glow.

Those well-versed in magic would have recognized it as the magic circle for the Fireball spell.

The knight looked down at Ruth's legs, his thoughts written all over his face.

There was nothing Ruth could do to resist. He was so terrified he couldn't even move. And so, he squeezed his eyes shut.

The other children, no doubt aware of what was about to happen, shrieked and backed away.

"I'll burn the greatness of Ehit into your flesh!"

"I think not." A cool voice interjected. A second later, the knight groaned in pain.

Ruth timidly cracked open an eye. The knight was on the ground, and Oscar stood before him. For some reason, he was holding out a black umbrella.

"Huh? Ani...ki?"

"I haven't heard you call me that in a long time. I'm here to take you home, Ruth." Oscar smiled gently.

For a moment, Ruth's brain couldn't grasp that the man standing before him was Oscar.

His confusion was understandable. He was wearing strange clothes and carrying around a black umbrella. More than anything though, he didn't seem like his usual lazy, carefree self. No, this Oscar had a sharp glint in his eyes and looked dangerous. With his graceful features and fashionable glasses, he looked more like the accomplished son of a noble than a man who'd come out of an orphanage.

Oscar looked down at the floor in front of Ruth. When he spotted the magic circle, he stretched his hand out toward it.

"Oh, the transmutation didn't work..."

"Yep. That's because of what the bars are made of. Here, let me show you."

Golden yellow mana swirled around Oscar. He hadn't spoken a chant, or used

a magic circle, but he still achieved what Ruth hadn't been able to.

"The bars are made of sealstone. They dissolve mana. Most prisons use it, but even sealstone has its limits. If you put more mana into your transmutation than the ore can handle, you'll be able to reforge it like everything else." Oscar easily transmuted the bars, turning them into ingots of lead.

Then, he kneeled down and looked Ruth in the eye.

"You did good, Ruth. It's because you used transmutation magic that I could find you so quickly."

"Aniki... I..." Oscar ruffled Ruth's hair. Ruth's face scrunched up. His efforts hadn't been for nothing after all.

Oscar really had come to save them. When he'd reached the 65th floor, Oscar had found the kids' clothes, along with their coins stored in a safe.

They'd been stripped of all their possessions when they'd been kidnapped. This had effectively nullified Oscar's tracking. He'd decided to search the rest of the floor before doing anything else, and had found multiple templar knights on patrol. He'd been growing more suspicious by the minute when he'd sensed someone using transmutation magic. One of the knights had noticed too, and had gone to investigate. Oscar had stealthily followed after him.

Had it not been for Ruth, Oscar would still be searching aimlessly through this maze of a floor.

"I don't see Dylan and the others anywhere. Do you know where they are?" Ruth wiped away the tears that had finally fallen and shook his head.

"No. They brought all of us to this big building in the mines. There were these guys in white, and they made us all stand on this magic circle." There weren't many buildings inside the Greenway. *And if they were all wearing white, it's obvious they're part of the same organization.* Something very suspicious was going on, especially considering the templar knights had gotten involved. Oscar narrowed his eyes.

"I don't know what they were doing, but they said I wasn't compatible. They took Dylan and the others further inside the building, but they brought me here..."

“I see... I get it now. Thanks, Ruth. I’m glad you’re safe. I guess I should get you guys out of here first. Come on, everyone. It’s time to go home.” Oscar looked behind Ruth at the other children. They were staring at him in awe. His gentle tone helped ease their nervousness and they began shuffling out.

“We’re going home?”

“I can see Mommy and Daddy again?”

The children looked hopefully up at him.

“Yeah, don’t worry. You’ll get to go home and see your parents again. Just be quiet so the scary knights don’t find you.”

Ruth looked over at the knight Oscar had knocked out. Though he’d gotten the knight with a surprise attack, he’d still downed him in a single blow. Templar knights were known to be strong enough to take on five regular soldiers at once. No normal craftsman should have been able to take one out so easily.

“.....” Oscar didn’t look anything like the loser Ruth was accustomed to seeing, either. He’d transmuted the bars with such ease, and there was a sharpness to him that he didn’t recognize.

“What’s wrong, Ruth? We don’t have much time. We need to hurry.”

“I-I know that!” Ruth snapped back, irked at being interrupted in the middle of thinking, but Oscar didn’t respond at all. Instead, he just smiled.

That was how he always was. Whenever he was faced with something unpleasant, he just laughed it off. And yet, the smile Oscar gave Ruth this time somehow felt different.

Questions whirled around in Ruth’s head.

Oscar led the children through the cavern. Ruth trailed at the end of the line, carefully scrutinizing his brother’s back. He was torn between believing in Oscar again and the voice in his mind that told him he’d only be disappointed once more if he hoped.

Oscar felt Ruth’s burning gaze, but he didn’t address it. He focused on avoiding the patrols of knights and led the children to where he’d initially come

down from.

Next to the safe that had stored their clothes and Ruth's coin. Though safe was perhaps too grand a word for what was really just a hollow indent covered with bars. There were spare workers clothes and a few other miscellaneous tools stored inside it as well. It was obviously not meant to hold anything important.

Oscar transmuted the bars and walked through them.

He put his hand to the wall in the back, and mana the color of sunlight enveloped him. There was a warmth to his mana that made it feel like actual sunlight.

"Wow, it's so pretty!"

"Amazing."

The children watched in amazement. For some reason this made Ruth, not Oscar, blush. He kept stealing glances at Oscar's work, but tried to make it look like he wasn't interested.

Oscar's spell only took a few seconds. The wall had been transformed into a staircase leading upward.

"Alright everyone, listen up. There's still other kids out there. I need to go save them. This staircase will take you all the way back to the first floor. Can you guys go up it without me?"

Was there a staircase like that on this floor? Ruth puzzled over that while the other kids exchanged nervous glances. They'd been hoping Oscar would take them all the way home. They were scared of going without him.

"Don't worry. Ruth here's my little brother. He's a brave guy. He'll lead you guys out of the Greenway."

"Huh!?" Ruth exclaimed in surprise. The children all turned to him.

He certainly had been the only one to try and use magic to escape, so the children were willing to trust him a little.

Since he couldn't follow them out, Oscar transmuted a few maps for the children. He carved out disk-shaped slabs of rock from the wall and engraved a

map of the first floor onto them.

“Ah, that’s the map of the first floor! My dad sells that to tourists!” One of the children recognized it.

The others crowded around, eager to get a glimpse of the maps.

Oscar’s maps were so detailed that they looked like they had been drawn by a master artist. Oscar’s golden mana faded away as he finished working.

“Take these. I’ve marked the shortest route to the exit. Follow that and you’ll be able to get out. Can I count on you to guide my brother if he gets lost?”

“I-I’m not a kid! I wouldn’t get lost on the first floor!” Ruth protested hotly. However, Oscar’s words had reassured the other boy. He was less nervous now that he had a role to play as well.

“I have one last request for you guys. See how there’s another map on the back of these disks? That’s the map to the Orcus Workshop. I know you all want to go home, but I need you guys to go there first and tell a man named Karg what’s going on. I need his help to save all the other kids.” In truth, Oscar just wanted Karg to look after them. If the templar knights were involved, then he couldn’t trust any public institution to keep them safe.

If the kids went back to their families, it was likely their parents would inform the guard. That was the last thing Oscar wanted. It was obvious the guard would report his actions to the Holy Church.

He couldn’t exactly tell the children not to trust the town guard, either. Because they’d assume if they couldn’t trust the guard, they could still trust the Holy Church.

And they wouldn’t believe him if he told them not to trust the Holy Church, either. If anything, that would make them more suspicious of him.

And so, he’d decided to send them to the one person with authority in this city that Oscar knew he could trust. He knew Karg would handle things discreetly.

Oscar hid his true intentions behind an explanation that was easier for the children to swallow. Ruth stared at Oscar suspiciously, but the kids were all

eager to get going. They all puffed out their chests and said things like “Leave it to us!” or “We’ll do it!”

“Thanks. You’re all really brave.”

The kids blushed in embarrassment. Oscar ushered them forward, and they began climbing the steps.

As always, Ruth took the position of rearguard. Though this time he’d done so because he wanted to hang back and talk to Oscar before leaving. Once they were alone, though, he found himself at a loss for words.

“Go on, Ruth. We don’t have much time. You know the first floor better than anyone, and you’ve met the old geezer before too.”

“I-I know. But... Aniki, you really weren’t—” Oscar knew what Ruth was trying to say, but he interrupted him before Ruth could finish.

“Ruth, get down!”

“Ah!?”

Oscar pulled Ruth close and buried him underneath his coat. A gust of hot wind blew past Ruth’s head and there was a loud boom behind him.

Oscar’s black coat had deflected the attack, but Ruth paled when he turned to look at what had happened.

“Wh-What the?”

“I know I had to make sure the kids were safe, but it looks like I wasted too much time here...”

The bottom part of the staircase was a smoldering mess.

Ruth realized what must have happened, and his heart sank.

“Stealing an offering to Ehit is an offense punishable by death.” Ten templar knights rounded the corner, their armor clanking as they walked. One of them had their arm outstretched.

He was the one who’d shot those flames at them. Thankfully, the children had already started climbing, so they hadn’t been hit by the spell.

The knights formed a semi-circle around the cavity. Since it had just been an

indent that was transformed into a storage area, it was effectively a dead-end. The knights were blocking the only way out.

Oscar glanced back. In order to let Ruth escape he'd first need to douse the flames and retransmute the stairs. Then, he'd have to create a wall around them using the sealstone he'd transmuted to keep the knights from chasing after the kids.

"Trying to run away, are we? Let's see you try, you little heretic. We'll end you the moment you turn your back to us." Oscar would have to deal with the knights first.

He prepared to fight.

He'd brought this upon himself. From a purely logical standpoint, it would have been better to let Ruth get burned. He wouldn't have died, and Oscar could have healed him later. Then, he would have been able to go to Dylan and the others right away, and they would have escaped.

Though I probably couldn't ever forgive myself for doing that... Oscar smiled bitterly to himself.

The knights drew their swords. One of them was glowing with mana and stuck a hand out toward him. Judging by the force of the previous spell, Oscar guessed it had been the intermediate-rank Crimson Spear.

Strong enough to melt even their bones if it hit.

"A-Aniki, don't! I-If you apologize I'm sure—"

Ruth pulled on Oscar's coat. He still thought they could get out of this by apologizing. *If only you knew.*

Ruth didn't think they could win a fight. After all, Oscar was up against templar knights. The best of the best, strong enough to kick about normal soldiers with ease. Even if Oscar had been hiding his talents, he was still just a Synergist. A blacksmith, not a warrior.

Still, Oscar was determined.

"Don't worry. I won't let them hurt you." He turned to face the knights. There wasn't even a hint of fear in his expression.

Looking at him, Ruth was reassured. He stared at the back of the man who he'd thought of as a loser.

"You won't let us hurt him, huh? Looks like someone needs to be taught their place." The knights were irritated.

One of them scratched his chin thoughtfully. It seemed he was considering something.

He came to some kind of conclusion and addressed Oscar, his voice dripping with casual malice.

"Here, I'll give you a choice."

"What do you mean?"

Oscar asked suspiciously.

"You raised a hand against a templar knight. On top of that, you stole Ehit's offerings. A heretic like you deserves to be cut down on the spot."

"Your point?"

"Abandon the brat."

Oscar raised an eyebrow. He could see exactly where the knight was going with this. He didn't like it one bit.

"He's family, right? Well, dump him and beg for your life. Pray for Ehit's forgiveness. If you do, I'll consider letting you live. So, what's it gonna be? Throw away your life, or throw away your pride?"

The knights' shoulders shook from barely suppressed laughter. They weren't mad at their comrade for saying something so insulting.

No, they were enjoying it. They thought they had an overwhelming advantage, and they were using it to try and torment Oscar.

They wanted to see him weigh Ruth's life against his own. They wanted to know what kind of person he really was.

"Sheesh... I never realized you knights were so rotten."

"What was that? Bastard, I dare you to say that again!"

Oscar just shrugged his shoulders. He didn't look conflicted at all. He'd spoken relatively softly, but his voice had carried far thanks to the cavern's acoustics. The knights hadn't expected this response.

In fact, they were a little shaken by Oscar's unwavering confidence. He gave the knights a thumbs-up.

"The Holy Church, you templar knights, all of the priests, and even Ehit can suck my dick." He turned his hand so his thumb was facing down.

"Wh-Wh-What was that!? You damned heretic! Die! Be executed! Receive divine punishment!" The knights' anger was unbelievable. They were so furious that they could barely form proper sentences. The lead knight unleashed his Crimson Javelin.

"Aniki!" Ruth's scream bounced across the walls.

The flaming spear hurtled toward Oscar. He could feel the heat coming off it as it closed in on him.

"I wish you'd just done this from the start instead of trying that disgusting Q&A on me," he said, his voice completely calm.

"No way..." The knights staggered backward.

The javelin scattered, blown away by a glowing object in Oscar's hands.

It was his umbrella.

The black umbrella he'd taken from his house. He'd held it in front of him like a shield, and it had completely blocked an intermediate-rank fire spell.



“I’ll start with you.” An umbrella had blocked magic. The knights were still struggling to comprehend that fact, but Oscar wasn’t going to give them time to get their bearings. There was a soft whoosh, and something shot out of his umbrella.

“Guoh!? Was that an arrow!?” Indeed, Oscar’s umbrella had fired a small metal arrow. It slammed into the breastplate of the knight who’d fired the Crimson Javelin.

“But something like this won’t even pierce... Ah!?” The arrow had possessed quite a bit of force, but nowhere near enough to punch through the knight’s armor. That was why he’d thought there was nothing to worry about. How wrong he was.

The arrow started emitting sparks, and a powerful electric current flowed down it and into the knight.

He was struck directly by an intermediate-class lightning spell. Even someone as strong as him couldn’t take that head on.

“Gah...” He slumped to the ground, white smoke rising from his armor.

Oscar folded his umbrella. In that state, it looked more like a cane.

There was a moment of silence.

“You bastaaaaaard!”

“Curse you, heretic!”

After which the knights all charged at once.

Despite being in full plate, they were fast. One of them was mere feet from Oscar now.

Oscar flung the hem of his coat backward, revealing a holster strapped to his thigh. He pulled out the throwing knives stored within and flung them at the knights.

They struck the ground inches in front of the knights.

“Hah, fool. You miss—” The knives exploded, interrupting the knight’s taunt and sending them all careening backward.

This was another one of his artifacts, Combustion Blades. He'd made his own miniaturized enchanted weapons. Enchanted weapons were, as their name suggested, magically enhanced weapons. Most were rare and valuable enough to be a national treasure.

Oscar had just thrown a few out like they were nothing. Anyone who knew their worth would have fainted at how casually Oscar wasted such valuable weapons, but for him, this was nothing. He made objects of that level in his spare time for fun.

The explosions had thrown the knights' formation into disarray. Oscar nimbly sidestepped around them.

"You really should pay more attention to your feet." He hooked his umbrella around the feet of a knight and tripped him.

"Whoa!?" The knight fell flat on his face.

The other knights quickly reformed their ranks and charged.

Oscar turned to the knights and trained his glasses on them. They emitted a blinding flash of light. These were yet another one of his artifacts, Obsidian Spectacles. He'd packed a multitude of features into the frame and lenses. A person like him wouldn't wear just any old spectacles.

"My eyeeeeees!" As the knights stumbled around, Oscar pulled out more throwing knives and lobbed them. These ones didn't explode. In fact, a single glance was enough to tell that they were different from the previous ones. As they flew through the air, the knives began to glow red hot.

These were yet another one of his enchanted weapons, Heater Knives. They sliced through the knights' armor like, well, a hot knife through butter. The heat melted any flesh it came into contact with.

It looked like their armor had just gone through a blast furnace. The heat was great enough that it melted the knives too, and the knights screamed in agony as the molten metal burned them to death.

The remaining knights backed away in fear, but Oscar wasn't even looking at them. His focus was on the knight in the very back. The one who was chanting a spell.

“Die, you monster!” The knight Oscar had tripped earlier got to his knees and sliced at Oscar’s feet.

Oscar stretched his left hand out toward the chanting knight while expertly blocking the knight’s blow with his umbrella.

There was an unexpected metallic clang as the sword slammed into Oscar’s umbrella.

“What kind of umbrella is that!?” It was, of course, another artifact. It had been enchanted with body strengthening, and made from an alloy of the hardest metals in existence.

Naturally, he didn’t tell the knight that. It wasn’t just the handle that was super-hard, either. The part that was supposed to keep off water and normally made of cloth was actually composed of metal mesh as well. The whole thing weighed a solid eight kilograms.

It made for a great blunt weapon. Oscar didn’t feel its weight since he was using body strengthening, but the knight definitely did.

Oscar snapped his wrist, flipping the umbrella around in his hand. Then, he slammed the handle into the knight’s neck.

“Uwah, what the!?”

“Guaaah!?”

The blow sent the knight careening into the path of a different knight, who’d just been about to stab Oscar. Instead, he ended up stabbing his comrade. Unfortunately, the knight had strengthened his sword with light magic, hoping to finish off Oscar in one blow. His strengthened sword punched through his comrades armor, killing him instantly.

The knight in the back screamed at the same time.

The few remaining knights turned around to see that he’d been stripped naked and bound head to toe in slender chains.

There was an ingot of some kind of metal at his feet, and white smoke rose from his body.

Upon closer inspection, the knights noticed electric sparks running down the

chains.

The chains had been sent by Oscar, of course. When he'd pointed his left arm at the knight, the chains had flown out of his sleeve.

Yet another one of his artifacts, Metamorph Chains. Normally, Synergists could only transmute things they were touching directly, or things that were a short distance away from whatever they were touching directly. The chains helped overcome that restriction. They were made out of spirit stone, so he could control them remotely, and they allowed Oscar to accurately transmute anything they were touching.

Such a godlike feat was only possible through the combination of Oscar's outstanding transmutation abilities and the artifacts he'd created.

Without an incantation, Oscar had transmuted the knight's armor into ingots of metal, then activated the lightning magic he'd enchanted his chains with.

"Take him down with magic!" They realized now that he had a myriad of weapons. Four of their number had already been killed. This was no longer the time to be acting cocky. They needed to take this threat seriously.

They fell into a proper formation. The vanguard would hold him at bay while the rearguard prepared their spells.

In the time it took for them to get into formation, Oscar pulled out another three throwing knives and hurled them at the backline.

"Don't think that'll work on us again!"

The vanguard batted away his knives. Since these knives hadn't started heating up the knights had assumed they were the exploding type. They'd figured they could withstand the blast and had risked hitting them.

Their instantaneous judgment was truly praiseworthy. If this really had been one of the same knives that Oscar had thrown before, it might even have been a good plan.

"The forecast for today is localized showers with a chance of hail. Do be careful when heading underground." Oscar raised his umbrella over his head. It glowed golden with his mana, and a second later water started spraying from

the umbrella's canopy.

It was a strange sight, seeing an umbrella create rain rather than ward against it. The knights paid it no mind though, and charged forward after judging the water not a threat.

"Watch your step."

"Ice magic!? When did he cast that!?"

"The knives! They were enchanted!"

Bingo. The knives he'd thrown that time were the enchanted weapons, Ice Daggers. They froze the area around whatever they struck. The water Oscar had drenched them all in had amplified their effect.

The three knights in the vanguard had their legs frozen, and couldn't move.

"But now you're finished!" The rearguard had finished chanting their spells.

They held their swords aloft, their bodies surrounded by a radiant halo of mana. Their target wasn't Oscar, but Ruth. That way, Oscar wouldn't be able to dodge.

"Take this, heretic! Tremble before the might of the templar knights' ultimate technique!" Oscar kneeled in front of Ruth and stuck out his umbrella. It was time to see if his shield could withstand the templar knights' strongest attack.

"Celestial Flash!" This was the technique the knights were known best for. Three shockwaves clad in Ehit's fury hurtled toward Oscar. Being able to use this skill was the requirement to become a templar knight.

Celestial Flash was an advance-rank light spell. It was so powerful that it could shatter through barriers of similar rank.

And Oscar was facing down three at once. Everyone expected him to die.

"Aniki!"

"It's fine."

Ruth was scared out of his wits, but Oscar was as calm as always.

Booooooooom... The shockwaves of light smashed into his umbrella. There were furrows in the ground where they'd passed through.

“That spell can take down even advance-rank barriers. I don’t care if you made that umbrella out of Azantium. There’s no way you can take three of those at... once?” The knight lowered his sword as he spoke. At the end, his voice trembled.

“This is the first time I’ve tested this against a Templar Knight’s Celestial Flash, but I should have known Hallowed Ground could take it. It was worth spending three whole days crafting this.” Oscar was completely unscathed. His umbrella wasn’t even scratched. In fact, it was shining brighter than the Celestial Flashes had been.

He’d enchanted it with the strongest barrier spell known to man, Hallowed Ground. It had taken him three whole days to enchant his azantium umbrella with it. He had no aptitude for light magic or defensive magic, so it had taken him much longer than anything else, but the result was the strongest shield ever seen.

The umbrella wasn’t just made of azantium, either. It was a compound alloy that included sealstone in it as well. The alloy alone was nearly indestructible. Combined with a barrier spell, it became truly invincible.

“Impossible... There’s no way! What in Ehit’s name are you!?” The ice holding the vanguard in place had melted, and in their panic, the knights prepared to charge again. They’d lost their ability to think straight after seeing Oscar casually shrug off their strongest attack.

Oscar calmly snapped his umbrella shut and stood up. Then, he held the handle in both hands and slowly lowered the tip.

“I’m just your average Synergist.” He said, as he tapped the umbrella’s ferrule to the stone floor.

Huge cracks spread out from the point of impact.

“R-Retreat! Retreaaa—” The lead knight had a very bad feeling about those fissures and called out the order to retreat, but it was too late. As he’d moved around the battlefield, Oscar had transmuted certain points in the floor. Underneath a thin surface layer of rock, the ground below had been transformed into coarse grains even finer than sand.

That thin layer of rock wasn't able to bear the knights' weight, and it crumbled underneath them. They all fell into the sandpit trap Oscar had set up around them. It was actually shallow enough for them to stand in, but they were so panicked that they looked like drowning sailors.

"*Cough...* You bastard! Don't think you'll *cough...* be able to *cough...* get away this this!"

"Transmute." Oscar's voice was pitiless. The sand pit was surrounded in golden light. It slowly began to coalesce back into hard stone.

Realizing what was happening to them, the knights reached out desperately toward Oscar.

"N-No please, forgive—"

"Will you value human life more than Ehit's will? I might consider letting you live if you do." It was hard to tell if he was trying to get back at the knights for giving him two unreasonable choices, or if he truly wished for them to realize the error of their ways.

It didn't matter though, as the knights were too stubborn to change their ways.

"Nothing is more important than Ehit's will! *Cough...* How can you not realize that!? If you repent your sins now, you might still be—" Oscar had thought they'd been begging for forgiveness at first, but it seemed they'd actually been trying to say "forgiveness is still within reach for you."

"Didn't even want to consider it, huh?" Oscar muttered quietly to himself as he sealed the knights into their stone tomb.

Once the deed was done, he breathed a tired sigh. It had been his first time facing templar knights, and he'd actually been rather nervous.

He relaxed now though, and because of that he didn't notice the figure that had been hiding further down the passage, nor did he notice when it dashed off.

Ruth watched in amazement as Oscar buried the templar knights alive.

He wasn't confused by Oscar's unbelievable strength. No, in fact, a sense of happiness he couldn't quite describe welled up within him.

The brother he'd admired for so long really wasn't a loser. He'd had the courage to come down here alone, just to rescue his family. And his Synergist skills were even greater than Ruth had initially thought.

He was so strong that even templar knights couldn't beat him. Ruth was a fledgling Synergist himself, which was why he could tell Oscar's abilities far surpassed that of any normal Synergist.

No, surpassed wasn't quite the right term. He'd been able to transmute sealstone, an ore that was supposed to resist magic. He realized now that that staircase heading straight to the first floor had been made by Oscar too. It must have been how he'd reached Ruth so quickly. *How good do you have to be to make a 65 floor staircase in a few seconds?*

This was what it meant to be a master. All of the various tools Oscar had used to defeat the templar knights were artifact-level masterpieces; and he'd made them all himself.

Ruth didn't know why Oscar had been hiding his talent all this time, but that didn't really matter. *Aniki's even greater than I thought he was!* That was what was important.

"Ruth, are you alright?"

"Y-Yeah! Aniki, I'm sorry I misunderstood you all this time..." Oscar gently patted Ruth's head.

"It's fine, Ruth. It was my fault to begin with. Anyway—" Oscar fixed up the staircase heading to the first floor.

"I'm sure the kids who went on ahead are worried about you. Go look after them for me."

"But... I want to help you... You're going to save Dylan and the others..." He couldn't just leave his siblings behind. But more than that, he wanted to help his brother, to make up for being mean to him all this time. He wanted to chase after him like he had in the past. Oscar could tell from Ruth's gaze.

Just then, the pair heard the familiar clanking of plate armor. The knights had been overconfident, and hadn't bothered to request backup when they'd engaged Oscar. That had been a real help while he'd been fighting, but of course other squads must have heard the commotion.

"Hurry up and go, Ruth."

"But—" Ruth glanced back and forth between Oscar and the staircase. Oscar smiled fearlessly, something Ruth had never seen him do.

"I'll take care of Dylan and the others, but you need to look after these kids. You're my little brother, Ruth. I know you can do this." Ruth could tell Oscar was just trying to give him a way to make it look like he wasn't running, but after being told all that, there was no way he could say no. He bounded up the first few stairs and turned back to Oscar.

"Aniki. Take a right at the fork we passed through. From there, follow the path with the low ceiling made of flamrock. Then, go right where the walls are made of stratified shtar. After that, follow the taur and blastrock tunnel. Then, take a turn at the corner where the green glowstone is chipped! That's where the building they took us to is! Keep Dylan and the others safe!" With that, he turned back around and dashed up the stairs.

Oscar was a little surprised at how detailed Ruth's description was. Still, he quickly closed up the entrance to the staircase, transmuting it to look exactly like the wall around it.

"He really is my younger brother. He'll grow up to be a fine Synergist." Oscar twirled his umbrella. He smiled, proud at how much his brother had grown, and dashed off down the corridor, following Ruth's directions.

He came across a number of templar knights on his way. Some he defeated with his artifacts, others he buried in walls, and yet others he fled from by transmuting himself through the walls.

Finally, he spotted a glow in the distance. Not the natural glow of green glowstone, but the soft light of lanterns.

"Ah!" Oscar quickly hid himself behind a nearby boulder.

The reason why was simple. The passage opened out into a dome-shaped

room with a ceiling that was twenty meters high. There was an ornate building in the center, and a veritable army of templar knights guarding it.

There were at least thirty of them. Judging by the building's size, the number of storage sheds scattered around it, and the fence surrounding the compound, Oscar guessed that it was no ordinary facility.

Makes sense most of them would be here if they've gotten reports that there's an intruder on the loose. I don't regret doing what I did, but I really should have been faster about it... Now then, how to handle this? Should I just transmute an underground tunnel leading directly into the building?

Before he could put his plan into action, however, he was spotted.

"Get out here, heretic. We know you're hiding." An old, grizzled voice echoed through the room.

Guess they found me.

Of course, he had no reason to actually show himself. He could hear men closing in from behind as well. It was time to make himself scarce. He put his hands on the ground, preparing to transmute himself a new hiding place.

Sadly, things didn't go as planned. In fact, the worst possible thing happened...

"You came to steal this kid from us, didn't you?"

"Ah!" Chills ran down Oscar's spine. He timidly poked his head out.

"Oh no—" One of the men had Corrin by the scruff of her collar.

Why? How? Had they known Corrin was one of his sisters? But when did they find out? And who told them? Those questions whirled around in his mind.

His confusion was understandable. His enemies shouldn't have known who he was. Had they assumed he was here to take all the children back, and had picked a hostage at random? No. They wouldn't have said "this kid" if that was true.

Not only did they know who Oscar was, they knew who he was close to.

Where did I slip up? He had either defeated every knight he'd come across, or

fled from them before they got a good look at his face. Or at least, he thought he had. It seemed his countermeasures hadn't been perfect.

He clicked his tongue impatiently and stepped out behind the boulder. Corrin smiled when she saw Oscar.

"Ah, Onii— Ow!" Before she could finish her sentence, the man holding her tightened his grip on her neck. Her face twisted in pain.

"Stop tormenting little kids. Don't you have even a shred of humanity left in you?"

"What would a heretic like you know about humanity? Know your place, you Orcus Workshop dropout."

They exchanged insults. Oscar was surprised how much information they'd gathered on him. He adjusted his glasses to hide his shock. And, at the same time, he examined the man.

His face had more wrinkles than he could count. It was obvious he was old. However, the flames of ambition still burned brightly in his eyes. Old though he was, it seemed his hunger for power hadn't faded in the slightest.

His clothes, too, stood out. They were made of high-quality fabric, and were ornately decorated. It was clearly a priest's garment. No low-ranking deacon or curate's habit, either.

These were the robes of a bishop... The bishop of Velka to be exact.

"Those clothes, and that face... I remember who you are now. So you were the one behind the kidnappings, Forneus Abyssion." Though he hadn't believed, Oscar had still joined the Holy Church to avoid raising suspicion. But he hadn't been able to stomach their doctrine, and had rarely shown his face. Still, he had a vague recollection of the bishop from the few times he'd gone.

Forneus' eyes narrowed in anger. He couldn't believe it had taken that long for Oscar to remember his own bishop.

"You thrice-damned heretic. How dare you forget the face of your exalted bishop? Such a heinous crime is deserving of death!"

There sure are a lot of crimes punishable by death according to the Holy

Church... The bishop went on to talk about how dangerous heretics were, how wonderful the Holy Church was, and how he'd been ordained by Ehit himself for this holy mission. Oscar ignored him completely.

He'd provoked the bishop in the first place in order to buy himself some time. During the bishop's rant, he'd transmuted the ground underneath them, turning the terrain to his advantage. Then, he quietly sent out his Metamorph Chains, setting up traps in various locations.

Oscar held his umbrella in both hands like a sword, tip pointed at the ground. His pose looked regal, like a knight standing before a challenger. He kept his gaze focused on Corrin all the while.

Don't worry, Corrin, I'll save you.

Okay, Onii-chan! They didn't need words to communicate with each other. Corrin was scared out of her wits, but she had absolute faith that Oscar would save her. She managed a weak smile.

A panicked, familiar voice interrupted the bishop's speech.

"L-Lord Bishop! Your glorious sermon is wasted on this worthless plebeian! Kill him and be done with it! So long as you hold the child, he cannot fight back!" They were trying to cut the time Oscar had bought short.

However, hearing that voice had finally made Oscar understand the truth of the situation. He realized why Forneus had known so much about him, and also why Forneus had taken Corrin hostage. Plus, most importantly of all, he finally knew exactly why his brothers and sisters had been captured in the first place.

It's them. People had told Oscar they'd spotted them wandering around the residential district.

"You're the only reason I can think of for them to come down here." Oscar remembered the words the adventurer had told him.

So that's how it is. Golden-yellow mana swirled around Oscar.

"So you're the one responsible for hurting my family."

"Hiii!?"

"Uwaaah..."

“N-No, we’re...” Ping, Torpa, and Raul all took an involuntary step backward.

Oscar’s eyes burned with anger as the light wrapped itself around him. His anger hit them like a physical force. Even some of the templar knights balked.

He had far more mana than any human they’d seen before.

Oscar hadn’t finished all of his preparations yet, but he couldn’t hold back his anger any longer. He’d appeared calm, but when he’d first seen Corrin taken hostage he’d already been furious. And then, when Forneus had started talking he’d barely held himself in check, but the appearance of Ping and his cronies had tipped him over the edge. What made it worse was that they’d done this all because of a petty grudge.

Because of these three dumb bullies, Oscar’s family had been put in danger. It seemed his loser act had made them think they could walk all over him. And so, he was furious not only at them, but at himself for letting this happen.

“How are you using your mana like that!? Don’t tell me you’re— Ngh, you blasted heretic! Don’t you care about what happens to her!?”

Corrin screamed as Forneus dragged her closer. He pulled out a magic stone the size of his pinky finger and held it to Corrin’s mouth.

Oscar had no idea what it was, but that didn’t matter.

He stuck out his black umbrella. Forneus and the knights were still stunned by the monstrous amount of mana coming out of him, so they were slow to react. The umbrella absorbed all of his mana and unleashed an unbelievably powerful gale.

His Black Umbrella artifact had multiple abilities. This was the sixth of them— Godstorm.

“Nuwaaaaaah!?”

“Kyaaa!?”

The windstorm was powerful enough to send even the templar knights flying. There was no way Ping, Corrin, and the bishop would be able to withstand it. However, Corrin remained where she was. Oscar’s chains had snaked out of the ground and kept her from being blown away. Still, the wind had swept her off

her feet, and she screamed as the gale lifted her into the air.

The chains clanked against each other as they wound their way back to Oscar's hand.

"It's... Well, it's not alright, but you're safe now, Corrin."

"Waaaaaah, O-Onii-chan!"

Oscar retrieved Corrin and hugged her tight. She hugged him back, her eyes still spinning.

Once the dizziness faded, she looked up at Oscar and smiled. She had no doubt that his arms were the safest place in the world.

"Kill him! I want his head on a pike right this instant! Punish that heretic!"

The bishop and his knights had been knocked around quite a bit by Oscar's Godstorm. The bishop's once-fine clothes were smeared with mud and debris.

The knights charged at Oscar.

He stomped on the ground in front of him, Corrin held in one arm. The ground glowed with light, and in seconds it had been transmuted into a thick stone wall.

"You're just delaying the inevitable!" One of the knights raised his sword and began chanting. He could shatter a barrier like that in an instant. Judging from the light running down his sword, Oscar assumed he was casting Celestial Flash. *So he'll just cut right through it.*

"Sorry, but this isn't actually a barrier," Oscar muttered, then thrust his umbrella into the wall.

There was a thunderous roar.

A second later—

"Gwaaah!?"

"Fuck, how did he cast something so powerful in an instant!?"

"Ngh... What in Ehit's name is that umbrella!?" The knights screamed in pain and confusion.

When he'd stuck his umbrella into the wall, he'd created a shockwave that had shattered the wall and sent chunks of stone hurtling toward the knights.

This was his umbrella's second ability— Wall Blast. It utilized a fusion of wind and fire magic to create an explosive blast. Normally, that blast was meant to knock down enemy attacks, but Oscar had combined it with his transmutation to make it into an offensive spell as well. It had taken him nearly half a month to enchant his umbrella with the spell.

The fiery shockwave and the barrage of rocks that accompanied it destroyed the knights' formation.

"Corrin, hang on tight!"

"O-Okay!" Corrin clung to Oscar's neck as he stabbed his umbrella into the ground in front of him.

The ground a few meters in front of him froze over.

This was the fourth of his Black Umbrella's abilities— Flash Freeze. This was just a straight port of the intermediate ice spell, Flash Freeze. So long as he maintained the spell, it would freeze all of a set area in front of the direction he was facing.

"Not this time!" The knights didn't know what Oscar was up to, but they weren't waiting to find out. Those still standing launched Crimson Javelins at him. Oscar found himself facing a crossfire of magical lances.

Using his Onyx Boots to enhance his leg strength, Oscar leaped forward. The javelins crashed into the wall behind him, exploding in a torrent of flames.

The knights fired another barrage at him, and this time Oscar bent his back right before the javelins struck, making them pass harmlessly over his head.

Normally bending so far backward would have caused him to fall, or at least made him stop to regain his balance. Instead, the ground he'd frozen over allowed him to keep sliding.

"Curses, someone stop him!" The knights watched as Oscar slid his way across the ice field he'd made for himself. He moved at an alarmingly fast pace. Any time he seemed about to run out of ice to slide on, his umbrella made more for

him.

The knights pelted him with spells, but he proved difficult to hit. His speed and unorthodox posture helped him avoid every spell thrown his way.

Eventually, his wild slide took him right to Forneus.

“Hiii! Get away from me! You fools, do something about him!” Forneus legs gave out under him, and he fell backward.

“I won’t let you— Celestial Flash!” A shockwave of light split the ground between Oscar and Forneus. It left deep furrows in the ground.

However, Oscar got back to his feet and leaped into the air.

“Fool, you’re finished now!”

“You can’t dodge midair!”

Two more knights unleashed their Celestial Flashes. They came at Oscar from both sides, catching him in a pincer attack.

