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

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ARIFURETA ZERO: FROM COMMONPLACE TO WORLD'S STRONGEST

ryo shirakome takayaki

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MILEDI REISEN
MEIRU


NAIZ
OSCAR ORCUS
SHE'S THE REAL DEAL.

Prologue

"O-kun. Lend me some money."

What the heck is going on? O-kun, aka Oscar, thought to himself. He removed his trademark black-rimmed glasses and wiped them down with a handkerchief. And after making sure they were perfectly clear, he put them back on. Then, he blinked three times, hoping that would finally let him see reality.

"O-kun. Give me money pleaaashe."

Guess I wasn't hallucinating after all. Oscar could no longer deny the reality staring him in the face. His closest friend, and the leader of his organization, was kneeling in front of him, desperation etched onto her face. In fact, she was so desperate she'd just bit her tongue. However, she trembled, trying to bear the pain without crying out.

Oscar took his eyes off Miledi and examined his surroundings. Reflected in his glasses was a world of splendor. Dozens of chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and ladies wearing resplendent dresses milled about. Upbeat music wafted through the hall. Skilled waiters slipped through the noisy crowds, carrying trays laden with sparkling goblets of champagne. Everywhere he looked, the world was sparkling with color. Well, except for the spot directly behind Miledi. Standing there was a group of men in dark clothing, glaring angrily down at her, their arms folded.

"...How'd things end up like this?"

Oscar looked worriedly up at the ceiling and sighed. There was murder in those men's eyes. He didn't know exactly what Miledi had done, but they clearly meant business. Cold sweat poured down Oscar's forehead due to the sight. Worried sick, he thought back to the events that had led up to this situation.

Chapter I: The Saint of the Western Seas

A refreshing scraping noise filled a small oasis on the western edge of the Crimson Desert. The oasis was little more than a spring, a handful of trees, and a field of grass. It could have been the courtyard of some rich person's mansion. And sitting at the edge of the spring were Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz.

"I never imagined I would be eating frozen dessert in a desert..." Naiz said as he thrust his spoon into the mountain of shaved ice in front of him.

The three of them had stopped by the oasis to take a short break from their journey and had decided to cool off with some shaved ice. Miledi had created the ice with magic, which Oscar had then turned into shaved ice using the makeshift machine he'd transmuted on the spot.

"Mmm... Mmmmmm... Mmm!"

"What the heck are you doing?"

Oscar looked down at Miledi, who was rolling across the ground next to him.

"It huuuuuuuuurts! My head huuuuuurts!"

"You ate it all at once, didn't you? I told you to eat slowly!"

Tears still in her eyes, Miledi looked up at Oscar and gave him an exaggerated shrug. Her expression seemed to say "You clearly don't get the true joy of eating shaved ice." Annoyed, Oscar raised an eyebrow.

"You just don't get it, O-kun. The freezing sensation in your brain's the best part! Right after you stuff your face full of fruit-juice-drenched ice, you get to feel the pain only cold food can give you. You have to be a real connoisseur to understand, O-kun."

Miledi wagged her spoon at him, lecturing haughtily as if she were some kind of famous professor. Every time she moved her spoon, flecks of spit and melted ice splattered onto Oscar's glasses. Water was every glasses-wearing person's greatest enemy. In fact, Oscar found water droplets almost as annoying as

Miledi herself. He wiped down his glasses and tried his best to ignore Professor Miledi's lecture. And as he was doing so, Naiz turned to him an spoke.

"Oscar. Do you still have some of that fruit syrup left?"

"The limon-flavored one? Sorry, I just used up the last of it. Did you not like the other flavors?"

Oscar's bowl of shaved ice glinted pale yellow in the sunlight. Limon was a citrus fruit that had a slight hint of sweetness to counterbalance the tart.

Naiz looked longingly at Oscar's bowl of shaved ice, then shook his head.

"Oh no, all the flavors are delicious, but... they're all quite sweet. I'd like something sour to wash them down."

Naiz's bowl of shaved ice was dyed a deep orange. His was mangu-flavored. Said mangu was a sickly-sweet fruit that was a staple of this desert. And from the looks of it, he'd poured too much of its syrup on his ice. Naiz had a formidable sweet tooth, but even he'd found this quantity too much to bear.

"Oh yeah, that does look *way* too sweet. Here, you can have some of mine if you want."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I've started craving a little more sweetness myself, so let's trade."

"Thanks."

Smiling, the two of them reached for each other's shaved ice. However, as they savored the flavor of the other's dessert, Miledi shoved her way into the conversation.

"What are you, a pair of teenage girls!?"

Oscar and Naiz turned to her with confused looks, spoons still in their mouths. They were in perfect sync.

"Seriously, are you two teenage girls or something!?" Miledi repeated herself.

Oscar and Naiz exchanged glances, still not understanding what Miledi was getting at. After a brief pause, they shrugged their shoulders and looked away, once again in perfect sync. They figured it was just Miledi being Miledi again.

Irritated at them for ignoring her, Miledi raised her voice in a huff.

“You know, I’ve been wondering this for a while! How come you two get along so well, O-kun, Nacchan!? You guys are like, in perfect sync! It’s starting to make me feel left out! No bullying, guys!” Miledi made a big X with her arms and puffed her cheeks out as she finished her speech.

In response to her fervent plea, Oscar sighed and adjusted his glasses.

“Miledi.”

“Heeere. What’s up, O-kun?” Miledi brightened up, glad he was finally paying attention to her.

“You’re kicking up dust, so can you stop thrashing around like that?”

“Sorry! But O-kun, that’s not what I wanted to hear from you!” It appeared she’d been hoping for a different conversation. Likely, she’d wanted Oscar to say something nice to her. Unfortunately, it seemed Oscar had been a bust. And so, Miledi turned to Naiz, a faint gleam of hope in her eyes. *Let my feelings reach him!*

“...Do you want to try some too?” After struggling with himself for a few seconds, Naiz finally offered Miledi a spoonful of his shaved ice.

“Don’t treat me like I’m some glutton!” Though she said that, Miledi still gratefully ate Naiz’s shaved ice.

You’re hopeless, Oscar thought to himself and offered Miledi a spoonful of his own shaved ice. Naturally, she took that as well.

“*Munch... Munch...* Sheesh, you two don’t understand a woman’s heart at all. *Crunch... Crunch...* First of all, you really shouldn’t be treating me like an eyesore. *Chew... Chew...* Like, I’m not saying you have to be flirting with me all day, but *Smack... Smack...* like, you two always stay up late at night talking about whatever, or playing games O-kun comes up with. *Gulp...* And that’s a real problem. The three of are us traveling together, you know? Shouldn’t you be inviting me to play with you guys, or to join in on your conversations?” Miledi droned on, her litany of complaints punctured by mouthfuls of her own shaved ice. She’d been quite dissatisfied with Oscar and Naiz’s treatment of her as of late. She wanted to feel like she was part of the group too. But now that

she'd said the equivalent of "Please pay attention to me too!" she felt too embarrassed to meet Oscar or Naiz's gazes.

After a few minutes of silence though, she finally worked up enough courage to glance up at the two of them.

"Knight to E-4. I launch an assault on your pirate."

"I can read you like a book. I activate my field skill, allowing me to move my pirate one space immediately. Pirate to D-4. With this, I avoid your assault."

"Im...possible. You've already mastered the field skill, even though it's a new rule? You're good, Naiz."

"Heh. Praise me all you want, but I won't hold back."

The two of them were engrossed in one of Oscar's board games. It was a turn-based strategy game reminiscent of chess. The biggest differences from chess were how pieces promoted, and the existence of field skills. For example, even a pawn could defeat a knight, so long as it had leveled up enough, was fighting in an advantageous field, and had support from an allied mage.

Oscar had packed a lot of realism into his game. The two of them had started playing since they'd sensed that Miledi's tirade would go on for a while.

Miledi silently rose to her feet, her long bangs hiding her expression, which made her look like something straight out of a horror movie. She walked over to the two men and shouted.

"Dieeee! Inverse Square!" Her gravity-reversing spell washed over the two chess players.

"Whoa!?"

"Uoooh!?"

Oscar, Naiz, the board game between them, and even the grass around them rose up into the air. However, while the two people fell back down instantly, the game and its pieces flew far away.

"Wh-What was that for, Miledi!? You just sent my game flying!"

"Shut uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuup! You should just lose your glasses

and wander around looking for them like a zombie! You damn four-eyes!”

“Quit insulting my glasses! And stop trying to use gravity magic on them! Where’d you learn to control it with such precision, anyway!?” Oscar hurriedly defended his glasses, preventing Miledi from sending them flying. She was really holding a grudge over being ignored.

“H-Hey... I’m sorry, Miledi. We’ll stop now, so—” Feeling a little guilty, Naiz tried to mediate, but Miledi was past the point of listening.

“Stuuupid! Dummy! Kiddy diddler! You’re just a pervert who walks around with a picture of two little girls everywhere, Nacchan!”

“Take that back! I am not into children!”

So he does *carry around a picture of Susha and Yunfa?* Oscar thought to himself. In truth, Naiz didn’t really have a choice. The two girls who loved Naiz to the point of worship could somehow sense when Naiz wasn’t carrying that picture around. The first time he’d taken it off his person, the liberators’ messenger had come bearing an ominous-looking letter. Written inside was a single question, “Why did you put it in your luggage?”

Naiz had spent the entire day trembling in fear after that. And from that point on, he made sure to keep the picture in his pocket at all times. Even though it was a suggestive picture of the two of them in revealing maid outfits, he had no choice but to hold fast to it at all times.

“Shut uuuuuuuuuuuuuup! It’s your fault for ignoring me all this time, Nacchan! You deserve to be punished by Sue-chan! I’ll tell her you were flirting with me and feeding me desserts!”

“Don’t do that, you moron!”

“I’m gonna do it! Then you’ll have to face Sue-chan’s wra—”

“The one who’ll feel her wrath will be you, not me! She’ll kill you!”

Naiz had a point. Susha’s jealousy would most likely be directed at Miledi, not him. Miledi thought back to Susha’s reaction when she’d first told him she’d been meeting with Naiz regularly. Her gaze had become so cold that she could have passed as an apostle.

“Y-You know what, forget it. I won’t tell Susha about this! Instead, I’ll tell her all about your dates with O-kun!”

“That’ll just make things worse!” Naiz leaped at Miledi, intent on keeping her quiet. He teleported behind her using spatial magic, but she used gravity magic to fly to safety. At the same time, she reversed Oscar’s gravity for a second to trip him up.

“Whoa!? Ah, crap, my glasses!” As he stumbled, Oscar’s identity flew off his face. Miledi then plucked the glasses from the air.

“Fwahahahaha! Phantom thief Miledi strikes again! Feel my pain, O-kun!”

“Miledi!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! How dare you smudge the lenseeeeeeeeeees!”

The fact that she’d stolen them wasn’t as important as the fact that she’d smudged them. He sent a flurry of Metamorph Chains, which were the artifacts that allowed him to remotely electrocute and transmute targets, after her.

“You’re nothing without your glasses, O-kun! Ahahahahahahaha! Hey, how does it feel having your glasses stolen by the girl you kept ignoring? Well? Tell me! Look, I’m rubbing my fingers all over the lenses!”

“Damn you, Miledi! How could you!?”

Miledi danced through the air, calmly dodging the barrage of chains flying at her. She then smirked at Oscar and rubbed her fingers as hard as she could against his glasses’ lenses. At that, something inside Oscar snapped.

“Naiz.”

“I hear you.”

Oscar had had his precious glasses stolen from him, while Naiz was being blackmailed. And the threat of siccing Susha was not one he took lightly. Neither of them could afford to back down, so the greatest Synergist of all time and the Guardian of the Desert decided to team up. However, that only caused Miledi to grow even angrier.