“Actually, I can.” Oscar didn’t seem worried at all.

He leaped up a second time, propelling himself even higher into the sky.

This was another feature of his Onyx Boots, Footholds of Light. He’d enchanted the boots with one of the most basic light spells, Holy Shield. Except he’d reversed the effect, allowing his boots to create platforms made of light to jump off of, even in midair.

“What the!?”

“Impossible!”

The Celestial Flashes crossed paths underneath him and slammed into opposing walls.

Oscar swung his umbrella down at one of the knights, making blades of wind shoot out from it. The knight’s armor saved him from instant death, but the wind blades were still powerful enough to slice through the metal and leave him bleeding.

Then, Oscar landed right next to Forneus.

“Don’t move. You move even a finger, and I cut your head off.”

“B-Bastard, who do you think— Hiii!” Forneus tried to protest, but quickly fell silent as Oscar transformed the tips of his umbrella into blades and rested them against his neck.

“You knights don’t want your bishop to die, right? Then you better not move. Ping, you too.” The knights froze in place. Ping and his cronies had been trying to sneak away in the confusion. However, they froze in terror when Oscar’s chains burst out of the ground in front of them.

After seeing Oscar beat down an entire squad of knights with a little girl in his arms, they were absolutely terrified of him.

“Now then, Bishop Forneus... Tell me.”

“T-Tell you what?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Where Dylan and Katy are. The other two kids you stole from the orphanage. Actually, if you’ve got any other kids in there too, free them as well.”

“Free them?” Forneus had been trembling in fear thus far, but an edge of anger creeped into his voice.

“Yeah, you heard me. I have no idea what you’re planning on doing with them, but whatever it is, it can’t be good. Return the city’s children to their parents.”

Forneus made to protest, but then he hesitated. After a second of deliberation, a hateful smile split his face and he nodded.

“Very well. These children were chosen for this duty by Ehit himself. There is nothing to “free” them from... Still, if you really want to see them that badly, I’ll bring them out. Enjoy your little reunion!”

“What are you scheming?”

“I’m just here to watch your touching reunion. See how your family has been transformed into part of Ehit’s loyal army!” Forneus’ eyes opened wide. His gaze was directed not at Oscar, but at one of the knights.

“Don’t move!” Oscar’s warning was unnecessary. The knight wasn’t trying to

move. Though, his mouth had been moving this entire time. As his helmet covered his face however, Oscar hadn't noticed. Nor had he noticed the magic circle engraved on the inside of the knight's helmet glowing.

He'd been using Telepathy to communicate with the people inside the building.

Unbeknownst to Oscar, they'd already unleashed the ultimate weapon. And so, his warning came too late.

The knight didn't move, but the building's door did. It creaked open.

"Groooooooooorrr!" And, from behind it, a beast's voice echoed through the room.

"What the!?" Oscar turned to the source of the noise, but a giant clod of metal filled his vision.

"Ah!?" Fortunately, he managed to get his umbrella up to defend him just in time.

The lump of metal crashed into his umbrella with a loud thud, and the shock of the impact traveled down his arm. The force of it sent him flying backward.

Had he not strengthened his umbrella, and had it not weighed eight kilograms, Oscar doubted it would have been able to block the lump at all. Even if he might have come out of the impact alive, it could have killed Corrin.

Corrin screamed, and Oscar sent his chains running across the ground.

He remotely transmuted the ground below them to cushion their fall. Then, using his boots' Footholds of Light and Updraft spells he'd enchanted them with to adjust his position in midair, he landed on his back, protecting Corrin. His coat further cushioned the impact, making the landing perfectly smooth.

Eventually, he rolled backward and got to his feet, sticking the tip of his umbrella into the ground to grind him to a halt.

"Raaaaaaaaah!" He heard another roar, this one much closer.

"Huh!? Ability ten, Hallowed Ground! Activate!" Normally, Oscar didn't need to call out the name of his abilities to activate them, since he could control mana directly and all. However, he was so flustered that he forgot all that and

called it out anyway.

Whatever it was they'd brought out was incredibly fast. It had managed to keep up with Oscar after blowing him away. Then, it mercilessly followed up with another attack.

Golden light surrounded his umbrella, and a dome-shaped barrier surrounded him.

Blows so powerful enough to shake the earth slammed into it. Three of them in total.

It seemed there was more than one of whatever Oscar was facing. Swords and maces slammed into his barrier, and small cracks formed at the points of impact.

"Ngh! So strong... Who on earth are you people!?" On the other side of the barrier, Oscar finally got a good look at his opponents.

They looked human, but unlike any humans he'd seen before. Their muscles bulged, they exhaled plumes of white smoke, and their eyes were bloodshot.

The one directly in front of Oscar was the one who'd sent him flying at the start. He was wielding a giant warhammer, which Oscar recognized as the lump of metal that had tried to kill him.

Their blows were fast, powerful, and well-coordinated. Frankly, they surpassed the templar knights in every way. They were even masters of their chosen weapons. Oscar guessed they were the elite guards Forneus had brought with him.

Oddly, he couldn't shake this strange feeling he had upon seeing them. For one thing, they all looked too young to be soldiers. *They all look no older than teenagers. Actually, no, they barely look over fifteen.* They were practically boys.

Moreover, everything aside from their weapons looked to be crudely made. Forget leather armor, they seemed to be dressed practically in rags. The same kind of rags that Corrin and Ruth were wearing...

"Onii-chan!" Corrin's shout snapped Oscar out of his musings. He looked around and realized the knights were all chanting powerful spells. It looked like

they were determined to bring him down right then and there.

Stop spacing out! Don't forget you're protecting Corrin right now too! Oscar mentally berated himself.

It didn't matter who he was fighting, he would eliminate anyone threatening his little sister.

"Don't blame me for this!" A wave of light pulsed out of Oscar's umbrella. He'd activated Wall Burst. The three boys trying to break his Hallowed Ground stumbled backward.

After they did, Oscar held his umbrella high, dispelled his barrier, and began twirling the umbrella. White smoke poured out of its tips.

This was the seventh of his umbrella's abilities— White Prison. The smoke was actually the high level earth spell, Petrification.

"Raaaaaah!" The three boys' legs were petrified, and they roared in frustration.

Oscar nimbly leaped over them. A second later, a barrage of magic spells smashed into the ground he'd been standing on.

The entire tunnel shook from the force of the ensuing blast. Cold sweat poured down Oscar's back as he realized the knights were willing to harm their own allies to get to him. The three kids were close enough to be affected by the blast's shockwave.

Oscar landed a ways away. Two shadows burst out of the dust cloud the knights' spells had raised and dashed toward him.

Though these boys were extremely powerful and more skilled than he'd expected, Oscar could still deal with them as long as he handled things calmly. At that point, Oscar's only option was to go all out and crush Forneus' spirit so he'd be willing to spit out Dylan and Katy's location.

"Wh-What are you doing?" Oscar didn't even try and hide his surprise this time. He'd instantly put up another Hallowed Ground when he'd sensed the two new assailants coming, but when he saw who they were, his mind went blank.

Shaken, Oscar shouted again.

“What are you doing, Dylan, Katy!?” The two people attacking his barrier right now were indeed Dylan and Katy. Dylan was holding a knife, while Katy wore clawed gauntlets.

“Dylan! Katy! What’s wrong!? It’s me, Corrin! Don’t you recognize me!” Corrin was just as shocked as Oscar.

However, neither Dylan nor Katy responded. Instead, they simply stared at Oscar with blank eyes, bloodlust oozing from every pore.

The knights hurled another barrage of Gale Claws, Crimson Javelins, and Celestial Flashes at Oscar.

“Shit!” He cursed aloud. Oscar thought back to what had happened seconds ago. The knights hadn’t hesitated to kill those boys along with him.

Oscar dispelled his Hallowed Ground and activated his glasses’ blinding flash. While they were still disoriented, he used his Metamorph Chains to grab Dylan and Katy and fling them away. At the same time, he leaped in the opposite direction.

He barely managed to get everyone out of the way in time. However, now Dylan and Katy were charging him again.

Their eyesight recovered way too fast! Things weren’t looking good. Dylan and Katy closed in on him with polished movements. They definitely hadn’t been like that before. Their proficiency with their weapons was unbelievable, given their utter lack of training.

“Gwah!?”

“Onii-chan!”

He obviously couldn’t fight back, but he knew dodging would be hard from his position. On top of that, he needed to keep Corrin safe as well. In the end, he was forced to take the blows.

Katy’s clawed gauntlets scraped his neck, while Dylan’s knife plunged into his side, and then his thigh. It was only because his Metamorph Chains fouled their aim that he was even alive. Still, his wounds were serious. He was bleeding

profusely.

“Dylan, Katy, come back to your senses! It’s me, Oscar!” Oscar leaped backward with an Onyx Boots-enhanced jump and tried to communicate with Dylan and Katy.

However, the two of them didn’t stop. Ignoring his words, they cut off Oscar’s chains. Then, with unbelievable speed and coordination, they chased him down.

It was almost as if they were different people. In Oscar’s eyes, there was no way they should have been able to move with such practiced ease.

But still... Dammit, those two are definitely Dylan and Katy! He’d watched over them their whole lives. There was no way Oscar would mistake them.

It was then that Oscar noticed something. Both Dylan and Katy’s faces were oddly flushed. Not only that, but their eyes were bloodshot and their breathing was rougher than before.

Whatever they were doing to power themselves up was taking its toll on their body, but they still didn’t stop.

“Gah! Dylan, Katy, I’m sorry, but this is going to hurt a little!” Oscar stuck his umbrella into the ground. It unfurled beneath him, and electricity began running along its surface.

This was the ninth of his umbrella’s abilities— Spark Plasma. Spark Plasma was one of the strongest lightning spells. Normally it shot bolts of electricity at enemies, but by combining the spell with a metal surface, Oscar had transformed it into an electric barrier. And, by adjusting the amount of mana put into the spell, he could also control the voltage to only stun instead of kill.

Dylan and Katy reacted instantly, however, and leaped out of the barrier’s effective range. The toll of pushing their bodies so far was beginning to show, though. They stumbled as they landed, falling to one knee. Worse, blood dripped from their nose and mouth.

“Dylan! Katy!” Oscar cried out again. He instinctively tried to run toward them, but the blood loss had taken its toll on him as well. His legs gave out and he sunk to his knees. The lack of blood left him dizzy. Moving around like he had only made him lose blood faster, too.

He didn’t even have the strength to hold Corrin anymore, so he dropped her. She tried to help him up with tears in her eyes.

“Well, are you enjoying your reunion?” Oscar turned to Forneus, who was smiling sadistically.

“What did you do to them, Forneus?” His tone was surprisingly flat. Corrin shivered. She’d never seen Oscar like this before.

“This was all thanks to His guidance. These children were chosen. They have become a core part of Ehit’s flock. You see, they are the very foundation of what will soon be Ehit’s Legion.”

“Ehit’s... Legion?”

Oscar took stock of the situation while he talked. He was surrounded by templar knights, and while Dylan and Katy were no longer bleeding, their faces were still flushed. As much as he hated talking to that fanatical windbag, he needed to squeeze as much information out of Forneus as he possibly could. He’d take any hint that would help him cure his family.

However, Forneus had caught on to Oscar’s plan. And so, he didn’t bother answering further questions. Instead, he smiled and switched to a different topic.

“You’ve surprised me, Oscar. I thought you were just another heretic, but after looking at all those magic items of yours, I’ve changed my mind! They’re all artifact-level! I didn’t believe Ping at first when he told me you’d beaten down my knights. I thought those were just the words of a coward... But you’ve proven me wrong! You made all of those items, didn’t you Oscar? I can’t possibly imagine you being a loser, or a failure!” Forneus spread his arms wide, carried away by the fervor of his own speech.

Ping, who had hidden behind the building, poked his head out and glared hatefully at Oscar.

“What’re you getting at?”

“Work for me, Oscar. Kneel before me, and profess your faith in Ehit. Devote yourself, body and soul, to the service of our great lord!”

“And if I refuse?” Oscar glanced back at Dylan and Katy. Ever since Forneus had starting talking, they hadn’t moved. Their loyalty to him made Oscar sick to his stomach. At the same time though, he knew what his answer would have to be.

“Can you really bring yourself to?” Though it irked Forneus how little Oscar thought of working for Ehit, it did little to temper his joy at having him dancing in the palm of his hands. And so, he continued, making sure Oscar had no escape.

“If you show your sincerity to Ehit, I am sure he’ll be willing to grant numbers 44 and 45 his protection. Though, if you refuse, it’s possible they will join him in heaven very shortly.”

In other words, either I join and he brings them back to normal, or he keeps pushing Dylan and Katy until they die.

Oscar ground his teeth. The word “fury” didn’t do the wrath in his gaze justice.

Still, there was nothing he could do. After all, there was no telling what Forneus would do to Dylan and Katy if he attacked.

He could kill all the knights and then threaten to kill Forneus if he didn’t turn Dylan and Katy back. However, there was no guarantee that would work. Forneus was a zealot through and through. Oscar doubted threatening his life would be enough to make him do something he’d see as a betrayal to his god. It was a risky gamble.

Besides, can I even beat the knights with my current injuries? His black umbrella had a healing spell built into it, but even if he could activate the spell instantly, the healing itself would take time.

He doubted his enemies would wait patiently for him to recover. More importantly, the blood he’d lost wouldn’t come back.

But more than anything, he couldn’t risk their lives.

“Dylan, Katy...” They didn’t react to his voice. He wasn’t confident he could disable them without doing any harm.

He closed his eyes and considered his options. Then, with a dark look in his eyes, he glared at Forneus.

“You have to promise not to hurt Corrin... and the rest of my family at the orphanage. Also, you have to turn Dylan and Katy back to normal and send them back home. Those are my conditions.”

“Whether I do that or not depends on the depth of your faith.”

Oscar gave in. Forneus’ lips curled up into a sneer.

“If you don’t promise me at least that, I’ll kill you all, even if I have to give my life to do it. At least that way, all the other families will be safe. Don’t think I’ve shown you everything I can do yet.” That was a bluff. Oscar was out of trump cards. Still, he was serious about giving his life to kill them all if he had to. One look at the resolve in his eyes was enough to tell Forneus that.

Forneus frowned unhappily.

“Hmph. Very well, I won’t touch the kids at the orphanage. But 44 and 45 stay with me. Who knows what kind of dangerous items you might make. If I turn these two back to normal, what guarantee do I have that you won’t turn against me? You can transmute sealstone without any trouble, so even a slave collar won’t be able to contain you. Until you’ve proven your faith, those two will stay with me. Don’t worry, I promise to keep them alive until then at least.”

“Urgh...” Oscar ground his teeth, but in the end he nodded. He knew there was no way Forneus would agree without some guarantee. And like he’d said, methods of restraining Oscar wouldn’t work.

He swore he’d get his revenge once Dylan and Katy were free.

Forneus called Dylan and Katy back to his side. Then, he ordered Oscar to kneel before him.

“Onii-chan...” Corrin clung to Oscar’s sleeve as he stumbled over to Forneus. She knew. She knew he was swearing himself to a life of servitude, just to save them.

Oscar patted his clever little sister’s head for what might be the last time.

“Don’t worry. I promise Dylan and Katy will come back one day. You just wait

at home with Mom like a good girl, okay?”

But what’s going to happen to you? Corrin couldn’t bring herself to say those words aloud.

He’d made his decision, so nothing she said would be able to change that. Still, she clung to his sleeve, hoping to convince him not to go.

Oscar gently shook her off. It seemed Corrin didn’t have the strength to stop him. Throughout the entire fight, Corrin hadn’t cried even once. But now, big fat tears rolled down her cheeks. It pained Oscar to see her like this, but still he turned around and faced Forneus. Then, he walked the last few steps toward him.

“Hehe, don’t worry. So long as you serve Ehit, these two test subjects won’t die. I won’t do anything to the rest of your family, either.”

“You had better not. For your sake as well.” Oscar kneeled before Forneus.

His grin grew wider, and he nodded.

“Now, swear your eternal loyalty to Ehit. We mustn’t forget the formalities.”

You just want to gloat, you old sleazebag. Still, Oscar’s expression remained blank. He had never once sworn his loyalty to Ehit, but he would have to now.

“Almighty, all-knowing lord of creation, Ehit. I hereby swear my fealty to you. I, Oscar, dedicate my life, and my soul—” At that point all was left was for him to say “to you,” but he never got those last words out.

A loud rumbling interrupted him. The tunnel shook so violently that chunks of the ceiling crashed broke off and crashed to the ground.

“Wh-What’s happening!? Is this an earthquake!? What is this!?” Forneus yelled out in confusion. However, no one answered.

The knights looked around, clearly surprised by the turn of events. This was unexpected even to them.

Naturally, this wasn’t Oscar’s doing either. Unlike Forneus though, Oscar realized something. Because he was a Synergist, he was more in tune with the stone all around them than the others.

“It’s coming from inside the building? Shit, don’t tell me we’ve got to deal with another crazy monster.” The earthquake originated from the building. In a sense, it was true that they were about to have another “crazy monster” on their hands. However, it was not of the sort Oscar was expecting.

The vibrations stopped. Silence filled the room. A second later, the building’s roof popped off. And from within came...

“Hiyaaah! Everyone’s favorite gal, Miledi Reisen, is here to save the day!” The building’s roof remained floating in the air. There was no visible air magic holding it in place, either. Miledi stood on top of it, striking a heroic pose. She made a peace sign in front of her face and winked at Oscar. He could have sworn he saw stars floating in the background behind her.

“Wh-What on earth are you—!” Forneus, Ping, and the templar knights all exclaimed in surprise. They were surprisingly in sync, and their eyes all looked ready to pop out of their sockets.

As always, Miledi did as she pleased, heedless of their shock.

“Mwahahaha! You, the disgusting old man over there! Too bad, but O-kun’s already promised himself to me~ Did you think you’d won? Did you really think you beat him? Heheheheheehe!” Forneus’ veins bulged as he looked up at Miledi. Never before had anyone dared to call him a “disgusting old man.” What infuriated him even more though was Miledi’s playful grin. It aggravated him more than words could express.

Moreover, she’d arrived at the absolute perfect time to save the day. It was almost as if she’d been listening in on their conversation and had planned her entrance. Oh, also, she’d blown the roof off of Forneus’ precious building. He had plenty reason to be angry.

He opened his mouth to yell at her, but before he could say anything, Oscar looked up at her and voiced his thoughts. “M-Miledi? Wh-Why are you here?”

Miledi looked down and grinned at Oscar.

“O-kun, I can’t believe you. If you’d just asked me for help, you wouldn’t have gotten hurt like that, and you wouldn’t have made Corrin-chan cry! How pathetic can you get? You even made a little girl cry!”

“That’s not true! Okay, well, maybe it is! But still, I thought really hard about what you said and... Wait, this isn’t the time!”

Even when she’d just saved his life, she managed to be annoying about it. The shouting exacerbated his injuries, and Oscar doubled over in pain. Miledi’s expression grew serious, and she continued.

“O-kun, I can’t believe you. You should know he’d never keep his promise. As long as it’s in the name of their god, they think anything’s justified. Even he doesn’t know how to turn Dylan-kun and Katy-chan back to normal.”

“What?” Oscar’s eyes went wide in surprise.

Forneus flushed with anger and he screamed at Miledi.

“You bitch, I made that monument for Lord Ehit! How dare you destroy it! Oscar, is she one of your allies!? If that building is completely destroyed these test subjects will never return to normal! Are you fine with that!?”

“Ah—” Oscar felt as if he’d been punched in the gut. Forneus glared at him, silently imploring him to call Miledi off.

Oscar gripped his umbrella. However, Miledi continued cheerfully, as if unaware of the turmoil in Oscar’s heart.

“Hm? Could it be you’re worried about me destroying... this?” She snapped her fingers, and a large object floated out of the roofless building.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh—” Forneus couldn’t even articulate properly anymore. His surprise was understandable.

Floating in the air, with chunks of it crumbling away and falling to the ground, was a section of the ground nearly six meters in diameter. A complex magic circle had been engraved onto the surface of the earth, with an altar of sorts resting above it. The altar was held up by a rectangular pillar in the magic circle’s center, and an eye had been engraved into its center.

“O-kun! This is what transformed Dylan-kun and the others into mindless fighters. It’s an artifact that holds the memories of ancient masters. Not only that, it can transfer those fighting skills into other people. But this stupid bishop doesn’t actually know how to use it right!” According to Miledi, the sheer

amount of information transferred into the people who inherited these skills was too much for the hosts to handle. Because of that, it suppressed their original personalities. At first, the subjects he'd tested on had gone berserk, but after a while the bishop had figured out how to at least control his super soldiers. However, he still didn't know how to turn them back.

Moreover, in order to execute the kind of moves master fighters had been able to, the hosts had to push their bodies far past their limits. Of course they couldn't last long in that state, and quickly destroyed themselves. But because their healing abilities had been forcibly increased as well, their bodies regenerated over and over. Still, there was a physical limit to how long they could keep doing that. Even with such powerful healing magic, a few battles would leave them dead and broken.

Dylan and Katy had started coughing up blood just from moving around a little. It was obvious fighting for even thirty minutes would be enough to kill them. *So the skills of the best warriors from the past were forcibly implanted into their bodies.*

"I crushed those knights' bones with gravity magic until they talked, so I'm sure of it."

"No... then that means Dylan and Katy won't..." A despair-filled wail interrupted Oscar's trembling voice.

"My... My artifaaaaaaact... You have Ehit's Eyes! Aaaaaah, how could you!? You accursed, wretched, harlot!" Forneus tore at his hair. He looked completely deranged.

His artifact was known as Ehit's Eyes. As Miledi had explained, it allowed its user to transcribe ancient skills into new hosts. It seemed templar knights had stumbled across it by accident when exploring the sixty-fifth floor.

Forneus received a report on what they'd found and he'd quickly formulated a plan to create Ehit's Legion, an army of super soldiers dedicated to their god. The floor had also made for the perfect location to conduct his experiments out in secret. His knights weren't skilled enough to carry the altar back out with them completely unscathed, so it was practical as well. He'd excavated one of the larger rooms on the floor and built the building Miledi had destroyed to

serve as a base of operations.

“This was meant to be my greatest offering to Ehit! I would have created for him a legion of worthy soldiers, loyal to his every command! My achievements would have elevated me to the position of archbishop, no, even to the papacy! Aaaaaaaaaaah!”

That’s what he sacrificed Dylan and Katy for? Darkness wormed its way into Oscar’s heart. He could feel flames of black hatred raging within him. He felt like he was the one about to go mad, not Forneus. Oscar gripped his umbrella tight and pointed it at Forneus. He wasn’t thinking rationally anymore.

“Don’t cross that line, O-kun.”

“Mi...ledi...”

Miledi floated down and put her hands over Oscar’s. He was gripping his umbrella so tightly that his knuckles had turned white.

For some reason, Miledi’s touch soothed him. The haze of hate that had been clouding his thoughts dispersed.

Forneus turned to Oscar.

“Oscar, kill that wretch! Don’t forget, I hold those miserable childrens’ lives in my hands!” At Forneus’ command, Dylan and Katy pointed their weapons at their own necks. With a single word from him, they would kill themselves.

Oscar ground his teeth in frustration at that. However, he was no longer fighting alone.

Miledi looked directly into Oscar’s eyes. There was no cheerful frivolity in her gaze anymore.

“O-kun. Even if you join him, you won’t be able to protect anyone.” She snapped her fingers again.

At her signal, Dylan and Katy lowered their weapons. Seeing how they were struggling desperately to raise them back up, Oscar guessed that they hadn’t lowered them voluntarily.

It was as if their weapons suddenly weighed too much to lift. Forneus watched in dumbfounded amazement.

“It’s time for you two to rest.” Her voice was tinged with kindness. Dylan and Katy rose up into the air and floated over to Miledi. They tried to break out of her spell, but there wasn’t much they could do midair. She tapped both of them with a light electric shock, making them lose consciousness. She then lowered them gently to the floor. Next, she lifted Corrin up and flew her over to Oscar. Corrin gasped in surprise as she flew through the air.

She was still a little confused, but she hugged Oscar tight. There were still tears in her eyes.

“You weren’t born into this world so you could suffer like this.”

“Miledi?”

Miledi stroked Dylan and Katy’s hair.

“You focus on healing yourself, O-kun. Those injuries are pretty serious. I’ll handle these fools. Okay?” She stood up and turned to face Forneus and his knights.

“The artifact’s in my hands. I’ve rescued all the other children that were in the building. The ones you’d already transformed are unconscious and restrained. O-kun’s a master of using artifacts, so I’m sure he can use it to turn everyone back to normal. Do you get what this means, you crazy monster?” Miledi’s voice was so cold that Oscar could hardly believe she was the same person.

The knights began chanting their spells. Forneus grasped the crystal hanging around his neck and glared daggers at Miledi. He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, Miledi interrupted him.

“You face Miledi Reisen. This is checkmate.” Sky blue mana erupted all around her. It twisted into a spiral, its radiance illuminating the dark room. She floated up into the sky, as if the laws of gravity had no effect on her. Her blonde ponytail fluttered back and forth, and her blue eyes sparkled as she gazed down at her foes.

A swirling black sphere appeared in between her hands. She set it to orbit around her.

Her mana capacity surpassed even Oscar’s.

The knights were stunned speechless. It felt as if time slowed to a crawl.

Hovering over them like that, Miledi looked almost divine. Everyone was left awestruck.

Forneus was the first to return to his senses.

“Wh-What are you fools doing!? Shoot that woman down!”

The knights returned to their senses and unleashed their spells. Oscar made to shout out a warning, but it proved unnecessary.

“Wh-What is that!?”

“My magic just... disappeared!?”

The knights’ spells were sucked into the sphere orbiting Miledi and vanished.

This was one of her gravity spells, Spatial Severance. She’d created a black hole that absorbed all spells, regardless of their element. Even the knights’ Celestial Flashes couldn’t escape the dark star’s singularity. An unbreakable barrier made of gravity protected her.

“If I can just take control of her consciousness!” Forneus yelled and held up his crystal. It seemed his crystal was imbued with some kind of mind manipulation magic.

The knights began chanting again, hoping to supplement Forneus’ attack with their own.

“Too late— Heavensfall.” Countless tiny black spheres popped up around her. They gathered above Forneus and the knights.

A second later, they all sunk to the ground. The knights hadn’t even had time to scream. They were flat on the ground in the crater Miledi had created, not moving an inch. Forneus was barely conscious, but he still managed to spit out an insult.

“Gah! Y-You harlot, what did you do!?” Blood dripped from his mouth.

Miledi didn’t answer, and instead shifted her attention to the knights struggling to their feet. It seemed they’d survived by casting multiple body strengthenings at once.

Miledi silently swung her hand down.

“Gwaaaaaah!”

“Uwooooooh!”

They’d been using their swords as crutches, but Miledi’s new spell drove them back to their knees. They screamed in pain as they were forced to the ground.

“Something’s pushing down on—” The knight didn’t get to finish. With a thud, the crater underneath him grew larger. All of the knights collapsed.

They couldn’t even croak out an incantation.

“You accursed heretic! You may break my bones, but you shall never break my faith!” Though his robes were tattered, the man wearing them was anything but. Oscar fully believed Forneus would take death over renouncing his faith. The faint light surrounding him led Oscar to guess that he’d used some kind of magical barrier, or a spell that absorbed mana to defend himself. Whatever it was, it just barely let Forneus withstand the weight.

“The heavens belong to the gods! I shall smite you down— Earth Blast!” Having a large amount of mana was a prerequisite to becoming a bishop. A high-rank earth spell like Earth Blast was well within Forneus’ capabilities.

The spell shattered the ground around the caster, and allowed them to use the resulting rubble as ammunition to shoot down their enemies.

A hundred boulders of various sizes all hurtled toward Miledi.

“Miledi!” Oscar shouted a warning. He was worried the sheer number of projectiles would overwhelm Miledi. Fortunately, he was mistaken.

“Unbelievable, even mass attacks like that don’t work...” Forneus’ voice trembled in fear.

To be honest, even Oscar sympathized. Miledi had stopped all of the boulders in midair, but they hadn’t fallen to the ground. Now they too were orbiting around her.

“How is this possible! First, we have to fight a monster who can make artifacts left and right, and now you!? Why do heretics like you possess such power!? You disgusting, worthless, wretched, deplorable, bitch!” Forneus cursed Miledi

out with unbridled rage.

Miledi didn't even dignify that with a response. Instead, she raised one of her hands. The boulders stopped circling around her. She brought her hand down and they all moved in accordance with her will.

She'd shaped the hundred boulders into a guillotine made of rock. If that fell on Forneus, he would surely die. There was no dodging it. All he could choose was whether he'd be crushed to death, or have his head cut off.

This was the most bizarre execution Oscar had ever witnessed.

"I remember now. Reisen... Miledi Reisen. You were the daughter of Count Reisen. You're from that family of imperial executioners! Wait, your entire family was supposed to have died a few years ago. Why are you still—" Miledi wasn't interested in entertaining his questions.

"Don't waste your breath. Like I said, this is checkmate." Before he could finish, Miledi buried him under a ton of rock.

The floor reverberated with the sound of a hundred boulders slamming into the ground. For a second, Oscar was worried Miledi would bring the whole cavern collapsing down on them.

Miledi protected Oscar and the kids from the shockwaves with a gravity barrier, but he deployed his own Hallowed Ground just in case, then stood protectively over Dylan, Katy, and Corrin.

Eventually, the noise subsided and the dust cleared away. Miledi walked down a flight of imaginary stairs and stopped next to Oscar.

"Phew. That's the end of Miledi-chan's one-sided slaughter. Did you see me, O-kun? I was amazing, right? I was like, super cool out there, right?" She was back to talking in that same cheerful tone Oscar knew so well.

He could hardly believe she'd been mercilessly slaughtering people mere seconds ago.

Oscar smiled at Miledi. It was an awkward smile, but this time it was one hundred percent genuine.

"You're... one hell of a woman, you know that?" He said the first thing that

came to mind.

Once the battle was over, Miledi patiently waited for Oscar to heal himself.

“But you know, that’s a pretty neat trick. You hold up your umbrella and it rains healing light down on you. Is this supposed to be a joke because of how normally umbrellas keep rain off you?”

“I just figured the stretcher was the best place to enchant with healing magic. The ore’s best suited for the purpose. It’s not really a joke or anything.” The healing light of the high-ranked spell Benison Aura poured down Oscar as he spoke. *Though, now that I think about it, it does make for a pretty good joke. I’m holding up an umbrella that’s raining on me.*

His wounds had mostly closed up, and he looked far less pale. Corrin snickered at him as he looked away from Miledi, embarrassed by his unintentional bad pun.

“Anyway, Miledi. How long were you inside that building? And how’d you get inside in the first place?” He decided now was a good time to change the topic.

Miledi’s grin faded and she shrugged.

“While you were fighting, I punched my way up through the sixty-sixth floor and snuck into the building from below. I lowered the kidnapped children down to the floor below. My comrades led them to your staircase from there, O-kun. I imagine they must have led the kids to the surface by now.”

“By punched your way up... you mean you used that black sphere of yours?”

“Correeect~”

“Since you know about my staircase, that means you were following me, right?”

“Yep. I know you told me to leave, but I wanted to say my goodbyes to the kids first. Though, when I got to the orphanage Moorin-san looked almost hysterical. When she told me what happened, I thought I had to chase after you, so I asked my comrades to guard the orphanage. When I found you, you were just leaving your house. You had an umbrella even though it wasn’t

raining, and you jumped way higher than anyone should be able to."

So she went to the orphanage right after I did, then caught up in the time I was getting my equipment.

"Why didn't you say anything to me?" Even if halfway through Oscar's invasion she'd decided it was smarter for her to head to the building straight away, she'd had plenty of opportunities to talk to him before that. Considering her personality, he'd expected her to show herself right away, honestly.

Miledi looked around uncomfortably.

"Well... I thought you wouldn't want to see me, O-kun."

"....." *In other words, you're telling me that arrogant, straightforward girl got cold feet at the last minute? Wait. I'm the one who rejected her. No matter how outgoing and cheerful she is, that had to have hurt.* Oscar thought back to the sad smile she'd given him at the end.

She'd been afraid of being rejected by him again, yet she'd still plunged into danger to help him. Oscar couldn't even think of what to say to her. His musings were interrupted by someone tugging on his collar. He looked down to see Corrin staring angrily at him.

"Onii-chan, did you bully Onee-chan?"

"Huh? Uh, no I..." *Does that count as bullying? I guess it does.* Oscar trailed off guiltily, unable to fully deny Corrin's words. Corrin looked from Oscar to Miledi, who was smiling awkwardly. That settled it.

"Onii-chan, when you do something bad, what are you supposed to say?"

"Huh?"

"Onii-chan!"

"Oh, uh, s-sorry?"

"Not to me, to Onee-chan!"

"Oh, yeah."

Eighteen-year-old Oscar had just been scolded by a seven year old.

Miledi burst into laughter. It seemed she'd been trying to hold it in this whole

time. She laughed so hard that she had to hold her stomach and pause for breath.

“Haaah... Haaah... Oh man, my stomach hurts! O-kun, you just got lectured by a little girl! Ahahahahah!”

“Sh-Shut up! Besides, you’re the—”

“Onii-chan!”

“Guh.” Oscar groaned. Tears leaked out of the corner of Miledi’s eyes.

Oscar adjusted his glasses and got to his feet. He had fully recovered. He snapped his umbrella shut, then turned to Miledi, who was still laughing.

“Miledi.”

“Ahahahaha. C-Corrin-chan, you’re the best! You guessed it! O-Oh man, it hurts to breathe.”

“Miledi.”

She stopped snickering when she heard the seriousness in Oscar’s voice. With tears still in her eyes, she looked up at him.

“Miledi, I don’t think the decision I made back then was wrong. You asked me a serious question, and I wanted to give you a serious answer.”

“O-kun.”

“That’s why I won’t apologize. Still, something I need to say.”

Miledi tilted her head in confusion.

“Thank you.” Her eyes opened wide.

“Thank you for saving us. Thank you for lending me your strength. I owe you a debt. Truly, thank you.”

“O-Oh... Y-You’re welcome?”

Miledi hadn’t been expecting that. She blushed a little, unused to such straightforward gratitude. The tips of her ears were red.

Corrin glanced between the two of them, her eyes brimming with the kind of curiosity only a young child could possess.

Oscar and Miledi stared awkwardly at each other for a few seconds.

“Ahem, anyway. I’ve recovered now, so we should head back to the surface. You said that artifact was called Ehit’s Eyes, right? I need to start analyzing it to figure out how to turn Dylan and Katy back.”

“Y-Yeah. Let’s do that.”

They looked away, both painfully aware of Corrin’s gaze. Just then, they heard something.

“Gyaaah... Gaaah...” It sounded like a pained groan.

Oscar and Miledi exchanged disbelieving glances. Miledi cleared a few of the boulders with a wave of her hand, and they found Forneus lying underneath them. By some miracle, he was still alive.

“Y-Y-Y-You bastards... Face E-Ehit’s wrath!” He coughed up blood with every word.

Oscar couldn’t believe he was still alive.

“How... How on earth did you survive that?” He muttered. Miledi just stared in slack-jawed disbelief, while Corrin let out a small scream.

His body from the neck down had been crushed, and his head hadn’t come out unscathed, either. Plus, his skull had caved in, and his eyes were nearly falling out of their sockets. Yet, despite all of that, he still drew breath. He glared at Oscar with a look of pure hatred.

“Our lives belongs to Ehit... We live for him... and we die for him! That is the only meaning to our existence! How can you not realize that!” Faint tendrils of mana began swirling around him.

Was it his fanatical faith that kept him alive? Regardless of how he’d survived, the fact was that he looked terrifying.

“Die, die, die! Heretics, enemies of Ehit... You don’t deserve life!” He was no longer sane. Though he was on the verge of death, his expression was ecstatic.

Is he even human anymore?

“Oh Lord Ehiiiiiiiiiiit, my exalted god! Watch my final moments! Know that

until the last, I, Forneus Abyssion, was your loyal servant!”

“This isn’t good. Miledi!”

“Die already!”

Oscar had a really bad feeling about the whole situation. Trusting in his instincts, Oscar raised his umbrella and fired a needle at Forneus. At the same time, Miledi cast a gravity spell.

The needle pierced Forneus’ head with a wet thud. Miledi drove the point in even further with her magic, to ensure the blow was fatal.