“You little brats! Look at me, not each otheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeer!”

“Stop smudging my lenseeeeeeeeeeeeeeeees!”

“I will ensure that your tasteless jokes never reach Susha’s ears.”

Gravity magic made the land around the oasis collapse, spatial magic left dimensional scars in the air, and legendary artifacts whizzed through the sky. Three wielders of magic from the age of gods did battle at a tiny oasis. It was quite possibly history’s most ridiculous war.

A few hours later.

“.....”

A group of three trudged silently through the rust-colored dunes. All three of them were soaked to the bone.

“I can’t believe we did that.”

“That oasis is never going to be the same...”

“We did leave some food and water behind for anyone who might head there looking to take a break, but... I doubt anyone who sees what’s happened to the place will want to stay.”

Travelers who happened upon the oasis would probably curse Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz’s names if they knew the three of them were responsible. Oases were invaluable reservoirs of water for merchants and nomads. To destroy one was a sin greater even than murder.

After the three of them had realized how much destruction they’d caused, they’d calmed down and tried to repair the damage. But still, the oasis would never be the same again.

Oscar sighed at his own foolishness, then turned to Miledi.

“Sorry for leaving you all alone, Miledi.”

“Don’t make it sound like you abandoned me...! But well, apology accepted. I’m sorry for smearing my fingers all over your soul.”

“Just so you know, Miledi. My soul’s in me, not my glasses. Also, that really doesn’t sound like an apology.”

The oils left by Miledi’s fingers hadn’t come off even after he’d used his

glasses' self-cleaning function. Her crime was far graver than she knew.

"Sorry, Nacchan."

"Well, it's not like you actually hurt me, so—"

"Sorry for telling Susha and Yunfa everything you've been doing until now."

"So you're the one who ratted me out! And what's the point in apologizing after the fact!?"

Incidentally, Miledi had been pretty vague in her reports. It was thanks to Susha's sharp skills of perception that she'd been able to pick up on what was really happening. Regardless, both Oscar and Naiz suddenly found themselves growing angry again. The great irony was that it was Miledi's antics that were causing Oscar and Naiz to grow closer, though she didn't realize it.

The more annoying Miledi grew, the more Oscar and Naiz became in sync. However, a Miledi that wasn't annoying was nothing more than a beautiful genius mage. And the last thing Oscar and Naiz wanted was to strip part of her identity away from her. Meaning Miledi was doomed to be ignored in the future too. If only they could find another comrade, they'd be able to do something about the loneliness Miledi felt.

"The Saint of the Western Seas, huh?"

Naiz tilted his head as Oscar muttered that.

"That's the title of the person whose rumors we're chasing. Why'd you suddenly bring her up?"

"Nah, I was just thinking. If she's supposedly a saint, then if she really exists, she must be a really wonderful, kind woman."

"Wait, does that mean I'm a saint too, O-kun?"

Oscar ignored her babbling and continued.

"I'm sure someone like her would be able to handle Miledi."

"I see now. You're right, a saint would be kindhearted enough to accept Miledi while also having the fortitude to scold her when she does something wrong. Truly, a perfect fit."

“I know, right? I... really hope she exists.”

“Likewise.”

“Hey, O-kun, Nacchan. If you want another fight, I’m ready to go anytime. In fact, why don’t we go another round right now? I’ll make another Reisen Gorge right here in this desert.” Surprisingly, Miledi seemed actually angry. Her eyes had glazed over, and a whirlpool of dark gravity magic swirled above her hand. She really didn’t enjoy being treated like a wild animal.

Cold sweat poured down Naiz and Oscar’s foreheads, and they hurriedly changed the subject.

“Hopefully we can find out whether or not the rumors are true once we reach the port.”

The party’s current destination was the port city of Epona, which was on the desert’s western coast. They were traveling there because the rumors Susha and Yunfa had heard about the Saint of the Western Seas had come from traders originating in Epona. All they knew so far was that she scoured the western seas, healing those who had been shipwrecked or assaulted by pirates, then sending them safely back home. And as always, tracking down the source of the rumors was proving to be a rather difficult affair.

“Well, even if we don’t find anything at Epona, we’re bound to pick up some more hints at Andika.”

“Andika, the city of outlaws...”

Naiz’s expression stiffened as Miledi whispered that name. Andika was a city built on floating island far off the coast of the Crimson Desert. While it was officially just another maritime city, it had come to be known as the city of outlaws among locals. No one knew how the massive island stayed afloat. However, what everyone did know was that it was the place people went when they were banished from the continent. By now, it had become a gathering place for heretics and criminals of all kinds.

It was a lawless city where survival of the fittest reigned supreme. A city where the strong stole from the weak, where greed was a virtue, where kindness was a myth, and humans lived, struggled, and died as beasts. It was

known by many as the world's garbage dump. A veritable hell on earth, abandoned by god. An execution grounds for the world's faithless. Rumors of the atrocities committed there had spread all across the continent.

There were two reasons why the Holy Church hadn't launched a crusade against the city. First, its existence served as a good example to the rest of the citizens. Living proof that godlessness led to hell, basically. Second, it made for an effective prison. Hunting down every single heretic on the continent was too much effort. By creating a sanctuary for heretics to find refuge, the Holy Church was able to round them all up in a single place without having to lift a finger. After that, the heretics could kill each other all they want, and the Holy Church still came out ahead.

Oscar and Naiz had both been told bedtime stories about how bad children get sent to Andika, so they had a few misgivings about visiting the place. And upon seeing their hesitation, Miledi snickered.

"You know, one of our Liberators was from Andika."

Seeing as she was using the past tense, Oscar and Naiz could guess what had happened to said Liberator. And judging from the sad glimmer in Miledi's eyes, she'd been closed to whoever it was.

"According to them, Andika was the only truly free city on the continent. They were really proud of the place. Supposedly everyone was responsible for their own fate. Obviously there were evil people living in the city as well, and you couldn't ever let your guard down, but apparently, there were plenty of kind people living there too. But the point was, everyone could live freely there."

"So then..."

That man had joined the Liberators 6 years ago. After knocking out a priest to protect a child, he'd been caught by the church's inquisitors and sent to Reisen Gorge after harsh torture. His name had been Davy Consman. The same man who'd first planted the seeds of doubt in young Miledi's mind. The sentenced criminal who'd told Miledi there was no worth in a world where children can't smile. In a way, everything had started with him.

After Miledi had disavowed the Reisen family and joined the Liberators, her new comrades had told her stories about Davy. Apparently, he'd joined the

Liberators because he wanted places like Andika to exist on the continent as well.

“That’s why I’ve always wanted to visit Andika. I mean, if a guy who smiled right before his death said it was an amazing place, it’s gotta be crazy. I’m sure it’s way cooler than whatever you guys are thinking! We’ve gotta go there!”

Seeing her beatific smile, Oscar and Naiz couldn’t help but grin. The two of them exchanged a glance, then nodded at her.

“Besides! It has *casinos*! I’ve heard it’s the capital of casinos! Think about how much money we’ll make! My gambler’s soul is burning with excitement! O-kun, Nacchan, a world of betting awaits!”

“Wow, that just killed whole mood real quick.”

“That’s just how Miledi is...”

Oscar and Naiz’s smiles vanished.

Hundreds of sand dunes, a few monster fights, and three nights of camping underneath the bright canopy of stars later, the trio arrived at the port of Epona. The sun had recently crested its zenith, and a good chunk of the day remained. The salty tang of the sea filled their nostrils as the city shimmered into view.

The three of them had never seen the ocean before, so when the roar of waves reached their ears, their eyes lit up, and they dashed through the streets. They passed the city center and the long rows of warehouses past it to find themselves at—

“It’s the seaaaaaa!”

“W-Wow! So that’s the ocean?”

“.....”

As the ocean came into view, Miledi threw her hands up in the air and yelled at the top of her lungs, Oscar’s eyes sparkled with excitement, and Naiz fell silent, overwhelmed.



This was their first time seeing a body of water that spanned the horizon. Sunlight glinted off the vast blue expanse, giving it the illusion that it was filled with thousands of diamonds. Ships of all sizes bobbed along the shimmering waves, and dozens of piers reached out from the harbor toward them. Seagulls squawked overhead, mingling with the cacophony of sailors and dockhands yelling amicably at each other.

Awed, the three of them took in the magnificent view. A group of children walked over to the edge of one of the empty piers and whooped cheerfully as they jumped into the water below. Miledi's eyes began to sparkle, and she turned to her two companions. As always, she wasn't one to miss an opportunity to have fun.

"Let's go, you punks! Follow meeeeee!" Without waiting for a reply, she dashed off toward the pier. In the time it took Oscar and Naiz to blink, she'd already thrown off her robe, shoes, and socks.

"Yahoooooo!" Miledi leaped off the pier and landed among the children with a resounding splash.

"Oh, come on. Don't just go stripping in public."

Oscar smiled ruefully to himself as he picked up Miledi's discarded luggage and articles of clothing. Meanwhile, Naiz glared angrily at the sailors who'd ogled Miledi when she'd started to strip, scaring them off from trying anything funny.

Naturally, Miledi paid no heed to the troubles of her companions.

"Wahahahahaha. What's wrong, kids!? If you don't pick up the pace, I'll fly right by you guys! I thought you were all supposed to be good at swimming!?"

"Wha— Where the heck did you come from!? Hey, get back here! Just you wait, I'll catch up to you!"

"Wh-Who's that girl!?"

"Don't underestimate me, weird mystery girl! No one's faster than me in the water!"

In seconds, Miledi was playing around with the children as though she'd

known them for years. However, whether it was because they'd never met someone with such a refined air about them, or because they just hadn't ever seen anyone like Miledi, all of the kids, both male and female, found themselves blushing.

"Honestly, those looks are wasted on her."

"Heh... So you admit she's beautiful, then?"

Oscar awkwardly adjusted his glasses, unable to respond.

"Hey, wait. Is Miledi using gravity magic to swim?"

"I can't believe she's getting that worked up over competing with kids."

Oscar and Naiz watched, exasperated, as Miledi raced the children to the buoy line.

"I can't catch up to her! How's she that good at swimming!?" one of the rowdy boys exclaimed. "Onee-san, I can see your panties!" the youngest girl yelled as she blushed and covered her face with her hands. "Is she secretly a dagon or something?" "Wow, outsiders are scary..." the other kids muttered to each other. Most of them gave up on racing her halfway and bobbed in the water as they watched her sprint all the way to the finish line in one go. She turned back while treading water and waved to Oscar and Naiz. Once she had their attention, she smiled and pointed a single finger up into the air, announcing her victory.

"Look, we get it already, so hurry up and get back here!" Oscar cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted.

Miledi crossed her arms, firmly refusing his request. She then beckoned with both hands. It appeared their esteemed leader wanted the two of them to join her.

Oscar and Naiz exchanged glances, then with noncommittal shrugs, started taking their clothes off. Unwilling to wait, Miledi cupped her hands around her mouth as well and shouted,

"O-kuuuuuuuuun! Nacchaaaaaaaaaaan! Hurry up and— Waaah!?" Before she could finish her sentence, she was swallowed whole by a shark of some

kind. Though Oscar had only caught a glimpse of it, it appeared to be at least 10 meters long. It had also been glowing a sinister dark red, so it likely possessed mana. Meaning it was a monster.

“.....” Oscar and Naiz stopped stripping, and just stood there silently. The kids were too stunned to move as well. This was the first time they’d seen someone swallowed up just like that. All anyone could do was watch as the shark raced off toward the north.

And around 10 minutes later, Miledi washed up onto a sand dune a short distance away.

“How tragic...” Naiz muttered. Miledi’s ponytail had been undone, and her hair clung to her shoulders like seaweed. Worse, her clothes had been ripped up here and there, and she was drenched in some sticky, transparent, jelly-like liquid.

“A-Are you okay, Miledi?” Oscar said as he gingerly rolled Miledi onto her back. An expressionless stare greeted him.

“This is wrong.”

“Well, that definitely was some bad luck. Anyway, you look like a hot mess. I’ll make you a shower room so you can clean yourself up.”

“Thanks, O-kun. But there are times when a girl just can’t back down.”

“I have no idea what you’re trying to say.”

“I-WANT-TO-HAVE-FUN-SWIMMING!”

Like hell I’ll let some monster get in my way!

“My name is Miledi Reisen! The embodiment of free will! One who struggles against all that is unreasonable in this world!”

“Well, I won’t deny you’re the embodiment of free will at least.”

“Prepare to taste my revenge, monsters! If you think you can keep me from the sea, well think again!”

Miledi, the sea’s poor victim (?) dashed off into the waves once again. Once she was deep enough, she switched from running to a graceful front stroke.

“Aaah!?”

The result was as Oscar expected. The two men watched on with pity as Miledi challenged the sea 10 times, and was washed up each time. It appeared she was quite popular with sea monsters.

One week later, after spending the morning hunting for information and eating a hearty seafood-filled lunch, Miledi and the others headed once more to the northern shore.

Oscar got to work on a metal boat he’d been crafting, while Naiz started writing a letter. A cream-colored eagle came to perch on his shoulder as he wrote. The eagle belonged to Tim Rocket, one of the Liberators’ scouts, and such eagles were the primary way in which the organization exchanged information. Incidentally, its name was Creme. Furthermore, almost all humans on the continent used these isoniol eagles as messenger birds.

Tim possessed the special magic Animal Harmony, which allowed him to strengthen regular creatures to monster-level strength. So, unlike regular isoniol eagles, Creme could travel at 120km/h and could maintain that speed for days on end if necessary. This allowed the Liberators to communicate extremely fast.

It had brought Miledi a few regular reports, along with letters from Susha and Ruth. Since it was already here, Naiz had decided to pen a reply. Oscar and Miledi had already written their own letters and placed them in the pouch hanging around Creme’s neck. The reason Naiz was taking so much longer than the others to write his letter was because he knew he needed to be careful about what he said. The last thing he wanted was to cause a misunderstanding with Susha.

While Naiz wrote and Oscar worked, Miledi sat far away from the water, her hands wrapped around her knees. Her earlier defeats had traumatized her.

“The sea’s a terrifying place... *Hic...*” Tears streamed down Miledi’s cheeks as she thought back to her past tussles. The first time she’d broken down, it had taken Oscar and Naiz everything they had to console her. Now she just watched the two of them work and sighed to herself.

“You know, since I met O-kun and Nacchan right after each other, I was hoping we’d run into the saint right away too. But I guess it’s not going to be that easy.”

Oscar heard her dejected mumbling and turned to her with a wry smile.

“I mean, that’s to be expected.”

“Oscar’s right. But that’s why we’re preparing for our trip to Andika, right?” Naiz said as he looked up from his letter.

They’d spent the past week hunting for clues, but their investigations into the saint had gotten nowhere. In the end, the party had decided they were better off trying in Andika. However, there was just one problem. No ships went to Andika. Not even merchant ships. Thinking about it, it made sense. No one would willingly want to associate with a city filled with heretics. Sure, Andika’s existence was tolerated, but it was by no means welcome.

“I wonder how the people who flee to Andika make it there?” Though Miledi was curious, she knew she couldn’t go around asking the townspeople that. After all, it would be the same as declaring she was a heretic too.

“They must have some kind of hidden route. Or maybe if you pay certain merchants enough, they’d be willing to smuggle you inside... I doubt everyone builds a boat like us, so they must have some other way to get there.”

“The real problem is whether or not total amateurs at navigation like us can sail the seas successfully.”

None of them knew Andika’s precise location. They had bought a nautical map, but all that had told them was that Andika was pretty far from the shore. At a rough estimate, maybe around 500 kilometers from the nearest coast. Even a skilled team of sailors would need 3-5 days to get there, so Miledi and the others, who knew nothing about nautical navigation, would definitely take longer. The worst case scenario would be if they found themselves lost at sea. Or so Miledi thought, but Oscar adjusted his glasses and spoke confidently.

“We should be able to get our bearings using the stars, and I’m planning on leaving a transmitter behind at the port. Worse comes to worst, we’ll be able to use my Silver Slate to find our way back here.”

With a flourish, Oscar unveiled the glowing ruby ring on his finger. A second later, a medium-sized chunk of ore appeared in the air above him. He caught it as it fell, then transmuted it.

“Not only that, but the Treasure Trove you helped me create is working perfectly. We’ll be able to store months’ worth of provisions easily enough.”

“Treasure Trove” was an artifact Oscar had created by imbuing a special jewel with Naiz’s spatial magic. By doing so, he’d created a pocket dimension within the jewel, which had quite a bit of space. He’d then attached the jewel to his ring. And it was thanks to this ring, along with his other artifacts, that they didn’t need to worry about starving at sea. As Naiz smiled in relief, Miledi muttered dejectedly.

“Now all we have to do is deal with my monster attraction, right?”

“.....”

That was indeed their biggest problem. Oscar and Naiz gave Miledi a pitying look.

“L-Look, we’ve got three masters of ancient magic here! We’ll be fine!”

“Yeah, we can handle sea monsters no problem!”

The two men tried their best to cheer Miledi up. Her expression cleared up and cheer returned to her voice.

“Y-Yeah, you’re right! We’ll be fine!” Miledi exclaimed with a smile.

The three of them sent their letters off with Creme, finished off their final preparations, and cast off into the sea.

Ten days later, two guys and one girl were facedown on a beach somewhere. Naturally, they were Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz. None of them stirred. They were as silent and as unmoving as corpses. The sea’s tide washed contemptuously over them, over and over. Finally, one of the three groaned.

“Nnngh... A-Are we alive?” Miledi was the first to wake. She cradled her head in her hands and lifted her weary body into a sitting position. Then, she stared off into the distance, eyes unfocused, for a few seconds before coming back to

her senses.

“Oh yeah, O-kun, Nacchan!”

Her precious comrades were sprawled out on either side of her.

“O-kun, Nacchan! Are you two okay!? Don’t die on me!” Miledi crawled over to their bodies and started shaking them. When they didn’t respond, she brought her ear to their chests.

“Thank goodness, they’re both still alive.”

Relief flooded her, and Miledi returned to a sitting position. It was then that she finally noticed the chains wrapped around her torso.

“Ahaha... Oh yeah, I remember O-kun yelled out to us just before I lost consciousness. He must have saved us with these.”

Oscar screaming her name was Miledi’s last memory before the massive wave had washed over their tiny boat and knocked her unconscious. Had he not tied the three of them together, they likely would have been washed up in different places, or possibly just drowned. Even after losing consciousness, Oscar’s pale fingers were wrapped tightly around the bundle of chains holding them together. A rare, gentle smile spread across Miledi’s face as she examined his ragged knuckles. And then, she covered his hand with her own.

“Thank you, O-kun.” From her tone, it was clear she was grateful for more than just keeping them together with his chains.

“Oh, whoops. I should probably heal you before getting all sentimental. I’m all out of mana, so I guess we’ll have to use potions here.” The reason for Miledi’s bone-deep weariness was that she was completely drained of mana. In fact, she didn’t even have enough left to cast the most basic recovery spell.

She shook her head to clear away the dizziness, then poured her last remaining drop of mana into Oscar’s Treasure Trove. That simple action nearly made her black out again, but she managed to open it without losing consciousness. She fixed the image of a mana potion in her mind, and a few small vials appeared in the air in front of her with a puff of light.

“Thank goodness, we still had some left... Only three, from the looks of it. I

guess this is everything, huh?”

Well, I’ll just have to make do, Miledi thought to herself as she quaffed one down, then fed the other two to Oscar and Naiz. They choked a little on it, but the mana-restoring liquid did its work, and soon the two of them were groaning awake.

“Ugh... Where are we... Miledi?”

“Right here, O-kun. Awake, and pretty as ever. Good morning.”

For some reason, Oscar didn’t get up and instead continued to stare blankly at Miledi. She tilted her head in confusion, but then grinned.

“Oh, O-kun. Did you fall for me after seeing my beautiful figure first thing after waking up? Or were you hoping I’d feed you your mana potion through a kiss, like in the stories? You’re such a pervert, O-kun! I’m not that easy!” Miledi grinned and poked Oscar’s cheek. However, Oscar didn’t rise to her taunts and instead smiled.

“Thank goodness. It really is you, Miledi. When I was still a little out of it, I saw you smiling like an angel and gently holding my hand, so I was worried some kind of demon had possessed you or something. But you’re being as annoying as always, so I’m relieved. It’s amazing... No one else can ever hope to be this annoying.”

“I’m going to dump you into the bottom of the sea.” Miledi’s expression went blank, and she sounded like her old Executioner Reisen self.

“I’d have preferred to not see you two flirting first thing when I wake up.” Naiz rubbed his head, nursing a nasty headache. Whether that headache was caused by his lack of mana or because Oscar and Miledi were acting the same as usual despite narrowly surviving a deadly situation, no one knew.

“You okay, Naiz?”

“Nacchan, are you alright? Also, O-kun was being a *huge* meanie.”

Naiz ignored Miledi’s complaints and patted himself down. From the looks of it, aside from a severe lack of mana, he was in perfect health. Silence followed as the three of them worked out their aches and pains. They then exchanged

glances and, after a brief pause, spoke simultaneously.

“I thought we were going to die back there...”

As for what exactly happened after they’d left Epona, well, suffice to say, Miledi was even more of a monster magnet than they could have ever imagined.

They’d faced down dangerous sea beasts one after another. To make matters worse, once they’d made it out to open sea, they’d been hit by a very powerful, very localized storm. And when that happened, well, Miledi had been thrown overboard and violated by tentacles more times than anyone could count...

Unfortunately, it wasn’t just Miledi who had been targeted once they’d gone further out, and Oscar and Naiz had been forced to fight for their lives as well.

The worst thing they’d faced though, were the terrors of the sea. It wasn’t technically a monster, as far as they could tell, since it possessed no mana crystal. Regardless, the terrors had been massive, translucent jellyfish that could control the seas themselves. On top of that, their bodies were made of some sort of corrosive liquid that dissolved anything it touched. Needless to say, Miledi had been stripped by the jellyfish right off the bat.

For nine days, Miledi suffered through an endless parade of storms and monsters. By the end of it, she was convinced the sea hated her. They lost their ship after that, and Oscar was forced to transmute a makeshift raft for them. Adrift at sea, and running dangerously low on restorative supplies, the party had decided to return to Epona. But before they could, they were once again visited by a huge terror of the sea.

The whole ordeal had taught them that the western seas were a deadly place. But worst of all, after they’d fended off another wave of terrors, they’d been hit by the largest storm they’d seen yet. Finally, a massive wave had washed over the battered and exhausted party, and they’d all been flung overboard.

“I hate the sea, I hate the sea, I hate the sea, I hate the sea...”

“Oscar, I think Miledi’s trauma has resurfaced.”

“To be honest, I don’t blame her.” Oscar watched as Miledi buried her head between her knees. She’d probably have nightmares about the ocean for weeks

to come.

“Now then... where exactly are we?” Oscar struggled to his feet and looked around. After a while, he spotted a figure off in the distance and spoke up.

“One minute, I’ll go ask.”