No human should have been able to survive that. Granted, no human should have been able to survive Miledi’s first attack, either. However, Forneus’ intense hatred kept him bound to mortality for a few seconds longer.

“Glory to Lord Ehit!” There was a needle stuck through his head, and yet he was still able to talk.

Oscar and Miledi watched as his mana dispersed into mist.

A second later, a massive explosion rocked the ceiling. Or rather, the roof. From what Oscar could tell, the explosion had come from the floor above. The tunnel shook from the force of the explosion.

More explosions shook the demolished building. They were smaller than the one above the room’s roof, but they still blew out the building’s walls.

“Ability ten, Hallowed Ground, activate!” Stones rained down from the ceiling. Oscar immediately deployed a barrier to protect him and Corrin.

Miledi’s face twisted into a grimace as she saw the cracks growing in the ceiling.

“O-Oh no, the ceiling’s going to collapse!” Miledi took to the skies. Surrounded by a whirling tornado of blue mana, she attempted to reverse gravity for the floor above.

“Gaaah... Th-There’s too much to hold!” It seemed the previous explosion had destroyed the foundations of the entire floor.

Miledi’s mana drained away at a prodigious rate as she held five hundred

square meters of floor together.

“O-kun, I won’t be able to hold it for long! You have to hurry and get Dylan and the others out of here!”

“But what about Ehit’s Eyes!?”

“Why do you think I’m trying to hold up the ceiling!? We don’t have time to carry that thing out, so you’ll have to strengthen it enough that it won’t break!”

Miledi could have easily evacuated everyone before the ceiling collapsed, but she’d tried to hold it up instead to buy enough time for Oscar to get the artifact out safely.

Considering how large it was though, it would be hard for Oscar to carry it through the passage he’d come in. And it definitely wouldn’t fit in the impromptu staircase he’d made. Plus, there wasn’t any time to transmute a larger passage.

He knew he wouldn’t be able to use the passage Miledi had made to the sixty-sixth floor either. The floor above collapsing wouldn’t affect just this floor, but likely the one below it as well.

In other words, the only way for Oscar to protect Ehit’s Eyes was to transmute a box around it that was strong enough to withstand the impact. They’d be able to come back for it later that way.

“Got it. Just give me twenty seconds!”

“Nnnnnngh. I’ll try!” Miledi lowered Ehit’s Eyes next to Oscar.

He put his hands on the ground in front of it and began transmuting.

He regretted not being able to take it back and save Dylan and Katy right away, but he shook off those thoughts.

“I’ll make it harder than anything on Tortus.” Oscar’s umbrella was crafted from the most resilient alloy on the planet. He’d mixed azantium with sealstone and a few other essential metals. And now he was going to melt it down to coat the rock tomb he’d raised around Ehit’s Eyes. That, combined with the activation of Hallowed Ground, would definitely be enough to ward off the ceiling’s collapse.

Damn you for making me do this, Forneus. Oscar really didn't want to part with his prized umbrella, but he had no choice.

"Graaaaaaaaah!" Just before he could transmute it though, Oscar heard a peculiar scream.

"What was that!?" The room shook as something banged against the walls of the building.

A second later, an entire wall was sent flying.

A three-headed earth dragon emerged from the rubble. It was only four meters long, but the danger it posed was immense.

"Wait, what on earth is that monster doing here!?"

The dragon looked up at Miledi, reacting to her voice. She groaned in a very manly fashion.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaah!" One of the heads' eyes glowed bright red and it spewed fire at her. Even Oscar could feel the flames' heat.

"W-W-Wait, time out! Spatial Severance!" Miledi's gravity sphere swallowed up the flames. She had to divert some of her power to do that though, so the cracks in the ceiling deepened.

"Miledi! Damn dragon, stop that!" Oscar pointed his umbrella at the dragon and cast Spark Plasma. Oscar's bolts of lightning hit the dragon dead-on. However, it barely made the monster stagger. Spark Plasma was Oscar's strongest instantaneous spell, and the dragon just shrugged it off like it was nothing.

"This isn't good..." The dragon turned to Oscar. He'd succeeded in grabbing its attention, but he hadn't expected it to do no damage to it.

However, for reasons Oscar couldn't fathom, the dragon didn't fire its breath at him. It simply glared at Oscar with its three heads for a while... before looking away.

"Huh?" Oscar followed its gaze. It was staring at Ehit's Eyes.

Why's it so focused on that? Either way, Oscar wasn't about to let this opportunity go. He quickly stooped down, and told Corrin to get on his back. He

belted his umbrella and scooped Dylan and Katy into his arms.

A second later, the dragon roared again.

“Graaaaaaaaah!” This time it did charge. Oscar could feel his heart thumping loudly in his chest.

He activated his Onyx Boots and sped away. He was worried about what might happen to Ehit’s Eyes, but there was no time to fortify it now.

The dragon reached Oscar’s old location a second after he leaped ten meters away.

“Gaaaaaaaaah!”

“Ngh... Hallowed Ground, partial activation!” Oscar dropped Dylan and Katy and pulled his umbrella out. He barely got his barrier up in time to deflect the dragon’s breath. However, a second later the breath’s strength doubled.

“Nnnnnngh!” Oscar was slowly pushed back by the force of the dragon’s breath.

He wasn’t able to see it through his umbrella, but the dragon’s second head had added its wind breath to the other head’s fire.

If he was pushed back any further, Dylan and Katy would no longer be inside the barrier.

Miledi’s strained voice reached Oscar’s panicked ears.

“You little! Take this— Heavensfall!” A massive wall of gravity pressed down on the dragon.

The breath attack stopped, and Oscar fell to his knees. Plumes of white smoke rose up from the molten ground around him. The heat was so intense that he broke out into a sweat. Though part of that might have just been because of how panicked he was.

He looked over at the dragon.

“So it can even take Miledi’s magic...” She’d succeeded in pushing it down. However, its legs were still planted firmly on the ground, and it glared fiercely at Miledi, even through the pressure of her spell. Heavensfall hadn’t been able

to defeat it.

However, Oscar noticed something.

“I knew it, it’s protecting the artifact.” Despite the pressure Miledi was placing on it, the dragon didn’t thrash around. It kept a careful eye on Ehit’s Eyes and kept its distance to ensure Miledi and Oscar’s attacks didn’t accidentally hit it.

Oscar suddenly remembered an old tale he’d heard as a kid. Supposedly there was a treasure buried deep inside one of the labyrinth-like floors of the Greenway. The adventurer who defeated the dragon guarding said treasure would have their name go down in history.

Forneus had given his life to create that explosion above them. However, there’d also been an explosion inside the building.

There was only one theory that made sense to Oscar. This dragon had been the original guardian of Ehit’s Eyes.

He guessed Forneus and his knights hadn’t been able to kill it, and had therefore settled on sealing it inside that building. With his dying breath, Forneus had undone that seal.

“O-kun, I’m sorry... I can’t hold it much longer.” Miledi’s strained voice broke Oscar out of his musings.

He looked up, and saw her grimacing from the effort of holding up the ceiling. Her eyes were squeezed shut, and sweat poured down her forehead. Even he could tell she was using every last ounce of strength to hold it together.

She had her back against the ceiling and was somehow keeping it afloat while also putting pressure on the dragon.

She wouldn’t be able to keep it up for long, though.

Suddenly, she smiled.

“Run away, O-kun. I’ll keep the dragon and the ceiling at bay until then.”

Oscar gasped. She was planning on sacrificing herself for him.

“I’ll protect Ehit’s Eyes somehow, too. Leave it all to the invincible... Miledi-chan! But even if I’m invincible... I can’t hold this any longer, so run!” How

would she protect Ehit's Eyes while avoiding the dragon, all while the room was collapsing around her to boot? Would she give up her life just to protect it with gravity magic? Even though she was almost completely out of mana? In all honesty, it was unlikely she'd be able to do it, but Oscar believed her. He knew she'd fulfill her promises no matter what.

She sounded as frivolously cheery as always, but Oscar knew she was just trying to act tough for them. Even now, she still hadn't broken. She would save Oscar and his family, even if it cost her life to do it. Her will was iron.

Oscar glanced back at Dylan and Ehit's Eyes before making his decision.

"Miledi, could you kill that dragon with your remaining mana!?"

"Huh!? If I used it all on my strongest attack, I-I think I could do it." Miledi answered the unexpected question almost reflexively.

"Perfect. I'll handle the ceiling. You get that dragon! As long as Ehit's Eyes are here, he won't move!"

"Huh? What? Wait! You can't do that! I swore I'd defend Ehit's Eyes with my life—"

"As long as they're alive, I'll find a way to save them. Just you watch!"

"B-But!"

"Saving them would mean nothing if you die! If we do this, everyone will be saved! Please, Miledi! Trust in me!"

"Ah!" Miledi gasped, then after a second she nodded.

"Make your move at the count of ten!" Oscar carried Dylan and Katy to the relative safety of the passage outside the room. Then, he shot the ferrule of his umbrella at the stone ceiling. It lodged itself into the cracks, Oscar remotely transmuted barbs on it to keep it in place, and thin wires shot out of the ferrule's tip.

"Corrin, I know this is scary, but Miledi and I will get you all out safely, so just hang in there, alright?"

"Okay. I'll be fine, Onii-chan."

Oscar detached the wires from the umbrella and tied them to boulders he'd transmuted. After a second, he'd completed a makeshift gondola. He then put Corrin and the others inside it. This way they'd be fine even if the ground collapsed.

He patted his brave little sister's head and returned to the battlefield.

As he made his way back to Miledi, he activated another one of his black umbrella's skills.

"Activate skill six— Godstorm, wide area variant! Transmute!" A violent gale began to blow through the battlefield.

He'd transmuted the cloth of the umbrella off its frame and turned into a multitude of metal strings, which flew up to the ceiling. Then, he used remote transmutation to made sure they stuck to the ceiling where they landed.

It looked like he'd spread a spider's web across the ceiling.

"Miledi, now's your chance! Send that oversized lizard to hell!"

"Sheesh, you're such a slave driver!" Though she was complaining, it looked like Miledi was enjoying herself.

The ceiling rumbled as Miledi dispelled the magic holding it up. The dragon made its move as well. It opened all three of its maws, determined to exterminate the thieves who had dared defile the treasure it was protecting.

"Let me show you my final trump card." Oscar threw his umbrella, which at this point had been stripped down to only the frame, at the three-headed dragon.

When it was directly above the dragon's heads, it exploded in a shower of sparks.

This was his umbrella's final trick, a self-destruct.

He doubted it would kill it, but it would definitely buy Miledi some time.

Miledi rushed down toward the dragon, while Oscar leaped up to the ceiling. The two of them crossed paths in midair.

As they passed each other, Oscar gave Miledi the jewel that had been

embedded into the umbrella's handle. He'd taken it out before throwing it.

Miledi gasped when she felt the vast amount of mana stored inside it. She glanced at Oscar and smiled triumphantly.

Then, with their backs to each other, the two of them used their most practiced skills.

"Transmute!"

"Nether Burst!"



Golden mana ran across the cracks in the ceiling. At the same time, a pitch black nova descended upon the ancient dragon, emitting sky blue sparks from its surface.

There was no loud bang, and vibrations from the impact could be felt. Miledi's deadliest attack was also her most silent.

At the same time, the ceiling repaired itself in the blink of an eye. When Oscar looked down though, he found the ground had vanished.

"....." The two of them gazed silently at each other.

Oscar hesitantly opened his mouth.

"I know I told you to send it to hell, but I never said anything about *making* a hell..."

"Ugh..."

"What the hell are we supposed to do now? This is way worse than a floor collapsing, you know that, right? There's no way I can fix that even with my Transmutation."

"Y-You don't have to yell at me! Even I know I overdid it a little! Besides, this is all *your* fault, O-kun!"

"M-My fault? You're the one who made a giant abyss! Quit trying to push responsibility for that on me!"

"No, it's totaaaaaally your fault! What the heck was in that jewel!? I thought it was some kind of artifact that stored mana, so I drew it all out, but there was way more than I thought there'd be! Like, tons more! Not even the rarest of artifacts even come close to that!"

"Uhh, well, it's, uh... A Divinity Stone I made, I guess?"

"Excuse me, I have no idea what you just said." *Or rather, I wish I had no idea.*

Divinity Stone— It was a legendary crystal that very rarely showed up in nature. It was pure, crystallized mana. Usually Divinity Stones took thousands of years to form. They could store more mana than anything else. It took another couple of centuries for a newly formed Divinity Stone to become fully saturated

with mana. Once it was though, it secreted a liquid known as Ambrosia. Ambrosia was a miracle drug that could heal any wounds and cure any disease.

And Oscar had just said he'd "made" one. As it was just a crystallization of highly concentrated mana, it could in theory be created.

"When I learned about Divinity Stones, I figured maybe I might be able to make one, so I tried it. Of course, this one doesn't secrete Ambrosia. All it's capable of is storing mana. I thought if I kept pouring mana into it it'd eventually start making Ambrosia on its own, so I've been pouring some of my mana into it every day since I was twelve. I put it into my umbrella because it was capable of absorbing a percentage of the mana used in spells directed against me, too."

"I see. I don't get it at all."

Indeed, Miledi's brain failed to comprehend how Oscar had managed to make a mythical crystal at the age of twelve. She smiled, a look of pure confusion on her face.

"I can't believe you used six years worth of mana in one spell, though... Haaah... Well, I guess we didn't really have time to discuss this, and it's my fault for not warning you, but... Ugh, I can't believe I helped you make a giant hole in the Greenway... I think I'm going to be sick."

Though I guess killing a bishop and his templar knights is an even bigger crime. It's a bit late to be worried about being arrested for vandalizing the Greenway. Oscar shook his head and shifted gears.

"Anyway, let's get out of here. Could you give me my Divinity Stone back, Miledi?"

"Uh, I still don't really get what you're saying." Miledi repeated, that blank smile still on her face. Except now there was cold sweat pouring down her back.

It seemed there was more than just confusion and surprise stopping Miledi from giving it back.

"Miledi, give me back my Divinity Stone."

"O-kun, I'm the kind of woman that never looks back on the past."

“Didn’t you tell me your entire life story a few hours ago? Anyway, where’s the jewel?”

“D-Down there, I think.” Miledi pointed down at the bottom of the abyss, averting her eyes all the while.

“Explain yourself. No excuses.”

“I was so surprised at how strong my magic was that I accidentally dropped what I was holding. I was holding your Divinity Stone. The end.”

Oscar stared at Miledi with dead eyes. Miledi refused to meet his gaze, as buckets of sweat continued to pour down her forehead.

Oscar glared at her for a few more minutes before finally sighing and shrugging his shoulders.

“Well, at least we’re all safe. One Divinity Stone isn’t a big deal.”

“You’re such a nice guy, O-kun!” Miledi grinned, and Oscar smiled back. Then, they noticed Corrin standing in Oscar’s makeshift gondola and waving frantically at the two of them.

“Guess we should go,” Oscar said lightly, and gave Miledi a high-five.

Two days after the incident in the Greenway.

It was still early enough that the sun had yet to rise. Velnika, the capital, still slumbered. Oscar walked down one of the city’s deserted streets.

He had a black coat on, was carrying a large bag, and had an umbrella belted to his waist even though there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. It looked as if he was about to set out on a long journey.

And indeed, he was. Today would be the day he left Velnika.

There were a number of reasons for his departure. The first was obvious. He couldn’t remain here after rebelling against the Holy Church and killing Bishop Forneus. Of course, the evidence of his death and the surrounding circumstances had all vanished into the bottom of the abyss Miledi had created. However, he couldn’t be certain *all* of it had been buried.

Moreover, he had a lot of acquaintances in this city. If someone went after him again, it was possible they'd target those friends of his first, just like how Dylan and the others had been kidnapped.

The second reason he was leaving was to find a cure.

They'd ended up destroying Ehit's Eyes. As they no longer had anyone to command them, Dylan and Katy weren't trying to kill him anymore, but they'd become empty husks instead. He'd tried all sorts of healing magic and even enlisted Miledi's help, but both Dylan and Katy remained in a coma.

Normal magic had no effect on them, so he needed to search for something new, which was another reason why he was setting off.

Before he'd left, he'd convinced Moorin to take the kids out of the capital.

They'd be moving to the hidden village Miledi's organization used as its base of operations.

Miledi had promised to protect Moorin and the kids. Even if she hadn't been Oscar's friend, she still would have taken the kids there. Dylan and Katy were important witnesses, and Corrin and Ruth now knew the truth about the Holy Church.

It was possible the Holy Church wouldn't care as everything they did was sanctioned by the populace at large, but it was also possible they'd try and kill the kids to hide the evidence of their deeds. In which case, an anti-church organization's hideout was about the safest place in the world for them.

The kids had cried when Oscar told them of his plans to leave, but Ruth had stepped up to comfort them. With Dylan in a coma, it had become his turn to take charge. Ruth had looked quite manly when he'd told Oscar to leave the kids to him.

Furthermore, Oscar had seen the kind of comrades Miledi had with her. They were all highly skilled warriors, so he was sure that they'd be able to safely guide Moorin and the children to their village on their own.

Miledi herself had vouched for them, which had been more than enough for Oscar.

As she'd had a lot to take care of after the battle, they'd parted ways for the night.

Oscar had then spent an entire day replenishing his stock of equipment and setting his affairs in order. He'd set out early in the morning to avoid being spotted by anyone he might know.

Despite the early hour, he avoided the main street and stuck to the back alleys.

"I wanna say my goodbyes to Gramps," Oscar muttered to himself.

Oscar had already talked to Karg before when he'd gone to pick up the kids he'd sent to the Orcus workshop.

He'd explained what had happened and the reasons why he couldn't stay, but he hadn't really said goodbye. It was true that he was in a rush, but he'd also felt ashamed, as if he was letting Karg down by leaving.

However, what would really be shameful would be not saying goodbye to the man who'd done so much for him.

And so, Oscar found himself heading to the Orcus Workshop on the morning of his departure.

Normally, Karg wouldn't even be in the workshop this early.

Oscar needed to leave soon, though. If Karg didn't show up after a while he'd leave his farewell letter and be on his way.

He continued walking for a while longer.

"Ah..." As he approached the workshop's gates, he spotted a man leaning against them with his arms folded across his chest.

It was a man he'd recognize anywhere.

"So you came after all, Oscar." Karg spoke as if he'd expected Oscar to come from the beginning, and scoffed.

"How did you..."

"I knew you wouldn't be able to leave without saying anything." He'd been Oscar's surrogate father for years now, so Oscar's thought patterns were as

clear as day to him.

Oscar smiled awkwardly.

“You’re going, then?”

“Yeah. I need to find a way to cure Dylan and Katy.”

“Will you be coming back?”

“I’m not sure. Not for a while, at least. It’s going to be a long journey.”

“I see...”

The silence stretched on. Karg could tell at a glance that Oscar’s black boots, black coat, and black umbrella were no simple traveler’s garb. He knew they were all powerful artifacts. That brought a smile to his face.

“Damn boy, you’re good.” He praised Oscar in his customarily coarse fashion.

Oscar blushed and smiled.

“I guess.” He was unable to hide the joy he felt at being praised by Karg, and nodded.

Karg closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and walked up to Oscar. His expression was dead serious, and his eyes were filled with all sorts of conflicting feelings.

“Oscar. It’s not really much of a parting gift, but will you take what this old man has to offer?”

“What is it?” Oscar tilted his head in confusion, and Karg nodded.

He spoke solemnly.

“I want you to inherit the name Orcus.”

“Gramps... I’m quitting the workshop, so—”

“I know, but I still want you to take it. I told you before, you’re the only one fit to be this generation’s Orcus. You’re the best damn Synergist I know. I refuse to pass the name down to anyone else.”

“But then...” *Who’s going to be the next head of the workshop? Besides, I might become a wanted man soon. Worse, the Holy Church’ll probably brand*

me a heretic. What'll happen to the workshop if I inherit its name?

Oscar tried to say as much, but Karg cut him off. Karg was prepared for the consequences. He had been since the moment he made his decision.

He continued his speech.

"Us craftsmen are a stubborn, peculiar lot. Sure, we get jealous of each other's skills and are always trying to one-up each other, but any craftsman worth his salt also knows shame, boy. None of them will ever be the next Orcus, and not just cause I won't give them the title. They all know you deserve it, and they'd be ashamed to take it from you."

Oscar's eyes went wide with surprise. He'd been convinced all of the craftsmen thought he was a loser. However, the truly skilled members of the workshop had always known. Even if it had grated them to admit it, they knew how good Oscar was.

Sure, Oscar never made any weapons, but the Orcus craftsmen were professionals. They could tell how good he was from the quality of his household products alone.

I really do have a lot to learn... Not just in terms of my transmuting skill, but as a person too.

Though he'd worked alongside them for years, Oscar hadn't understood one thing about them. Not their pride, not their feelings, not their love for their craft. He hadn't understood a craftsman's soul at all. Oscar closed his eyes when he realized that, sinking into deep thought.

They understood how much trouble this would bring the workshop. Despite that, they'd still chosen him to be the next Orcus. At that point, he wouldn't be a man if he didn't take up mantle offered to him.

He opened his eyes, and stared back determinedly at Karg.

"I'll do it, then. From today onward, I'm the new Orcus, Oscar Orcus." Karg's face lit up in a beaming smile.

Oscar walked to the capital's main gate with a new spring in his step.

Worry colored his face again when the gate guard began to scrutinize him, though. Fortunately, he was waved through without incident.

Forneus' disappearance had become public knowledge at this point, and the city was conducting a full-scale search. The guards were simply on high alert because of that, so they weren't especially suspicious of Oscar or anything. Plus, it had only been a day since Forneus' disappearance. It was entirely possible Forneus had left on some secret mission with his templar knights. A man in his position wasn't required to report his comings and goings to anyone.

Only Oscar and Miledi knew he was resting at the bottom of the abyss, so a single craftsman heading out on a journey, likely to the next town over, didn't seem suspicious at all to the guards.

Oscar walked silently down the main road for a while. Before long, Velnika was no more than a dot on the horizon. Just as he was thinking he was far enough away that he could activate his Onyx Boots' powers without attracting suspicion, he spotted a familiar figure sitting on a boulder up ahead.

Her blonde ponytail fluttered in the chill morning breeze. She swung her legs back and forth, as if bored.

Oscar adjusted his glasses. Then, with hurried steps, he walked up to her.

"Morning, O-kun. It's nice out today."

"Yeah, though you still look pretty bored."

Once Oscar drew close enough for them to be able to hear each other, Miledi hopped off the boulder.

"I'm not really the waiting type. I prefer action."

"Then why didn't you act? Don't you think it's kinda late to ambush me here? I was expecting to see you crawl out of somewhere ages ago."

"Hey, that's rude!" Miledi puffed out her cheeks and Oscar smiled.

The two casually talked about what they'd done since parting two nights ago.

Miledi updated Oscar on Moorin and the children's travels, while Oscar told Miledi he'd closed off the entrance and the exit to the staircase he'd made. Miledi also explained that thanks to the false rumors her comrades had spread,

the search for Forneus was headed in the completely wrong direction. Oscar also told Miledi that he'd inherited the Orcus name.

Upon hearing that, Miledi congratulated him. Oscar blushed and adjusted his glasses to hide his embarrassment. Miledi saw right through him and grinned. She'd been around him enough to know his mannerisms now.

Oscar cleared his throat loudly and changed the subject. His expression was serious.

"You've helped my family so much. Thank you. I owe you a debt bigger than I can ever hope to repay. If you still want me to, I'll join your—"

"What's important isn't what I want, but what you want, O-kun." Miledi cut him off with a smile.

"Forget all that crap about debts. Your future is for you to decide. You have to choose what you want to do. If the path you want to walk is different from mine, then that's fine. I won't abandon your family just because you won't join me. Don't you dare think I'd ever try and blackmail you like that!"

"Miledi..." He didn't doubt her words. She wouldn't abandon his family over something so petty. Of that, he was certain.

The sun crested the horizon, and the world grew lighter. Miledi's hair sparkled in sunrise's first light.

"But my wish is still the same..." Miledi whispered, and looked into Oscar's eyes. Her sky blue eyes perfectly matched the color of her mana. And right now, the only thing reflected in them was him.

"This will be the last time I ever ask you this." Miledi sucked in a huge breath and held a hand out to him.

"You're an exceptional Synergist, Oscar Orcus. Don't you wish to see a world where people can live freely? A world where anyone can decry any ideology, where no one set of values reigns supreme, where those who call out oppression are not punished for it? Would you like to come with me and change the world?" Oscar held his breath. Her words pierced right through him, and he could feel their weight. He thought back to the day they'd first met. She'd captivated him right from the start, that night in the orphanage's

backyard.



Oscar already knew the answer to the question he was about to ask, but he had to bring it up anyway. Something inside him compelled him to.

“Who... are you?”

The sun continued its slow rise.

Miledi could guess why Oscar had asked. She smiled, exuding a radiance brighter than the sun itself, and puffed out her chest proudly.

“I’m Miledi Reisen the Liberator. One who fights against this world’s gods.”

I knew it. This is what it means to be captivated by someone.

He couldn’t make this decision halfheartedly. The world wasn’t so nice a place that resolve alone could change it.

Fighting the gods was paramount to suicide. Even a cat didn’t have enough lives to survive that encounter. If he followed her, he’d surely see hell.

But if it’s with her, I don’t think I’d mind fighting in hell.

That was what he truly thought, from the bottom of his heart.

Oscar adjusted his glasses to hide his expression. He didn’t want to let Miledi see him like this, but for a completely different reason than when he’d first refused her.

He poured all of his feelings into his voice and gave Miledi his reply.

“I’ll follow you for life, even if the path you walk takes us to hell and back.” He’d walk forward together with this unbelievably reckless girl.

Miledi’s response was completely unexpected.

“Uh, well, hell and back is kinda... creepy, you know? I know you’ve fallen head over heels for me, but I’m not really into yanderes. Sorry, O-kun!” Birds chirped nearby as the morning sun blazed down on them.

Aside from the birds, there was silence.

Oscar’s glasses began to glow, and his face turned beet red. He started trembling, then pulled out his umbrella.

“Miledi!!!!!!!!! I’m going to kill you, you bi!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!itch!”

“Kyaaaaaa, O-kun’s snaaaaaaaaapped!”

Miledi turned tail and ran.

Oscar chased after her, fueled by anger and embarrassment in equal measure. Lightning, flames, and blades of wind shot out of his umbrella.

Miledi dodged each of them, screaming all the while. There wasn’t even a hint of fear on her face, though. In fact, she was blushing slightly and smiling.

Chapter III: The Macho Fairy of the Desert

Light blazed down on a pair of travelers. The burning heat pricked at their skin, mirages appeared in the distance, sand got in to everything, and the air was so dry breathing hurt.

“He’s... He’s trying to kill us, O-kun.”

“Personify the sun all you want, that’s not going to make Mr. Sunny any less hot.”

A pair of footsteps trudged through the burning sand.

“It’s so hoooooot. Hooooooooot. I’m sweating so much I’ll dry out.”

“At least you’re wearing my coat so it’s better for you.”

Sand stretched out as far as the eye could see. Oscar and Miledi were walking through the Crimson Desert, located on the western part of the northern continent. It had been named such because of how striking the red sand of the desert was. The grains were all so fine that even a slight breeze would whip them through the air, turning even the sky crimson.

Oscar was carrying Miledi on his back as he walked through the unforgiving desert heat.

“My face is hot, my neck’s hot, my arms are hot. Everything feels hoooooot.”

“.....”

Miledi slumped against Oscar and flailed her arms around like a spoiled child. Oscar’s jet-black coat looked like the kind of thing that would absorb heat, not reflect it. But of course, it was an artifact with metal threads woven into it. Not only did it reflect heat, but there was cooling magic incorporated into its design, so it kept its wearer at a comfortable temperature.

Miledi had looked like she was really suffering from the heat, so Oscar had given her his coat and decided to carry her on his back.

In other words, not only was Oscar wearing a single, sweat-drenched shirt, he

was forced to lug a heavy object as well.

“I’m thiiiiiirsty. If we keep going like this I’ll dry up.”

“.....”

“I hate being all sweaty like this.”

“.....”

“And the sand’s getting everywhere.”

“.....”

“O-kun. O-kun. Hey, O-kun. Glasses-wearing O-kun. I mean, glasses—”

“Gaaaaaah, just shut up!” Oscar finally snapped. He grabbed Miledi by the ankles and started spinning. It looked like he was swinging her around like a giant bat. The pair of them spun in circles in the middle of the desert.

“Hyowaaaaaaaaah!” Miledi’s skirt flipped up, and her panties were clearly visible as she spun through the sand, her hands outstretched behind her.

“Take thaaaaaaaaaaaat!” With a spirited yell, Oscar flung his partner. Miledi screamed as she flew through the air. She landed a short distance away, and kicked up a cloud of dust as she hit the sand.

Oscar wiped the sweat off his brow and smiled.

“Bleh... Pwah... Sand got in my mouth! Why’d you do that, O-kun!? You brute! Devil! Four-eyes!”

“Can you stop making fun of my glasses!?” Oscar adjusted his glasses and walked over to Miledi.

“For crying out loud, the sand and the heat are bad enough without you complaining about it every five seconds. If you’re really that hot, then why don’t you make an ice block or something with your magic?”

“Ah...” Miledi gazed up at Oscar, her mouth a small O in surprise. After a second, she snapped back to her senses and glared at him.

“I could say the same to you, O-kun. You can use that umbrella of yours to block the sun and make water too, can’t you?”

“Ah...”

The two gazed at each other underneath the blazing sun.

A cloud of dust blew past them. They were quiet for a good ten minutes.

Miledi summoned a giant clod of ice, floated it above them with gravity magic, and summoned a breeze to waft past them.

At the same time, Oscar unfolded his umbrella and raised it above them. The cloth expanded to many times its normal size. Then, he activated the new ability he’d installed into it with Miledi’s help. With the combination of spirit stone and Miledi’s gravity magic, he was able to make the umbrella float above them. A veil of wind covered them, protecting the pair from the sand. The two were now pleasantly cool, and free of sand.

“This is all the sun’s fault for being too hot!”

“Seriously. It should learn some humility from the moon and quit trying to show off so damn hard!”

“Yeah, no one cares how bright you’re shining! This is why no one likes guys like you!”

“You’re not some street thug from Velnika, so stop acting like it, you damned sun!”

The pair vented their frustrations at the sun. They’d underestimated the desert’s heat, which had taken a bigger toll on their mental fortitude than they’d thought. They were rather embarrassed that such simple countermeasures hadn’t come to them earlier, so they took it out on the poor sun.

In response, it almost felt as if it got hotter. It was as if the sun was angry.

They walked onward for another hour, berating the sun the whole time.

“Hm? Miledi. Look, there’s a small oasis over there. I think it’s meant to be a rest stop on the way to the city. Should we stop for a bit?”

“Yeah, let’s do it! I was just getting tired too.” Miledi happily bounded forward, her ponytail swishing behind her.

“You’ve got really good eyes, you know that? I can’t even see it from here.” Oscar smiled proudly as he watched Miledi look around.

“Did you think these glasses were just for show?”

“I mean, they totally are, aren’t they? I know you’re the kind of guy who’d wear them to make himself look smarter. I mean, even in Velnika I could tell you were just pushing up your glasses all the time because you knew the girls thought it looked cool. You were totally going for an intelligent gentleman look, right?”

“We really need to have a talk about how you see me.”

Oscar glared at Miledi. Her words hurt even more since she’d said them all with a straight face.

Oscar cleared his throat.

“These glasses are an artifact too. I’ve enchanted them with a lot of different spells. The lenses can emit a powerful flash of light, and they make me immune to dark magic... I’ve also enchanted them with Farsight.” He did his best to explain that they weren’t just a tool for him to be popular with the ladies.

Miledi looked up at him in shock.

“Heh, I knew you’d be surprised. But now you know these glasses aren’t just _”

“Your glasses sparkle!? They can shine!?”

“Wait, that’s what you’re amazed about?”

Miledi’s eyes were glittering with excitement. For whatever reason, the fact that his glasses could glow had really impressed her. “I wanna see it!”

“I get the feeling you’re trying to make fun of me somehow, so no.”

“Why not!? I wanna see Sparkly O-kun!”

“Sparkly O-kun? Now I *know* you’re making fun of me.”

Miledi continued begging him, but Oscar ignored her and kept walking.

“Come on, O-kun. Make your glasses sparkle for me. Pleaaase O-kun!” A frigid wind blew against Oscar’s face, which made frost rim his glasses. However,

Oscar didn't reply, and the wind grew even colder in turn.

I can't let myself get angry. I'll just be playing into her hands if I do. I need to stay calm and compos—

"Remember when you went to visit Aisha-chan before you left, O-kun? She was crying and clinging on to you and told you that—" *Glasses Beam!*

"Higyaaaaaah!? My eyes! My eyeeeeees!" Miledi clutched her eyes as his flash hit them at point-blank range.

As a side note, the continuation of that sentence would have been "she'd heard from an adventurer that O-kun liked girls in aprons."

Oscar was only human. He drank with his acquaintances occasionally, too. Naturally, girls were one of the things they talked about while drunk. And it seemed Aisha had grilled those acquaintances of his to tell her more about Oscar. After that she'd requested one final job from Oscar and set up a surprise drinking party for him. By the end, Oscar had grown terrified of women.

There were some things in the world better left unknown.

"Look, Miledi. There's even a cabin at the oasis. We might as well stop there for lunch."

"You know, O-kun. I still can't see anything." Miledi was still groaning in pain and pawing blindly at the air. She'd experienced firsthand the fearsome power of Oscar's glasses. In all honesty, they scared her a little.

Oscar commanded his umbrella closer and used it to cast healing magic on her. This was the eleventh of his umbrella's abilities, Benison Aura. Healing light rained down from the umbrella's spokes.

"Aaah, I can see again. The world isn't black!"

"Haaah... Stop fooling around, Miledi. Let's go."

Miledi raised her hands up to the light, as if offering a prayer to heaven. Oscar sighed and carried her in his arms.

The oasis had a number of trees growing around it, and the shade was pleasantly cool. The cabin seemed to be in good condition as well. *Someone probably comes and cleans it regularly.* Clean though it was, it was still just an

empty cabin. It kept the sun and sand out, but it was still hot inside.

In fact, it was more comfortable under Oscar's umbrella than in the cabin. And so, the pair decided to stay outside and sat next to the shore.

Oscar brought his umbrella back to the ground, just in case anyone else showed up. He didn't want people to suspect what magic they were capable of.

"Everyone needs an O-kun in their house." Miledi washed her face and hands in the oasis as she said that.

"You could at least make it sound like I'm a person, not an object. Besides, I'm not here to make everyone's life more convenient." Oscar bent down and started washing his face as well.

They'd gotten pretty dirty in the time they hadn't been keeping themselves comfortable with magic. The cool water felt great on their hot, sweaty skin.

Oscar felt refreshed, but this wasn't enough for Miledi.

"Ugh, it got in my hair too." She undid her ponytail and ran her fingers through her hair. They came back gritty. Her clothes, too, were filled with sand. Her sweat caused them to stick unpleasantly to her skin.

"We're just going to have to deal with it until we make it to the city. We'll get there by the end of the day, and you can just take a shower there. I wonder if I can enchant my clothes to keep sand off... Is something like that even possible? Hmm..." Oscar trailed off, and Miledi spoke up.

"Can't I just strip and jump in the oasis?"

"Bwah!? Are you kidding me!? This is a public place! What if someone comes here!? Actually, forget that, *I'm* here! Don't you have any shame!?" Oscar hurriedly stopped Miledi from stripping down.

Normally this would have been the part where Miledi started teasing him for getting flustered, but she was still staring at the oasis instead, a dangerous look in her eyes.

She was still a girl, after all. They may have been in the middle of a journey, but she still wanted to be clean.

At this rate she'll probably jump in fully clothed if she has to.

“Calm down, Miledi. Think about this rationally.”

“I need to jump in there so I can start thinking rationally again. A famous person once said something like this: Why do I leap into oases? Because they’re there.”

“Whoever this person was, they probably only became famous because everyone thought they were a pervert. Either that, or you got the quote wrong.”

Miledi edged closer to the water. Any more and she really would fall into the oasis.

Oscar sighed.

“Alright, alright. You want to wash up, right? I’ll make you a shower room in the bushes over there, so just use that.”

“I love you, O-kun!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Oscar held Miledi back as she tried to hug him and pulled one of his artifacts out of his pocket.

It was his Silver Slate. Originally it had just been made to track people, but he’d added a second function to it. It could now detect the presence of mana within a certain radius.

They were hunting for other people with ancient magic. It was likely such people would have mana reserves as large as Miledi’s and his own. Moreover, it could sense the approach of any threat, or just anyone with abnormal strength.

As beastmen didn’t possess any mana it couldn’t sense them, but he felt it was good enough for the time being. Oscar definitely wanted to improve it before they reached Haltina, though.

Still, it made a good alarm for Miledi.

“No one around in a three-hundred meter radius. Perfect.” There were only two dots on the plate. Miledi and himself. They were both glowing as bright as possible.

Oscar walked over to a surprisingly dense thicket, and transmuted. He did his best to not harm the local flora as he scrounged materials from underground to

craft his makeshift shower.

An average Synergist would have fainted in awe at Oscar's unbelievable skills. However, he was taking no chances. This was a shower room for his beloved partner!

"Miledi, this is just to ensure your privacy, so the walls aren't that tough. Don't go wild in there, okay?"

"Wow, you actually put a shower in there!"

Before Oscar could even tell her to get her own water, she'd scooped out a huge quantity of it with gravity magic and poured it into the tank he'd prepared. He'd left the ceiling open, so she could bring in more if she needed it.

The shower had a faucet and everything, but before he could explain how it worked, Miledi had jumped into the shower room.

"O-kuuun!"

"Yeah?"

"Thank youuu~"

"Uh, yeah. You're welcome." Oscar scratched his cheek awkwardly and walked away.

"I'm not that far, so if you need anything just yell for me. Though I think we'll be fine since I've got my Silver Slate."

"Mmm, got it. No peeking~"

"Don't worry, I won't."

"You better not. Like absolutely, definitely better not. I'm serious, O-kun. Don't you dare—"

"Are you trying to hint at something!? Or what, do you really not trust me at all!?" Oscar could hear Miledi's laughter through the walls. A second later, the sound of falling water replaced it. Miledi seemed to be in a good mood.

"Seriously..." Oscar adjusted his glasses in exasperation.

"Come to think of it, I'm pretty sweaty too. Plus, there's sand all over my clothes..." He realized he was just as dirty as Miledi had been. He looked down

at his Silver Slate. It appeared there still wasn't anyone nearby.

"Hmm... I guess I could wash up too..." He wasn't planning on stripping down and taking a full shower, just taking his shirt off and wiping himself down. Plus, since he was a man, he didn't need to make a separate changing room for himself.

Oscar took his shirt off, soaked a towel, and started wiping himself. He scrubbed hard, making sure he got all the sand and sweat off.

Just then, he noticed someone looking at him. Instantly wary, he turned to see what was staring at him.

"Gulp..." Miledi was peeking over the shower room wall.

"What are you doing?" Oscar asked, his eyebrows twitching.

"You know, I realized this back when you were carrying me, but... O-kun, you're surprisingly buff. You look like a thin scholar, but you've got a lot of muscles."

"I had the adventurers teach me how to fight, just in case. Also, those eyes of yours are scaring me. What happened to not peeking? Don't you have any tact?"

"I left it back in the Reisen Gorge."

"Then go get it back!"

And she's the one who said not to peek on HER! I never knew she was such a hopeless pervert. Just then, Oscar saw something out of the corner of his eye.

"M-Miledi, let's just drop this. Get away from the wall."

"Nihihihihi. Are you embarrassed, O-kun? That embarrassed to be seen naked by a girl? Well, are you?"

"I won't even complain about how annoying you're being, so please just get away from that wall. I told you before, the shower room wasn't built to last."

"Hm? It's not?"

"Yes, so— Aaah, wait! Don't lean against it! If you do—"

There was a sharp crack. Then, walls of the shower room suddenly began to

crumble.

“Huh?” Miledi’s weight was too much for them to bear, and they collapsed.

“Whoa...”

“Ah...” Miledi, who’d been leaning against them, fell forward. Her naked body flew toward Oscar. He got a good view of her slender back, her beautiful curves, and her smooth legs.

“Gah, I can’t believe this—” Miledi stood up, realizing too late what kind of view that would give Oscar.

“O-O-kun, don’t look!”

“Way ahead of you!” Oscar pivoted on the balls of his feet and turned straight around.

“Ugh, he totally saw. There’s no way he didn’t... I mean it’s my own fault, but... maybe I should hit him with Nether Burst anyway...” Oscar didn’t like the sound of that. There wouldn’t even be a speck of him left if she hit him with that. It had caved in an entire floor of the Greenway.

“I-I didn’t see anything! Promise!”

“Liar. You’re a big fat liar, O-kun! Your voice is shaking!”

“Guh. Okay, so maybe I saw a little... Sorry.”

“Ugh. It’s my fault, so you shouldn’t be the one to apologize... It feels wrong.”

It was kind of novel, seeing Miledi genuinely embarrassed for once. Oscar found it quite cute.

“Anyway, the changing room should be fine still. Go hide in there. I’ll repair the shower, if you want to finish up.”

“Nah, it’s fine. I’ll just go change.” She was acting uncharacteristically meek. When she was like this, she seemed just like any other girl. Oscar found that he preferred her annoying version more, since he didn’t have to feel bad about hitting her when she was like that.

Putting those thoughts aside, Oscar found his shirt and started getting dressed.

The two of them spent some time sitting by the oasis under the shade of Oscar's umbrella.

"....."

"....."

They didn't say anything. Miledi's ears were still red.

Oscar rifled through his pack for their food. He'd brought a lot of non-perishable goods along. They'd been stored in his containers that were popular among adventurers. His airtight seals meant food lasted even longer than usual inside them.

The versions he'd made for himself were, of course, a lot more impressive than the toned down variants he'd made for other adventurers. If word of his improved inventions spread, he'd probably have been flooded with requests from every single country. Logistics for supplies was the hardest part about organizing an army.

"We sweat out a lot earlier. Need to get some salt back in us." He handed Miledi some food.

"Y-Yeah, you're right!" She took it excitedly. It seemed she was still trying to shake off her embarrassment.

Oscar was at a loss for what to say too, so he focused on eating.

Today's lunch was beef. He used a lot of seasonings and spices on the sauce, so it made for a surprisingly delicious meal. That was the other reason Oscar's food containers were in such high demand. The food he packed into them was good. On top of that, because of how well-sealed his cans were, he could keep perishables in perfect condition too.

"Mmm, this is great! This is the same dish that was at Aisha-chan's restaurant, right?"

"Yep. Remember how there were always a bunch of adventurers there whenever we went? They like that place because it serves spicy food like this."

"I see. No wonder our lunches were so delicious. Wait, that means you bought all this from Aisha-chan's restaurant, didn't you? That's how she found

out you were leaving and started crying!”

“Pretty much.” Oscar stuffed his face full of meat. He clearly didn’t want to talk about that. Unfortunately for him, he’d piqued Miledi’s curiosity, which at least meant she was back to normal.

“Hey, O-kun. What did Aisha-chan say to you? Come on, tell me. And what’d you tell her? Come on! It’s no big deal, right?” She grinned at him and ribbed him gently with her elbows.

Oscar adjusted his glasses.

“Miledi. You’re being annoying again. Unbelievably annoying. I’m kind of relieved. Please stay like that forever, so I don’t feel guilty about blowing you halfway across the planet.”

“H-Huh? That wasn’t the reaction I was expecting... What’s that even supposed to mean? Here I am making fun of you and you look almost... kind. I don’t even know what I’m supposed to say to that.”

It was rare for Oscar to show Miledi any kindness, so she was taken aback.

“Uh, umm... Oh yeah! About the city we’re going to!” She forcibly changed the topic.

Oscar went back to his food and grunted a reply.

“The city’s called Chaldea, right? It’s the biggest city in Polvora, I think. They’re part of the Sharod Federation, right?”

Miledi nodded while chewing on some meat. The desert they were crossing was ruled by a group of countries that formed the Sharod Federation. The federation was a loose alliance between the many small independent fiefdoms that dotted the desert. The fiefdoms were more large tribes than properly organized regions, though. Each of the tribes had their own culture, customs, and laws. Even Sharod, the most powerful member of the federation and its namesake, didn’t have the power to influence the rule of another region.

These small tribes had joined together in order to show a united front against the larger powers among the human world.

Polvora was on the southeastern tip of the desert, and the closest fief to

Velka. Its largest city, Chaldea, was famous for its textiles.

“We’re going to start by gathering information. And since we’re there anyway, we might as well spend some time checking out their clothes, too.”

“We’re looking for the ‘Fairy of the Desert’ right?”

“Yep. The Fairy of the Desert. I was actually on my way to Polvora originally. I just stopped by Velnika because it was on the way.”

“Turned into a pretty big detour, huh?”

“It turned into the best detour of my life.”

“Mhm,” Oscar replied, and swallowed down his food.

“You said you’ve been searching for more wielders of ancient magic ever since you joined the Liberators, right? You and your comrades have supposedly been scouring the globe looking for people?”

“Most of our leads have ended up being dead ends, but yeah.” She’d told most of this to him back when they’d been in Velnika.

There weren’t too many people like Oscar and Miledi, who could use ancient magic and possessed ungodly amounts of mana. It stood to reason that those few who existed would stand out, which meant rumors of them would spread. However, Oscar hadn’t heard any such rumors. He assumed they were like him, hiding their talents from the rest of the world. That was why Miledi and her comrades had leaped on even the most outlandish of rumors. They were all they had.

Most had ended up being false leads, but every now and then they’d hit the jackpot. Oscar was the first person Miledi had found capable of using magic from the age of the gods, but they’d still picked up a number of insanely talented people.

As their current method of chasing outlandish rumors had borne some fruit, they continued to rely on it. And the Fairy of the Desert was one such rumor.

According to legend, there was a wandering fairy who patrolled the Crimson Desert and guided lost travelers home. It sounded pretty fake to Oscar. He tilted his head.

“Why a fairy, of all things?”

“Because they’re a pretty, dainty little girl, maybe?” Miledi tilted her head as well. She wasn’t sure either.

They still didn’t have enough information, which was why they were planning on going to the largest city in the area and gathering more.

“It would be nice... if they could use ancient magic too.”

“Healing magic specifically, right?” Miledi replied gently.

Miledi wanted to find someone who could help her in her fight against the gods. However, while Oscar did of course want to help her achieve her goal, he also wanted to find someone who could cure his brother and sister. For him, that still took precedence.

Oscar pushed up his glasses, embarrassed at being seen through so easily.

The hidden village where Oscar’s family had been sent, and where all the non-combatant members of Miledi’s group lived, was deep in the Reisen Gorge. Back when she’d worked as an executioner, Miledi had chanced upon a cave deep in the gorge. There were a few other places Miledi had considered putting their base, but this was the easiest to defend and the least likely to be discovered.

Oscar had entrusted the orphans and a few members of the Liberators with some of his artifacts, so the village was at least better defended now.

Once they found a way to heal Dylan and Katy, Oscar was planning on going back to see them. Whenever that was, he’d be sure to bolster the village’s defenses with the most heinous physical traps he could come up with.

Anyone who dared to hurt his family deserved only the most painful of deaths.

“Hey, O-kun? You’re smile’s starting to creep me out. You look kinda evil.”

“Oh, whoops.”

Miledi had finished eating and now she stared at Oscar, shivering in fear.

Oscar hurriedly finished his own meal.

“Well, that’s a long enough break. If night falls before we get into the city, it’ll be harder to find an inn.”

“At least this time the journey will be nice and cool.”

Miledi and Oscar walked into the harsh desert, their floating ice cube and umbrella providing perfect air conditioning.

Sand stretched on as far as the eye could see. The wind shaped the dunes, causing them to undulate like waves. It really felt like they were traversing a sea of sand.

“Hm? Miledi, we’ve got something coming from the right. Five of them.”

“I don’t see anything. They must be underground.” Miledi scanned the area to her right.

Oscar started counting down. As he reached one, five crimson scorpions shot out of the ground.

Miledi struck at almost the same time.

“Heavensfall!”

The scorpions were slammed back into the sand. Gravity magic pinned them in place. The scorpions screeched in pain. However, they were in the desert. Below the scorpions was just sand. Instead of being crushed against the ground, the scorpions sunk deeper inside it.

“Hmm, deserts and I really don’t get along.” Miledi cast a combination of earth and wind magic to summon a blade of sand, which cut through the scorpions. The five of them screeched again as they died.

“You’ve been using gravity magic an awful lot lately. Any reason for that?”

“Practice. It’s pretty hard to use, and it takes up a lot of mana. I want to get better at controlling it, and hopefully reduce the amount of mana it drains, so I’ve gotta keep practicing.” She puffed her chest out proudly.

Though she appeared skilled at first glance, Miledi still couldn’t fuse other elemental magic with her gravity magic. Furthermore, there were spells even she couldn’t control still.

Her Nether Burst was one such spell. Once activated, it would drain all of her mana unless some external factor forced the spell to be cut off partway.

She wasn't happy that her most powerful spell was one she couldn't fully control. Worse, if she wasn't careful she was liable to kill herself with it.

"I see. It certainly does seem difficult to use. So even you're not able to use it perfectly..."

"Hey, O-kun. I've been the only one fighting for a while now... Do you really plan on making a girl do all the work?" Miledi glared at Oscar.

Like most places, the Crimson Desert was rife with monsters. In fact, it was one of the more dangerous regions on the continent.

The scorpions Miledi had just defeated were known as the assassins of the desert. Travelers feared them because of their deadly poison and ability to move through the ground undetected.

Since leaving the oasis, they'd been attacked rather frequently. However, Oscar was always able to detect them ahead of time and Miledi crushed them in seconds, so there was no sense of urgency.

Still, as strong as she was, Miledi was still a girl. She was tired of being the only one fighting, wanting her partner to pull his weight.

Oscar just stared at her blankly in response. It was almost if he didn't get the reason for her complaints.

"Okay, now I'm mad. I'm mad, O-kun! I'm a girl too, you know!? I know this is child's play, but you could still say something like 'Oh, leave it to me' or 'I'd feel bad making you do all the hard work' or something!"

"You just said yourself that this is child's play. You're better suited to fighting than I am. Besides, just thinking about you acting like a normal city girl is... Haha."

"Hey, why'd you laugh? O-kun, you better explain yourself." Miledi glared at Oscar, a dark look in her eyes. But just then, Oscar's Silver Slate reacted again. There was a giant monster headed their way. It was fast, too.

"Miledi, behind us. It's fast. I'll count down for you."

“.....”

“10, 9, 8 ,7 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, go!”

A giant earthworm, known to the people here as a Sandworm, burst out from under the ground, directly under their feet.

Oscar and Miledi jumped back in different directions, just barely avoiding the creature’s circular maw. Its razor-sharp teeth ground the sand it had been chewing. It almost looked like it was grinding its teeth in frustration at failing to catch its prey.

“Hm? Huh?” Oscar looked over in confusion.

Normally, Miledi would have crushed the worm to the ground with her gravity magic.

Is she charging up a really powerful spell or something? Oscar flicked his left hand. Thin chains flew out of his sleeve.

His Metamorph Chains. Before he’d had to physically fling them, or snake them along the ground to his target by using the spirit stone contained within them. Now, however, he’d enhanced them with Miledi’s gravity magic and they floated freely in the air.

He could control all five at once since they’d become easier to handle. Furthermore, the pouch at his waist had a huge carrying capacity, so he’d lengthened each one to one hundred meters.

His chains wound their way around the Sandworm. They were powerful enough to bind it in place.

He sent a second chain burrowing through the ground, then remotely transmuted the ground underneath the Sandworm into stone.

“Miledi, how much longer is this going to take!?” Oscar shouted to his partner. However, there was no reply. *Don’t tell me she got injured!?* But when he looked over he saw that she’d dodged just fine. Her actions baffled him.

“Miledi? What are you doing?” She was lying in midair, her hands behind her head. High up enough that the Sandworm couldn’t reach her.

Miledi grinned at him.

“I thought I should give you a chance to train your skills too. That monster is a gift from me to you. Oh, what’s that? No need for thanks! We’re partners, after all.”

Guess she’s holding a grudge. She’d lifted herself high enough that she was in no danger.

A vein pulsed in Oscar’s forehead. He tightened the chains around the Sandworm, and it screamed in pain.

“Miledi. Doing in this in the middle of a fight is not funny. What you’re trying to say doesn’t even make sense. Listen up, in the first place—” He himself cut off as he looked at his Silver Slate. A number of huge enemies were headed their way. Oscar guessed they were this Sandworm’s friends.

“M-Miledi. There’s six more coming. Stop playing around and get rid of them.” Miledi made no move to get up.

“No.” She said, like a spoiled child, and smiled.

Six Sandworms popped out of the ground, surrounding Oscar. They looked at their trapped buddy, and then at Oscar. Their anger was palpable.

Oscar’s expression stiffened, but he remained calm. Then, he adjusted his glasses.

“Miledi, I understand that you’re frustrated. I’m willing to listen, so let’s talk this out, okay? But first, could you please get rid of these—”

“Giyaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Before he could finish, the Sandworms converged on Oscar. Six gaping maws bore down on him.

Oscar screamed, and a cloud of dust rose up where he’d been standing. The Sandworms’ heads were all stuck in the ground, and they looked like giant upside-down Ns.

A second later Oscar spoke.

“A-Are you really just going to sit there!?” As the dust cleared, Miledi saw Oscar on one knee, with his umbrella thrust out before him.

He'd activated Hallowed Ground to keep himself alive. The sheer weight of six massive creatures should have buried him in the sand even with a barrier, but he'd transmuted the ground into metal and affixed his umbrella in place. His Transmutation abilities were truly impressive.

"You're my partner, aren't you, O-kun? You're not going to be much help against the gods if you can't beat monsters like this." Oscar finally snapped. Miledi didn't notice, and kept needling him.

"What's wrong, O-kun? Come on, you can do it! Don't give up! Stay light on your feet! Believe in yourself! I know you can do better than this! Come on, get back up!" Oscar stood up. He extended the umbrella's shaft toward the Sandworms, then pulled out a single black glove and put it on. After that, he also took out a few of his enchanted weapons.

Finally, he took a deep breath, looked up at Miledi, and shouted.

"Mileddiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii! I'm going to fucking murder you!" His voice carried pretty far.

At the same time, there was an explosion, and the one of the Sandworms flew back. The first Sandworm that he'd suppressed with his chains was a smoking husk. He'd used lightning to kill it.

The explosion had torn huge chunks out of a few of the remaining Sandworms' torsos.

He'd hit them all with Combustion Blades. The resulting blast had been pretty powerful.

Chunks of meat rained down on him, which he fended off with his umbrella. He then bent one of his gloved fingers. There was a loud whistling noise, and one of the Sandworms was split into five.

This was another one of his artifacts, the Sable Glove. It was crafted from superfine threads of metal that had been enchanted with gravity magic. The threads were made of spirit stone, so he could also control them freely. While his chains were made for binding and restraining targets, those were made for killing. The threads of spirit stone were sharp enough to cut flesh.

The remaining Sandworms tried to burrow back underground, as this

opponent was too much for them to handle.

“You’re not going anywhere.” Oscar transmuted the ground around him. The sand, which should have been their domain, turned into the tombs that entrapped them.

Oscar closed his umbrella, lifted it up, and slammed it into the ground. Blades of wind bisected two of the Sandworms, while electrified chains and metal wire made mincemeat of the rest.

It hadn’t even taken a minute for Oscar to wipe them all out.

After finishing up, he glared at Miledi.

“I knew you could do it if you tried, O-kun!” She was clapping happily.

In order to ensure they had a good working relationship going forward, Oscar decided he needed to teach her a little lesson. He aimed his chains at her. But before he could fire them off—

“Hm?”

“Huh?”

The air shook. A second later, the ground began to shake too.

Something a few hundred meters out was running right at them. It was kicking up a cloud of dust so big that it looked like a sandstorm was following in its wake. That something turned out to be an entire herd of Sandworms.

Oscar looked down at his Silver Slate. The whole thing was glowing with light. There was easily more than a hundred of them, which spanned an area over three hundred meters wide. One of the Sandworms looked a lot larger than usual.

It appeared those Sandworms from before had a *lot* of friends.

He knew he wouldn’t be able to fight such a large group. He’d be blown away by their sheer mass before he even had a chance.

“Miledi-san? If you’re telling me to fight *that* all on my own too, I’m going to have to rethink my decision to travel with you.” Oscar looked pleadingly up at Miledi.

“E-Even I wouldn’t be that cruel. Actually, let’s get out of here! I don’t think my magic’s gonna be enough for that!”

“Y-Yeah.”

Oscar attempted to leap into the air with his Onyx Boots.

The Sandworm army was almost on top of him. They were even faster than he’d thought. Up close, he realized the giant one was even bigger than he’d first thought. It was like a living mountain was looming over him.

Crap, I might not make it. Miledi must have been thinking the same thing, as she lightened him with her gravity magic.

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

Just then, Miledi and Oscar looked down in shock.

This was hardly the time for it, but what they saw was simply unbelievable. A man had appeared between him and the monsters.

He had rustred hair and eyes as sharp as a hawk. His eyes were the same color as his hair. He wore a faded gray robe, with a white sash over it. Standing a formidable two meters tall, he had a massive frame. Oscar guessed he was in his mid-twenties.

From his clothes it seemed likely that he was a resident of the Crimson Desert, but neither Oscar nor Miledi had sensed him coming at all.

He silently dashed over to Oscar, as if completely unconcerned about the army of Sandworms behind him.

“Huh, wait, who are—”

“Don’t worry about that.”

Oscar faltered as the heavily muscled man towered over him. He grabbed Oscar’s arms, his voice utterly emotionless.

A second later—

“Wha?”

“O-O-kun?”

Miledi was directly in front of him. They both blinked.

With his free hand he grabbed hold of Miledi.

A second later, they vanished.

“Huh?”

“Wha? Wait, all we’ve been saying for the past minute is huh and wha...” And reappeared on a sand dune somewhere else. A giant city rose up in the distance.

The two of them exchanged looks and turned back around.

“Please forget all about me.” He let go of their hands and looked into their eyes. Just then, Miledi blurted out,

“A-Are you the Fairy of the Desert?”

“Huh?”

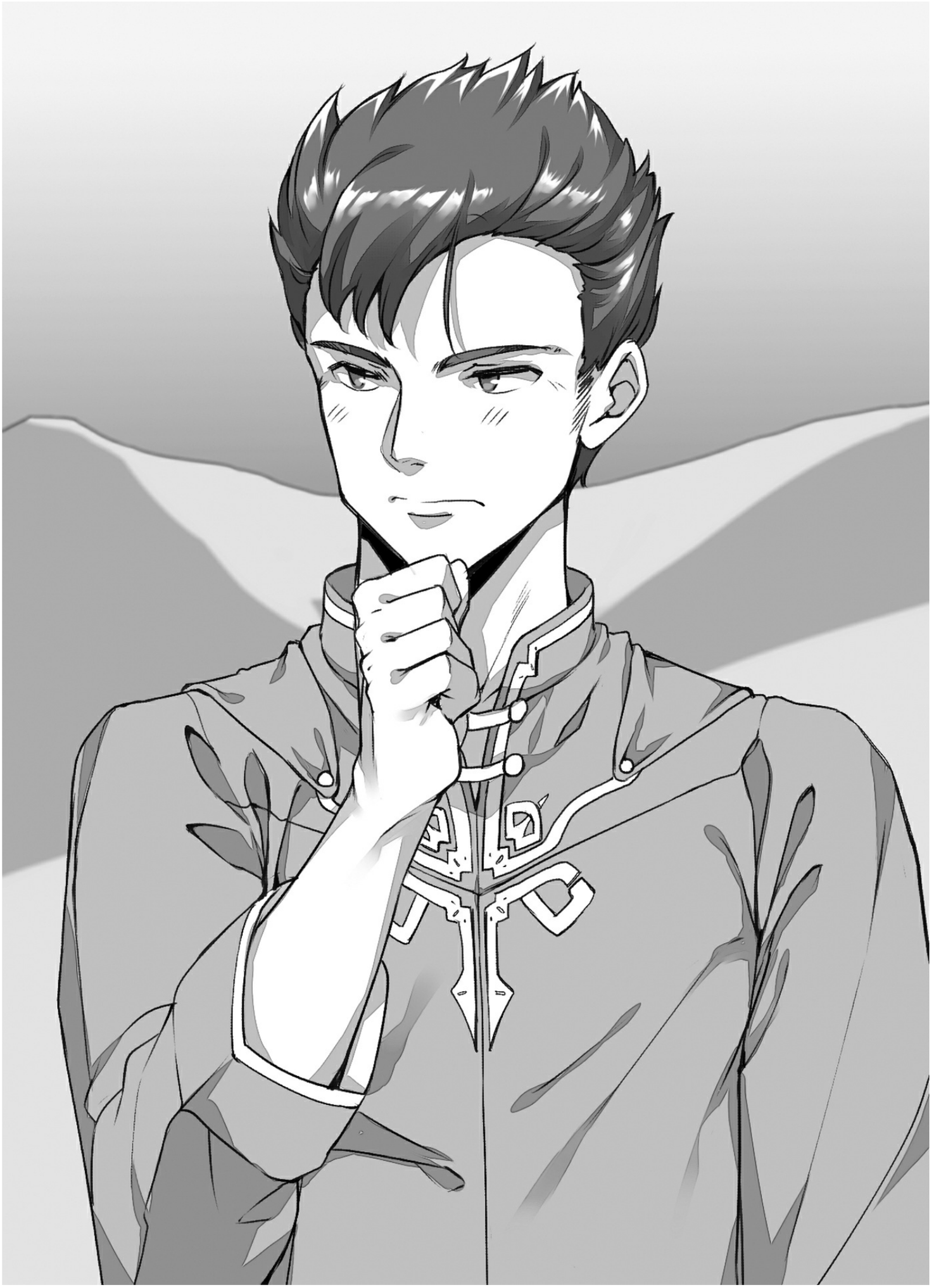
“Huh?”

Both the man and Oscar looked at her in surprise.

Oscar then turned back to the man.

“Fairy?” His sharp eyes refused to meet Miledi’s gaze.

“F-Fairy?” A blush spread up his chiseled face. It looked like he’d only just realized that was what people called him. He must have been embarrassed to have such a dainty nickname.



The man returned to his senses and coughed.

“Anyway, please don’t tell other people about me.” Mana began swirling around the man.

“O-kun, don’t let him get away!”

“Huh? Oh, got it!” Oscar wrapped his chains around the man, which made his mana disperse. The man let out a gasp of surprise.

“Wow, that was amazing, O-kun! And it looks like we hit the jackpot right off the bat! I can’t believe this! I spent years searching fruitlessly before I found you, and now we’ve got another falling right into our laps! Looks like my luck’s finally turning around!”

“Uh, sure.”

Miledi got herself hyped up. She pumped a fist into the air and leaped with joy. Oscar was honestly a bit put off.

Meanwhile, the man tried to free himself of his restraints.

“Fufufu, don’t even bother. O-kun’s chains are made of sealstone. You won’t be able to emit mana easily with those around you.”

“What do you plan on doing to me?” He stared warily at the two of them. When he narrowed his eyes, he looked positively terrifying.

Cold sweat poured down Miledi’s forehead.

“Th-Thanks for saving us back there, but we can’t have you leaving just yet. We actually came here to find you. But man, I can’t believe we ran into you before we even got around to gathering info!”

“What do you plan on doing to me?” He repeated his question. His tone was even fiercer than before. It seemed Miledi had only made him more suspicious. Oscar sighed and removed his chains.

The man looked at Oscar in surprise.

“Sorry. It’s true that we came all this way to meet you, so I panicked a bit when you were about to leave. Also, I apologize for my partner’s attitude. I’m truly sorry.” The man looked away, clearly uncomfortable at being apologized

to.

“And what’s that supposed to mean!?” Miledi screamed. But then a second later she looked back at the man and bowed with a mumbled “Sorry.”

The man tried to look anywhere but at the two of them.

Oscar held out a hand.

“Thanks for saving us back there, really. My name’s Oscar. Oscar Orcus.” The man looked at Oscar’s outstretched hand.

He made no motion to take it. After a brief moment of silence, he shook his head.

“Sorry, but I’m not interested.” Mana started swirling around him once more.

Miledi tried to stop him.

“Wait, please listen!”

“.....”

Miledi yelled out one last thing just as he was about to vanish.

“We’re like you! We can use magic from the age of the gods too!” His mana dispersed again. This time though, Oscar hadn’t done anything. He’d stopped casting of his own accord. Judging by his stunned expression, he probably hadn’t meant to.

Miledi breathed a sigh of relief and stared at the man. Her expression was serious now.

“You’re the same, aren’t you?”

The man’s expression gave nothing away, but Miledi continued anyway.

“You just popped up out of nowhere, and then you touched O-kun and showed up next to me with him. After that, you brought us here in an instant. You must have some kind of teleportation magic, correct? Something normal mages can’t possibly use.”

“You’re wrong. My power is nothing special. It comes from an artifact I happened to find.”

The man pulled a necklace out of his robes.

Miledi glanced over at Oscar. Oscar gazed intently at the necklace for a few seconds before turning to Miledi and shaking his head.

“That’s just a normal necklace.”

“You simply cannot see its power. I’ll say this now: I won’t lend it to you. If you plan on stealing it—”

“Sorry, but those lies won’t work on us. I told you before, we can use ancient magic too. O-kun over here’s probably the only Synergist alive who can make artifacts still. No one’s more knowledgeable about them than him.”

The man turned to Oscar, clearly at a loss for words.

Oscar made his chains and umbrella float in the air. Electric sparks flew off of them. They were obviously not your average magical tools.

“By the way, I was floating using gravity magic earlier, not wind magic.” Miledi showed off her powers as well. Sky blue mana swirled around her, and a second later a massive segment of sand flew up into the air.

“We’re on a journey to find other people with powers like ours. Please at least hear us out.” She silently gazed at the man after saying that.

For a while, he just stared at the floating umbrella and sand. Neither Miledi nor Oscar could read his expression.

Though Oscar thought he caught a hint of jealousy in the man’s eyes.

“My answer remains unchanged. I have already decided how I wish to live my life. I have no desire to join any group.” His sharp gaze pierced through Miledi.

“Why? You’re using that power of yours to help people, aren’t you? So why do you want to be alone?”

“This power is nothing more than a curse.”

What kind of things happened in his past? Oscar was surprised at the darkness in his eyes as he said that.

“That’s all I have to say. Please don’t trouble yourself any further with me.” He said with a tone of finality.

Miledi hung her head. She was trembling. The man felt a little guilty about leaving her like that.

Oscar spared Miledi a glance before giving the man a look of sympathy. He already knew where this was going.

“No! I’m not giving up that easily! I managed to seduce O-kun eventually, too! Don’t underestimate me!”

“Can you please stop using suggestive words like that?”

Miledi ignored his protests. After throwing a mini-tantrum, Miledi closed in on the man.

Flustered, he took a step back. Miledi’s menacing demeanor, or perhaps just her overbearing presence, had been enough to leave him disturbed.

“I’ll make you listen to me, even if I have to force you!”

“Wh-Wha!? I told you I don’t— Cosmic Rift!”

Miledi disappeared into a glowing ring of light. Just before she vanished, she let out a confused yell.

The man was breathing heavily, and looked like he’d just faced down some kind of demonic monster.

“Sorry about that. Our leader’s a little excitable. Just making sure, but she’s okay, right?”

“Haaah... Haaah... Y-You’ll see in a moment.” The man waved his hand. Another ring of light appeared at Oscar’s feet. Oscar, too, yelled in surprise and vanished into the portal of light.

A very exhausted man remained alone on the sand after that.

There was a huge splash in a small oasis some distance away.

“*Ack... Hic...* I swallowed too much water...” This stopping point between desert towns was empty, but had anyone been there they would have seen someone appear seemingly out of thin air right above the water.

Oscar splashed about in the shallows, still trying to get his bearings. He slicked

back his hair and looked around. His glasses were missing.

“Looks like I got sent to an oasis somewhere... That guy’s got some impressive magic. Anyway, did he also send Miledi...” *There she is.* She was sitting at the edge of the water, sobbing and cradling her knees.

Upon closer inspection, Oscar realized that her clothes and hair were muddy, and her face was dripping with water. Her nose was red, as if it had scraped across the ground.

Off to the side, he noticed the oasis turned into a marshy swamp a little ways away. There were skid marks showing someone had slipped into it recently.

That told Oscar everything he needed to know. When Miledi had been teleported, she’d been running. If he’d teleported her near the oasis, it stood to reason that she would have slipped on the slick mud. And because she’d been waving her arms around wildly, she wouldn’t have been able to stop herself from falling flat on her face.

Oscar walked over to Miledi.

“Should I make you another shower?”

“Please.” Miledi sniffled and nodded meekly.

A short while later, Miledi returned to Oscar’s side. Her nose was still a little red, but she was clean. Oscar was sitting cross-legged at the oasis’ bank and staring at his Silver Slate.

“O-kun, thanks for the shower.”

“Your welcome.”

Miledi sat herself next to him. She hugged her knees and stared at the water’s surface.

Finally, she muttered something.

“All the wielders of ancient magic are a huge pain the ass.”

“I hope you realize that includes you.”

She ignored him, as usual.

“That was teleportation magic he used back there, right?”

“Seems like it. That ring of light... It’s some kind of portal, I guess? Passing through it will put you in a completely different location. It seems he can transport himself even without that portal, though. Either way it’s pretty impressive. And it’s going to be a real pain to deal with.”

“Anytime he realizes we’re close he can just send us away, or teleport himself. We won’t even have a chance to talk to him.”

“I’m pretty sure he only teleported us away that time because you were scaring him.”

Oscar was once again, ignored. Still, he cleared his throat and continued.

“At any rate, he refused our offer. Quite firmly, too. I imagine that won’t be deterring you, though.”

“Of course not! I mean, he didn’t refuse us completely. You could tell there was something else in his eyes, right?”

So you won’t stop until you hear what he really thinks, huh? Oscar smiled to himself. Like she’d said, that was how she’d managed to seduce him too.

He almost felt a twinge of sympathy for the poor man.

“Though, I have no idea where we are or where he went... And since he can teleport wherever he wants, it’s going to be hard to gather information on his whereabouts... Jeez, what are we supposed to do noooooow.” Miledi rolled around and pounded the sand angrily. She was back to acting like a spoiled child.

Oscar smiled and his Silver Slate began to glow.

“Finding him will be a piece of cake, actually.”

“Huh? How!?” Miledi looked up in surprise and Oscar showed her his slate.

“The moment he transported you, I figured I’d be next. So while we were talking, I attached one of my trackers to a thread and hid it under the ground. I managed to get it onto him before he dropped me.”

The slate showed Miledi and Oscar in the center, two dazzling pinpricks of light. Some distance away was a third pinprick of light, equally as bright.

“Oh, and from the looks of it, he transported us two days east of Chaldea. I found a signpost near the oasis while you were taking your shower. Judging by the distance, he’s probably somewhere near the city still.” Miledi started trembling.

Is she going through some weird withdrawal symptoms or something? Oscar thought to himself. A second later, she hugged him with all her might. His head felt like it was being squeezed in a vice.

“Nice job, O-kun! I knew I could count on my partner! Those glasses really aren’t just for show after all! I’m sorry I thought you were a weirdo for wearing a black coat in the middle of the desert!”

“Can you give it a rest about my glasses already!? Wait, hey, you were really thinking that!? And get off of me! Let me go!”

“Come ooon~ Let me hug you a little longer!”

“Daaaaaaaaaaaaaah! God you’re so annoying!” Oscar finally managed to push Miledi away. Though it might not have been because he thought she was annoying, but for a different reason entirely. Oscar’s face was bright red as he adjusted his glasses.

“Alriiight! Thanks to your quick thinking we know where he is. Let’s hurry back to town!” She pumped her fist into the air energetically, already over being pushed away by Oscar.

“Roger,” Oscar said with a nod. He was still blushing.

One day after Miledi and Oscar left the oasis.

The man who’d sent the terrifying girl and her weary glasses-wearing companion away led a herd of four iraks into Chaldea.

Iraks were large four-legged mammals that the desert folk used in place of horses. Normally, the beasts were lazy creatures. They were often too lazy to even find food, and had evolved to be able to survive a month without eating. As long as they drank water every few days, at least.

They shambled along as fast as a human walking briskly. Rarely could their

riders urge them into anything faster than that. But if they felt their lives in danger, they could gallop across the dunes for hours on end without tiring. They often spit at people who annoyed them, too.

Still, iraks were valued by the desert people and sold for high prices.