Meanwhile, Naiz and Miledi cleaned themselves up and changed into a fresh pair of clothes. And when Oscar returned, it was with a huge smile on his face.

“Miledi, Naiz, we made it. This is Andika.”

The floating city of Andika was atop an island that was roughly heptagonal in shape. The city itself was circular and split into three rings, outer, middle, and inner. Wealth tended to gather in the center of the city, and the further from the innermost layer one was, the seedier the district.

The outermost ring was split into seven districts. Going clockwise from the north, they were the Avid District, the Gradd District, the Arcadia District, the Night District, the Gadaf District, the Arrogan District, and the Luthria District. Each had its own unique traits. The Gradd District, easternmost and closest to the mainland, was known for its sandy beaches and was filled with inns and bars. It was also the district closest to where Miledi and the others had washed up. As the adjacent Avid District was Andika’s main port, a good number of boats passed through Gradd’s waters. Miledi and the others picked up this information from Gradd’s residents as they made their way toward the city’s inner ring.

“Whoa, this place is even more unruly than I heard!”

As befitting of a district known for its bars, there were more drunk people in the street than sober. Intoxicated residents drank alcohol straight from their bottles as they tottered down the street.

Fights could be seen breaking out inside bars and in back alleys, with crowds gathering to cheer the combatants on. Some of the onlookers even joined in, simply eager to fight. Seeing as no one batted an eyelid to these frequent brawls, Miledi and the others concluded that they must be regular occurrences.

Most of the buildings they passed by were dilapidated, and not a single one

so far had had all of its windows intact. Continuing down the street, the trio watched a new window shatter as an old man was thrown through it. He got to his feet with a smile and sauntered off, none the worse for the wear.

“Pay yer goddamn tab already, ya bastard!” the barkeeper’s angry voice called out. He fired off a barrage of Crimson Javelins at the fleeing old man. But his aim was poor, he ended up hitting the shop across from him, setting it ablaze. A second later, water poured down from nowhere, dousing the flames. Infuriated, the shop owner fired a retaliatory barrage of fireballs at the bar.

The situation looked to be heating up, but before the two could get into a serious magical slugfest, an old woman walked out and smacked the shop owner on the head with her frying pan. Chances were she was his wife. She then grabbed the unconscious man and hauled him back into the shop. No one even batted an eyelid at the exchange.

Further down the street, merchants hawked their wares from open-air stalls, claiming their competitors were cheats and that their own baubles and trinkets were actually legendary items. This was the most chaotic, confusing, crude, and lawless city that any of them had seen.

Oscar’s lips curled upward into a cramped smile as he spoke.

“I’m not exactly sure how to put this, but... Well, it’s rowdy, but it doesn’t feel like a bad place.”

“Yeah. You can’t let your guard down here, but I don’t hate this kind of atmosphere.”

“Nyufufu,” Miledi snickered. She was glad Andika was everything Davy had told her comrades it was like.

“For better or worse, it looks like it’s survival of the fittest here.”

Andika was certainly as lawless as the rumors said. Still, the people here were far too lively for anyone to think this might be hell.

Even as they gazed around, a group of nearby drunks downed their bottles and burst into song.

Live as you please, here on the island of distant seas. For Andika is the land of the free. Got tricked? Messed up? Got beat? Well, ain't that a treat. You got no one to blame but yourself for being weak. Unprepared fools never get what they seek. You're responsible for wiping your own ass. Win or lose, succeed or fail, you decide how the die is cast. But remember just one thing. This is Andika, the city God abandoned! There's no greater life than one here!

The song barely had any rhythm to speak of, but it was sung in a lively enough tune. And were anyone to sing that on the continent, they'd be executed in a heartbeat.

Miledi watched the drunks with an inscrutable expression on her face.

"I guess there's a lot of people out there who can't stay on the continent. Plenty of them are just criminals, I'm sure... but this is also the only safe haven for heretics."

Indeed, this was likely the only place in the world where people were so openly faithless. It was also the only place accepting of anyone. Looking closely, Miledi could see beastmen and demons mixed in with the crowd. And as she watched, a human man and a girl with fox ears walked out of a bar, their arms twined around each other. No one seemed to discriminate against each other based on race.

It was as wonderful a city as Davy Consman had claimed. The only city where freedom reigned supreme. A demon girl, elf boy, and human boy ran past her, giggling to each other. Judging by the snippets of conversation she caught as they passed, they were on their way home from lunch.

"What worth is there in a world where children can't smile, was it? Fufu, you were absolutely right."

"Miledi?"

"Are you alright?"

Oscar and Naiz gave her worried looks. However, Miledi simply skipped forward a few steps, spun around to face them, and beamed. Her golden ponytail fluttered behind her, and she looked absolutely dazzling in the

noonday light. Taken aback, Oscar and Naiz could only gaze silently at her. Her smile was so radiant that even random pedestrians stopped to look.

“O-kun, Nacchan! I’m hungry! Let’s go get lunch! And take some pictures! It doesn’t matter where, let’s just go! We’re free to do whatever we want here!”

Oscar looked at her blankly for a few seconds before nodding with a smile. Naiz’s lips curled upward as well, and the pair shrugged to each other before chasing after Miledi, who’d already started running toward a nearby stall.

“Hey, old man! Those look like some tasty skewers! What meat are they made of?”

“Thanks for the compliment, young lady. These are laks fish skewers. The fishermen haven’t been bringing in good catches recently though, so it’s gonna cost ya. But trust me, they’re delicious”

“Fine by me! Give me 3 skewers!” Miledi accepted the skewers, then continued, “So, are these fish rare or something?”

“Nah, that’s not it... You must be new around here, young lady. All the locals already know.”

“Yep. We’re a bunch of heretics who just washed up here today!”

“I-I see... Sounds rough.”

Normally, heretics came to Andika by boat. There were in fact smugglers who took criminals and other refugees there from Epona. Half-shocked and half-impressed by Miledi’s bold declaration of heresy, the old man told her about recent events on the island. Apparently, a spate of storms and sea monster attacks had hit the island the past few days, greatly reducing the number of fish fishermen had been able to bring in. As Andika’s soil was fertile and many fish also swam in the shallows near the beaches, the city wasn’t in danger of running out of food. However, fish prices had begun to rise.

“Some unlucky fellas even ran into those jellyfish that can control the sea. The last time we saw those beasties was decades ago. Plenty of people have been shipwrecked by those nasty creatures. And a bunch o’ others started digging holes since their livelihood got destroyed.”

Miledi and the others all exchanged glances. Those monsters were definitely the same ones who'd hounded them since they'd left Epona.

"H-Hey, what's wrong, young lady? Yer looking a little out of it..."

"Oh, I'm fine. Just thinking about how scary the sea can be. Anyway, what do you mean by digging holes?"

Apparently, while Andika's island was a giant floating rock, the land extended a good few hundred meters down into the water. There were plenty of valuable mineral resources to be mined there, and the miners were colloquially referred to as hole-diggers.

Most mining operations in the city were controlled by the Devault family, which ruled the city. Working for them was a hard, thankless job, and most people down in the mines were criminals who'd been caught, people who'd challenged the Devault family and failed, and those who'd been tricked into debt.

Over the years, an extensive network of tunnels had been built underneath the city, and the mine shafts were now a veritable maze. Oddly enough, even if someone dug so deep they hit the sea, water didn't rush into the tunnels. Instead, the sea remained where it was, held back by some invisible barrier. In fact, divers who went searching for mollusks to harvest occasionally discovered holes leading into the mine shafts. However, most holes were at least covered with iron grilles to prevent monsters from getting in.

"Huh... Andika's a more mysterious place than I thought."

"Well, I was born and raised here, so I don't really find these things that strange."

Miledi thanked the man for the information and the group took their leave. The party organized the information they'd obtained thus far as they went around buying anything that caught their fancy. Then, they took a quick lap around Andika's other outer districts before making their way to the center. As they walked down the main street, Oscar stopped at a nearby stall.

"You really do find higher-quality stuff the closer you get to the center. We ended up losing a lot of our supplies, so I want to restock soon..."

“We especially need more mana potions.”

“Yeah. But I don’t want to buy inferior products. Once we get into the central district, we can—”

“Hit up the casino!” Miledi interrupted.

Actually, I was going to say find a good-quality shop to get more supplies... Oscar sighed as he watched Miledi jump up and down in anticipation.

“First, we need to buy up some necessities and find an inn. Maybe then we can—”

“Go to the casino!” Miledi’s sky blue eyes sparkled with unbridled excitement.

Just how much of a gambling addict is this girl? Oscar gave Miledi an exasperated look, but she ignored him.

Naiz massaged his temples as he came to Oscar’s aid.

“Miledi. Have you forgotten that we almost died? There’s no telling what might happen here, so we need to—”

“Go~ to~ the~ casino!”

It was obvious from Miledi’s tone that she’d just throw a tantrum if Oscar or Naiz tried to argue any further. The two men exchanged glances, then sighed deeply. After that, they turned back to Miledi, who was looking expectantly at them and shrugged their shoulders in resignation.

“Thanks so much, O-kun, Nacchan! Now let’s go! Come on, hurry up! The casino’s calling to us! It wants you to follow after me, you punks! Gambler Miledi’s about to clean house!” Miledi sprinted down the street, eager to get betting.

“When did we become liberators of our desires instead of liberators of the people?”

“If being a Liberator means liberating yourself from common sense, then Miledi’s doing a good job.”

Oscar and Naiz smiled ruefully as they followed after their extremely liberated leader.

The central district was filled with so many flashy buildings that Oscar could see how it had been designated the casino capital of the world. At the center of the district stood the palace, a building so magnificent it stood out even in this opulence. Its scale dwarfed the palaces of Grandort and Velka. Three spires jutted out from a spot around three hundred meters from the center of the palace. They towered over the island, a giant trident rising up from its vertex.

There was more majesty here than in even the greatest kingdoms' capitals. The streets, the buildings, all of them were as clean and as beautiful as any capital's. Most structures were made of wood; stone and metal didn't seem to be popular building materials. Since it was an island, those resources were likely limited. Oscar surmised that most of their stone and metal was imported from the mainland.

While the buildings were mostly wood, the central district's main street was paved in marble. The adjacent buildings had all been painted white to match the color scheme, giving the entire area an air of nobility. This was obviously a place meant for the rich, as evidenced by the high-class clothing most people here were wearing. Their shirts and robes were bedecked with jewels, showing off their wealth.

"I guess that's what most people think constitutes high-class clothing," Oscar muttered, quietly enough to that only his companion heard him. He'd changed out his outfit to blend in with the nobles strolling about. However, he wasn't wearing an ostentatious robe, or a shirt buttoned in diamonds. No, he was dressed in a simple tuxedo. So long as he didn't let his commoner accent show, he looked like a stereotypical rich merchant's son.

"You don't like those gaudy outfits?" Naiz muttered back. He was wearing a similar simple but elegant tuxedo. It was the first time he'd worn anything so fancy, and the first time he'd worn anything other than his traditional desert garb, so it still felt a little uncomfortable to him. However, the black outfit fit his sharp features and tall stature well, so despite the discomfort, he looked good in the tuxedo. Perhaps a little too good, in fact. Unlike Oscar, he looked less like a nobleman's son and more like a mafia boss. Even just standing there made him appear intimidating.

The reason both of them had changed was because Andika's largest casino had a strict dress code. Naturally, neither of them had owned any formal clothing. Fortunately, they'd been able to borrow some from a shop in the palace. Oscar and Naiz were now waiting outside of that shop, waiting for Miledi to finish changing. The wide, majestic hall that extended from the shop to the inner palace was filled with noble ladies, all of whom shot Oscar and Naiz furtive glances as they walked past. Oscar ignored the attention and turned to Naiz.

"I wouldn't say that. It's just, there were plenty of people like that in the kingdom too. Merchants who suddenly hit it rich and tried to show it off by wearing ridiculously expensive clothes and stuff."

"You mean to say normal nobles don't wear clothes like that?"

"Yeah, sort of. Well, they're not that different, and I guess every country has its own customs... but at least in Velka, people looked down on you if you tried to be too flashy."

"I see... So grandiloquence is crass, while simplicity is elegant. At least to the people of your homeland."

"Basically. Though, for rich people back home, it was a contest to see how expensive you could make your 'simple' outfit. But the previous generation's Orcus, Karg, never wore anything showy even though he met with palace officials and nobles all the time. Then again, he just hated ostentatious clothes in general."

"So, in order not to be ridiculed, he stuck to simple but elegant clothing?"

I see... There's a lot of thought that goes into clothing choices, Naiz thought as he nodded to himself. Andika's noble ladies were getting tired of being ignored and were about ready to try and butt into Oscar and Naiz's conversation. However, before they could make a move, Miledi exited the rental store.

"O-kun, Nacchan, sorry for the wait."

"Miledi, what took you so—"

"....."

Oscar trailed off as he turned around. Naiz's eyes opened wide and he just stared. Both of them had been utterly captivated by her outfit. And not just her outfit. She didn't have the same frivolous air about her that she usually did. Instead, she was standing with her back straight and her arms, which were usually waving about everywhere, were folded demurely in front of her. Plus, she wasn't stamping her feet when she walked like she usually did. She'd let her hair down, golden-blonde strands floating lightly behind her.

On top of all that, she'd changed into an elegant, pure-white dress. While the base design was simple, frills adorned the sleeves, and there was a cute ribbon attached to the dress' back. Pearl earrings dangled from her ears, and she wore a sky-blue necklace that matched the color of her eyes. Both the earrings and the necklace were small, so they served more to highlight Miledi's beauty than to emphasize their own.

What caught their attention more than anything, though, was her expression. It wasn't her usual shit-eating grin, or her boisterous smile, or even the occasional expressionless mask she had when she returned to her old Reisen Mode. Instead, it was a refined, elegant smile with her eyes downcast and her eyebrows knit together.

Simply put, she looked like the spitting image of a high-class noblewoman. One whose beauty dwarfed all others. It was almost to the point that had she told people she was a princess, they would have believed her.

Oscar and Naiz weren't the only ones stunned by her appearance. The shop's other patrons and the ladies loitering in the hallway were all captivated as well. They knew instinctively that Miledi was on a different level than them. That she was a real lady. Miledi gracefully glided over to where Oscar and Naiz were standing.

"....."

Seeing their stunned silence, Miledi looked up at them and tilted her head quizzically. Even that gesture had an air of refinement to it. Naiz and Oscar's hearts skipped a beat.

"Nyufu..." But then Miledi's noble smile vanished, replaced with her usual irksome grin. Her aura of refinement vanished in an instant.

“Oh my? What’s wrong, O-kun, Nacchan? Why’re you looking at me like that?”

“Uh, no reason...”

“I-It’s nothing, really.”

Her sudden transformation left them flustered and unable to reply properly. And so, her grin grew wider, and she leaned in closer to the two boys.

“Don’t worry, I understand completely. You’ve totally fallen for me, haven’t you? My stunning good looks have left you speechless, haven’t they? Nyufufufufu.”

“D-Don’t be ridiculous. I was just surprised at how different you are from usu _”

“You can’t fool me. I can see you blushing, you know~ Oh, O-kun, you’re hopelessly, madly in love with me, aren’t you? Hey, flustered O-kun! How’re you feeling right now, huh? Why don’t you tell me? Come on, say it!”

When she was like this, no matter how beautiful she looked, all Oscar could think about was how annoying she was. Not only had he completely regained his cool, but he was also starting to get angry.

“How am I feeling? To be honest, I want to dump you in the bottom of the sea right now.”

“Kyaaa!” Miledi screamed playfully as she hid behind Naiz. It appeared she’d changed targets to him.

“Hey, hey, Nacchan. Can I write a letter to Sue-chan and Yun-chan?”

“...What do you plan on writing?” Naiz could more or less guess, but he asked anyway, his expression stiff.

Miledi’s grin turned wicked as she responded.

“I’m going to tell them Nacchan liked my dress so much he was stunned speechless! And that he’s totally cheating on you guys!”

“Don’t you dare... or I’ll be the one dumping you into the bottom of the sea.”

As Naiz reached out to grab her, Miledi once again squealed and ran off. Once

she'd gone a good distance down the hall, she spun around, her skirt and hair flaring out behind her.

"O-kun, Nacchan, let's go!"

Seeing how high her spirits were, Oscar and Naiz both sighed heavily and followed after her. However, Oscar wasn't content to let Miledi have the last laugh.

"Miledi."

"Hmm? What's up, O-kun?"

"I admit it, you looked absolutely stunning back there. That dress really suits you."

"I-I see... Thanks." Miledi had looked over her shoulder when Oscar had called out to her, but she quickly turned back to face the hall in front of her. Even though Oscar had praised her as she'd wanted, she seemed at a loss for how to reply. Going by how red her ears were, Oscar could guess why.

Of course she'd been happy when Oscar had said the dress suited her, but calling her a stunning beauty with a straight face had been more than she could handle. It made her especially happy because, while Miledi had never had an opportunity to go out in high society before, it had been Belta who'd taught her how to look and act. In a way, it felt like Oscar was praising both her and the girl who'd been like an older sister to her.

"Nice going, Oscar."

"It's not my style to let her keep beating me. Besides, nothing I said was a lie. Or do you disagree, Naiz?"

"Heh... No objections here. If anything, this is the first time she's actually seemed like a former earl's daughter."

Miledi could clearly hear the two guys' conversation, making it even harder for her to turn around and face them.

"Ah, jeez! Quit gossiping and start moving! We've got a casino to conquer!" Miledi dashed forward, still too embarrassed to turn around. Though, there was a definite spring in her step now.

The party was checked over for weapons by a pair of frowning men in black suits, after which they were led into the casino floor. It was as impressive as they'd imagined. Sparkling chandeliers hung from the ceiling at regular intervals, and a band was playing soothing music somewhere in the distance. Jubilant cheers rang out as gamblers won their big bets, contrasting with the groans of those who lost. Waiters circled the floor, carrying glasses of champagne on polished silver trays. As one passed by, Miledi joyfully took a glass and downed it in one big, ungraceful gulp. She was really fired up.

After placing her empty glass on another tray, Miledi turned back to Oscar and held out her hand with a huge smile.

"O-kun, give me money!"

"Can't you at least ask more politely?"

A few nearby guests turned to him, giving him looks that seemed to be saying, " Time to show her how much of a man you are, kid." Lips twitching, Oscar secreted some money from his Treasure Trove into his tuxedo pocket. While all three of them carried enough cash to get food and other necessities, most of their funds were stored in the Treasure Trove. And while Miledi was asking him for money, that money technically belonged to the group as a whole. Though most of it Oscar had earned selling magical artifacts on their journey, so it wasn't too much of a stretch to call it his money.

"Oscar, I'd like some money as well."

Naiz walked over to Miledi's side and held out his hand as well. Oscar looked at him, dumbfounded.

"Naiz... Is it just me, or are you getting pretty hyped up too?"

Naiz blushed a little, though his expression was still stern. This was the first time in his life he'd gotten to explore a place like this, so it wasn't too surprising that he was excited.

"Well, I can't deny I'm pretty excited to see what this place is like myself."

Oscar grinned wryly and handed both of them some coins.

"Just don't go too crazy, guys. We still need to buy stuff aft—"

“Yaaaaaaaaaaay! Time to start gambling! What should we try first!?”

“Listen to me!”

However, Miledi dashed off without a backward glance. And to Oscar’s surprise, Naiz followed after her.

“H-Hey, don’t leave me behind!” Oscar chased after the two of them. The trio tried all manner of games, from roulette, to dice games, to betting on rat races. Needless to say, they were having a ball.

“Fwahahahahahahaha, this is awesome! I’m so good it’s scary!” Miledi held piles of gold coins in both hands as she laughed maniacally. Next to her, Naiz trembled as he looked at the heavy bag of money in his hands. He’d never seen this much money in his life, and it terrified him. Both of them had made a killing from the last few games.

“I can’t tell if it’s beginner’s luck or the universe’s way of balancing out how much the ocean hates you.” Oscar said as he smiled faintly, holding his own bag of enormous winnings. To be honest, he couldn’t deny that he was having a blast.

“I’ve decided, O-kun! I’m gonna master this casino! Let’s have a match to see who can bring home the greatest winnings! Not that either of you stands a chance against Master Gambler Miledi! Bwahahahahaha!”

“H-Hey, Miledi!”

Too excited to listen, Miledi smiled triumphantly and dashed off.

I guess that means we’re competing now?

“What do you think, Naiz?”

“I’ll be accepting her challenge, of course.”

“I-I see. You sure are getting fired up...”

“I’ll make her pay for always teasing me about Susha and Yunfa. I’ll bury her under the weight of my winnings.”

“Naiz, calm down. You’re not acting like yourself.”

“What are you talking about, I’m the same as always. After I’ve silenced

Miledi, I'll send the rest of the money back to Susha and Yunfa. That way, I'll be able to negotiate a way out of keeping risque pictures on me at all times."

"I get the feeling they'll think that money is a divorce fee and get even scarier than before..."

"Fear not. I shan't lose, not to the other gamblers, or to Susha!"

Burning with fighting spirit, Naiz waded into the battlefield of gamblers.

"I wonder if those two'll be alright...? Well, no point in worrying about it. Might as well go enjoy myself."

Oscar shot one last worried look over at Miledi and Naiz, who were already attempting some of the most popular games, and went to find his own games to enjoy.

One hour later.

"O-kun. Lend me some money," Miledi said, getting on her knees and putting her forehead to the ground. Oscar, who'd been lost in a long flashback, had his attention returned to the present when one of the black-suited men yelled at him.

"Sir, would you happen to be a companion of this lady?"

His stern glare and furious tone were at odds with his polite choice of words, but for the moment Oscar and Miledi were still patrons of the casino. After a brief pause, Oscar glanced behind him.

"...?"

He looked confused, as if he was certain the black-suited man must be talking to someone other than him. An unlucky waiter who happened to be passing by twitched as Oscar's gaze met his. *Looks like they're asking for you. Nope, this has nothing to do with me!* The two of them had that silent exchange with their eyes.

"Hey, O-kun!? Don't pretend like you don't know me!"

"But I don't?"

“Since when were you such a good actor!? This is just too cruel, O-kun! I thought you said you’d follow me through hell and back!”

“Tch!”

“And now you’re clicking your tongue at me!?”

Oscar remembered saying something to that effect after Miledi’s final attempt to recruit him to the Liberators. He also remembered Miledi responding with something akin to how that had sounded creepy. *So how come you remember my words perfectly, you little twerp!?* Worried that he might really abandon her, Miledi desperately tried to do anything she could to prove their relationship. In doing so, she blocked off Oscar’s only path of retreat.

“How could you do this to me, O-kun! Especially after you saw me naked! And you’re the one in charge of all my stuff. I can’t even get my underwear out without your permission!”

“Wha—”

The crowd surrounding them started muttering to each other.

“So that’s what that young man is into...” “He treats her like a slave...? Heh, that kid’s got good taste.”

Oscar’s expression cramped up. The one time he’d seen her naked was because Miledi had put too much weight on the makeshift shower room he’d transmuted for her and broken it. In other words, that had been completely her own fault. And the reason why he was in charge of her stuff, including her underwear was because it was his Treasure Trove the party stored all their items in. However, the way Miledi had phrased her statement it sounded almost as if Oscar had control over whether she was allowed to wear clothes or not. Like she was a slave, and he her master.