This man was an irak herder who made his living selling them.

He'd sold quite a few at the nearby villages already, and was planning to sell the remainder of his stock in Chaldea. After that, all that remained was to deliver supplies to a few other villages.

Chaldea's main street was a cacophony of noise. Travelers and merchants haggled over prices, hawkers called out the names of their wares, and people shouted to be heard over the din.

The man gently led the iraks down the street and turned at an intersection. Before him stood a large pillar, to which many iraks' reins were tied.

This was the main irak market.

"Oh, it's you. I was expecting you." The owner of the iraks smiled and walked up to the man. He was well-built, but a slight paunch still bulged out from behind his white robe. His clothes were of fine quality, and had clearly been sewn by a master tailor. One could easily tell he was a prospering merchant.

"I've brought three to sell. What's your price?"

"Curt as always, I see. I haven't seen you in months, my friend. Surely you can spare some time to share a tale or two."

The man looked away, troubled. The merchant clearly meant no harm, though.

"Well, I won't force you. I certainly wouldn't want to lose your business... Marvelous. As always, the iraks you've brought me are of exceptional quality." The merchant tied the three iraks' reins to the pillar and nodded in satisfaction. He asked the man to sit inside his shop while he performed a more thorough inspection of the goods. And so, he sat down and an apprentice brought him some tea.

The apprentice had seen the man quite a few times by now too, and wasn't

nervous around the silent giant. The man smiled slightly and gave the boy his thanks.

He didn't know if the merchant had sent the boy to keep him company while he examined the iraks, or if it was the boy's own curiosity that kept him there. Regardless, the boy was clearly intent on making conversation.

"Mister, the master's been complaining a lot recently."

"Huh?"

"The Holy Church has started monopolizing the irak trade... Of course, that means master was able to sell his whole herd to them, but then he was out of stock. An irak trader is nothing without iraks, so he went around looking for more to buy, but the other big irak traders sold to the Holy Church as well, and all he could find were dregs no one else wanted."

"Why would the Holy Church want iraks?"

"Beats me... Anyway, that's why master's so happy to see you. I don't suppose you'd be willing to sell all four of them?"

"I'd have a hard time getting home if I did."

In truth, he'd have no trouble at all, but it would start raising suspicion otherwise. The merchant was convinced he lived far away since he only came by once every few months, and it would be odd not to take an irak over such long distances.

Besides, he'd kept that one irak a long time, so it was practically family to him. He knew he wouldn't sell it even if he could.

The boy knew he wouldn't part with his last irak either. He smiled in understanding and said "I thought as much."

"Well, did you have any trouble getting here? Like a run-in with monsters or something?" The man looked up in surprise.

It was clear from his gaze that he was wondering what had led the boy to that conclusion.

"You just look tired, is all."

This boy is quite sharp. He'll make a good merchant someday. The man thought back to his strange encounter yesterday.

That boy and girl who'd possessed the same kind of abnormal powers he did. They'd claimed they'd come looking for him.

Neither of them had seemed like bad people, really. Furthermore, they'd both seemed proud of their abilities.

The boy had claimed he could create artifacts, even. *The power to create...* Truly, he'd been a little jealous. Especially of their relationship.

Though the girl seemed to lead him by the nose quite often, the pair clearly trusted each other as equals. Neither was the other's servant.

"Umm, Mister?" He snapped back to the present. The boy was looking at him with worry.

The man gave him a small smile.

"Ah, sorry. It's nothing." In a sense, he had encountered monsters, and he told the boy as much.

He took another sip of his tea and—

"Miledi-chan's here! I've finally found you!"

"Bwah!?"

He spotted Miledi hurtling down from above. The man spit out his tea. The boy, who she'd landed on, rolled across the ground, covering his eyes in pain.

"Wh-Why? How did..."

How did she find me? In fact, how is she even here? I sent her two days away just one day ago.

Miledi looked down at the man and grinned.

"I won't let you escape that easily!" Miledi frightened him, but that grin of hers also irked him.

The man hesitated for a moment. Meanwhile, the young boy whimpered.

"Mister, why did this happen to me? Did I do something wrong?" He was still

rubbing his eyes, which Miledi had hurt. The man was worried about him of course, but right now he needed to find a way out of this predicament.

He couldn't open a portal here. The risk that someone might see it was far too great. That left running. But he hadn't been paid yet, and he didn't want to leave his irak partner behind.

"Hey, what's going on in there?" The merchant had heard the noise and came to see what was happening. An idea came to mind and the man turned to the merchant.

"Sir. Please put the money for my iraks on the pouch tied to my personal irak. I'll come back for it later."

"What? But then how... Hey, wait!"

The man dashed off without waiting for a reply.

"Aaah, get back here!" Miledi ran off after him.

"Master? Master! What's going on? I still can't see." The young apprentice blinked a few times to clear his sight.

"Sorry about my companion. She's rather boisterous. Anyway, could I ask you a few questions about the man who was in here?" A young man in a stiflingly hot black coat appeared in the doorway. For some reason, he was carrying a black umbrella.

"What on earth is going on here?" The merchant scratched his balding head and turned to Oscar.

"*Sniffle...*" A young girl was crying at the edge of an oasis. She was soaked from head to toe, and covered in mud. Her nose was red.

Suddenly, there was a blinding flash of light in front of her.

A second later, Oscar fell into the water with a huge splash.

The water and wind magic embedded in his clothes cleaned and dried him off, and he walked out of the water looking none the worse for the wear.

When he saw the state Miledi was in, he guessed more or less what must

have happened.

“O-kun, he threw me away like I was trash...”

“Ah... I see.”

Oscar gave a noncommittal reply and nodded.

After Miledi had chased after the man, she’d run straight into a portal he’d set up in an alleyway. However, she’d managed to dodge over it with her gravity magic.

Certain that he’d be willing to at least listen now that she’d rendered his traps ineffective, Miledi had let her guard down. Just as she’d started talking, the man had grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and threw her into his portal.

She’d been so shocked that she’d lost her concentration and fell into the mud.

“Ugh, damn that man! I can’t believe he’d throw a girl like that!”

“In your case, I can see why he’d do it... Also, it’s Naiz, not ‘that man.’”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“That’s his name. While you were wasting your time running after him, I talked to the merchant he was with. The guy’s name is Naiz. Turns out he’s an irak herder. He comes by every few months with a few well-bred iraks to sell.”

Unfortunately, that was all he’d been able to find out. Even the merchant, who seemed somewhat close to Naiz, had known very little about him. He’d described Naiz as a taciturn, but sincere man.

After Oscar was done talking to the merchant, he’d noticed that Naiz’s irak was missing.

The merchant was wondering when Naiz had had time to come get it, but he assumed he’d just missed Naiz while talking to Oscar.

On the other hand, Oscar had guessed what must have really happened.

He’d thanked the merchant and decided to head back. When he’d stepped into an alleyway though, he’d fallen through one of Naiz’s portals.

Still, they’d gotten some more information on him, at least.

“You’re amazing, O-kun! No matter what happens, you still come away with something useful!”

“Meanwhile, you just keep charging in like an idiot.”

She went to hug him, but Oscar restrained her with his Metamorph Chains. He didn’t want to get smeared in mud too. He sighed and made another shower room for Miledi. Then, he threw her into the changing room and heard her mutter “I feel like I’m being thrown around a lot lately...” which he ignored.

Two days later.

Naiz finished up his business in the surrounding villages and started on the road home. He led his irak from the village on foot until he was out of sight. Only then did he teleport.

He’d gone to that village to deliver stillstone, which only grew in the wastelands to the north, or within the Red Dragon’s Mountain. When he’d been on his way to Chaldea, he’d heard the villages had been suffering from a stillstone shortage, so he’d teleported north and gathered some for them.

Though those two had somehow found him at the irak trader’s place, he was certain he’d be safe in the surrounding villages. His business there hadn’t been planned, and no one knew he’d gone there. Still, he looked around restlessly.

He had a nagging feeling that that girl who came and went like a storm would somehow appear anyway, followed by that respectable young man.

“I’m just being paranoid...” This time he’d teleported them a whole five days away. That was the furthest distance he could teleport anyone. There was no way they’d catch up to him in just two days.

The irak tilted its head at Naiz, wondering what he was worrying about. Its droopy eyes were trained on him.

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it. Let’s go home, Suzanne.”

“Gweeeh.” Suzanne was his irak’s name. It lost interest in Naiz after hearing his reply, and turned its half-dead eyes forward again.

It seemed to be staring at something. Something far off in the distance.

“Suzanne?”

“Gweeeeeeh.” Naiz had been with Suzanne for years now. He could tell what her grunts meant.

“What is it, girl? What do you see?” Naiz squinted at the horizon. All he could see was the sun, the sand, and—

“Hm? What’s that...” Naiz felt a sense of foreboding. He spotted something far off in the sky.

“Is that a black...dot? No, it seems to be a...” Naiz’s voice was trembling.

The steadily growing black spot turned out to be two people.

“Found youuuuuuuuu!”

“Impossible.”

Miledi’s voice rang loudly through the empty desert. He was stunned. This was quickly becoming his worst nightmare.

As they got closer, Naiz could see that Miledi was holding Oscar by the collar. Oscar looked exhausted, and it was clear that if they’d been on the ground he would have been slumped on the floor.

“We found you again, Nacchan!”

“N-Nacchan?”

Miledi landed lightly. The moment her feet touched the ground though, she doubled over and started panting. Her chosen method of travel had exhausted her quite a bit.

Naiz was amazed at what seemed like her nickname for him. He looked over at Oscar, who she’d deposited at her side.

He was lying face-up on the ground. It didn’t look like he’d be getting up anytime soon, either.

“Is he... alright?”

“Haaah... Haaah... He’s fine! He’s O-kun after all!”

I’m not quite sure how that’s a proper reason. Still, Oscar raised his hand and waved it weakly to indicate he was fine, so Naiz left it at that.

“I gotta say though, using ancient magic for two days straight really wears a girl out. Even with all of O-kun’s mana, I was barely able to make it. If monsters found us now, we’d be dead!”

“That’s not really something to be excited about...” Naiz stared at her as if he was looking at some alien creature.

“How’d you find me?”

“That’s a secret!” She brought her finger to her lips and winked at Naiz. Though there was no wind blowing, her ponytail bobbed back and forth.

For a few short seconds, Naiz lost it. He knew he could kill at that very moment.

“How’d you find me?” Once he’d calmed down he repeated his question.

“Fufufu. Well, I *suppose* I could tell you. But not for free. You’ve gotta listen to what I have to say fir—” Naiz opened a portal beneath them. His retribution was merciless.

Oscar vanished into it.

“Ah, O-kuuuuuuuuuuuuuun!?” Miledi dropped to all fours and stared into the portal.

“Come to think of it, he can’t move... Oh no. I hope he doesn’t drown...”

“Wait, O-kun’s in trouble!? Damn you, don’t think this is over yet! Even if I leave now, I’ll keep coming back as many times as it takes!”

With those parting words, Miledi jumped into the portal of her own volition.

The desert was quiet once more.

Though for some reason, with the disappearance of just one girl, the silence now felt oppressive.

A slight breeze ruffled Naiz’s hair.

“Gweeeeeeh.”

“You’re right, Suzanne. Let’s go home.” Naiz started on the road home.

A few days later.

Naiz was back home. Though whether his living space really qualified as a house was up for debate.

Currently, he lived in a cave. It fell straight down, and ended at a terraced base. There he'd carved out rooms from the rock. There was a spot for his bed, a table in the center, a storage room, a kitchen, and so on.

What was truly strange about his dwelling though was that it was lit by magma.

His cavern home was at the heart of the Red Dragon's Mountain, which was the massive volcano that was the heart of the Crimson Desert. No people lived near the volcano, nor was it somewhere people should have been able to live in.

The volcano had earned its name because its eruptions were like a red dragon's breath, burning hot and always unpredictable.

The nearby villagers believed a red dragon truly did sleep in the volcano's depths.

Not only did no one live at its base, but people didn't even dare approach it usually.

Despite that, Naiz had no problems living there. The magma's extreme heat didn't seem to bother him in the slightest. He stepped out on the terrace and looked at the river of magma below him.

"Everything looks fine..." He turned on his heel and returned to his room, then sat down at his table and reached for the basket atop it. In it was food he'd bought with the money he earned selling his iraks. Bread, cheese, and fruit.

He pulled a sheet of parchment from a nearby rack and started writing something as he munched on some bread.

"The Holy Church has been buying up iraks..." He muttered quietly to himself. That was what the merchant's apprentice had said. He was somewhat curious about what they were planning, but it didn't really matter to him since he was basically retired from irak herding.

Though he knew it would be a problem if their actions made iraks vanish from the desert.

They were the preeminent beasts of burden in the area, and were used in many different aspects of life. The more rural villages depended on iraks for trade, and would die without them. Transporting as many goods as possible in one trip was of paramount importance because of how frequent monster attacks were.

Oftentimes traders lost their iraks to monsters. Unless they were able to find a replacement instantly, they were forced to transport their wares by foot. If the Holy Church had taken all of those spares, then it was a reason to be concerned.

“Maybe I should see what they’re scheming...” Naiz finished off his bread, downed a pitcher of water, and stood up.

He thought back to the two who’d been chasing him this whole time. He was certain they wouldn’t be able to chase him into the volcano, but once he left chances were they’d pop up again.

“Nah, it’s impossible... This place is too far from where I sent them. They definitely won’t find me here.” He’d encountered Miledi and Oscar in the southeastern fringes of the desert, but the volcano was to the north. Moreover, he was planning to make his trip using teleportation. There was no possible way for them to keep up.

At least, that was what he kept telling himself. He was still terrified of running into them the moment he stepped out of his house. *Next time I’ll force them to tell me how they’re tracking me and promise to leave me alone.*

Unwilling to even step foot outside of his house, he left using teleportation. He spent the day checking up on the outlying villages, finally starting down the road home as the sun began to set.

He breathed a sigh of relief. The pair of troublemakers hadn’t appeared all day.

Once he was safely hidden behind a pair of sand dunes, he teleported back home.

“Ah, welcome back, Nacchan!”

“Sorry for barging into your house without asking. We brought you some gifts, though.”

Miledi and Oscar were sitting at his table, sipping tea. Naiz couldn’t believe it.

“How?” He croaked out.

“D-Don’t be so mad. I-I’m sorry I came in without asking. Please forgive us, Nacchan.”

“I’m not mad. Just amazed. Also, quit calling me Nacchan.” He said, as he sank down into a chair. Idly, he noticed there were more than there had been before.

In truth, he almost admired their persistence. At the same time, he couldn’t believe they’d managed to track him down all the way here. Or had the guts to come into a magma chamber, even. More than anything though, he really wished she’d stop calling him Nacchan.

“You might as well give up... That nickname’s there to stay. She’s crazy— I mean, stubborn. Oh, these are for you, by the way. They’re baked sweets made with the local fruit. You don’t dislike sweets, do you?”

“Hm? Yeah, they’re fine.”

“Hey, did you just call me crazy, O-kun? Did you? Hey! Answer me—”

“You won’t teleport us away again, will you?”

“Now that you’ve found even this place, it won’t matter where I send you. At this point, I have only two options. Find out how you’re tracking me and destroy whatever means you’re using, or...”

“Hear us out and refuse our offer, right?”

“Yes.”

“Hey, why’re you two leaving me out? Don’t you think that’s mean? Also, O-kun, you totally did call me cra—”

Oscar and Naiz stared at each other, completely ignoring Miledi. They were

trying to probe each other's intentions. An epic battle of wills played out between the two of them in the span of a few short seconds.

After a while, they heard sobbing from under the table. The two men blinked as they returned to reality. They looked underneath the table simultaneously, and found Miledi curled up in a ball, crying.

The two proceeded to ignore her completely and resumed staring at each other. Oscar took a sip of his tea.

"By the way, your place is amazing. As far as I can tell you're not using any artifacts, but the place is still perfectly insulated against the magma. Are you doing this with your ancient magic?"

"You could say that."

"But why make a place like this your home? Well, I guess if you want to avoid people the middle of a volcano is a perfect place to live."

"Are you here to tell me what you came for or to ask me about my life?"

"Whoops, my apologies. Your design choices just piqued my interest as a Synergist." For once, the two of them were actually carrying on a conversation.

Still in tears, Miledi crawled out from under the table and sat with them.

"Okay, I'll be serious now, so can you please stop ignoring me?" Her tone was uncharacteristically contrite.

Naiz and Oscar sighed simultaneously.

"How are you two in sync like that?"

"Probably because of you."

"It's definitely because of you."

"*Hic...*" Miledi blew her nose a few times.

Once she'd composed herself, she gave Naiz the same speech she'd given Oscar. She talked about the tyranny of the gods, the Holy Church's madness, and the twisted way of the world. She spoke about the fate that awaited those who stepped out of line, as well as the horrors that accompanied blind fanaticism.

Finally, she came to the organization she belonged to— the Liberators.

She also briefly explained her past and how she came to meet Oscar.

Three people's soft breathing were the only sounds that could be heard when she finished.

"My magic allows me to interfere with space. I can connect two different points together, teleport somewhere else in the blink of an eye, and, like I did with my house, create spacial barriers to block things off, even insubstantial things like heat... But I don't have the ability to heal. Not one bit." After hearing their tale, Naiz explained his powers.

Oscar could guess why he'd brought up healing.

"Don't worry about it," he said with a smile and shook his head.

Miledi looked warmly into his eyes and spoke to him once more, offering her praise.

"You're a good person." She said it with conviction. What had pained Naiz the most wasn't the truth about the gods, or the wretched state of the world, but the fact that Oscar's siblings had been hurt. And he lamented his own powerlessness to help.

Come to think of it, he was like that the first time he saved us, too. Oscar thought to himself. Judging by his actions and the fact that he'd chosen a volcano for a home, Oscar could tell he was trying to hide his powers too.

Despite that, he hadn't even hesitated to use his powers to save the two of them from the Sandworms.

The only reason rumors of him had spread at all was because he'd broken his cover to help those in need.

However, Naiz didn't seem happy at all to be called kind by Miledi. He twisted his face into a grimace.

"No, I'm not. I'm just—" He cut himself off. They could tell whatever it was he couldn't say pained him to no end.

Miledi looked straight at him and urged him to speak.

“Just what? Tell us.” She knew it was rude, but she asked anyway. Even if it hurt him to speak, they couldn’t help until they knew.

Oscar chimed in as well.

“I have no way of knowing what kind of things you’re dealing with, but at the very least you’ve saved enough people in the desert that rumors have spread about you. And for that, I respect you. We’d really like to have someone like you in our group.”

Naiz could tell they were being sincere, but his expression hardened. Then, he delivered his ultimatum.

“As you wished, I listened to your story. However, my answer remains unchanged. Nothing you say can convince me otherwise.” In the end, he said no. At the same time, he opened up another portal. It was obvious he wanted them to leave. Miledi and Oscar could tell from his grim expression that he would say no more.

They exchanged glances. Oscar shook his head. Miledi’s shoulders drooped, and she smiled sadly at Naiz.

“Okay. Bye then, Nacchan.” She stepped into the portal of her own accord. Oscar nodded to Naiz and followed after her.

Silence filled the room.

For some reason he felt cold as he stared at the chairs Oscar had transmuted into his home.

Naiz spent a long time staring at those two chairs.

The next day.

“We’re baaack. Nacchan, are you here? I’ve come over to hang out!”

“Hey it’s been a while. A whole day in fact. We brought you some cheese this time.” Miledi and Oscar returned to Naiz’s house.

He stared at them in shock, as he’d been certain he wouldn’t see them again.

“Oh? Did you think we’d leave you alone because of how we parted

yesterday? Puhahaha! I never said anything about leaving you alone forever! You just assumed that all on your own, Nacchan!”

Miledi cackled, her serious demeanor from yesterday nowhere to be seen. A vein pulsed in Naiz’s forehead and he opened a portal underneath Miledi.

However, she used her gravity magic to dodge out of the way. Then, she sidestepped every other portal Naiz opened too.

“How many times do you think you’ve done that to us now? I’ve got the timing of your portals down pat!” Naiz wanted to knock that smug smile off her face. This was the first time in his life he’d actually wanted to hurt anyone.

“We brought our cups too. Seems like we’ll be coming here pretty often now, so do you mind if we leave them here? This is your cupboard, right? Oscar put not just cups, but a few plates and spoons into Naiz’s cupboard as well.

I thought he was suffering under Miledi’s tyranny, but he’s just as brazen as she is.

Had Oscar realized how much Miledi had influenced him, he’d probably have been so shocked he’d stay huddled in bed for a week.

Another week passed.

Oscar and Miledi started taking their meals together with Naiz. Sometimes they’d talk about the Liberators, other times they’d just make small talk.

Whenever Naiz tried to tell them he wasn’t interested, Miledi would wave him off and change the topic. He couldn’t get rid of them either. Miledi was too used to his portals now, and could dodge them with her gravity magic.

Oscar had found himself fascinated by the ore contained inside the volcano, and had started exploring its depths. At one point he had ridden his umbrella like a miniature boat down the volcano’s magma streams.

In doing so, he’d figured out the real reason why Naiz had chosen this volcano as his home.

In truth, the Red Dragon’s Mountain was an active volcano that had erupted once every fifty years or so. It had been 55 years since the last eruption, and most of the desert dwellers were expecting another one any year now.

However, Naiz had been forcibly keeping the volcano dormant. He'd calmed the magma by dumping a massive quantity of stillstone into it. He'd also carved a side channel with his spatial magic for the magma to flow into when the pressure grew too great.

That had told Oscar that even if he explained to Naiz how they'd been following him, the taciturn man still wouldn't disappear. Unless something serious happened, he wouldn't leave the volcano.

So far, neither threats, nor escape, nor even a blunt refusal had gotten Miledi or Oscar to leave Naiz alone. He was at his wits' end. Still, though he didn't realize it, he had started to look forward to Oscar and Miledi's visits. Eating meals together, talking to Oscar about his various inventions, and discussing iraks with Miledi had started taking on a certain charm.

Naturally, Oscar and Miledi easily picked up on the shift in his attitude.

The fact that he genuinely seemed to enjoy their company was the main reason that they hadn't given up.

Though Naiz still stubbornly refused to budge whenever they brought up the topic of joining them.

Eight days had passed since Miledi and Oscar found out where Naiz lived. They were currently eating breakfast at a restaurant in the small oasis village of Liv.

Though it was classified as a village, the settlement had grown to the size of a small town. It was located in the southern Doumibral domain, and was the closest human settlement to the volcano.

The two had rented an inn here because of its proximity to Naiz.

At present, Miledi was flopped over their table and groaning loudly. The two of them were supposed to be hashing out a plan to convince Naiz.

They were eating their breakfast early, and there was still a chill in the air. The sun hadn't risen yet, and nights in the desert were frigid. For denizens of the desert though, this cool time period between the freezing nights and scorching days was one of their favorite. Despite the early hour, many other people were eating their breakfast as well.

Most of the other patrons' gazes were locked onto Miledi, whose loud groaning had attracted their attention. Oscar, meanwhile, was perusing a local brochure and paying his partner no mind.

"Miledi, according to this brochure, the greengrocer to the east distills his own wine. What do you think of bringing some to Naiz as a gift? He seems like a heavy drinker, but it didn't look like he liked the dry sake we got him last time."

"O-kun, can't you see how distressed I am? As my partner, shouldn't you be more concerned about me?"

Oscar looked up from the brochure.

"Sorry. I figured you were just complaining about breakfast. You're always whining about how you don't have enough to eat."

"Excuse me, I'm no glutton. Besides, what I'm worried about is how we're going to convince Nacchan. I know you two get along now and all that, but we still haven't gotten any closer to convincing him to actually join us."

"Well, he's definitely interested in all of my inventions. He's liked all the ones I showed him so far. Whenever I bring up what I'm working on he instantly pulls out the alcohol and we start talking for ages. Anyway, as for changing his mind... I think we should just take it slow. First we've got to build a relationship of trust."

"So Nacchan can tell us what's burdening him, right?"

"Exactly. Even you had to warm up to me before you were willing to tell me about your past."

"You've... got a point there."

Oscar set aside the brochure. Then, he entwined his fingers together and spoke carefully, choosing his words.

"Life is... difficult. For everyone, really. But especially if you have scars so deep that they're still hurting. His problems aren't something he can tell just anyone, nor are they things we can ask about just because we're curious. That's why I want us to get to know each other better. We have to grow closer if we want to help him. And making lasting friendships is something that takes time, right? If

we push him, it'll only end up driving him into a corner."

Oscar gulped down some water. As he felt the temperature rise, he turned away from Miledi and looked over at the sparkling oasis. While watching the sun crest the horizon, he spoke once more.

"So let's take it slow. I'll follow you forever, so long as you haven't given up. There's no need to rush." He'd promised her he'd follow her to the depths of hell, and he meant to keep his word.

Miledi didn't reply. The sounds of other customers eating filled the silence between them.

Oscar turned back to Miledi, wondering why she was so quiet.

"What's with that expression?"

"Hmmm? What do you mean?" Miledi was grinning from ear to ear. Oscar's mood suddenly soured.

He busied himself with cleaning up the remnants of their breakfast.

"You're totaaaaaally in love with me, aren't you, O-kun?"

"Leave the sleeptalking for when you're asleep and help me clean up." Oscar narrowed his eyes and jerked his chin at Miledi's plate. Still grinning, Miledi teased him further.

"Oh are you blushing? You *are* O-kun!"

Oscar debated throwing his coffee into Miledi's face, but he decided to be civil instead. As the days passed, he was getting better and better at handling Miledi.

And so, Oscar simply adjusted his glasses and changed the topic.

"Naiz said he'd be busy this morning. He's probably delivering iraks to the villages that are running low, so I'm thinking we should head over in the afternoon."

"He's out helping people again? I can't tell if he's just a good person, or if..."

"Hopefully we find that out eventually too. Though I am a little worried. Sure, he tends to hide his abilities, but he'll use them if necessary to help people.

After all, he didn't hesitate to save us. And rumors have spread so far that even you'd heard of him, all the way in the east. It's only a matter of time before his powers are exposed."

"You're right. One thing I don't get though... Why does everyone call him a fairy?"

The rumors had all said that the "Fairy of the Desert" had saved them. With his bulky frame, taciturn expression, sharp eyes, and red hair, Naiz was the furthest thing from a fairy that Oscar could imagine.

"Bwah." Oscar nearly spit out his coffee, as he imagined Naiz trying to look like a fairy.

"W-Well, it doesn't look like he's the one who came up with it, and rumors have a habit of going wild. A wandering fairy of the desert who helps lost travelers makes for a much better story than a buff dude doing the same."

Still, I really want to know how anyone came to associate the word fairy with Naiz. Both Miledi and Oscar were burning with curiosity.

As they were cleaning up, a young girl's voice interrupted them.

"Umm... have you met the Fairy of the Desert before?" Miledi and Oscar turned to see two girls looking up at them.

They appeared to be siblings. At the very least, they resembled each other quite a bit. They both had dark brown skin and jade green eyes. The older one looked to be around 12 or 13, while they younger couldn't have been over 8. The younger girl wore her long hair loose, while the older sister had her shoulder-length hair in braids. They were both wearing white robes and sandals, and seemed to be local residents.

"Umm, are you talking to us?"

"Ah, y-yes. We're sorry for interrupting you!" The older sister bowed her head. It seemed they'd overheard Oscar and Miledi talking about the Fairy of the Desert.

Miledi smiled reassuringly at them.

"He certainly didn't look like a fairy to me, but we have~ We were just

wondering why everyone calls him a fairy... Would you two happen to know?” The girls’ expressions changed when Miledi mentioned that they’d met him. They exchanged furtive glances. It was obvious they knew something. However, the two didn’t say anything. They weren’t sure whether or not it was safe to tell Miledi.

After a few seconds, the older sister replied.

“Are you two from the Holy Church?”

“Hell no.” Oscar and Miledi answered in sync, their contempt obvious. Such an open display of malice would have been dangerous had they been talking to devout believers.

Fortunately, the two girls seemed relieved when they heard Miledi and Oscar’s disgust. Unable to hold back any longer, the younger sister leaned forward and blurted out something.

“Onii-san, Onee-san! Do you know where the guardian deity is!? Me and Sue-nee really like him! We’ve been looking for him this whole time! We really want to see him again!” The older sister hurriedly tried to cover her younger sister’s mouth, but it was already too late.

Miledi and Oscar exchanged glances. She’d called him a guardian deity, not a fairy. This was something they needed to know more about.

Especially when the younger sister, who didn’t know when to shut her mouth, added, “Sue-nee is really popular with the boys, but she turned them all down because she’s in love with him!” Poor Sue blushed as she tried to shut her sister up.

Oscar and Miledi nodded to each other.

“Would you like to join us for breakfast?”

“We’ll treat you to dessert too.”

They bribed the sisters with food.

The sisters loaded their plates, the younger with gusto, the older with a little more hesitation. She was still embarrassed by what her younger sister had said.

Over the course of breakfast, Miledi and Oscar learned that the older sister's name was Susha Liv Doumibral and the younger's was Yunfa Liv Doumibral. They were, as Oscar had guessed, residents of the village.

It was customary for people in the desert to take the name of the region and village they were born in, which was why their middle and last name were Liv and Doumibral respectively. She was from Liv village, in the Doumibral fiefdom.

That reminds me, where's Naiz from? As Oscar hadn't known too much about the desert customs before, he hadn't given much thought to Naiz's last name. He'd asked Susha if she knew, but she hadn't even known that his first name was Naiz.

When Oscar had told her, she'd repeated it to herself like some kind of charm. *Damn, this girl's serious about him.*

Miledi asked how the girls had met Naiz, and it turned out their first encounter was pretty much the same as Miledi's.

They'd been under attack by monsters when he'd shown up and teleported them to safety.

However, one of the monsters had caused Yunfa's mana to go berserk. When Susha told Naiz that, he vanished and came back with stillstone for her.

They'd been so surprised by Naiz's constant teleporting that they hadn't even been able to thank him before he'd disappeared with his customary "Don't tell anyone about me."

"Since then, we've been looking all over for him. I still haven't been able to give him my thanks."

"And you want to confess and marry him too! I'm fine with being his mistress!"

Susha blushed again. She wrapped an arm around her sister's mouth and gagged her.

"We actually spread the rumors that he was the Fairy of the Desert on purpose. I thought that since Naiz-sama didn't want people to know about him the least we could do was say that someone who looked completely different

saved us. I knew word would spread eventually, so I made sure to tell all the adventurers and bards that visited this place my version of events first."

"I see. So your way of thanking him was turning the guardian into a fairy."

Miledi nodded in understanding. However, Oscar noticed something off about Susha's story. Yunfa's next words solidified his suspicions.

"I helped Sue-nee out too! I told everyone exactly what Sue-nee told me to!" *So this was definitely all her idea...* Oscar came to a conclusion. He pushed up his glasses and asked a question to help confirm his theory.

"Sorry for asking such a sudden question, but do your parents run this bar?"

"No?" Susha instantly followed up with an explanation.

"Our parents were killed by monsters when we were young... Right now we're living with our parents' friends."

"And they run this bar?"

"Yes." This time she didn't deny it. Now Oscar was certain. Susha had been the start of the rumors.

"You were the one behind the fairy rumors?"

"Yep." Susha grinned.

Oscar and Miledi exchanged glances. According to Susha, Naiz had saved them around two years ago. In other words, she'd come up with this elaborate plan to create the Fairy of the Desert when she'd been just ten years old. All on her own.

And it had worked. At the very least, everyone talked about a Fairy of the Desert, and not a guardian.

"Th-That's pretty impressive." Miledi spoke her honest opinion.

Susha blushed and replied.

"It's all for Naiz-sama's sake." Considering her age, it was conceivable that she would have hit puberty already. Still, the fact that she was so set on Naiz from the age of ten was rather impressive. She was really serious about him.

"What kind of relationship do you two have with Naiz-sama? You said you'd

met him.” Susha definitely wouldn’t let any leads out of her grasp. Yunfa stared expectantly at the two of them. They both really wanted to meet him again.

“Hmm... You could say we run into him a lot these days.”

“R-Really!? Where is he staying!?” Susha leaned forward excitedly. Neither she nor Yunfa had expected them to be able to meet him at will.

“We’ll have to ask him if it’s okay to tell you first. We’re going to see him again today too, so we’ll ask him then. I promise you’ll get to meet him soon, so just wait patiently, okay?”

“Miledi-san... I suppose we’ll have to. Yeah, we’ll wait.”

Though she was a little disappointed, Susha had to admit Miledi was right. She nodded.

Yunfa looked from Oscar to Miledi. After thinking to herself for a few seconds, she dropped another bombshell.

“By the way, are you two a couple?” Susha turned back to her sister in a panic. *You can’t just ask that!*

Miledi stared blankly at Yunfa, while Oscar grinned.

“Hahaha... That’s a good joke, Yunfa-chan.”

“O-kun? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Even if you’re not going to admit it, you could at least not deny it so cleanly like that! As Miledi glared at Oscar, Yunfa continued dropping bombshells.

“You’re not? It would have been better if you were, though~”

“Huh? Why’s that, Yunfa?”

“Because you said you’re always talking to the guy Onee-san’s in love with. And you’re going to meet him again today... If you two aren’t lovers, then maybe you’re seducing him!”

“.....” Susha fell silent. Her expression was thunderous. There was a dangerous glint in her eyes.

“It’s a misunderstanding! I don’t have any interest in that guy, promise!” Miledi hurriedly tried to explain herself. Susha’s glare was absolutely terrifying,

so much so that Miledi broke out in cold sweat.

Oscar simply watched the whole exchange with a grin. Miledi turned her reproachful gaze onto him.

“Besides, O-kun’s been with me the whole time! I promise it’s really not like that. What we’re going to see him about is something a lot more serious than that.”

“A lot more... serious? You mean your future together?”

“Shit. I should have known it would end up like this!” This was the first time Oscar had seen Miledi, who was always the one teasing others, so flustered. It was the most fun he’d had in ages. Plus, Yunfa wasn’t done yet.

“It’s okay, we have Sue-nee anyway! Her boobs are way bigger than yours! Once he sees them he’ll totally fall for her!”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

Miledi looked at Susha’s chest. Susha looked at Miledi’s.

It was hard to make out the shape of Susha’s body through her bulky robe. Despite that, her chest still stuck out a little bit.

Miledi compared that to her own chest. She ran her hands over her washboard-flat boobs. Her head drooped. She looked crestfallen.

Oscar was honestly impressed.

“Yunfa-chan, you’ve got a bright future ahead of you. Not many people can say they’ve made Miledi cry...”

“Huh? Umm, ehehe, it was nothing.” Yunfa didn’t really get what Oscar was saying, but she could tell she was being praised.

The real question is, was she doing it all by instinct, or was that planned? Seeing as Yunfa’s older sister had been a master of information manipulation at the age of 10, Oscar was certain she had a lot of potential.

He had a sneaking suspicion that Yunfa had torn Miledi down just in case she’d been thinking of taking Naiz from Susha, but he didn’t want to stir up a

hornet's nest, so he didn't ask.

Oscar watched while Susha consoled Miledi and wondered how the presence of these sisters would change the relationship between himself and Naiz.

The Red Dragon's Mountain was a dome volcano. That meant its eruptions were usually just outpourings of viscous lava instead of violent explosions. It also meant the mountain itself was shaped like a gently sloping trapezoid. It was a mere three kilometers tall, but it spanned a length five kilometers wide.

After parting ways with the sisters, Miledi and Oscar headed over to the volcano. They could feel the lava's heat as they landed on the summit. White smoke rose up from holes in the summit, and it really looked as if a red dragon might live there.

There was an entrance to Naiz's house from the top. They approached the glowing orange crater that doubled as Naiz's front door. The lava's heat was kept at bay by Naiz's barriers.

"Let's go, O-kun."

"No matter how many times I do it, I'll never get used to jumping into the mouth of an active volcano."

"Says the guy who rode his umbrella down a lava river."

The pair bantered with each other as they leaped into the crater. Miledi sped them up with her gravity magic as they headed down to the terrace Naiz made his home.

As they drew closer to the ground, the air grew cooler. Naiz's barriers kept the heat out around his house more effectively than elsewhere. They were quite an impressive achievement. Oscar had learned over a night of drinking that it had taken Naiz a lot of time to master barriers that precise.

"Nacchaaaaaan! You home? We've come back to play~"

"Sorry for coming over all the time. We brought you some wine today. It's still mid-afternoon, but how about a drink?"