“Damn you, Miledi, stop causing misunderstandings! I’ll fucking kill you!”

“Hiiiiii, Master, violence is wrong!”

With that, everyone in the crowd was convinced that the young man in glasses was the girl’s master, and therefore the one responsible for her debts.

“What a brute.” “He must be some heinous criminal!” “How terrifying...”

Furthermore, it appeared they were also convinced Oscar was a heartless monster.

You guys are all criminals too, or you wouldn't be here! But as much as Oscar wanted to say that, now wasn't the time to start an argument. Sighing, Oscar went up to the men in black suits and confirmed that he was indeed Miledi's guardian.

"Haah...Miledi, don't think this means I've forgiven you. You're still getting a lecture later."

"Ugh..."

"So how much did you lose? I've got a decent amount of winnings, so we'll probably be able to pay it all off."

Oscar looked down at Miledi. She averted her gaze, cold sweat pouring down her forehead. Oscar then looked up to one of the black-suited men. He had a very bad feeling about this.

"This is the bill, sir."

Oscar's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets as he took the slip of paper handed to him. Miledi owed ten times as much as all the money they had on them. That was a fortune large enough to feed and house a person for 3-4 years.

"Hold on! How on earth did you lose this much money!? Actually, wait. Once you lost all the money you had you'd need to come to me to get more..."

Oscar's eyes glinted with a dangerous light, and Miledi turned her head all the way around to avoid meeting even the edge of his gaze. In a cold voice, Oscar asked her the obvious question.

"Miledi, did you borrow money to keep gambling?"

"I have no excuse for my actions."

Miledi once again bowed her head, her forehead touching the floor. Apparently, she'd gotten hyped up after winning multiple times in a row, and challenged some of the other gamblers to a card game. Said card game had been one where there was no betting limit, and players could bet more than

they had since payment would be deferred. Miledi had bet high since she'd had absolute confidence in her hand, and been utterly destroyed.

The men in suits crowded around Oscar. They were obviously waiting to see if he could pay up or not. He glanced around the casino floor, searching for salvation. His only hope was that Naiz had made a killing and the two of them could somehow repay the debt by pooling their winnings. However, reality was a cruel mistress.

"I already told you, I'm broke!"

A familiar voice reached his ears. Oscar turned and spotted Naiz surrounded by a group of dark-skinned female guards. It appeared he'd been caught too. And from the looks of it, he was hoping Oscar could save him as well. The young alchemist looked up at the ceiling and sighed. *I never knew my comrades were so pathetic...*

"Sir?"

The black-suited man wasn't as polite as before. *Looks like I'm running out of time.* Oscar looked over at the card table Miledi had been playing at earlier. The middle-aged man Oscar assumed she'd lost to grinned as he looked Miledi up and down with lust-filled eyes. Making up his mind, Oscar touched the frame of his glasses. He then nodded to himself and heaved a weary sigh.

"You really are hopeless, Miledi."

"*Sniffle*... I'm soooooorry, O-kun."

Oscar grinned and spoke up as he heard those words.

"Yeah yeah, I'll listen to your apologies later. But for now, close your eyes."

"Huh?"

Miledi looked up at him in confusion, but a second later it became clear what he was doing.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please!"

The moment everyone turned to him Oscar pressed his glasses again and a beam of light shot out of them.

“Nuwaaah!? What the heck!?”

“My eyes, they buuuuuuuuurn!”

The men in black suits had been standing much closer than the rest of the crowd and so had been hit much harder by the beam.

“Miledi, let’s get outta here!”

“My eyes, my eyeees! I can’t seeeeee!”

It appeared Miledi hadn’t heeded Oscar’s warning. She was rolling on the ground while covering her eyes in pain.

“Sheesh, you’re one troublesome girl, you know that?”

Oscar scooped Miledi up and ran for the casino exit. The agonized screams of the casino patrons grew more distant.

“Naiz, we’re getting out of here!”

Relief spread across Naiz’s face and he hurried to Oscar’s side.

“Don’t think you’ll get away with this,” one of the black-suited men shouted to the group’s retreating backs.

“A wise man once said, debts exist to never be paid!”

“You thief!”

Pretty ironic, being called a thief by a bunch of thieves.

The rest of the casino security staff tried to apprehend Oscar and Naiz, but they used passing noblewomen as shields and transmuted new passageways into walls and stripped the security guards with metal wires to keep them at bay. Using every underhanded trick in the book, the trio were able to successfully escape.

Afterward, rumors of Oscar’s escapades began to spread and he earned various nicknames such as “thief among thieves” “Outlaw of outlaws” and “Brutish gentleman in glasses.”

Deep within the labyrinth of tunnels that extended beneath Andika, directly underneath where the royal palace was, lay a vast ruin. It looked as though it

had been mostly destroyed. The dome-shaped room was made out of marble, and a detailed magic circle was engraved onto the floor. An altar stood in the circle's center, and a giant obelisk thrust its way out from the altar's base. Around it wound a spiral staircase. Near its base lay countless pebbles, each no bigger than the tip of a pinky finger. Those pebbles were fragments of what the ruins had once been. They were pieces of a large fresco that had spanned the room's walls and ceiling.

A single girl lay atop the altar. She appeared to be in her early teens. She had luxurious, emerald-green hair and amethyst-purple eyes. From the way she carried herself, she appeared to be a demure, mature girl. The loose, white one-piece gown she wore gave her an ephemeral beauty. However, her most striking feature was the gill-shaped ears that sprouted from above her neck. The girl was a dagon.

She closed her eyes as if focusing on something, then held her hands out while muttering something in a small voice. A second later, the room was filled with dazzling light, and the pebbles littering the floor flew up to the ceiling as if being sucked in. They fit into place like pieces of a puzzle, completing the fresco that had long since been destroyed. The girl had only restored a handspan's worth of the fresco, but she'd done so in an instant.

"Phew..."

The girl heaved a large sigh. Sweat had beaded on her forehead, and her face was pale. The magic she'd cast had cost quite a toll on her. However, its effects had been spectacular enough to leave any spectator stunned. After all, there was no normal magic that could return things to their original state. And repairing inorganic objects like these with transmutation required direct physical contact. Meaning whatever magic this girl had used was one that shouldn't exist.

She looked up at her handiwork and shook her head. A second later, someone walked into the ruins' entrance, their footsteps echoing loudly in the chamber.

"Hey, how'd it go? You figure anything out?" An old man in his mid-fifties shouted at the girl on the altar. His black hair was swept back, though a few stray strands dangled over his face. He was wearing an outfit fashionable with

nobles on the continent and chewing on an expensive cigar. He had amethyst-colored eyes like the girl, but his glowed with a dangerous light. He was the head of the Devault family that ruled Andika— Baharl Devault.

Behind him stood a few of his trusted guards. They were all burly and seemed to look perpetually angry. The girl, his daughter Diene, frowned and responded.

“Father... I’m terribly sorry.”

“Tch... No progress at all, huh?” Baharl clicked his tongue, and Diene winced.

The old man dropped his gaze and clicked his tongue again. It appeared this particular father-daughter pair didn’t have a very close relationship. If anything, they were more like a mafia boss and his skilled but disliked money launderer.

Baharl then looked up at the ceiling and muttered.

“I can’t believe something like this might have been living under my city this whole time. God, what a headache.”

The part of the fresco Diene had repaired depicted a massive serpent. It lay curled around itself in the depths of the ocean, sleeping, with an island that was likely Andika floating above it.

Around two years ago, Baharl had discovered these ruins. He’d then had his daughter, Diene, use her special magic, renewal magic, to restore the ruins’ fresco and began interpreting what it meant. The fresco had had writing on it as well, and while it had been written in ancient script from the age of the gods, once Baharl had deciphered what it meant he’d discovered a terrifying truth.

“The Divine Beast Leviathan, the monster of Andika... To think this island was actually an artifact meant to seal away a beast from the age of the gods.”

According to the fresco, millennia ago people had prayed to the gods to deliver them from this beast, the monster of Andika. Hearing their prayers, the gods had sealed it away using this island.

“Umm, Father? I heard that strange things have been happening out at sea recently. I’m worried that repairing the fresco has something to do with that...”

She didn’t say it, but Diene clearly didn’t want to repair any more of it. She fidgeted uncomfortably, and Baharl’s sharp gaze fell onto his daughter.

“Can’t deny that, I suppose. At the very least, we know why this island floats and why crops can grow so fast on it. That divine beast’s mana is feeding the land.”

As Baharl had said, the fresco had explained the mysteries of the island. But the more of it they repaired, the more dangerous the seas became. Judging by the unnatural manner in which the fresco had been destroyed, it was likely the fresco itself was the key to undoing the leviathan’s seal.

Diene trembled in fear at the thought.

“If only we could find some way to control it...” Baharl muttered and gritted his teeth. In truth, they’d discovered that the monster of Andika held multiple meanings. The first was, of course, the obvious one. It was another name for the leviathan that was powerful enough to destroy Andika. However, according to the fresco, the very same leviathan might have been the key to saving Andika from an outside threat. Meaning it was a monster that would protect the island.

It was entirely possible that the ancients had possessed some way to control the Leviathan. Though the fact that it had ultimately been sealed away meant whatever control system they’d had wasn’t perfect. Still, if Baharl could find that control system, then he’d finally have a way to protect Andika from outside threats like the church, and possibly even fight against them. However, he couldn’t deny that his current efforts were causing Andika more harm than good.

Baharl glanced at his cowering daughter and clicked his tongue.

“Alright, we’ll stop the restoration for now. Go ahead and shatter the fresco. We’ll keep an eye on how things develop, and slowly repair the few pieces we haven’t deciphered yet. Do you understand, Diene?”

“Y-Yes...” Diene nodded multiple times, glad that her father was willing to stop.

“Boss, you sure this is a good idea? Weren’t you just talking about how we might be able to use this to get rid of those pirates buzzing about our shores?” Ace, one of Baharl’s subordinates, spoke up. He had nondescript features and dull black hair. In a way, it was impressive how average he looked. But while his looks might have been average, his intelligence was anything but. Among the

Devault family's retainers, he was the sharpest. He also happened to be Baharl's childhood friend.

"Oh yeah, those guys. Well, you do have a point."

Upon hearing Baharl's words, Diene started trembling again. However, it was for a different reason this time.

"I get what you're saying, but there's no point in reviving a monster we can't control. We'd be the world's biggest laughingstock if we got killed by our own weapon. But still... I'd like to take care of those annoying pirates before the church makes a move..."

"Boss, don't you think it's about time you let me handle this? If you just give me a fleet, I'll have those pirates sleeping with the fishes in no time."

Another one of Baharl's aides stepped forward. He looked far tougher than the rest and was armed to the teeth. His name was Kelvin. He was a bear of a man with ultramarine hair that looked to be receding. He was also able to use a brand of special magic, one known as White Claw. It allowed him to transform his arms into that of a savage white bear and cover his claws with blades of wind. Normally he would have been taken under the church's protection, but once they'd discovered the nature of his magic he'd been branded a heretic and forced to flee to Andika. Baharl had taken him in when he'd been just a boy, and he'd sworn absolute loyalty to Baharl ever since.

"Kelvin... I'm not giving you permission to sortie."

"Why not, Boss?"

Ace shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated fashion and answered in place of Baharl.

"Look here, Kelvin. Just how many other pirates and mercenaries do you think we've hired to do the same thing? And of them, how many came back alive? It pains me to admit it, but we're not up against your average pirates here. Most of the groups we sent out had people who could use special magic like you, too. If you challenge them without intel, you'll end up like the rest. Especially since you're only good at thinking with your fists."

"I dare you to say that again, you sneaky little bastard!"

In stark contrast to Kelvin's heated threats, Ace remained calm and collected.

The other guards standing behind Baharl guffawed. No one seemed nervous. Of course, there was no reason to be. Kelvin and Ace's arguments were a daily occurrence. And despite their constant fights, they were good friends.

Sighing, Baharl turned on his heel. He no longer had any business here. Just before he left the room though, he turned back over his shoulder. Diene's face was deathly pale.

"Diene, how many times did you use your special magic today?"

Renewal magic consumed a lot of mana. Diene only had a little more mana than the average person, so even a single cast of it left her drained. In fact, she could only use three renewal spells a day. Furthermore, since this room held a seal, repairing the fresco took even more mana than restoring a normal object. Each cast repaired only a tiny fraction of the fresco. Luckily, the section she'd restored today wasn't that large. Certainly not enough to make her this pale.

"Th-Three times, Father. I stayed within my limits, just like you told me to."

Diene faltered, and Kelvin awkwardly explained the reason behind her exhaustion.

"Well, Boss. You see, we ran into some injured miners on the way down here, so the young miss here used healing magic on them..."

Just as Kelvin was about to say that was why she had less mana than usual, he heard a loud slap.

"Ah..."

He looked up to see Diene nursing her cheek. Baharl had walked up to her and slapped her.

"How many times do I have to tell you, you brat! Don't use healing magic without telling me!"

"I-I'm sorry... Father..." Diene took a few faltering steps backward as her cheek began to swell.

"Tch... Don't you realize how dangerous your talents are? If you keep doing this and rumors of the saint spread, the church won't be able to ignore them."

Baharl's sharp gaze pierced through Diene. Years ago, Diene had used her powers to heal one of the Devault family retainers who'd been injured in a scuffle. Since then, her fame as a saint had begun to spread.

However, "saint" was a word that the church would not abide. Baharl had known that, and he'd immediately issued a gag order on any and all rumors.

"Do you want to be caught by the church? Would you rather live your life a slave to their faith, stripped of free will? Huh?"

"N-No... I'm truly sorry..."

Baharl clicked his tongue and stalked off toward the room's entrance. But just before he left, he took a palm-sized plate made of clear crystal out of his pocket and chucked it toward Diene. She scrambled to her feet and caught it in midair.

"This is today's recording. There was a huge commotion at the casino today, so it's more entertaining than usual. Now, go back to your room."

With that, Baharl turned back around and walked out of the chamber. As he walked through Andika's underground labyrinth, he clicked his tongue again.

"Boss... Don't you think you're being a little too hard on her? It looked like she was about to cry." Kelvin looked timidly up at his boss as he said that, but one glare from Baharl sent him scurrying.''

"Uh, forget it," he muttered and took a few steps back. Ace then shrugged his shoulders and sighed.

"You'll make the young miss hate you, you know that, right Boss?"

"Like I care."

Baharl picked up the pace, and Kelvin, Ace, and his other subordinates smiled ruefully at him. He ignored their gazes and thought back to the past.

Reej... Reej had been the name of a dagon woman. Diene's mother. Despite her frail body, she'd had an unbreakable will. No matter what gifts Baharl had given her, no matter how much wealth he'd showered her in, she hadn't shown him any interest. Nor had the burning light in her eyes ever dimmed. Before long, he'd found himself obsessed with winning her heart. He'd wanted so dearly to earn her trust, to learn the secret he'd eventually realized she was

keeping. At some point, he'd realized even when he glared at her she would just give him an exasperated smile and shake her head, like she was dealing with an unruly child. That faint smile of hers was one he could never forget.

She was the only one who accepted me... but in the end, she never did tell me the secret she was always worrying about...

His lips twitched up into a ghost of a smile. After giving birth to Diene, Reej's condition had steadily worsened and in the span of a few years she'd passed away. Even now, Baharl wasn't sure if he'd loved her. Love was such an alien emotion to him. Baharl had grown up in a world where the only thing that mattered was strength. Where it was kill or be killed, submit or make others submit before you.

Whenever Baharl thought of Diene, he couldn't help but be reminded of how much she resembled Reej. His daughter's crying face appeared in the back of his mind.

"Tch... If you're her kid, then don't give up so easily, dammit. Fight back!" Baharl shook his head in annoyance. Noticing his subordinate's stares were growing even more pointed, he clicked his tongue again.

Meanwhile, Diene returned to her room, a tiny corner of Andika's underground maze, and flopped onto her sofa. Her cheek stung as she landed, the pain bringing a fresh wave of depression. She no longer desired to have a normal relationship with her father. When she was little, her mother had always told her to stand up to anyone, even her father, but Diene was terrified of Baharl.

"What's so different between you and god, Father?"

Her despondent whisper vanished into the stagnant underground air. As far as Diene was concerned, the one trapping her down here and restricting her freedom was Baharl, not god. Anything she asked for, she received. Whether it was food, clothes, or jewels, a palace attendant would always bring her the highest quality products. However, she was denied her freedom. Her entire world consisted of this underground room and her few occasional visits to the palace. Aside from that, all she had was the plate Baharl gave her.

Diene took out the crystal rectangle and poured a tiny fraction of mana into it. As she did so, a video filled the clear screen. The plate was made of a special ore known as telestone. When mana was poured into a crystal of telestone, it emitted all of the light its linked stone absorbed over a certain period of time. It was used on the continent to make recording devices.

“Oh my!” Diene exclaimed as she watched a bespectacled youth strip one of her father’s subordinates. He was running down the streets of the central district with a girl tucked under his arms. He eluded his pursuers by punching them, stripping them, and occasionally blinding them with a flash from his glasses. Before long, the main streets were filled with nude men hiding their privates.

“Th-This man is a very, very naughty person!”

By the time the video ended, Diene was blushing bright red. She covered her face in her hands and rolled around on her sofa. After a while, she went back to the plate and watched it again. When she finished, she rolled around on her sofa again.

“Phew... But you know, the umbrellas and glasses they make these days are amazing. I didn’t know they could shoot fire and light like that...”

Of course, she had no way of knowing that was no normal umbrella or pair of glasses. Thanks to a certain bespectacled youth, Diene’s common sense was overwritten.

Exhausted both because of her work today and the video, Diene got off the sofa and collapsed onto her bed. She rolled onto her back and looked up at the dim ceiling.

The moments before she fell asleep were always the worst. She could feel herself being crushed by the loneliness she felt. She left her magical lantern on, but once she closed her eyes, she simply had to contend with the darkness. As always, she called out for help as the blackness threatened to swallow her.

“Mother...”

But her kind, strong mother was no longer here. She thought back to the secret her mother had told her six years ago. To the hope she’d been

introduced to. Diene curled up in her bed, making her tiny body appear even smaller. And while clinging to her last ray of hope, she quietly muttered something.

“Nee-sama...”



Chapter II: Ghost Ship, Bane of Pirates

A number of beds lined a large room with rock walls. Glowing crystals had been embedded into the walls and ceiling at regular intervals, illuminating the numerous medicine-filled cabinets resting against the walls and alcoves filled with clean sheets. Most beds were filled, their occupants sleeping peacefully. Sleeping so peacefully, in fact, that one wondered if they were still alive.

A young girl walked over to the two beds furthest in the back. She dipped a towel in a bucket full of water, wrung it out, then wiped down the body of the boy sleeping on the bed beside her—Dylan. Once she was done she dressed him and checked his temperature. After that, she did the same for Katy, who was sleeping across from him. The luster in her hair showed that Corrin, the girl watching over her, had been taking good care of her for a while. Day after day, she'd nursed her two siblings who'd fallen into a coma after being transformed into living weapons by the church.

For Corrin, who was still only seven years old, it took a lot of effort to bathe and dress her comatose siblings. But despite how hard it was, Corrin not only looked after them, but also the other patients in this makeshift hospital. Most kids her age would have thrown a tantrum at the prospect of doing so much work, but she had never once complained in the four months since she'd left her orphanage and come to the Liberators' hidden village.

Since that day, she'd tied her red hair up in a ponytail, imitating the hairstyle of her beloved older brother, and done everything she could to be helpful.

"Dylan-oniichan, Katy... It's going to be okay. Oniichan will definitely find a way to bring you back to normal..."

Corrin patted her siblings' heads with her tiny hands. After the events in the Greenway, she'd been forced to mature much faster than a child her age normally would.

"Yo, Corrin. How're Dylan and Katy doing?"

“Ah, Ruu-oniichan.”

Ruth walked into the room, his spiky black hair making him easy to identify even at a distance.

“They’re doing the same as usual. Just like everyone else.”

“Well, I figured as much.” Ruth shrugged as he looked down at Dylan. After a while, he sighed and looked over at the bed at the very back of the room. It was oddly tilted and currently unoccupied. Corrin followed his gaze and watched as Ruth pulled a pair of black gloves out of his back pocket, put them on, and squatted down next to the bed frame.

It appeared the reason for its tilt was that one of the bed’s legs was damaged. Ruth placed a gloved hand against the damaged leg and closed his eyes. Concentrating, he imagined himself transmuting with the same confidence and poise as his respected brother.

“Transmute.”

Faint orange mana ran down the length of his arm. A second later, the metal leg was completely repaired.

“Wow, Ruu-oniichan, you’re amazing! You’ve gotten even better than before!”

“Hehe.”

Ruth grinned bashfully and rubbed his nose. Just as Corrin had taken on the duties of a nurse, Ruth had been going around the village repairing buildings, weapons, and furniture.

The Liberator’s hidden village was located deep within Reisen Gorge, so normally it was impossible to use magic down here. The gorge’s unique properties dispersed mana the moment it exited one’s body. The reason Ruth was able to transmute even here was because of the black gloves Oscar had given him before he’d left. Those gloves were an artifact with transmutation circles engraved into them. On top of that, they strengthened the cohesiveness of their user’s mana. Though their range was limited, within a two-meter radius Ruth could use his mana without it getting dispersed. He’d spent the past few months tirelessly training his transmutation skills, motivated by a burning desire

to be as skilled a Synergist as Oscar. Thanks to that, his skills had improved dramatically since he'd arrived in the gorge. At this point, even many of the Liberators depended on his transmuting.

"You're awesome, Ruu-oniichan. I wish I could do more than just this..." Corrin looked down despondently at the bucket of water in her hands. It frustrated her that all she could do was nurse patients.

Ruth looked down awkwardly at her, then patted her head.

"Don't be stupid. Oscar asked you to look after Dylan and Katy, didn't he? And you've been doing just that."

"I know, but..."

"Even I can only 'just' transmute things... All the other Liberators are way more amazing than me. If you want to be helpful, you just have to keep trying your best and getting better, right?"

"...Yeah."

After a moment, Corrin nodded with conviction. The two young girls who'd joined the Liberators recently were around the same age as her, but they were way more competent. So she'd been feeling a little inferior. On the other hand, Ruth had matured as much as Corrin since The Greenway incident, which was why he'd known just what to say to encourage his younger sister.

"Fufu. What a reliable older brother you are, Ruth-kun."

"Geh." Ruth turned around with a grimace. He looked like he'd just run into his mortal nemesis.