They waltzed into Naiz's house like it was their own. The pair found him

sitting cross-legged on the floor, grinding something down with a pestle and mortar. He sighed and turned to his unwanted house guests.

“It’s already been more than a week... How long are you planning on doing this?”

“Until you agree to become our comrade.”

“So you’ll keep coming for the rest of your life?”

“Ahaha, I feel like someone else said that to me before too!”

“That’d be me.”

Oscar gave Naiz a sympathetic look and helped him clean up his workspace.

“Is that stillstone?”

“Yes. It’s difficult to harvest, so most villages are always short.”

“Except you live where it grows, so it’s a piece of cake for you. I’ve taken the liberty of harvesting some for myself too.”

Oscar eased himself into the chair he’d brought to Naiz’s house. Miledi sat down next to him and idly swung her legs. She seemed bored. Whenever Oscar and Naiz started talking about these kinds of things, Miledi found herself left out of the conversation.

“I wanted to see if I could grind the powder so fine it would turn into a liquid.”

“You what?”

“There’s a lot of monsters around here that make people’s mana go berserk. Stillstone is considered the only cure, since it suppresses people’s mana.”

“I mean, yeah, but why would you need to liquify it?”

“I’m not sure yet, but maybe it’ll be easier to ingest if it’s a liquid. Also, you could change the concentration if it’s liquified. And if you’re trying a dangerous magical experiment, you could make your magic circle out of liquified stillstone.”

“Hmm... So basically, you’re looking for ways to use it other than as medicine.”

“Precisely. So—” As the conversation grew more technical, Miledi interrupted them with a yell.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! I can’t believe you two are ignoring me and having fun on your own! It’s not good to ignore your friends like this!” Miledi crossed her arms in an X shape.

Oscar and Naiz shared a knowing smile. Miledi sulked when she saw them getting along so well.

She muttered something angrily.

“I’ll tell Sue-chan that Nacchan’s more into O-kun than he is into me.”

“Hey, don’t make it sound like we’re gay. Also, I get the feeling she’ll take you seriously, so please don’t say that.” Oscar shivered.

Naiz looked over at Oscar with a questioning gaze.

Oscar and Miledi exchanged glances and nodded to each other.

“Sue-chan’s this girl who lives in Liv. She has a little sister called Yunfa.”

“Hmm?”

“They’re the ones that spread the rumor that you’re the Fairy of the Desert.”

“What? What does...”

Naiz suddenly looked interested. He was always interested in the rumors spreading about him. He looked puzzled as to why anyone would change them, though.

Oscar chimed in with an explanation.

“You saved a pair of sisters from monsters two years ago, right? The younger had her mana go berserk and you healed her. Remember them?”

“...Those two, huh?” Naiz combed through his memories for a minute before replying.

“So you do remember them.”

“Nufufufu. You’re one smooth operator, Nacchan. The older sister’s totally head over heels for you, and she’s a real cutie to boot.”

“She’s what now?” Naiz, who didn’t recognize the expression, tilted his head in confusion.

After having been so thoroughly demolished in the morning, Miledi was dying to tease someone.

“Well, you see, ever since you saved them, those two girls have been looking allllll over for you. They said they want to thank you for saving them back then. But the truth is, the older sister’s in love with you! Even though she’s only thirteen years old!” Miledi didn’t mention that despite being only thirteen, Susha had bigger boobs than her. She wasn’t a masochist, after all.

“The little girl from back then is in love with me?” Naiz had remembered how young the children he’d saved were. He found it hard to believe that in just two years that girl had run a mass misinformation campaign because she’d fallen in love with him.

For her part, Miledi found it hard to believe that she’d been beaten by a girl many years younger than her. Worse, Susha was still in the middle of her growth spurt, while on the other hand, Miledi had long since passed through puberty.

“Since you said you didn’t want people to know about you she went and made up a story that the person saving travelers was a dainty fairy. All because she loves you.” Naiz grimaced as he heard Oscar’s follow-up explanation.

Miledi grinned and pointed at Naiz.

“Hey, how does it feel? Hey, Nacchan, tell me. How does it feel knowing a thirteen-year-old girl’s totally in love with an older guy like you? Come on, Nacchan, you can tell, I won’t spill your sec—” Naiz grabbed Miledi’s face in an iron grip.

“Oscar, do you mind if I throw your partner out of this volcano?”

Oscar pulled his chains out of his sleeves.

“Owwwwwwww! Hey, Nacchan, could you loosen your grip a little!? I can feel my skull cracking! And O-kun, you’re *my* partner! You’re supposed to be helping

me not him!”

“This is your fault!”

“Why are you two always in sync like thiiiiiiiiiiis!?” There was a loud creak and Miledi’s body went limp. When Naiz let her go she fell into her chair with a thud. After that, Oscar and Naiz ignored her and began drinking through the wine he’d brought.

Some time later Miledi awoke to find Oscar’s umbrella raining healing light down on her. Once her headache had gone away, Oscar returned to the topic of the two girls.

He explained how sincere their wish to meet Naiz was. Oscar had expected that Naiz, who had made helping people such a big part of his life, wouldn’t have minded meeting them. However, contrary to expectations, he looked troubled.

“She already knows about your powers. Plus, they’re trying harder than anyone to make sure no one finds out about you, so what’s the problem with going to see them?”

“Even if you don’t have much to say, I think you should go see them. If you don’t, I’m pretty sure Sue-chan will keep searching for you for the rest of her life. She’s that serious about you.”

Naiz spoke in a despondent voice.

“Those girls think I’m some kind of hero or guardian deity, don’t they?”

“I think some of the other locals think you’re a guardian deity too, but yes.”

“Well, they’re wrong. I’m no guardian. I’m only doing this for myself... to atone for my mistakes.”

Oscar and Miledi looked at each other, then Miledi sat up straighter.

“Did something happen in the past? Is that why you can’t meet Sue-chan, or come with us?”

“.....”

“Nacchan. You asked how long we’re planning on coming here. I won’t leave

until you at least tell us why you won't come with us. That's how much recruiting you matters to me. I know this is a rude thing to ask, and I know it probably hurts to talk about, but that's precisely why we can't leave until we know."

Her implacable gaze pierced through Naiz. He turned to see Oscar wearing the same serious expression. His quiet eyes held a deep resolve. They knew what they were asking of Naiz, but this time they wouldn't back down.

These are the most troublesome friends I've ever made. However, he'd already heard Miledi and Oscar's tales. He'd known from the start that they wouldn't be shaken so easily. He understood now why a flat refusal hadn't been enough. Unless he gave them a reason for his refusal they wouldn't back down. No, they couldn't back down. Realizing it was his own fault for dragging things on this long, Naiz smiled bitterly to himself and made his decision. He would tell them of his sin.

"Do you know of a village called Gruen?" Miledi and Oscar shook their heads simultaneously. Naiz took a deep breath before continuing.

"It's the village I was born in... and the village I destroyed." Oscar and Miledi gulped.

Eyes downcast, Naiz began his tale.

"My full name is Naiz Gruen Caliente."

"Caliente's the region furthest to the north, isn't it?"

Naiz nodded.

"Gruen was the village closest to the region's capital. My father was a soldier in the fiefdom's army. I always looked up to him, and wanted to be a soldier just like him. Me, my best friend Yogun, and my little brother Est would always practice swordplay together. My mother was the kindest person I'd ever known. Not only that, she was also a talented mage. Thinking back on it now, I realize I was truly blessed." He'd had a loving family, and friends who shared the same dreams. Not only that, he'd been a rather talented young boy. That certainly was what one called blessed.

Oscar glanced over at Miledi. Though she'd been born into a wealthy

household, her family hadn't shown her an ounce of love. Miledi noticed his gaze and looked over. She guessed what he was thinking from his expression, but she didn't seem the least bit depressed about her situation. In fact, she flashed Oscar a warm smile.

Seeing as he didn't have to worry about his partner, Oscar adjusted his glasses and returned his gaze to Naiz.

"My dad was usually away for work, but he'd come back for a few days every month to spend time with us. Mom always told us not to bother him because he was tired, but Yogun and I would always beg him to train us. My dad was the strongest warrior in the village, and I was always eager to show him how much I'd grown." Naiz spoke wistfully about the past. He'd obviously been very fond of his friends and family.

"Yogun had a saying, 'No true hero meets their end in a backwater village.' He wanted to fight for important people in important places and rise up in the world. His ambitions were always greater than mine, always looking toward to the future. And even though he was a talented fighter himself, he was always jealous of my skills." Unlike Naiz, who'd only wanted to be a soldier like his father, Yogun had been dreaming big. And Naiz had envied that part of him.

Naiz smiled briefly, reminiscing. But before long, his dark expression returned. Oscar couldn't tell if it was anger or regret that clouded Naiz's face.

"I never realized just how deep that jealousy ran. Even though I was always with him, I never noticed what he was really thinking."

On a day like any other, Naiz's father, Solda, had returned home and started sparring with Yogun. The hour had grown late, and Solda was planning on returning home when a bunch of the villagers ran up to him. Their faces were pale, and they were screaming about a monster attack.

The village had its own guards, of course. Most of the threats that showed up were dealt with by said guards. The reason they'd come to Solda this time was because the monster had been too powerful for the village guards to handle.

Solda knew his duty, and he immediately agreed to go help. The monster that had shown up was too powerful for the guards, but a professional soldier like Solda should have had no trouble beating it.

“Yogun and I begged my dad to let us go with him. We were already 15 by then. In one year we would have been eligible to join the army. My dad thought it would make good training for us, so he agreed.” The two of them had happily followed Solda to the village gates... and that was where everything went wrong.

“There were actually more monsters than the villagers had mentioned in their report. We’d just finished dealing with the ones the villagers had told us about, so we’d let our guard down, which was why neither me nor Yogun noticed them burrowing behind us.” By the time they’d heard Solda’s warning, they were nearly in the monster’s jaws.

There wasn’t even enough time to cast a barrier. Even if there had been, both Yogun and Naiz were too terrified to move. However, the crisis had awoken a slumbering power inside Naiz, and he moved entirely on instinct.

“That was the first time you used spatial magic, right?” Naiz nodded silently.

“Yogun, my dad, and even I couldn’t believe what had just happened. I’d shredded the monster in front of everyone’s eyes. I’d unconsciously opened a rift in space where the monster was. No incantations, no magic circle.”

“When your dad and Yogun found out you could use magic from the age of the gods, what did...”

It was obvious the awakening of his powers had been directly linked to the destruction of Naiz’s village. Miledi scrunched up her face. Oscar took a deep breath, mentally preparing himself.

“My dad made me and Yogun promise to keep what I’d done a secret. Though the people of the desert are believers of Ehit now, we used to worship nature. Everyone pays lip service to the Holy Church here too, of course, but most people aren’t as devout. There are many people who still follow the old ways in secret.”

“And your dad was one of them, wasn’t he? That was why he wanted to keep your powers a secret. Your father really loved you, but then...” Oscar furrowed his brows. He could guess what must have happened next. Naiz’s secret had gotten out. And since it was clear Solda loved his son, that only left... Naiz simply continued his tale.

“The next year, me and Yogun joined the army. At first we worked together, aiming to rise up the ranks... but then things changed. Yogun started to act odd, and he often looked at me with barely concealed contempt. I tried to pretend I didn’t notice...” With the awakening of his powers, an unbridgeable gap had been created between Naiz’s abilities and Yogun’s. Furthermore, Naiz discovered he had an aptitude for all kinds of magic. In order to keep his powers a secret he used fake magic circles and incantations, but he continued honing his ability to manipulate mana directly. Naturally, his skill with spatial magic grew along with that of the other elements.

Yogun burned with jealousy. There was no logic behind it, but he grew to resent Naiz. And so, in the end, he broke his word and spilled Naiz’s secret.

He told his lord that he knew someone who could use ancient magic. He’d gone to his lord and not the Holy Church, because he’d known that the Holy Church wouldn’t have given him a reward for the information. They would have said serving Ehit was reward enough.

However, the results of his betrayal were disastrous. Yogun hadn’t realized how far someone in power would be willing to go to get their hands on an ancient magic wielder.

The lord of Caliente, Bolemos, decided to adopt Naiz as his own son, and then step aside to make him the new lord. He wanted his region, Caliente, to be the predominant member of the Sharod alliance, and making an ancient magic wielder the lord of the region was the best way to achieve that dream.

“So then, Bolemos would have found your original family... a hindrance.”

“That’s right. There was a big rainstorm that day. My dad barged into my house, told me to take my brother and mother, and run. Bolemos had sent people to arrest my entire family. In order to let the rest of us escape, my dad...”

Naiz would never forget that stormy day. The sight of his father, yelling at him to save Est and his mother, while facing down the soldiers that had been sent to kill him, had been burned into his skull.

Warriors of the desert were taught to never show their tears, but Naiz cried that night. He wept, cursed his own helplessness, and left his father to die.

He would never forget what happened right after either. Another unit of soldiers ambushed him as he left his house. He was too distraught to fight back, and was nearly captured. But then, someone came to save him.

“It was Yogun. Yogun came to save me. He was the one who had told my father Bolemos’ plan. In the fight that followed, he was mortally injured. With his dying breath, he told me everything.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so, sorry, Naiz. I-I’ve done something terrible. Please forgive me.” He died begging for Naiz’s forgiveness, but Naiz wasn’t able to say “I forgive you.”

Even now, he wasn’t sure how he felt about Yogun.

Naiz hated Yogun for destroying his family, but he also couldn’t deny that he shared some of the blame. He’d spent the most time with Yogun, and yet he hadn’t been able to see how his strength was eating away at his best friend. No, he’d pretended not to see it. When he thought about things that way, he couldn’t say with certainty that he should hate Yogun.

“I ran all the way back to my village. I couldn’t teleport as freely as I can now. If I could have, maybe things wouldn’t have ended up the way they did.” When he’d arrived at his village, he knew he was too late. His mother and brother were dead. Hundreds of Bolemos’ soldiers had stormed the village, with Bolemos at their head. The corpses of Naiz’s brother and mother were at the center of the town. They were surrounded by the other villagers.

“He killed them? He didn’t try to take them hostage for leverage?” That would have been the smart decision. The only way to keep control of someone as powerful as Naiz would have been to take hostages to keep him pacified.

“According to Yogun, Bolemos had been planning on killing them all along and just saying he had them hostage. He’d told the other villagers that my mother and brother had been condemned as heretics and ordered them brought out. That was why Bolemos had gone in person. His words were backed by authority. If he was there, the villagers couldn’t disobey.” Bolemos had wanted to remove any trace that his soon-to-be adopted son had ever had a real family.

That was why he’d planned to capture Naiz, kill his father, and condemn his mother and brother as heretics. That way, there would be no one to question

his story. Anyone who knew the truth wouldn't speak out in fear of being silenced by Bolemos' assassins.

Oscar and Miledi looked at each other again. There was one part of Naiz's tale that didn't make sense: Naiz had said that Bolemos had ordered the villagers to bring Naiz's family to him.

Bolemos had needed Naiz to believe his family was still alive to hold any power over him, so he would never have killed them with witnesses around.

It would have made more sense to take them away and then quietly dispose of them later. That way, even if Naiz found a way to question the villagers, they wouldn't know whether his family was alive or dead either.

Chances were, the people who really killed Naiz's family were the villagers themselves. They'd done it to save their own skins. Having been told that Naiz's family were heretics, they would have wanted to show that they had nothing to do with his mother or brother. That the rest of the village was pure. And so, they'd killed Naiz's family to prove their loyalty.

After all, Bolemos had brought hundreds of soldiers with him just to capture two people. The villagers weren't fools. They knew the soldiers had come to destroy their village.

Bolemos had claimed Naiz's family were heretics, but he hadn't even brought a single priest to confirm that.

It was obviously suspicious. The villagers knew their lives were forfeit once they gave up Naiz's mother and brother.

So, like how a drowning man tries to drag others down with him, they'd killed Naiz's family. At least that way, Bolemos couldn't claim that they had been harboring heretics.

Of course, Naiz must have noticed that too, which was why—

"When I came to, there was nothing around me. I was holding my family's corpses in the empty desert. Bolemos, the villagers, and even the village itself had vanished." Naiz remembered how the villagers had looked at him near the end. They'd all worn the guilty expressions of men and women who knew they'd done something wrong, but had felt they'd had no choice. He

remembered how Bolemos had just looked annoyed that his plan had been ruined. He remembered the soldiers looking warily at him, scared of what he might do. But more than anything, he remembered the rage he felt.

What did my family ever do to deserve this!? You want power that badly!? Fine, I'll let you taste it, then!

He'd let his anger fuel him, and cast the most powerful spell he was capable of. He'd utterly destroyed a section of space. In other words, he quite literally wiped Gruen off the map, along with the villagers and Bolemos.

As Naiz finished his story, Miledi and Oscar let out breaths they hadn't even known they were holding.

He looked up at them for the first time since starting his tale.

"Even if Bolemos was guilty, I'm sure many of the soldiers following him were just doing their duty. They might have been good people, with families to return home to. I'm still not sure whether I hate the villagers for what they did or not, but that still wasn't a good reason to kill them all. What I did was horrible."

So that's why he said he's helping people to atone. And because he's doing it to atone, it's not something he wants to be praised or thanked for.

A monster like Naiz didn't deserve to be loved. That was what he believed, at least. He wouldn't have been able to live with himself if he was surrounded by people thanking him.

"This is the last time I'll say this." Miledi gulped. Oscar furrowed his brow.

"I won't join you guys. I swore to never again use my powers to fight, even if that means my death." Naiz had decided to only ever use them to run or protect.

He would never fight again, so he couldn't help Miledi achieve her dream. His refusal this time was absolute.

"But, Nacchan—"

"Please let this be the end. Don't come see me ever again. If you do, I'll leave. If I keep running, you'll have a hard time chasing after me and continuing your own journey at the same time."

He's right. Even if I can track him there's no way we can keep up with the speed of his teleportation. The only reason they'd been able to chase him thus far was because he never strayed out of the desert.

If he really tried to run, they'd never be able to chase him down. Unless they restrained him somehow, anyway. If they did that though, they'd be no different from Bolemos.

Naiz waved a hand and a gate appeared behind the pair.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Miledi Reisen, Oscar Orcus. I doubt we'll see each other again, but I wish you luck in your travels." Miledi opened her mouth to say something, but no words came to her.

"Let's go, Miledi."

"O-kun..."

Oscar put a hand on her shoulder. Miledi sighed and stood up. And then, the two of them walked over to the gate.

Miledi hung her head for a moment, then turned back to Naiz, a sad expression on her face.

"Nacchan... No, Naiz Gruen. Is this really what you want?" What saddened her wasn't that Naiz refused her. Rather, it was the path he'd chosen.

"It is."

"I see..." Miledi gave him a small smile and walked through the gate. Oscar didn't turn around, but he had some parting words for Naiz too.

"Someday, when our journey is finally over..."

"What?"

"Can we come visit you again, as just friends?"

"I'll think about it."

Satisfied, Oscar nodded and stepped through the gate.

Naiz stared at the empty space where his friends had sat.

"What happened to 'I doubt we'll ever see each other again?'" His tone was

full of self-derision.

Chapter IV: The Liberators and God's Apostles

Miledi plodded forward, away from the Red Dragon's Mountain. Oscar walked silently beside her, his umbrella shading them from the sun.

Miledi didn't have the energy to summon a breeze or her ice block, so the umbrella was all that staved off the heat. However, ice lined the edges of the umbrella, and a slight breeze wafted from its canopy.

Oscar looked over at Miledi. She was clearly depressed.

This must be how she felt when I refused her too. Even now, Oscar didn't think he had been wrong to refuse her back then. However, that didn't make him feel any less guilty. It hurt to imagine Miledi wandering Velnika's streets looking so depressed.

When she was happy she was a handful, and when she was sad she was still a handful. Oscar breathed a small sigh.

"Are you depressed because he didn't join us? Or because of how sad his story was?"

"Both."

"You can't accept the choice he made, can you?"

"I can't."

"But he's the one who made that choice."

"I know. That's why I won't try and convince him anymore." She didn't sound the least bit happy about it, though. Miledi puffed out her cheeks and pouted.

Naiz had given them a reason now, so they had no choice but to respect his decision. Pushing any harder would have been the same as forcing their will on him. And Miledi knew that

Still, that didn't mean she had to like it. Her feelings showed plain on her face as they walked back.

Naiz's berserk rampage had caused irreparable damage. Like he'd said himself, he'd killed all of the villagers, and hundreds of soldiers. Most of them likely had families to return to, and had only been doing their duty.

However, he was also a teenager who'd just seen his family killed before his eyes. Even a fully mature adult would have been hard-pressed to act rationally in that situation.

Despite that, Naiz still blamed himself. And he would spend the rest of his life atoning for it, forever alone in the cave he called a home. Oscar knew even if they tried to go back he'd just run away and start helping people somewhere else.

Isn't that just too sad?

"Haaah..." Miledi let out a heavy sigh. She looked utterly wretched.

Oscar adjusted his glasses, a conflicted expression on his face.

"Before I left, I asked him if we could visit again as just friends."

"Huh?" Miledi instantly perked up.

"He didn't exactly say yes, but he at least said he'd think about it." Oscar watched Miledi's eyes widen in surprise.

"We still have our own journey to complete. But one day, we'll come back to see him again. Not to convince him to be our comrade, but to help him out. We're his friends now. Surely he won't mind... right?" The original goal of the Liberators was to save those who had been crushed by the injustices of the world. It would be well within the scope of their goal to help a friend who'd enforced such a strict lifestyle on himself. In fact, they couldn't call themselves Liberators if they didn't.

"O-kun!"

"Whoa!?"

Miledi flung herself at Oscar. Flustered, he somehow managed to catch her.

"That's it! You're right! Absolutely right! We're Nacchan's friends!"

"Uh, yeah, we are. Anyway, that's why you don't have to feel so down about

it. We'll just say the Fairy of the Desert incident ended with us gaining a friend instead of a comrade. Now, please get off me."

"I knew I could count on you, O-kun! You're the greatest partner ever! Now we're friends with someone amazing! And if he needs our help, we can go back to save him anytime! Man, I feel way better now!"

"Great. Now quit clinging to me." Despite his best efforts, Oscar was unable to peel Miledi off of him. Though Miledi wasn't as well-endowed as Susha, she was still quite attractive. Oscar found himself troubled by her close proximity, especially since he'd seen her naked not too long ago. When he saw her smiling innocently at him, though, he berated himself for having such indecent thoughts. What mattered was that she wasn't depressed anymore.

Oscar gave up on getting Miledi off him and stroked her back until she was satisfied.

After a while, the two started walking again. There was a new spring in Miledi's step. Oscar too, walked with a lighter heart than before.

They crossed a number of sand dunes before the town of Liv came into sight.

"Hmm? Hey, O-kun?"

"Yeah, I see it. Something's definitely not right." Oscar activated his glasses' Farsight spell.

"There's an awful lot of iraks in the town. A bunch of wagons too. They all look pretty ornate... Miledi!"

"Huh, what is it? What'd you see?"

After a brief pause, Oscar continued in a strained voice.

"It's the Holy Church!" Miledi's eyes narrowed dangerously.

Members of the Holy Church arrived late in the afternoon.

At first, the villagers thought the herd of iraks and wagons in the distance was a merchant caravan. Hoping to trade for supplies, the villagers had eagerly crowded the main gate.

When they saw the opulence of the wagons and the knights on the iraks though, the villagers realized their mistake.

It was not merchants, but the bishop of Doumibral who had come to visit them.

The bishop, Agares Myurie, stepped out of the lead carriage. He was accompanied by his priests and the templar knights. All told, he had brought sixty knights with him. Either he was here to threaten the village, or he wanted to impress upon them the power of the Holy Church.

Agares was a young bishop still in his twenties. His blond hair was swept back, revealing a handsome face. He spoke softly and always seemed to have a gentle smile on his face. All things considered, he looked like the very embodiment of a pious, humble man.

However, one did not rise to the position of bishop at such a young age by being humble. The Holy Church had only thirty bishops at any given time, one for each major city on the continent. As there were only seven archbishops, four cardinals, and the pope who ranked above them, few bishop seats opened up because a previous bishop was promoted.

The primary reason for the election of a new bishop was because a current bishop had lost their position. There were various reasons a bishop could be stripped of their rank. Some retired because of age or failing health, others were demoted for failing to fulfill their duty. Yet more were excommunicated because their faith had been found lacking, or some perished in unexpected “accidents.” Agares’ predecessor had been deemed a heretic and executed. He had been known to all as a very pious man, so the decision had come as a shock.

Moreover, the inquisitor who had unveiled the previous bishop’s heresy was none other than Agares.

Agares had made quite a name for himself as a very effective inquisitor, so the town could more or less guess what he had come to Liv for.

“Good citizens of Liv, there is but one reason as to why I have come here today. We have heard there is a heretic in this town who dares declare themselves a god. Such an act is an affront to Lord Ehit. Are there any here who

know of the Guardian of the Desert?" Susha and Yunfa paled when they heard that name.

Someone must have told the Holy Church. Though Yunfa and Susha had tried spreading rumors that Naiz was actually the Fairy of the Desert, the number of people he had saved had grown so large that his old nickname had started making a comeback.

Still, his existence was nothing more than a rumor. To most, he was just a fairy tale. The Holy Church shouldn't have had any reason to send an inquisitor after him, especially because Susha and Yunfa had worked so hard to misdirect the rumors. They were the one organization they hadn't wanted finding out about Naiz.

And yet— *We didn't do enough!* Susha grit her teeth.

These past two years, she'd done everything in her power to keep Naiz's identity a secret. Plenty of adventurers, minstrels, and travelers Naiz had saved had also helped her out, but it still hadn't been enough. The Holy Church was after him now.

"Sue-nee..." Susha wanted to reassure her younger sister, but she couldn't. All she could do was tightly hold on to Yunfa's hand. Agares smiled at the villagers, looking absolutely harmless. That smile terrified them.

Many in Liv had been saved by Naiz. Of them, a good number knew what he looked like.

None of them believed they would be able to survive Agares' torture.

"All of the clergymen within the federation are out looking for this heretic known as the Guardian of the Desert. We will bring this accursed man to justice no matter the cost. Anyone who claims there is any god but Ehit deserves nothing but death. The same goes for all who try to hide him from us." Agares gestured with sweeping hand motions as he gave his speech, almost like an actor on a stage.

"There have been more and more reports of this godless heathen appearing in the desert. In order to keep this blessed world pure, we must weed out all heretics. In order to bring in this one, we have decided to launch an inquisition.

The archbishops have granted all bishops the authority to execute anyone they deem suspect.” As he said that, the knights unloaded a number of wooden beams and a giant blade from the wagon, then began fitting them together.

“A-A guillotine?” One of the villagers muttered. The contraption the knights were setting up was indeed a guillotine.

Agares fondly patted the scaffolding and swept his gaze over the villagers. They flinched back in fear.

“There is no reason for you to feel indebted to this Guardian of the Desert. Had he been a true believer, he would have used his powers in the service of Lord Ehit. The fact that he did not proves his guilt. Now then, let the inquisition commence.” Agares sat down on a magnificent chair that one of his priests brought out for him. His knights fanned out and dragged the villagers to him one by one.

Surprisingly, when the villagers told Agares they knew nothing he simply said “I see,” and let them return home.

An hour passed. The sun was about to dip under the horizon, and the curtain of night had begun to fall.

The villagers, who had been expecting to be tortured, started to look hopeful. This almost seemed like a formal, proper interrogation.

A middle-aged man was brought up to Agares and the bishop asked the same question he had to all the others.

“Do you know the Guardian of the Desert?”

Susha let out a barely audible gasp. The man was someone who had actually met Naiz.

Apparently Naiz had gotten him some valuable and rare medicine to cure his son. The man had swore he would one day repay the favor. He was also one of Susha’s conspirators, and had helped her spread rumors about the Fairy of the Desert.

The man, whose name was Porukka, stared unflinchingly at Agares.

“No, Lord Bishop. I do not.” His voice didn’t stutter. His poker face was

perfect.

Agares smiled and responded in a calm, cold manner.

“It’s not good to lie.” The villagers exchanged worried glances. Porukka’s expression stiffened.

“Wh-What do you—”

“You have met this man before, have you not?”

“N-No, I haven’t!”

“That’s a lie, isn’t it? You have a child, correct?”

“...Yes.”

“Now see, that is the truth. Is your child a girl?”

“Yes.”

“And that is a lie. You have a son, not a daughter. This Guardian of the Desert met with your son, did he not?”

“No, Your Eminence.”

“Another lie. He saved your son’s life, did he not?”

“No he didn’t! I’ve never even—”

“More lies. He saved your son’s life, which is why you’re lying to protect him.”

“You’re mistaken, Lord Bishop! Please, believe me!” Porukka shrieked, terrified.

Agares’ smile didn’t waver. He repeated the question.

Those that knew Porukka trembled in fear. Agares had guessed everything despite Porukka’s answers. No matter what the man said, Agares somehow divined the truth.

“It seems you really don’t know any more than this. Hmm, well, I was at least able to ascertain this man’s appearance. A step in the right direction.”

“Wh-Why? How...”

Porukka looked at Agares with lifeless eyes. Still smiling, Agares explained.

“Because I am an Apostle, one who carries the blood of Ehit in my veins.” The villagers began muttering to each other. Agares basked in their fear for a few minutes before addressing them.

“I have the power to see into people’s souls. You cannot lie to me. No matter how good a liar you are, your soul shall show your falsehood.” In other words, this was the special magic he had inherited. Like Oscar and Miledi, he possessed inhuman powers. It was also what made him such a good inquisitor.

“Now then, it’s time for your divine punishment. For the sin of lying, you and your entire family are condemned.” Even now, there was still a smile on Agares’ face. He hadn’t hesitated to condemn them all.

“Wait! Please wait! Spare my family at least!” However, it was too late. The templar knights dragged his family up to the scaffolding.

“The inquisition is not over yet. We must hurry the process along, or it will be dark before we’re finished. Surely you good people would not want to force the templar knights to do something as menial as create light for us?”

Even though Agares had just condemned a man to death, he was lecturing Porukka as if *he* was the unreasonable one for not agreeing to die quickly and quietly. Agares’ gaze held not even a hint of remorse. There was no hope for Porukka or his family.

Tears sprung to the villagers’ eyes as they watched Porukka and his family get dragged to the guillotine. Many of them couldn’t bear to watch and turned away. However, one brave soul was different.

“Is it a sin to thank someone who helps you?” Her voice rang out clearly through the crowd.

The knights stopped what they were doing and started looking for the voice’s owner.

The crowd hastily parted out of the way, leaving two young girls standing alone. However, Susha didn’t try and hide. She stood firm and met Agares’ gaze, her eyes glimmering with resolve.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t quite catch that. Could you say it again?”

His gaze seemed to be saying, “Say that to my face, if you dare.” However, neither Susha nor Yunfa flinched. This time it was Yunfa who replied.

“You don’t know? When someone helps you, you say thank you. And when you do something bad, you say sorry. I’m eight and even I know that. How come you don’t, Bishop?” Yunfa’s words dripped with venom. They echoed clearly through the night.

For the first time since he’d arrived, Agares’ smile slipped.

The priests and knights were amazed. On the other hand, the villagers watched on in abject horror.

“Bishop, please forgive our desire to help this man who has done so much for us. Our faith in Ehit is in no way false. We simply wish to show our gratitude to him as well. That’s all. Please allow us this shred of humanity. I’m sure Lord Ehit would show us mercy as well.” Now it was Susha’s turn to speak. She knew that once her turn came, she wouldn’t be able to keep hold of her secrets. Not in front of this man who could use ancient magic, anyway.

She had a rough idea of where Naiz lived because of the two odd strangers she’d talked to this morning. They’d told her they went to meet Naiz relatively often, and the two of them were staying at Liv’s inn. In other words, Naiz’s house had to be somewhere in the area. There was only one place you could hide yourself that was nearby. The Red Dragon’s Mountain.

Perhaps if they confessed, Susha and Yunfa’s lives would be spared. But neither of them would, even if they knew lying was futile.

No matter what happened, their lives were forfeit. If they were dead either way, they decided to go down fighting instead of begging. And now was the time to fight. Porukka had done his best to protect Naiz, so they had to do what they could to protect him as well.

Susha and Yunfa clasped each others hands and walked forward.

“Please forgive Porukka-san and his family. At the very least, spare their lives.” Susha looked far more mature than any twelve-year-old the village had seen. Yunfa, too, bowed her head and begged Agares to forgive Porukka.

While everyone else just looked on stunned, Agares grinned. His smile was far

more sinister than before.

“I see. Such splendid children. To think you would lecture me on morality. Fufufufufu, it has been some since I have enjoyed myself this much. Indeed, this is wonderful. As thanks for bringing me such joy, allow me to explain something to you.”

“Explain what?”

“You seem to be misunderstanding what morality is. It is certainly something very important. Indeed, almost as important as worshiping Ehit.”

Susha gulped. She knew where Agares was going with this.

“However, there is nothing more important in this world than Ehit’s will. Compared to that, something as trivial as human morality means nothing. In fact, what you’re doing is not truly moral if it contradicts the word of god. Besides—” Agares raised his hands up to heaven and brought his face close to Susha’s, his movements like a broken doll’s. Susha was terrified by his bulging pupils.

“What right do you have to speak of Ehit’s will?” Out of everything Susha had said, that was what irked him the most.

A ball of glowing fire appeared in Agares’ hand. He had used no magic circle, spoke no incantation, yet he had managed to cast one of the strongest fire spells known to man, Solar Blast. Normally, the spell created a sphere of fire over eight meters wide, but Agares had compressed it into the size of his hand and made it far more powerful. This was the power of one of God’s Apostles.

Originally, Agares had been planning on questioning Yunfa and Susha first, but their blasphemy had driven him over the edge. He would wipe them off the face of Tortus.

“You are not even worthy to breathe the same air as me. Disappear.” No one moved. The sight of him creating such a powerful spell had left them rooted to the spot.

Only Susha, who was hugging her little sister, still had the courage to glare back at Agares.

“Then Ehit’s will is wrong.” Her voice didn’t waver.

Agares unleashed his fireball, which was powerful enough to blow through the whole crowd and leave not even ashes behind, as the girls looked on and accepted their fate.

“Ability Ten, Hallowed Ground, Partial Activation!” A black shadow interposed itself between Susha and the fireball. He was holding something no one expected to see in a desert, a black umbrella.

He thrust it in front of him, and it began to glow with a vibrant light. The fireball smashed into it head-on. At the same time—

“Miiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiileeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeediiiiiiiiiiii” A girl’s voice rang out from somewhere far away. Then, a second later—

“Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiick!” A girl’s foot slammed into Agares’ face.

She slammed into him from the side, and the force of the kick nearly shattered his cheekbones.

He was sent flying away from his chair. The villagers watched as Agares flew through the air.

He flew straight through a number of buildings and skidded across the ground. His legs slammed into a tree, which flipped him around, and kept going. He skipped across the oasis and finally came to a halt on the far bank.

No normal kick could generate that much force. It had looked like she had almost been falling sideways.

Miledi, for the girl was obviously Miledi, alighted atop the chair Agares had been sitting on seconds before. She looked down at the dumbfounded templar knights and winked.

She made her characteristic peace sign as her ponytail fluttered behind her.

“It’s everyone’s favorite magical girl, Miledi-chan!” Miledi posed for the crowd.

A second later, Agares’ fireball flew off into the sky. Oscar had deflected it with his umbrella. It exploded safely above the heads of the villagers, illuminating the early night sky with its radiance.

The light framed Miledi perfectly, making her look like a goddess descending from heaven.

“Nice one, O-kun! I never knew you were such a good showman!”

“That was actually just a coincidence.”

Oscar swung his umbrella over his shoulder and adjusted his glasses. Whether it was on purpose or just a coincidence, he struck quite a theatrical pose as well.

The templar knights finally returned to their senses.

“L-Lord Bishoooooop!”

“Agares-samaaaaaaaaa!”

“We need a healer! Quick, bring a healer over to the bishop!”

A detachment of knights ran over to where Agares fell. Most of them expected to find him dead.

Oscar ran a finger over the temple of his glasses and nodded to himself. He had wanted to make sure.

“Miledi, you broke his neck. He’s definitely dead.”

“Can you really see that well in the darkness?”

“These glasses have night vision too.”

Just how many features did you put inside those glasses...

“Wh-Who on earth are you guys!? And what have you done!? Accursed heretics, prepare to face Ehit’s wrath!” One of the priests pointed a finger at the two of them and started yelling.

Killing a bishop of the Holy Church was one of the worst crimes imaginable. Harming a member of the clergy was the equivalent of besmirching Ehit’s name. It was the equivalent of declaring the entire human world your enemy.

However, Miledi didn’t seem the least bit worried.

“Good grief,” she said and shook her head sadly. Then, she pointed at Susha and Yunfa and shouted.

“Clean out your ears and listen up, all of you! You see these two girls over

here! See how cute they are!? That right there is the truth of this world! Cute is justice! Screw your god!”

“I’m not sure I like this world order any more than Ehit’s.”

Miledi ignored Oscar.

The priest, shocked by how blatant Miledi’s blasphemy was, could only sputter in shock.

“Sue-chan’s right, any god that would dare hurt a pretty girl like her is totally wrong!”

“U-Umm, that wasn’t exactly what I meant.” Susha was the kind of person who could articulate her opinion regardless of the circumstances. Even now, she managed to say that through her tears.

“O-Oscar-san, Miledi-san. Do you realize what—”

“Oh yeah, don’t worry. We’re prepared for the consequences.”

Yunfa and Susha looked worriedly up at their saviors. But Oscar gently patted their heads and reassured them.

What do they mean, they’re prepared for the consequences? Susha thought to herself.

Oscar saw the question in her eyes.

“We’re here precisely to fight against people like this. We’re here to liberate those oppressed by madness, by malice, and by this unreasonable world.”

“To liberate people?”

Oscar smiled at Susha. Before he could explain further, however, Miledi called out to him.

“O-kun, let’s go!”

“Yeah, yeah. Go ahead, I’m ready whenever.”

Suddenly, the templar knights charging at Miledi were thrown into the sky. Almost as if they were falling upward.

She’d used the gravity spell Inverse Square. It reversed the gravitational pull

of anyone she targeted.

Far off in the distance, the sun's last rays shot across the night sky. They illuminated the dozens of knights that were now falling upward. Miledi manipulated the direction of their fall so that when they finally came back to earth the knights landed outside the village. She wanted to move the battlefield to avoid getting the townspeople caught up in the fight. Both her and Oscar remembered all too well how Forneus had blown himself up at the end.

Miledi and Oscar leaped over to where she'd deposited the knights.

The villagers slumped to their knees, defeated. A few of them glared at Susha and Yunfa. They probably blamed the two girls for sowing the seeds of their doom. The villagers were too scared of pointing fingers at Miledi or Oscar, so they vented their frustration on the helpless girls who couldn't fight back.

Susha and Yunfa ignored them though. They exchanged glances.

"Sue-nee."

"Yep."

They were satisfied with how things had turned out.

With the villagers' angry glares at their back, they dashed out of the village.

"Impossible... How are you..." One of the knights groaned, his body sunk into the ground.

He was the last to have been defeated. He'd watched as Oscar and Miledi tore through the squad of templar knights like they were nothing.

Most of the knights were skilled magicians so they'd been able to soften their landing enough to avoid injury. The priests hadn't been so lucky. The only reason they hadn't died outright was because the sand cushioned their falls.

Perhaps it would have been luckier if they *had* died. The slaughter that followed was merciless.

None of the knights had been able to mount any kind of resistance. They'd been mowed down.

“Why? You’re God’s Apostles as well, aren’t you!? Why do you oppose us!?”

“Actually we’re god’s enemies~”

Despite being one of the most dangerous things you could say in this world, Miledi said it lightly.

The knight was stunned. He couldn’t believe anyone out there could blaspheme so casually. Once he recovered, he spat, “Heretics!” Those were his final words before Oscar crushed him to death.

“Always leaves a bad taste in my mouth when I kill people from the Holy Church.”

“Is there any kind of killing that doesn’t leave a bad taste in your mouth?”

Miledi sighed as she surveyed the destruction they had wrought.

She smiled sadly and chose not to answer Oscar’s question.

“Now then, what are we going to do about Liv? Even if they tell the Holy Church they had nothing to do with us...”

“I’m sure if the townspeople cooperate, the Holy Church won’t just kill them out of hand. Unlike Naiz, we’re not even from here. They have no reason to protect us. If you’re worried, we can hide out at a nearby oasis after this and see what happens.”

“Yeah, you’re right. We can totally do that. Do you think we should tell Nacchan too? Though it feels kind of awkward to go back right after we said we’d leave. He probably won’t like it either.”

“W-Well, you’re not wrong there. But I think we should still tell him.”

This is something that affects him directly. He’ll probably find out on his own eventually, but the sooner he knows the better.

“Anyway, what about Sue-chan and Yun-chan?”

“They sure went off on that bishop. The whole town heard them, too.”

Oscar doubted they’d be able to continue living in this village. *The next time a bishop comes to interrogate the town...* Chances were, they’d be taken.

“I want them to join the Liberators.”

“They certainly have the courage for it. The real question is whether or not they’ll want to leave the desert so long as Naiz is still here.”

Oscar and Miledi looked at each other.

Just then, they heard a voice behind them. They turned to see Susha and Yunfa heading their way. The two of them were riding an irak they’d stolen from the knights. They waved to grab Oscar and Miledi’s attention.

“And now they’ve stolen the Holy Church’s irak... They’ve got guts, and the ability to manipulate information on a large scale. I’d say they’re a pretty valuable asset to have.”

“I bet Nacchan would have been caught ages ago if it wasn’t for them.”

The two girls gulped as the sixty dead knights came into view.

But they quickly recovered and turned back to Miledi and Oscar.

“Thank goodness we made it in time... I was worried you two might leave before we got here.”

“Thank you so much for saving us, Onee-chan, Onii-chan!”

Yunfa hopped off the irak and skipped over to the two of them. Susha slipped off the irak as well, and bowed.

Then, with a look of determination, she said, “Miledi-san, Oscar-san. I know this is an unreasonable request, but please take us with you on your journey!”

“Please!”

Yunfa bowed her head as well.

Miledi and Oscar exchanged another look.

“Unfortunately, we weren’t able to convince Naiz to join us. If you come with us, you won’t get to see him.”

“I see. Even so, we’d like to come with you. I may just be a burden when it comes to fights, but I’m sure I’ll be able to help in other ways. I’ll do my best to be useful!”

“I’ll try hard too! So please let us come!”

Neither Oscar nor Miledi missed the few seconds they spent gazing longingly at the Red Dragon's Mountain.

They really were clever. With just the limited information Oscar had given them, the two had figured out roughly where Naiz lived.

Despite that, they still chose to go with Miledi instead of trying to meet him.

Harsh though it may be, they were facing reality. Even if they went to see Naiz, they knew there was no guarantee he'd really meet with them. Furthermore, as long as they stayed here their lives were in danger. If they wanted to survive, their best option was to go with Miledi and Oscar, who had already declared themselves heretics.

Their unbending will and tenacity to stay alive was impressive. Miledi and Oscar respected them for it. The two girls swallowed their complaints and their dissatisfaction, and continued struggling desperately to survive. Their determination was dazzling.

"Umm, it's true that we're here because we can't go back home anymore, but that's not all."

"Huh?"

"Hm?"

Miledi and Oscar were both surprised that Susha had guessed what they were thinking, and curious what else could be motivating the two girls. Yunfa sighed. She'd just explained this a few minutes ago.

"When someone saves your life, you're supposed to thank them. That's the right thing to do." And so the Liberators were lectured on morality by an eight-year-old girl.

"O-kun, I never realized I'd turned into such a calculating person."

"Don't say it, Miledi. That just makes me feel even worse about it."

"U-Umm! We were also thinking that if we went with you the chances of us meeting Naiz-sama would be higher than if we left on our own. So we're calculating too!"

Susha's attempt at cheering them up only made them more depressed.

That reminds me, even though Susha's in love with Naiz, the main reason she was looking for him was to give him her thanks. That was why she'd started spreading false rumors, even though she couldn't meet him.

It seemed what drove them even more than a desire to survive was a desire to repay their debts.

"Okay, okay, we got it. But it'll be too dangerous for you to come with us, so —" -So we'll take you to our headquarters and you can help our organization from there. However, Miledi wasn't able to get the second half of her sentence out.

Susha and Yunfa looked curiously at Miledi, wondering why she cut off halfway. Their eyes widened in shock as they saw Miledi break out in a cold sweat.

"O-Oscar-san, Miledi-san's—" Susha didn't finish her sentence either. Because Oscar looked just as surprised as Miledi. He gulped.

The two of them started panting.

They both turned around, their necks creaking like badly oiled machines. Susha and Yunfa followed their gaze, wondering what it was that had the two of them so terrified.

"To think you would notice me despite my attempts to erase my presence..." They heard a voice from above. It was a beautiful voice, one that rang out like a bell. At the same time though, it was completely devoid of emotion.

The sun dipped below the horizon, and darkness fell.

Floating in the night sky above them was a beautiful woman.

She was wreathed in silver light, and looked like a miniature incarnation of the moon.

Even in a shapeless nun's habit, her stunning figure was clearly visible. Her clear blue eyes and silver hair looked like they'd come out of a painting. From her back sprouted a pair of glowing silver wings.

Her beauty was beyond that of mere mortals.

"Hiii!"

“Uwaaah!”

Susha and Yunfa squealed in terror as they slumped to the ground.

Though the woman soaring above them looked like a divine creature, She was utterly and unbelievably terrifying.

Those eyes that stared down at them were inhuman.

Because the sisters were wise beyond their years, they understood at once how dangerous she was.

However, the presence of Miledi and Oscar bolstered their courage.

“Miledi!”

“Got it!”

The woman vanished the same instant Oscar deployed his umbrella’s barrier.

A second later, there was a thunderous boom and a shockwave spread out from his umbrella.

“Ngh!?” Oscar grunted and fell to his knees. He’d managed to block the woman’s radiant sword with his Hallowed Ground.

But it had been a near thing. The woman’s vertical slash had left deep cracks in his barrier. In a single attack, she’d done more damage to his Hallowed Ground than a barrage of spells from a squad of templar knights.

Still, Oscar had managed to buy the time they needed.

Miledi had successfully sent Yunfa and Susha flying back to the village. Or rather, unceremoniously flung them to safety. It was a pretty bumpy ride, but she didn’t have time to give them a controlled landing. The best she could do was throw them in the relative direction of the oasis so the water would at least cushion their fall.

She was not a moment too soon, either.

“Gah!?” There was another boom. When Miledi turned around, Oscar was nowhere in sight.

The strange woman held her twin swords aloft, prepared for any counterattack Miledi might mount.

A second later something slammed into the dunes a good distance away.

Putting the pieces together, it was obvious that the woman had sent Oscar flying. But Miledi couldn't spare the time to worry about him. Because she had her hands full dealing with the woman's next attack.

"Ah!?" Miledi barely dodged the diagonal slash by "falling" backwards.

The woman's longsword grazed her hair as it swung past. Had she spent even a half-second longer on the spell that had sent Susha and Yunfa flying away, Miledi's head would be rolling on the ground right now.

Cold sweat poured down Miledi's back as she realized how close of a shave that had been.

She continued falling backward, parallel to the ground, but the woman chased after her with a speed that surpassed Miledi's own.

"So annoying!"

"Your struggle is futile."

This time Miledi dodged by falling into the sky.

With one flap of her wings though, the woman was able to catch up. This time, there was no escape.

Miledi paled as she saw the sword close in on her. Even if she tried to counter with a spell, she knew at this distance it would avail her nothing.

Five small daggers came out of nowhere, deflecting the woman's death blow.

They'd come from such an angle that even the slightest change in trajectory would have resulted in them hitting Miledi instead. Oscar had enchanted all of his blades with gravity magic as well, though, which allowed him to freely control their flight in mid-air.

The woman faltered. It should have been impossible for throwing daggers to come at her with such speed and such accuracy. She then noticed that one of the daggers was glowing red-hot, while another was emitting sparks. *These daggers are enchanted.*

The woman struck down the burning and electric daggers with her sword,

while she swatted the rest away with her wings. One emitted a powerful gale as it spun away while another spewed petrifying smoke. The last froze the air as it flew off.

The woman was easily able to defend against all three with a barrier of light, but that gave Miledi enough time to get away.

“Nice save, O-kun!” —Heavensfall! Miledi summoned a massive black sphere and crushed the woman to the ground.

At the same time Miledi flew over to where Oscar was waiting.

“Sorry. I nearly hit you with those.”

“It’s all good. It’s only thanks to you that I’m still alive.”

The two kept a watchful eye on the cloud of smoke in front of them and took a moment to exchange information.

“What on earth *is* that?”

“Remember what I told you?”

A silver-haired nun. Oscar remembered now. Miledi had mentioned meeting her after destroying her family. According to Miledi, she’d barely escaped that encounter with her life.

“It’s not a person, whatever it is. It has no future, no destiny. And it’s quite a handful.”

“Told you.”

Though their voices were playful, their expressions were grim.

They watched as a massive pillar of silver light rose up to the sky. It spiraled away into the heavens, and blew away the dust cloud surrounding her. The night sky blazed with its light.

“The ability to manipulate gravity... So that is your special, no, your ancient magic. I remember you. You escaped from me once before.” The sky quaked. The earth trembled. The very heavens cowered in the face of her might. The woman unleashed a wave of pressure so potent it was palpable. Oscar found he could hardly breathe. If his focused slipped even a little, the woman’s aura

alone would knock him unconscious.

"To think my opponents would be humans who have inherited a fragment of my lord's powers. I suppose it is only proper to introduce myself then. I will be using my full strength against someone of your caliber." The sand surrounding the woman was blown away. Her nun's habit vanished, replaced by a white battle uniform. She now wore a helmet, gauntlets, greaves, and a waist plate.

She flapped her wings once, and swung her swords in front of her. A declaration of war.

"I am one of God's Apostles— Hearst. My duty is to rid my lord's game board of undesirable pieces." *Why's a "God's Apostle" or whatever here?*

By undesirable pieces, does she mean us? Has she been chasing after us this whole time? But if she only just remembered she fought Miledi before, then she couldn't have been chasing her. Does that mean she came here to eliminate someone else? There was only one other person she could have come for. That foolish, kind man who'd consigned himself to a lifetime of repentance.

It appeared Oscar and Miledi would have to make good on their promise to help Naiz sooner than they thought.

Despite the fact that they were clearly outmatched, the two of them grinned fearlessly.

"Bring it on."

"Do your worst."

Their voices melded together as they roared out a challenge.

"Just try and kill us!" They wouldn't let anything stand in their way.

Meanwhile, Susha and Yunfa had managed to crawl out of the oasis they'd been flung to. Fortunately, neither of them were hurt.

As they were coughing out the water they'd swallowed they heard a deafening boom.

"Sue-nee. What should we do? That lady was scary."

“Yeah. Even Miledi-san looked like she was having trouble. And she defeated all those templar knights like it was nothing.”

The two sat silently on the sand for a few seconds. Water dripped from their soaked clothes. Their breath misted in the air. Desert nights were freezing. However, neither of them seemed the least bit bothered by the cold.

As they sat there, they noticed that the sound of fighting was growing further and further away from the village.

“Are they leading her away from the village so it doesn’t get caught up in the battle?” Though she had no proof, Susha was certain they were.

She hadn’t known them for long, but she felt as though she understood them well.

“Sue-nee. I don’t like this. We can’t just leave them alone.” Yunfa and Susha both knew they were less than useless when it came to fighting. Yunfa bit her lip and clung to her big sister’s arm. Susha was proud to have such a brave little sister. Despite seeing firsthand how terrifying the enemy Oscar and Miledi faced was, she still wanted to help. Susha wracked her brains, trying to think of something they could do.

Her thoughts turned to the man who’d saved their lives. After their parents had died, Susha and Yunfa had found it difficult to stay with their parents’ friends. So they’d tried to run away. But not long after heading into the desert, they’d been attacked by monsters. Susha had cradled her sister’s poisoned body, thinking all hope was lost, when Naiz had come to save their lives. She’d been able to help him; surely she could help her two new friends as well.

“That’s it! I know what we can do! Let’s go find Naiz-sama!”

“Yeah! Naiz-sama should be able to help them!”

Yunfa nodded in agreement. The two sisters exchanged glances and stood up.

Naiz sensed a massive outpouring of mana, one greater than any he’d felt before.

He dashed out of his cave and saw bursts of mana flashing intermittently in

the direction of Liv. *Whoever's fighting over there, they're not normal people.*

Oscar and Miledi's faces appeared in the back of his mind.

"I should at least see what's happening." Naiz created a tiny portal the size of a small window and surveyed the village with it.

The first thing he noticed was the villagers' confusion. Next, he saw the abnormal amount of iraks and carriages in the town square. A closer look revealed that they were the Holy Church's carriages. However, he didn't see any templar knights or priests. He then moved his portal to the outlying desert.

"Wh-What on earth happened..." He saw an army of templar knights lying dead on the sand. Wisps of residual mana covered the battlefield, the remnants of a few extremely powerful spells.

A great battle had taken place here. Only Oscar and Miledi could have defeated such a large contingent of knights.

But then, who is it they're having so much trouble with? More importantly, why did someone so strong come to Liv? Were they chasing after the Liberators? A pair of young voices interrupted the thoughts whirling like a maelstrom inside his head.

"Naiz-sama! Naiz-sama!"

"You have to help Onii-chan and Onee-chan!"

How do they know my name?

He moved his portal closer to the voices and saw two girls shouting his name.

They were asking for his help. The way they talked, it sounded as if they were certain he'd come to their aid.

"....." For a moment, Naiz hesitated. But then he remembered that those two girls were the ones he'd saved two years back. Miledi had mentioned she'd told them a little bit about him. Seeing as they already knew both his name, and what his magic could do, he decided there would be no harm in revealing himself.

A second later, Naiz was standing behind the two sisters.

“What’s wrong?”

“N-Naiz-sama!?”

“Naiz-sama!”

The two started and turned around. After a moment’s surprise, tears began spilling from their eyes. They’d finally met him again.

Naiz panicked when he saw the two girls start crying. Before he could say anything though, Susha wiped away her tears and said, “Naiz-sama, thank you so much for saving us before. Forgive us for asking your help again before we even had a chance to thank you for the last time.”

“Naiz-sama. Onii-chan and onee-chan are in trouble! They’re fighting this scary person who looks like a person but isn’t a person!”

“What do you mean, looks like a person but isn’t a person?”

The sisters hesitated. They didn’t know how to explain it.

Regardless, Naiz could tell from the urgency in their voice that whatever it was, Oscar and Miledi were having a hard time against it. From Susha’s fragmented explanation, Naiz gathered that it was likely some kind of trump card the Holy Church had been saving.

Once she finished her explanation Susha brought her hands together, like she was praying.

“Please, please, I’m begging you. Help them! You’re the only one who can!”

“Naiz-sama!”

The two of them had absolute faith in the Guardian of the Desert. He was far more reliable than the Holy Church’s god, who they couldn’t even see and whose servants had brought them nothing but misfortune.

Though he had never hesitated to lend someone a hand before, Naiz hesitated.

“Naiz-sama?” He had sworn never to use his powers to fight. Would he even be of any use to those two? Whatever they were fighting was far stronger than any monster. Wouldn’t he just get in their way? Sure, he could help them flee.

But for how long? The Holy Church had sent this powerful creature after the two of them. Even if he teleported them to safety, it would just chase after them.

Would he just help them escape again? How long would he keep that up for? So long as he wasn't fighting, would he be of any help to them? Besides, he'd told himself he'd never meet with them again.

More than anything though, this situation brought back unpleasant memories. His mind flashed back to that day.

He'd obliterated his village and everyone in it. Not even a trace had remained.

His powers were too dangerous to be used in a fight.

There was no telling what he might accidentally destroy this time.

Which is why, I... Over and over, he repeated excuses not to go to his friends' aid.

"I'm sorry, Naiz-sama."

"Huh?"

He looked down, confused by her apology. Yunfa, too, bowed her head and apologized. They weren't berating Naiz for hesitating, in fact they looked almost sad.

"I don't know what exactly happened, but I do know my request is causing you pain. I'm sorry. I never wanted to force my savior to make that kind of face."

"I'm sorry too, Naiz-sama..."

"What face?"

What kind of face am I making right now?

Naiz unconsciously brought a hand up to his cheek.

"We'll go ourselves." Susha and Yunfa turned around.

Naiz asked automatically, "Go where?"

"To help Miledi-san and Oscar-san."

“Wha— What are you—”

“We know we’ll just get in the way. But maybe we can distract that woman, even if it’s only for a second.”

“I can do a little magic. Maybe if I make some sparks it’ll surprise the not-person.”

Though they spoke lightly, their resolve was the real deal. Naiz could see it in their eyes. They wanted to help, even if it meant their death.

“Why would you go so far for them? You can’t have known them for more than a few days...”

“Because they saved our lives.”

“Yeah!”

Susha and Yunfa jumped onto their irak. Susha took hold of the reins. She didn’t even look back.

Naiz couldn’t believe it. They had said that like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

If someone saved your life, it was only natural to risk yours to save theirs.

Anyone would agree; that was the moral thing to do. But few people would be able to actually follow through with that line of reasoning.

Suddenly, Naiz realized something.

In their explanation, Susha and Yunfa had mentioned why the Holy Church had come to their village.

The bishop, Agares, had launched an inquisition. Oscar and Miledi had saved the two girls just before the bishop had executed them for heresy.

But what was it that had gotten them suspected of heresy in the first place? There was only one thing that came to mind.

“Wait! Wait a second, you two. Why did the Holy Church declare you heretics?”

“Well...”

“Please tell me.”

Susha hesitated. She and Yunfa shared a look. But when Susha saw the sincerity in Naiz’s eyes she sighed and told the truth.

“Because I told the bishop there was nothing wrong with wanting to help the Guardian of the Desert.”

“Ah—”

So it is my fault after all.

Even Miledi and Oscar only got wrapped up in this because of me.

Though he’d told himself over and over he was keeping his distance to protect them, he’d only been protecting himself.

And now he was making excuses for himself, trying to pretend like this had nothing to do with him. Could he really let these two girls throw away their lives because he was too cowardly to help? *I’m an embarrassment!*

“I hope we can meet again one day, Naiz-sa—”

“Wait. You don’t have to go.”

Those words spilled out of their own volition.

These girls had risked their life for him, and now they were about to do the same for Miledi and Oscar.

He was done making excuses for himself.

Powerless as they were, these two girls were trying to do the right thing. Yet he’d just been trying to shirk his duty.

He didn’t want to shame himself any further.

How could I have forgotten? I’m a warrior’s son. I’m Solda Gruen’s son. My job is to defeat anyone who threatens our people! The chains of his sin still bound him. His guilt would never disappear.

This power of his was repulsive. He didn’t want to hurt anyone with it ever again.

But did that mean it was okay to abandon these two brave girls who were

begging him for help? Absolutely not. He was done running from his past.

If he abandoned them here, he'd never be able to face his family in the afterlife.

Naiz made his decision.

"I'll go."

"Naiz-sama!"

"Naiz-sama!"

Susha's eyes went wide with surprise, while Yunfa's sparkled in admiration.

"Thank you so much for trying to protect me. Wait here for me. I'll be back. With Miledi and Oscar."

The thought of fighting still pained Naiz, but his mind was made up. His resolve wouldn't waver.

The two girls looked up at Naiz in wonder.

"Good luck!"

"We'll be waiting, Naiz-sama!"

They waved farewell to their reliable Guardian of the Desert.

A localized thunderstorm raged a few kilometers south of Liv.

"Gah!?"

"Ah!?"

Flashes of lightning illuminated the torrential downpour. Oscar and Miledi were in the middle of it all, trying their best to dodge the deadly rain.

Oscar's umbrella was groaning from all the abuse it had taken. Miledi had put out multiple Spatial Severances, and each had absorbed so much energy it had collapsed.

They didn't even have time to grumble to each other. Even a moment's lapse in concentration would lead to their death.

"You better not underestimate me." Oscar flung a volley of daggers at Hearst. He controlled their flight freely, and had them close in on Hearst from all sides.

“I have seen that trick already.” Her silver wings smacked down Oscar’s missiles before they could reach their target.

They burned, scorched, and froze the air as they fell.

“But now you’re wide open!” Miledi fell upward into the sky. Once she was above Hearst, she unleashed a powerful gravity sphere at her.

Hearst crossed her swords above her head and blocked the sphere. Normal swords would have been crushed to a pulp, but Hearst’s weapons were made of sterner stuff.

Miledi’s lips twitched, but she wasted no time in increasing the sphere’s pressure.

Oscar jumped up next to her using his Onyx Boots and thrust his umbrella at Hearst.

“Ability Nine, Thunderlord’s Judgement! Full power!” Originally, he’d had Spark Plasma as his ninth ability. It was the most cost-effective lightning spell he had. But now he was fighting together with Miledi, and his own skills had improved. So he’d swapped out the ninth ability for the most powerful electric spell known to man.

His umbrella turned inside-out, and concentrated balls of lightning formed at the tips of each rib. They traveled down the umbrella’s ribs, combining into one massive lightning sphere at its ferrule. That massive sphere of lightning hurtled toward Hearst.

There was a blinding flash of light. For a few seconds, all Oscar could see was white. Hearst vanished inside the dazzling light.

Though the recoil sent Oscar flying backward, he was able to recover in midair thanks to his Onyx Boots.

“O-kun!”

“I’m sure that hit! But—”

He wasn’t able to finish his sentence.

There was a dull thud, and both Miledi’s gravity sphere and Oscar’s lightning were blown away.

Hearst leaped up to where Oscar was and crossed her swords around his neck.

It was only thanks to the heightened perception his glasses gave him that he was able to bring up his umbrella in time to guard.

Her swords bit into his umbrella. He could feel them cutting into his neck.

He'd avoided being decapitated, but only by a hair's breadth. The swords slowly digging into his skin reminded him that his head could still fly at any moment. That one attack had shaved a decade off his life just from the fright it had given him.

"You're surprisingly tenacious." Hearst's lifeless eyes bored into Oscar. They were the same shade of blue as Miledi's.

He knew this wasn't the time to be comparing eyes, but Oscar couldn't help it. While Miledi's looked like a clear blue sky after a storm, Hearst's resembled empty glass spheres.

There was only the tiniest hint of light in those glass globes. Up close, it felt as if her gaze was piercing right through him.

"O-kun!" Miledi fired a barrage of wind blades at Hearst.

Hearst turned to face the onslaught. She sent Oscar flying with a roundhouse kick as she turned, then cut down the wind blades with her swords.

Oscar slammed into the ground faster than he could blink.

"*Cough Cough* Gah, this isn't good." Coughing up blood, he struggled to all fours. Despite his coat's protection, one kick had been enough to knock the wind out of him. Had it not been for his Ebony Coat, he'd be dead right now. As he struggled to his feet, he heard a scream above him.

"Kyaa!?"

"Miledi!"

Oscar willed his wounded body into action, and leaped over to where Miledi was falling.

He caught her in midair, swallowed down the bile and blood that threatened

to spill out of his mouth, and landed on his back. He wasn't going to let her go, no matter what.

"Ugh. Th-Thanks, O-kun."

"Looks like you're...not okay."

There was a deep gash running from the top of Miledi's shoulder to the tip of her breast. Though she was pressing on it with her hand, blood still dripped between her fingers. The wound wasn't fatal, but it was certainly grave.

Oscar looked down at his umbrella. The earlier scissor cut had hacked it nearly in two. Despite the fact that the umbrella's cloth was made of the hardest material in existence.

He mentally reviewed his remaining trump cards.

He knew his chains had no hope of binding Hearst. If she had the strength to cut through his umbrella, his chains wouldn't last seconds. The same held true for the threads in his gloves. *Just what is her body made of?* They hadn't been able to get a scratch on her. Oscar was all out of enchanted daggers.

Even his strongest spell, Thunderlord's Judgement, hadn't been able to touch her.

"What kind of monster is she?"

"Ahaha, don't ask me."

The two smiled bitterly at each other. No matter what attack they threw out, it would probably be nullified by that barrier surrounding her. Even if they could get past that, her equipment and her body were both so tough they doubted they could dent it.

Not only could she fly, her physical specs were through the roof, she had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of mana, and her combat skills were unparalleled. She was an absolute monster.

"Have you finally given up?" The woman who called herself God's Apostle looked down at Oscar and Miledi.

"No way."

“I’m not sure I understand the question. The word give up isn’t in my dictionary.”

The two of them glared at Hearst. Though their wounds had left them pale-faced, neither of them even felt the pain.

Hearst observed the two of them dispassionately.

“Even though my charm spell is supposed to be quite powerful, it seems it’s not working on you at all.” Her eyes shimmered. It appeared she’d been using brainwashing magic on them this whole time.

“Hmph, don’t even bother. These glasses of mine—” Are enchanted to defend against dark magic. Except he never got to finish his sentence.

“You’re trying to charm my O-kun!? You little thief! Too bad, O-kun’s so head over heels in love with me that your feminine wiles won’t work on him! How does it feel knowing I’m way prettier and way better than you? Huh? You mad? Are ya?” Despite their perilous situation, Miledi continued taunting Hearst. *Is it just me or is she acting even more annoying than usual?* It seemed Hearst had really ticked Miledi off. Hearst raised her twin swords.

It looked like this was all the time they’d managed to buy.

“With your wounds, you won’t be able to dodge anymore. Pitiful creatures who could not even become my master’s pawns. I will grant you a painless end.” Silver feathers fell from her wings. They hung in the night sky like a sea of stars.

“I’ll block the next attack. You try and finish her with your strongest spell, Miledi.”

“Looks like I’ll have to do it. Even if I can’t control it, it’s the only option left.”

The two bumped their fists together and steeled themselves. This would decide it.

“Disappear!” Thousands of glowing feathers plunged to the earth like a meteor storm.

Oscar transmuted the sand around his feet and stuck his umbrella into the newly worked earth. Once again, he activated his Hallowed Ground.

All noise vanished.

Or at least, Oscar was so focused on the attack in front of him that no sound reached his ears. The feathers demolished any part of the ground not protected by Oscar's barrier.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaah!" Oscar screamed and poured more mana into his tattered umbrella. He was simultaneously maintaining the barrier while also repairing his umbrella with transmutation.

Sustaining both at the same time was a herculean task, and his mana drained away at a prodigious rate.

His damaged body cried out in pain, and he felt more blood fill his mouth.

Still, he managed to hold out. He'd bought enough time for Miledi to cast her most powerful spell.

"It's over! Nether Burst!" A two-meter sphere of pure destruction formed around Hearst.

"This is..." For the first time, there was emotion in Hearst's voice. Surprise.

The meteor storm of feathers vanished.

"Gah!" Oscar spat out a mouthful of blood and grinned triumphantly at Hearst.

Miledi's sphere closed in around the apostle. She still wasn't able to regulate the spell. Once she cast it, it wouldn't stop until it drained all of her mana.

So she had to make sure it would hit when she used it. Hearst was too strong for them to force an opening on their own. Which was why they'd waited for her to use her ultimate attack. That would be the only time she would show an opening.

"Wait, Miledi. Is it just me or is it smaller than last time?"

"Shut up! This is...the biggest I can...make it right now!" Miledi's words were punctuated by sharp gasps. Casting such a powerful spell had left her drained.

Her Nether Burst been so much larger last time because Miledi had also used the six years' worth of mana stored in Oscar's Divinity Stone.

“I see. But this should still be more than enough to—”

“N-No way!? She’s trying to break out of it!”

“What!?”

The walls of Hearst’s gravity prison grew thin in places, making it possible to see inside.

Oscar saw that she had her eyes closed and seemed to be concentrating on something. What surprised him most was that she’d been able to maintain her form. Anything stuck inside Miledi’s Nether Burst was crushed.

Miledi started groaning.

It was taking all of her concentration just to keep the skill going. Hearst’s mana and Miledi’s warred inside the gravity prison. For the moment, they appeared evenly matched.

“Shit. The only thing I can think of is throwing this in there and—” Oscar twisted his umbrella’s handle. Before he could do any more though—

“O-Oh no!” There was a huge explosion, and Miledi’s Nether Burst was ripped apart.

A huge cloud of dust blossomed where Hearst had been standing. Oscar and Miledi were both sent flying.

Oscar managed to keep them together with his chains, but was unable to mitigate the force of the blow.

Their bodies had been battered to begin with, but now they didn’t even have the strength to get back to their feet.

“You really don’t know when to give up.” Oscar couldn’t tell whether she was impressed or just exasperated. There was too little emotion in her voice to be sure one way or the other.

Oscar and Miledi were unable to do anything more than raise their heads.

There was a massive ball of fire burning as hot as the sun above her head.

Still glaring at Hearst, Oscar silently took Miledi’s hand in his own. She squeezed his hand back.

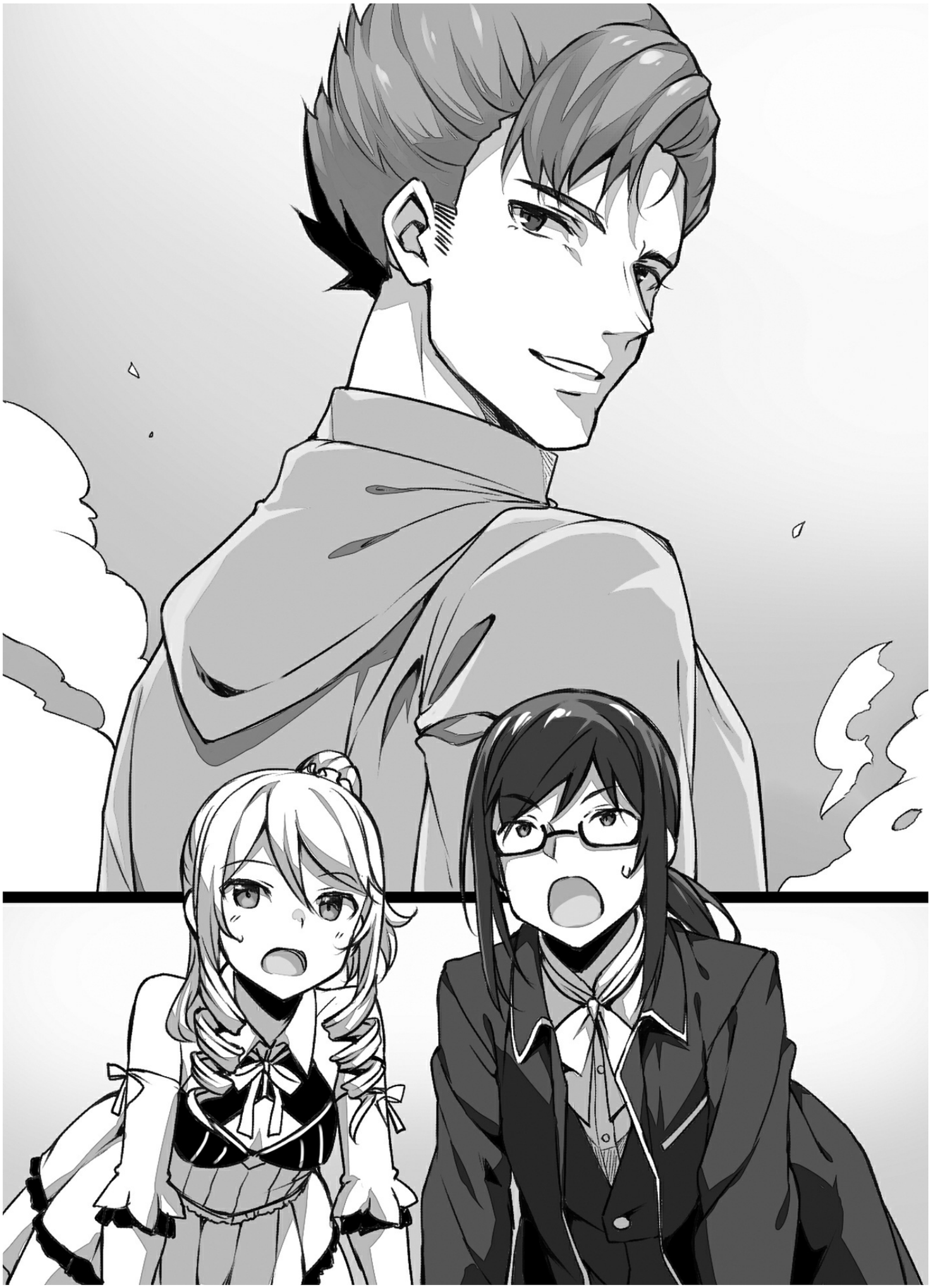
Just then— “Void Fissure!” Space itself warped.

“Ah!?” The burning sun vanished, and Hearst was blown backwards. She quickly recovered, but was then battered by a series of invisible explosions. Unable to defend herself, God’s Apostle was sent flying off into the distance.

“You’re still alive, right?”

“Nacchan!?”

“Naiz!?”



Naiz smiled at them and lifted each of them up with one arm. A few hundred meters away, there was an explosion of silver light. Even after Naiz had ripped apart space around her, Hearst was still fine, it seemed.

Still, he'd bought them a few precious seconds.

"Let's regroup." Naiz opened a portal and retreated from the battlefield.

Hearst returned to find everyone had vanished. She swept her gaze back and forth before stopping at a point some distance to the south.

"Th-This is..."

"We're about one hundred kilometers south of the volcano. This is as far as I can teleport in one go."

Naiz sounded tired. Miledi cautiously looked around. When she didn't see any silver-haired women chasing after her she raised her arms in joy. Except she was still injured.

"Owww!?"

"What are you doing, idiot?"

Tears spring to Miledi's eyes and she writhed in pain.

Oscar deployed his umbrella's Benison Aura to heal their wounds.

"O-kun...we're sharing an umbrella."

"Uhh, yes?"

Miledi purposely snuggled closer to Oscar. Oscar was too tired for a proper retort.

"It looks like I'm interrupting something. Should I just go back?" Naiz stared pointedly at the two of them. He pulled some mana potions out of his pouch and tossed a few to Oscar and Miledi. The rest he downed himself.

The two thanked him and gulped down their own potions.

"Why did you come?"

"Those girls begged me to help you."

“Sue-chan really knows what she’s doing.”

Miledi smiled.

“At any rate, you saved our lives. Thank you. I know how hard it must have been to make this choice.”

“Yeah, thanks for saving our hides again, Nacchan.”

“Don’t mention it...”

Miledi and Oscar both knew he must have agonized over his decision a great deal.

Naiz did his best to keep a straight face while they thanked him.

This was the first time he’d used spatial magic offensively since that day. Attacking Hearst had brought unpleasant memories back to the surface of his mind, and even now he felt like he might puke. Still, he was glad he’d come to save them.

“Now then. If there’s a hundred kilometers between us I think we have enough time to strategize at least... What should we do? Keep running? I don’t think we’ll be able to escape for long though.”

“No, no running.”

“Yeah, we wouldn’t be able to get away anyway.”

Naiz groaned as he heard their reply.

“But how are we going to beat her? Even my Void Fissure couldn’t scratch her.”

“And that’s exactly why we can’t run. You may as well assume it’s impossible to get away from one of God’s Apostles. I was able to do it once before, but the situation was completely different that time.”

In the past, Miledi had infiltrated the head chapel to ascertain whether or not Belta had told her the truth. Back then, she’d just scouted the area out. She’d only gotten close enough to monitor the building with Farsight. When she’d been discovered, she’d tried to flee right away. She’d kept the apostle busy guarding the chapel by firing wide-area elemental spells at it and had only used

her gravity magic to flee.

Back then the apostle had mistook her flight for wind magic and so hadn't realized what Miledi was. Hearst, however, knew Miledi and Oscar were Atavists. Furthermore she knew they were a threat to her lord, and would not stop until they had been eliminated.

Hearst would continue chasing them down. Miledi doubted they would be able to escape her notice indefinitely.

"Besides, you'd stay even if we ran."

Naiz started. He remembered again why the Holy Church had come here.

It hadn't been to chase down Miledi and Oscar. It was purely by accident that Hearst had discovered Oscar and Miledi were Atavists.

Her original goal was to eliminate Naiz.

"Remember, back when I asked if we could come visit again as friends? You said you'd think about it."

"As your friends, there's no way we'd leave you to die on your own."

Even though I never once actually called you guys my friends. Still, they were both willing to lay their lives down for him. Naiz couldn't help but be moved.

Ah, it's the same as last time. Once again, other people are protecting me.

"Alright, how do we defeat her then? Void Fissure's my strongest spell." He was sure if he thanked them he'd become a blubbering mess. So instead he focused on the enemy they needed to face. At the very least, he'd share his friends' fate.

Miledi and Oscar understood the intent behind his words. And they both smiled happily.

"She even broke out of my Nether Burst...I'm not sure we've got any cards left to play." Miledi rubbed her forehead.

Naiz's expression grew grim and he lapsed into thought.

Only Oscar didn't seem defeated. He looked at his two companions, then looked up at the sky.

“I do have *one* idea. I have no idea if we can actually pull it off though. The odds are going to be stacked really high against us, and even if we make it work we might end up killed along with her.”

“R-Really, O-kun!?”

“At this point, I’ll take anything. It’s still better than rolling over and dying.”

Miledi’s eyes shone with renewed hope, and the corners of Naiz’s mouth twitched up in a faint smile.

Oscar nodded. Just as he was about to explain his master plan though—

“Ah!?” All three of them looked up.

Oscar instantly activated his glasses’ Farsight ability. A shining silver meteor shower was headed toward them.

“She’s here!”

“Are you kidding me, this is one hundred kilometers away!? Just how fast is that thing!?”

“I’m starting to realize now that I didn’t escape last time. She *let* me run away!”

Despite their complaints, all three of them still prepared to intercept her.

Oscar started talking as fast as he could.

“I need an opening to stab her with my umbrella! Then when I give the signal, hit her with another Nether Burst, Miledi!” The storm of silver feathers reached them the moment he finished.

The three of them scattered in different directions.

A second later the feathers slammed into the ground with more force than any feather should rightfully have. Dust clouds puffed up one after another.

Hearst flew out of the dust with such speed that the air groaned in her wake. Her first target appeared to be Oscar.

Oscar backed out of the way and tried to counter with Spiral Blaze. A tornado of flames erupted out of his umbrella. Spiral Blaze was one of the strongest fire spells.

However, Hearst didn't even bother to dodge it. She crossed her swords in front of her and powered right through the flames.

"Uwaaah!?" The force of her charge pushed Oscar's umbrella up into the air. Hearst then tried to ram her sword through his now exposed chest.

"Not on my watch." Naiz suddenly appeared behind Hearst. He grabbed her head and they both disappeared. A second later, they appeared high up in the sky. Naiz pushed Hearst in front of him as they fell. She took the brunt of the impact as they hit the ground.

"Void Fissure!" Naiz followed that up with his strongest attack. A huge shockwave spread out from Hearst's helmet.

She turned her head to the side and glared at Naiz.

"Ah!" Naiz knew his magic wasn't powerful enough to kill her, but he'd been hoping to at least give her a concussion. It seemed even that had been too optimistic. Hearst fired a barrage of feathers at him at point blank range.

"Gaaah!?" Naiz had managed to teleport away fast enough to avoid being turned into a pincushion, but he'd still been hit a good few times. His entire body was covered in blood.

"Naiz!?"

"Don't worry about me! It wasn't fatal!" Hearst flew up after Naiz. Miledi cast six Heavensfalls to box Hearst in from all directions. All six sheets of gravity pressed in on the apostle. Hearst attempted to weaken one of the sides, planning to break out from there.

"!?" However, her body was pushed in an unexpected direction.

"Even if I can't crush you, I can mess with your sense of gravity! Good luck flying now!" As Hearst was tossed this way and that, she began gathering her mana. Her body glowed with an intense silver light. She held out her hand, and waves of fire exploded in every direction. She'd just cast the strongest area of effect fire spell in existence, Hellfire Tsunami.

Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz all dealt with the flames in different fashions.

"Shit—" However, just as Oscar had blown away the wave of fire, Hearst

appeared next to him. She drew one of her swords back and thrust it at him.

Oscar's Hallowed Ground cracked as it took the blow. A second later it shattered and Hearst's sword punched through.

It kept going and stabbed Oscar through the chest.

"Gaaah!?" Hellfire Tsunami's flames dispersed and both Miledi and Naiz were able to see Oscar floating in the air, stabbed through by Hearst's sword.

"O-kun!"

"Oscar!"

Miledi and Naiz screamed in horror.

"One down." Hearst brandished her second sword. The first had missed Oscar's heart by a paper-thin margin. Hallowed Ground had held just long enough for Oscar to move a few centimeters to the side and angle his Ebony Coat to deflect the sword another few centimeters.

There was no way he'd be able to dodge the second blow, not with a massive greatsword already stuck in his chest. Nor would Hearst give him the any time to recover.

"It's not over yet!" Oscar poured a huge amount of mana into his boots and hugged Hearst's torso. The problem with greatswords was that they were useless at close range. As long as Oscar was sticking to her, she wouldn't be able to swing her sword at him.

Of course, that also meant he drove the sword already inside him deeper. The pain nearly caused him to black out.

"Futile—"

"Miledi, Naiz, now!"

Oscar sent out all of the threads in his gloves. They wound around both him and Hearst. He then threw his umbrella out. It flipped around in midair, the point aimed directly at Hearst. Once more, he activated Hallowed Ground. This time though, the barrier covered both of them. He was using a defensive spell as a cage to trap Hearst. The greatswords in Hearst's hands vanished, and she made to strike Oscar with her bare hands.

Before she could hit him though, Miledi acted.

“Nether Burst!” Miledi’s black sphere covered both Hearst and Oscar. Even an apostle of god needed to focus to shatter it. In other words, it would hold for at least a few seconds.

Of course a mere human like Oscar wouldn’t last even a second inside it. Fortunately, Naiz opened a portal and saved Oscar seconds before the sphere finished fully forming.

“Gah!”

“Do you have a death wish or something!?”

Though it was only for a split second, Oscar’s body had been put under the immense pressure of Miledi’s Nether Burst. Blood was pouring out of his mouth, his nose, his eyes, his ears, every orifice that he had. The hand Naiz had grabbed Oscar with was bleeding as well.

“But we got her.”

Oscar raised a hand, and his umbrella flew into it. He thrust his left hand forward and pulled his right hand back, like he was drawing a bow. His pose was similar to the one Hearst had taken when she’d stabbed him through.

“Naiz, give me a portal!”

“R-Roger!”

Naiz opened a portal in front of Oscar. Its exit point was directly behind Hearst’s heart. Oscar transmuted the ferrule into a razor-sharp point and flung it as hard as he could into the portal.

Hearst had no armor protecting her there. When he’d hugged her earlier, Oscar had transmuted away the armor behind her heart.

The umbrella’s point pierced the apostle’s white skin.

But it didn’t drive in much further. Hearst’s ridiculously sturdy muscles prevented it from reaching her heart.

“But can you handle this?” Oscar snapped his fingers and the ferrule ejected from the end of the umbrella. The propulsion drove it even further into Hearst’s

body.

A second later, a jolt of electricity traveled down the wire connecting the ferrule to the umbrella and then directly into Oscar.

“Let’s get out of here.” Naiz teleported Oscar, along with the umbrella down to the ground. The only thing left near Hearst was the ferrule and its connecting wire.

“Gaaah!”

“Oscar, don’t die on me!”

He’d paid a steep price for his reckless antics. Rivulets of blood poured out of the gaping wound on his chest.

“Don’t worry, I’m fine.” He grit his teeth and cast a fire spell on his umbrella. Once the metal cloth was red-hot, he pushed it against his chest, cauterizing the wound. He screamed in pain as his flesh burned.

“O-kun, are you okay!?” Miledi looked like she was about to cry. Oscar didn’t have time to reassure her.

“What about her!? Did we get her!?”

“Huh? Well... Wait? I think my spell is winning?” Last time Hearst had been able to overpower Miledi and break free. This time though, Miledi’s mana was winning out against Hearst’s.

“Haaah, haaah, think you’ll be able to kill her with this?”

“No way! This just means she’ll be trapped for longer.”

“Figures,” Oscar said with a grim smile.

“But still, we managed to restrain her for a little bit. That means we can move on to stage two. Naiz.”

“I’m here. What do you want me to do?”

He didn’t ask for details because he had absolute trust in Oscar.

“Teleport me to the mouth of the volcano.”

“Understood.”

Naiz put a hand on Oscar's shoulder.

"Miledi, I'll be right back! Just hold her until I return!"

"You got it! I'll show her what I'm made of!"

The next second Naiz and Oscar were standing on the terrace overlooking the volcano's magma chamber.

"Naiz, recover as much mana as you can. You're going to need to cast two more long-distance teleports." Naiz nodded and began gulping down as many mana potions as he could.

Oscar pushed away the blackness gathering at the edge of the vision and brought out his Metamorph Chains.

"It's time we try a new vector of attack." He dropped all five of his chains into the magma.

Every second, a little more of Miledi's mana drained away. That mana was her lifeline. Once it ran out, the reaper would be coming for her.

But she wasn't worried.

Hearst stared at Miledi through her black prison.

Miledi smiled fearlessly at that emotionless face.

"Looks like you've gotten a lot weaker. Did O-kun's hug get you so flustered you couldn't fight back?" Her mana may be running out, but she still had an unlimited supply of snark.

Miledi knew it was Oscar's ferrule that had weakened Hearst and not the hug, but she still wanted to say it.

Her Nether Burst creaked ominously. It wouldn't be long before her prison failed.

"O-kun, Nacchan..." She whispered the name of her two comrades.

Just then, a bright light appeared directly above her.

"Is that a star? It looks too bright to be one..." Miledi looked up and saw what seemed to be a star. Though she hadn't recalled any star existing in that spot

before. It was also far brighter than the others. Before she could question it any further, she noticed it was growing larger.

“Wait? Is it just me or—” Cold sweat poured down her back. Her lips twitched.

Unable to believe her own eyes, Miledi continued staring at the burgeoning light.

“Wait wait wait wait wait wait wait! No way! A star’s falling down!” This wasn’t just a meteor shower. A giant burning hunk of rock was hurtling toward the earth. By Miledi’s calculations, it would land in another 20 seconds. She’d seen a lot in her life, but this was far beyond anything she’d experienced.

A voice broke her out of her stupor.

“Miledi!” Oscar and Naiz had returned. Oscar looked whiter than a sheet, and Naiz was so exhausted he couldn’t even speak.

“Guys, a star’s falling from the sky!”

“We know! Control its descent so it lands directly on her!”

Oscar started transmuting the ground as fast as he could. He dug a hole big enough for the three of them and surrounded it with as many layers of metal as he could.

You’ve gotta be kidding me! Still, Miledi flew over to Oscar and started working her magic.

There was a sharp crack, and her Nether Burst shattered.

“Unbelievable...” Hearst looked up at the massive blazing boulder of lava bearing down on her. Even a God’s Apostle was stunned by the sight of it.

She beat her wings, trying to fly out of the way.

“It’s over now!” Oscar’s chains had been waiting right outside Nether Burst’s sphere of influence. The moment it shattered he sent them flying up to Hearst. Hearst expected she would be able to shake them off easily, but the chains began to glow golden and wouldn’t budge. Oscar had enchanted them with one of Naiz’s spells, —Spatial Anchoring.

Ten seconds until impact. Great gouts of golden mana pulsed out of Oscar's chains. Hearst used all of her strength to try and shake them off. The chains began to creak.

Five seconds until impact. "You're not getting away!" Naiz burned the last of his remaining mana to cast as many Void Fissures as he could. The chain of impacts left Hearst rooted to the spot.

Oscar cast Hallowed Ground around their makeshift bunker. Miledi gave him the last dregs of her mana to help him bolster the barrier as much as possible.

Two seconds until impact. Miledi— "Don't you ever underestimate humans!"

Naiz— "Looks like we win."

Oscar— "Rot at the bottom of the earth, you puppet of the gods." Their voices were far too quiet to be heard through the din of battle. Still, at the last second, Hearst turned to the three of them and— Impact. The world went white.

The force of the meteor's landing knocked Miledi and the others out, even through all of their barriers.

The first thing Naiz felt when we woke up was pain. His whole body hurt.

He grimaced as he felt the buzzing in his ears and pushed himself to his knees.

"Ngh. Did it work..." He looked around. He spotted Miledi and Oscar right away. They were half-buried in the sand, and neither of them were moving.

"Oscar! Miledi!" He was so drained of mana that he couldn't even walk. He crawled over to where the two of them were. Oscar's umbrella was still in his hand. It was so battered it hardly resembled an umbrella anymore.

He somehow managed to get them both out of the sand and lie them down. Fortunately, they were still breathing. They were alive. Barely, but they were.

"Ugh. Where am I..."

"Nhaaah."

He slapped their cheeks a few times, and they woke up. Miledi groaned in

pain as she opened her eyes.

“Are you two alright?”

“In what world do we look, ‘alright’ Nacchan?”

“Heh. I suppose so. You look especially bad, Oscar...”

“Fortunately, I’m pretty tough. Owwwwww...”

Oscar took Naiz’s hand and rose himself into a sitting position.

“How long were we out for?”

“I’m not sure. A few minutes at most. Your blood’s still wet.”

The three of them somehow managed to stand while leaning on each other’s shoulders. There was a huge crater in the earth a good distance away. White smoke still rose from it.

They nodded to each other and began walking toward it. They reached the lip of the crater and looked down. There was still a huge pool of lava at the bottom, bubbling and smoldering.

After staring at it for a few minutes, Miledi raised her hands. Oscar and Naiz silently followed suit. The three of them exchanged high-fives.

“So what exactly did you do?” Miledi asked.

“While you were keeping her trapped we went back to the volcano. I turned a bunch of magma into a kind of magma boulder. Then I had Naiz teleport that into the sky above her.”

“Not only did I have to teleport it a hundred kilometers away, I needed to put it a few kilometers in the air as well. Then I had to teleport the two of us back too. I thought I’d pass out doing it.”

That had been Oscar’s plan. His last-ditch plan had been to turn a giant sphere of lava into a mini-meteor. He’d taken the idea from the huge Nether Burst Miledi had used to obliterate part of the Greenway.

“Th-That’s pretty extreme. Oh yeah, what did you do that weakened the Apostle anyway?”

“Oh. I stuffed the tip of my umbrella with liquified stillstone.”

“Ah, that was what Nacchan was making last time!”

He’d liquified and compressed as much stillstone as he could into that tiny umbrella’s tip. Honestly, he’d wanted to use it on a monster and see what happened when that monster tried to use magic.

“Even with the stillstone and the lava meteor I wasn’t sure we’d be able to pull it off properly... I’m glad it worked.” Despite all of the barriers they’d put up at the end, it was still a miracle that they’d survived. Oscar breathed a sigh of relief, and Miledi and Naiz smiled at him. Just as they were about to say something, the three of them heard a rumbling noise from inside the crater.

“There’s no way, right?” No one responded to Oscar’s muttered comment.

They watched as something began to rise up out of the lava.

The burning hot lava fell away to reveal Hearst, surrounded by a nimbus of silver light.

She’d lost an arm, her armor had completely melted away, and her clothes were burnt to cinders. Her entire body was covered in burns. But her mana burned as brightly as before.

She lifted what remained of the boulder with one hand and tossed it into the air.

As it fell back down, she jabbed up with her hand and broke it to pieces.

Despite her wounds, she was still raring to go.

Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz exchanged despairing looks. Grudgingly, they readied themselves for a fight. They had no mana and no weapons. Their chances of winning were less than zero.

But that was no reason to give up.

However, it looked like fate was on their side for once.

“Ah. But Noint, these irregulars must... Yes, ma’am. Understood. I shall return immediately.”

Hearst took to the sky. She glanced one last time down at Miledi and the others.

“Rejoice. I have been summoned to my lord’s game board.” She flew off to the northwest, a silver meteor shooting through the sky.

“What... just happened?”

“I don’t know, but it looks like we were spared.”

“I thought we were dead for sure.”

All three of them sighed in relief and fell backwards.

They lay there on the sand, looking up at the starry night sky.

After a while, Miledi mumbled, “We need to get stronger.” “Yeah,” Oscar and Naiz said in unison.

“Hey, Nacchan.”

“Yes?”

“Come travel with us.”

Miledi had exhausted all of her well-formed, eloquent arguments. Her final attempt at solicitation boiled down to a single sentence.

Naiz closed his eyes. He thought back to the village he’d destroyed. The pain of his sins weighed down on him even now. But would he really be able to protect people without going berserk? Now that Oscar and Miledi meant so much to him, he was worried he might accidentally...

“Don’t worry. If it looks like you’re going to lose it, we’ll stop you.” Oscar’s voice was quiet, but filled with conviction.

Of course. If I’m with these two, then there’s nothing to worry about...

Oscar followed up, jokingly, with “Besides, this tomboy’s too much for me to handle on my own. I need someone to help me with her.”

“Heeey! What’s that supposed mean, O-kun!?”

The two started trading insults again. Naiz found the noisy atmosphere pleasant.

He smiled, his eyes still closed.

“I want to be worthy of calling myself a Gruen again one day.”

“.....”

“And I get the feeling that if I keep traveling with you, that day will definitely come. So—

“I’d be glad to join you.” Naiz raised a fist into the air.

Miledi and Oscar followed suit. Three tiny fists joined together under the vast starry sky.

Epilogue

Ten days had passed since the Liberators' fierce duel in the desert.

Miledi and the others had fully recovered, and were planning on departing today.

Now that their business in the desert was concluded, their next destination was the western ocean.

Susha and Yunfa showed up to see the party off. They were accompanied by a few members of the Liberators. Miledi had seen to it that Susha and Yunfa be guided to their secret base.

The two sisters accosted Naiz while Oscar was busy thanking the Liberators for bringing him a heap of ore he could use to transmute new Artifacts.

"Naiz-sama. No matter how far apart we are, my feelings for you won't waver."

"I-I see."

"We're going to train hard so we can travel with you too someday!"

"O-Okay."

"I promise I'll be come the kind of woman you like, Naiz-sama!"

"U-Umm..."

"We're the only girls you can marry!"

"I think there might be a bit of an... age problem—"

"Farewell for now, Naiz-sama! Please don't forget about us!"

"We love you, Naiz-sama!"

Before Naiz could even say anything the two hopped onto their irak and rode off. The other Liberators noticed the girls leaving and hurriedly chased after them. "Wait, why are they going on ahead? They don't even know where the village is, do they!?" They yelled as they rode off.

“Hey, Nacchan.” Miledi had that devilish smile on her face that Naiz had come to dread.

“Hey, how do you feel right now? You just got proposed to by two preteen girls. You gotta tell me, does that make you happy? Did Sue-chan’s knockout body make your heart skip a beat? Even though you’re in your twenties? Come on, don’t be shy now—” Naiz grabbed Miledi’s head in a death grip. Her skull creaked from the pressure.

“Oscar. Looks like it’s going to be just you and me.”

“Perfect. We’ll be able to move faster that way.”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I won’t do it again! Please forgive me! My head’s—”

“Sorry.”

He let Miledi go.

She fell limply to the ground.

“Our next target is the ‘Saint of the Western Ocean’ right? What do you think of the rumors Susha and Yunfa heard at the bar?”

“No clue. But the Fairy of the Desert rumors turned out to be real. So I think it’s at least worth checking out. From the start, our journey’s had little chance of success. It’s like chasing after mirages in the desert.”

“So you go into each new lead expecting to come away disappointed?”

“Let’s just have fun and get stronger on the way. I don’t know about you, but I’ve never been to the ocean before. I want to try the seafood they have there too.”

“Likewise.”

Oscar and Naiz chuckled.

“Umm, did you guys forget about me again?”

Miledi was still lying on the floor like a discarded piece of trash.

Oscar and Naiz looked at each other. Then they walked off without a backwards glance.

“Heeeey wait for me! Stop ignoring me! People can die from loneliness you know that!?” Miledi hurriedly chased after them.

Despite what she was saying, there was a smile on her face.

Because Oscar and Naiz had left enough space between them for her to join in.

The three off them walked off into the desert, toward their next journey.



The Holy Church's great cathedral sat eight thousand meters above the ground, atop the Spirit Mountain.

A single woman kneeled before the cathedral's altar. It was raised atop a massive limestone pillar.

She was missing and arm and had burns all over her body—Hearst.

"Are you certain, my lord?" Her voice echoed through the large cathedral.

"As you wish, my lord." Though she appeared to be talking to herself, she was actually conversing with someone.

The pillar was radiating a divine energy.

"I am not worthy of such praise. Yes... Their powers clearly marked them as Atavists. At present, however, they are not much stronger than regular men."

Hearst, who had kept her eyes closed and her head bowed low until now, looked up in surprise.

A second later, her arm was restored, and her burns vanished. Even her clothes were restored to their former glory.

"My humblest thanks, lord. As always, I live to serve." Hearst bowed low. When she finally rose to her feet, the divine presence was no more.

She turned on her heel, and walked out of the cathedral. The cathedral opened up to the elements. A steep staircase cut directly into the mountain descended into the distance. Only a few were allowed to climb this hallowed staircase.

Though this place was normally devoid of people, there were quite a few here today.

Though perhaps it was wrong to call them "people."

Each and every one of them looked identical to Hearst.

They said no words. But the light in their eyes spoke volumes. That was all they needed to converse.

Hearst stretched out a hand. She pointed to a boulder in the distance.

Silver light gathered in her fingertips. Once she'd gathered enough, she fired a silver burst at the boulder. It vanished without a sound. There was no impact. It was as if the boulder had never existed. Tiny particles of dust flew off in the wind.

Satisfied, Hearst turned back to her doppelgangers. Without a word, all of them flew off in separate directions.

Afterword

Thank you so much to everyone who picked up this book.

Hey everyone, Ryo Shirakome here.

How did you like this Arifureta side story? It's a completely original prequel, one that's never been uploaded as a web novel. To be honest, I never thought a day like this would come, not even in my wildest dreams.

Still, it has, and now I'm finally able to tell the story of how the Liberators came to be.

I tried to make this as chuuni as possible too, and my only hope is that it entertained you enough to be worth the purchase. As long as you enjoyed it, that's all I could have asked for.

Now then, we're going to go off topic for a bit, but this is something that needs to be said.

Who on earth is that girl on the front cover!? I'm sure many of you thought that when you first picked it up, right?

To be honest, I kind of thought the same thing.

I'm sure no one expected that super annoying golem Miledi to have originally been such a beautiful girl. There is actually one description of her human form up on syosetsu, so those of you who've read that probably weren't as surprised as the rest.

Her whole thing is supposed to be that she's cute, but annoying as hell.

At any rate, my never ending thanks to Takayaki for drawing her so well.

By the way, I'm sure some of you might have guessed where Oscar's umbrella comes from. What can I say, I'm an easily influenced guy. If something tickles my chuuni instincts, I can't help but use it.

For those of you who are still wondering what it's a reference to, google "manners maketh man." You will learn what it means to be a true gentleman.

A lot of the events in this book tie in directly to the seventh book in the main series, which is why the two came out at the same time. For those of you who are interested, I definitely recommend checking out the connections.

Finally, it's time for the acknowledgments.

I'd like to thank Takayaki-sensei for doing all of the novel illustrations, as well as Roga-sensei for drawing one very kick-ass manga. I'd also like to thank my manager, Morimisaki-sensei, all of my wonderful editors, proofreaders, and all the people without whom this book would not be possible. And as always, a big thank you to my readers.

Really, thank you so much. I hope you continue enjoying Arifureta from here on out too.

Let us meet again in volume two.

Ryo Shirakome

Bonus Short Stories

Maid Lover

Oscar and Naiz lounged by a fountain located in the square of a small oasis town. Two weeks had passed since Naiz had joined Oscar and Miledi on their journey, and the three of them had stopped to stock up on supplies. They had decided to split up to do their shopping, then meet back up at the fountain. Over an hour had passed since Oscar and Naiz returned to the fountain, but there was still no sign of Miledi. Naiz frowned and muttered something.

“Miledi’s late.”

“Well, she is still a girl. It’s no surprise her shopping’s taking longer than ours.”

Naiz nodded in understanding. He’d heard that girls took longer to shop than guys too. But still, he was getting tired of waiting. He looked over to his partner, who didn’t seem the least bit impatient.

“You seem rather knowledgeable about women, Oscar.”

“Please don’t make it sound like I’m some kind of skirt chaser.”

Oscar frowned. Though it was true that back in Velnika he’d been forced to accompany girls in their shopping more times than he could count. Many of his regular customers, or their relatives, or their friends would “coincidentally” run into him on the street, and then strong-arm him into going along with them.

If those outings count as dates, then I guess I’ve been on dozens. Can’t say I actually wanted any of them though.

Oscar adjusted his glasses and changed the subject.

“Anyway, it’s not like we’re in any hurry. I made a new board game the other day, how about we play that to pass the time? It’s a mock-war game where you order your pieces around and try to capture the opponent’s king.”

“Oh, sounds interesting.”

Naiz’s interest was piqued. However, before they could start their game of magic chess, Miledi arrived.

“Sorry I took so long, guys! But I’m back now~”

Oscar and Naiz exchanged looks, and turned toward the overly energetic voice. When they saw what Miledi was wearing, their jaws dropped open.

“Miledi, what on earth is that outfit?”

“Nufufu. Impressed? You’re impressed, aren’t you? Have you finally fallen for my charms too, Na—”

Annoyed, Naiz grabbed Miledi’s face in a death grip before she could finish.

“Miledi, what on earth is that outfit?”

“Okay, okay, I’ll quit joking around, so please stop crushing my skull!”

Miledi hurriedly took out a letter and a photo from her pocket. She flung them both to Naiz, who caught them with ease. His expression stiffened as he examined the picture.

“Nufufu. Hey, Nacchan, how does it feel? Those two sisters took pictures of themselves in maid outfits just for you. As a grown man, how does that make you feel? Come on, tell—”

Naiz clamped down even harder. The picture showed Susha and Yunfa wearing revealing maid uniforms. Both of them were striking sexy poses. If anyone found out a grown man like Naiz was carrying around a picture like that, they’d certainly think him a pedophile. Ignoring a growing headache, Naiz opened the letter. It was quite long, but the gist of it was this: Naiz-sama, remember how much you were talking about the maid uniforms of that one restaurant before? We thought you might like them, so we tried wearing them too. I hope you like the picture. Love, Susha and Yunfa.

Naiz definitely knew what restaurant Susha and Yunfa were talking about. In the last town they’d stopped at, they’d had dinner there. Naiz had really liked their food, so he’d asked one of the waitresses for the recipe. The question was, why did Susha and Yunfa know about that?

“One of the Liberators delivered that to me. Then, on my way back, I saw a similar outfit in one of the shops, so I figured why not?”

Naiz wasn’t even listening to Miledi anymore.

“Hahaha... Look, Oscar. I can’t stop shaking.”

He was terrified. Terrified of the fact that Susha and Yunfa seemed to know his every move. Oscar, however, didn’t respond. In fact, he’d been completely silent since Miledi returned. Wondering what was wrong, Naiz turned to look at him.

“O-O-kun?”

Oscar’s attention was completely taken up by Miledi. She was actually somewhat scared by the intensity in his gaze.

“Glorious...”

Oscar looked Miledi up and down, his eyes sparkling.

“O-O-kun? What’s wrong? You’re starting to scare me a little...”

“Miledi, you’re the most annoying person I know. Even when you do those dumb cutesy poses of yours, they just make you look like you’re trying too hard.”

“Hey, are you *trying* to make me mad?”

Miledi went from scared to angry in a heartbeat.

Oscar ignored her and continued his speech.

“But still, that maid uniform suits you perfectly. I suppose if I had to critique your outfit, your skirt could be a bit longer, and folded better.”

Oscar started inching toward Miledi.

“You’re still a novice maid, so it’s understandable that you’re not an expert with the uniform yet. Listen up, first of all, a maid is supposed to be prim and proper. So no peace signs and definitely no cutesy crap. If you’re going to strike a pose, then you have to do it right. Keep your arms demurely in front of you, and when you walk, keep your gait graceful. Never, under any circumstances, act like an excited little child. Keep your eyelashes long, and don’t look too

arrogant.”

“Okay, I get it, you have a maid fetish. C-Can I go change now?”

Miledi slowly backed away. Oscar’s fanaticism terrified her. Once she’d put some distance between them she spun around and dashed off down the street.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Hiiiiii!? O-kun, snap out of it! You’re really starting to scare me now!”

Oscar grabbed her shoulder before she could go more than a few steps, then spun her around and forced her to meet his gaze.

“Miledi, right now you look more amazing than you ever have.”

“Thanks so much for that! But you know, you’re still scaring me! So I’m gonna go change!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! If you change, you’ll just go back to being your regular, annoying self! Without that maid uniform, you’re nothing!”

“Hey, now that I can’t let slide! I never knew you were such a pervert!”

“Excuse me! I am not a pervert! I’m simply a gentleman who loves maid uniforms!”

“I’m changing out of this right now!” “Don’t you dare!” “Just try and stop me!” “Oh, it’s on!”

Their back and forth exchange continued for a few minutes. Meanwhile, Naiz sighed deeply as he saw more and more people come to watch the spectacle. It didn’t help that he was still holding a picture of two underage girls in maid uniforms.

Farewell with my Beloved

“I’m sorry. I just can’t take you with me. Please, try and understand.”

Despite the man’s pleading, she didn’t listen. The forlorn look she gave him tore at his heart. He was just as sad to be leaving her as she was, however. They had weathered good times and bad together, supported each other in sickness and in health, braved both poverty and riches, and sworn to be together until

death did them part. They loved each other, so of course neither of them wanted to part ways.

Unfortunately, the man had to embark on a journey. One that had no end, which would be filled with hardship and danger. That meant he would be forever walking in darkness.

“Don’t make that face, please. This is hard for me too, you know? Please, Suzanne, just try and understand.”

“Gweeeh.”

Indeed, Naiz was tormented over parting with his beloved irak, Suzanne. He was gently patting her oval-shaped face in front of the irak-seller’s hut. The shop’s apprentice, Oscar, Miledi, Susha, and Yunfa were all watching, incredulous.

“He looks like one of those deadbeat husbands who try to sell their wife off to pay off his debts.”

“Don’t worry, Mister... I promise I’ll take good care of Suzanne-chan.”

The young apprentice tried his best to placate Naiz, an exasperated expression on his face.

“Wait, does Naiz actually understand what that irak is saying?”

“Beats me, O-kun. All I hear is gweeeh.”

“Don’t worry, Miledi. That’s all I’m hearing too.”

Oscar and Miledi stared at their new comrade with exasperated expressions on their face.

Meanwhile, the dramatic farewell between Naiz and Suzanne continued.

“Gweeeh.”

“That’s not true. I don’t hate you!”

“Gweeeh.”

“What? You think I’m leaving you because I found someone else? Don’t be ridiculous, I’d never do something like that!”

“Gweeeh.”

“So bring me with you? I can’t, it’s too dangerous.”

“Gweeeh.”

“Will I ever come back...? I’m sorry, I’m not sure if I will.”

“Gweeeh.”

“Wait. Wait, Suzanne!”

Miledi snickered to herself.

“Even I could understand that last gweeeh. It sounded like ‘Hmph, I don’t care about you anymore!’”

“Yeah, it sounded like that to me too.”

Suzanne huffily turned away from Naiz and walked over to the apprentice boy. He seemed at a loss for what to do. Naiz crumpled to the ground as he watched his beloved Suzanne go off to another man. Oscar had never seen such a look of profound despair on his face before. Susha suddenly butt into Oscar and Miledi’s conversation with a completely unexpected remark.

“I want to become an irak.”

“Sue-nee!?”

Even Yunfa was surprised by that. Oscar and Miledi turned to Susha, shocked. Her eyes were dead, and there was a mirthless smile on her face. Both of them backed away a few steps.

“Hey, Miledi-san, do something.”

“O-Okay! Umm, what’s wrong, Sue-chan?”

“Is there any magic from the age of the gods that can turn me into an irak?”

Oh crap, she’s serious...

“W-Well, the world’s a big place, so maybe? But I think you’re a lot cuter the way you are, Sue-chan.”

Susha turned her dead gaze to Miledi, who squealed in terror and clung to Oscar for safety. Unfortunately, he too was trembling in fear.

“What good is being cute, if it’s not the kind of cute Naiz-sama wants?”

“You’re right, I’m sorry!”

The leader of the Liberators kneeled and bowed her head to its newest member. Yunfa sighed and muttered.

“Haaah, Sue-nee’s gone over to the dark side again. Bringing her back takes so much time.”

Yunfa set about consoling Susha, her practiced mannerisms making it evident that she was used to dealing with this. Oscar and Miledi were once again reminded that Yunfa was just as amazing as her older sister. No one else had been able to stand up to Dark Susha. In that moment, they both thought the same thing: *There’s no way Naiz is ever gonna escape those two.*

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Arifureta Zero: Volume 1

by Ryo Shirakome

Translated by Ningen Edited by DxS

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