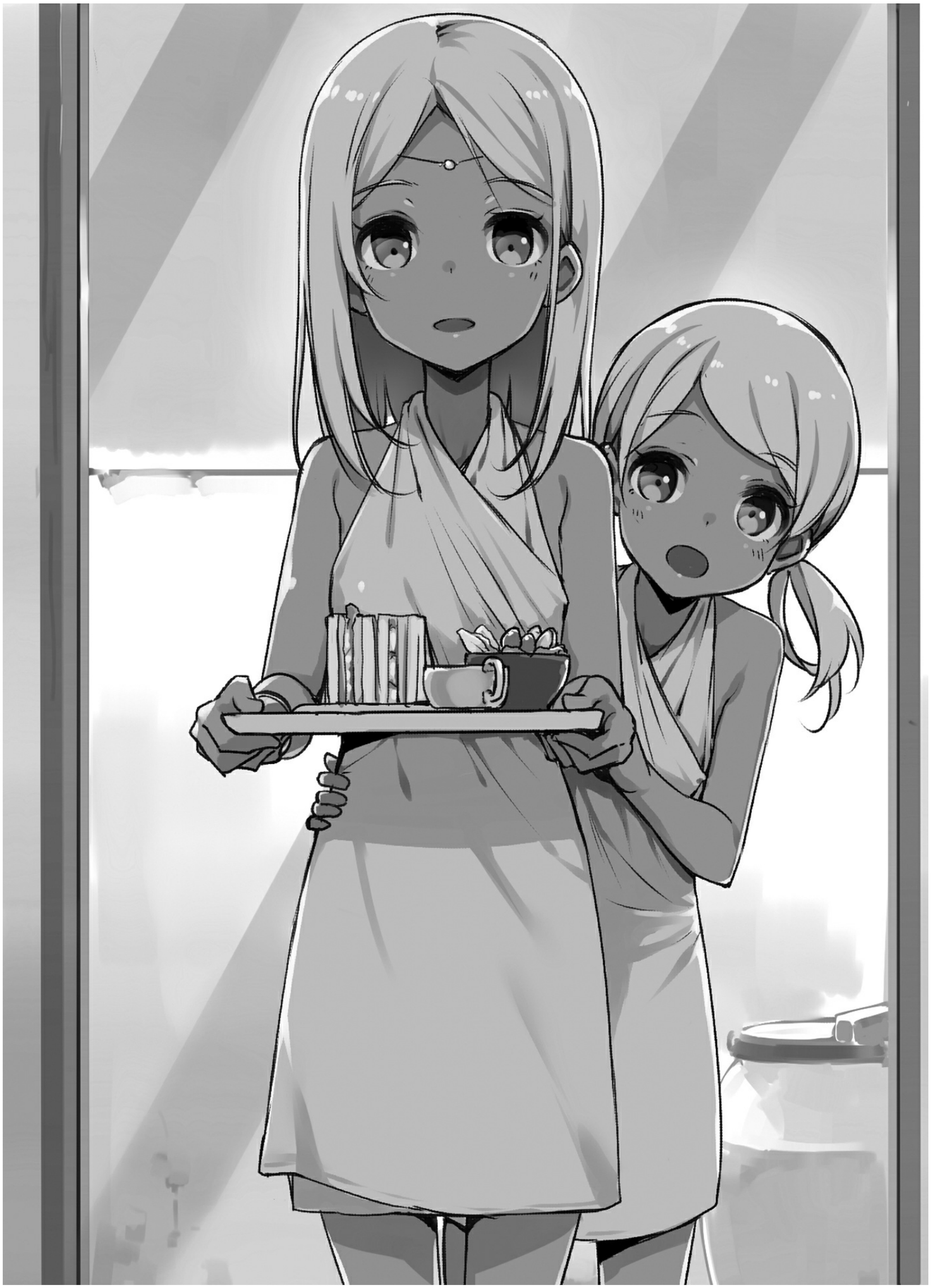
Standing in the doorway was a young girl holding a tray. She had dark brown skin, jade green eyes, and golden-blonde hair parted down the middle. She was, of course, Susha, the twelve-year-old girl from the desert.

"Corriiiiiin. We've brought you lunch!"

"Ah, Yun-chan!"

Yunfa poked her head out from behind her older sister's back. She looked like a younger version of Susha, with the same jade eyes, dark skin, and blonde hair. Incidentally, Susha had started growing her hair out since coming to the gorge,

and her once shoulder-length hair now fell all the way to her back. Long hair suited her figure well, and she looked far older than she was. Though they were only one year apart, Ruth found it hard to deal with this surprisingly mature desert dweller.



“Oh my, Ruth-kun. That hurts my feelings.”

“Liar. You don’t care about what anyone other than Naiz thinks.”

Susha raised an eyebrow and muttered something.

“Is that really how it seems? That’s quite troubling...”

Then, she shook the thought out of her mind and spoke up.

“Moorin made some sandwiches for us. Why don’t we eat them together?”

Susha held out the tray full of sandwiches. Ruth’s stomach growled as he looked at them. Corrin and Yunfa turned to him and giggled.

“D-Don’t laugh! I’ve been practicing all morning, so of course I’d be hungry!” Ruth snapped as he snatched the tray from Susha. He then stalked out of the sickroom and carried it over to the break room’s table. Despite his frustration, he didn’t forget to do the gentlemanly thing. Just like his respected brother Oscar would have.

Many of the older women in the Liberators’ village were worried about Ruth-kun’s future. He was blunt and easily embarrassed, but also serious and courteous. It was likely he’d have women falling for him without ever realizing it. Right now though, he was surrounded by his sister and two girls who were obsessed with Naiz, so his charms didn’t really affect them.

Inside the break room, the four children stuffed themselves full of bacon sandwiches. Ruth observed Susha as he awkwardly listened to the conversation between three girls.

Tim, the Liberator’s messenger, had brought Susha and Yunfa to the village about a month ago. They’d traveled as fast as their legs would carry them, and the two sisters had been exhausted when they first arrived. The reason they’d pushed themselves so hard was that they’d wanted to rendezvous with the other Liberators as fast as possible and get started on helping Naiz from the shadows. Their unwavering devotion had allowed them to complete a trip that would normally take four months in just thirty days. Tim’s Animal Harmony magic had helped speed up the journey by making the horses both tireless and faster than regular horses, but it was still impressive that two young girls had

managed to keep riding them for that long.

However, Ruth understood their obsession. After all, there was someone he wanted to match up to as well. It was for that reason he'd tried to get along with Susha and Yunfa at first. But after a few days, he'd realized the two girls were far more insane than he'd thought. To begin with, the way they used their jobs was far too bizarre.

Susha's job was Wordsmith. She had an innate talent for writing poems and stories, and her derivative skills allowed her to absorb and disseminate information with ease. Those skills of hers were what had allowed her to come up with the "Fairy of the Desert" rumor, and spread it across the entire continent in just two years.

Yunfa, on the other hand, was a Bard. As one might expect, she had a natural proficiency with instruments and support magic. Furthermore, she could improve the efficacy of her support spells by boosting them with her performances. Since she'd never touched an instrument before, she hadn't known of her abilities, but she'd been using them unconsciously when she spun her tales in a way that left lasting impressions on people. Her perceptiveness when it came to others also stemmed from her job. She supported her older sister from the shadows, and it was thanks to her efforts that the sisters had been able to leave a good impression on Miledi and Oscar when they'd first met them.

The two had first become aware of their jobs after arriving in the Liberators' village, and they'd spent their time perfecting their talents ever since. However, their obsession with learning was so great that it terrified the Liberators in charge of their education. No matter how many times their teachers told them not to push themselves, they just smiled and repeated the same words.

"We have to work hard for Naiz-sama."

For that reason, everyone, including Ruth, thought they were crazy.

"Oooh, Ruth's falling for Sue-nee!"

"Huh!?"

Ruth looked up in surprise. It appeared Yunfa had noticed he was observing

Susha. *That little brat's really sharp.*

Before Ruth could argue back, or admonish Yunfa for not being respectful to her elders, Susha replied in a troubled voice.

"I'm sorry, Ruth-kun. But my heart belongs to Naiz-sama."

"Quit it! You're making it sound like you're rejecting me! I don't even like you! I was just wondering how your studies were going!"

"Fufu, sorry."

Susha grinned playfully. It was that teasing attitude of hers that made it so hard for Ruth to deal with her. That, and how strangely seductive she looked whenever she was talking about her beloved Naiz. For someone only a year older than Ruth, she seemed far too much of an adult.

Hence why Ruth wasn't terribly fond of her. He was also jealous of the fact that she'd been put in charge of the Liberators' intelligence department the moment she'd arrived.

"Sue-oneechan and Yunfa-chan, you two really love Naiz-oniichan, don't you?"

Meanwhile, Corrin was completely oblivious. Her innocence warmed the cockles of Ruth's heart.

See, now that's how little girls should act... Dear Oscar, our little sister Corrin is as angelic as always.

"Oh yes, how about you, Corrin-chan? How do you feel about Oscar-san?"

"Huh?" Corrin cocked her head. After a few seconds, the meaning of Susha's words sunk in, and she blushed. Ruth gave her a bewildered look. However, she merely fidgeted bashfully and replied meekly.

"But Oniichan already has Miledi-oneechan..."

"Hmm, I wonder, are those two really like that?"

"When I asked them if they were a couple last time, Oscar-oniisan said no with a straight face."

It was certainly true that Oscar and Miledi shared a deep bond with each

other. However, at least at present, they didn't seem to be lovers. Yunfa and Susha weren't even sure they had romantic feelings for each other. From what they could tell, Miledi and Oscar were more than friends, but not quite lovers.

Yunfa pounded her fist on the table and burst out into a passionate tirade.

"Corrin-chan, if you're in love, you gotta go on the offense! If you really want to be Oscar-oniisan's wife, then your feelings have to be strong enough to overcome Miledi-oneesan's! You better send her a letter saying Oscar-oniisan's yours, so she better not lay a hand on him!"

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaat? I can't do that. Besides, I like Miledi-oneechan too!"

Please leave, before you corrupt our precious angel Corrin any further. Also... Dear Oscar, I trust you're not a pervert and would never actually lay a hand on a girl who's not even 10 yet. Because if you are... I'll make sure you never see the light of day again.

As Ruth monologued to an Oscar who wasn't there, a new face joined the break room.

"You brats got enough to eat? If you don't eat properly you'll never grow bigger."

A large man with an even larger voice walked over to the table the kids were sitting on. He was another one of the Liberators, Marshal Diamond. His cropped black hair was streaked with gray, and the hard contours of his face showed that his 45 years of life hadn't been easy. He'd originally been a 1000-man commander in Velka's army, but when he'd been forced between choosing the church or the lives of his men, he'd chosen his men. After that, he'd been forced to flee the kingdom and ended up with the Liberators.

"Excuse me, Marshal-san. I feel like you shouldn't encourage girls to overeat."

A white-haired woman in her mid-twenties walked in behind Marshal. Her name was Mikaela Eifield. She was wearing the white robe of an outlawed religion. Her people had been a band of pagans that had lived in the mountains to the north. When the church had discovered them, they'd been branded heretics and forced to flee for their lives. During her flight, Mikaela had run into the Liberators and ended up joining them.

Mikaela was blind, and so normally went around with her eyes closed. However, her special magic, Soul Sight, enhanced her perception far beyond what mundane sight would have given her, so her blindness was no handicap.

“Look, Mikaela. You’re the last person I want to hear telling other people not to eat...”

“Excuse me? I am no glutton.”

Mikaela was one hundred percent a glutton. Despite her slender frame, she usually ate through thrice as much food as Marshal. Whenever anyone saw her, she was snacking on something. Even now she was munching on a loaf of bread she’d taken from her pocket.

“Umm, did you need us for something, Captain, Mikaela?”

Most everyone who lived in this village referred to Marshal as just “captain.” It was a fitting title, since he was the village’s acting combat commander.

Mikaela was the one who answered Ruth’s question.

“We do indeed. My apologies, I almost forgot thanks to Marshal-san’s uncalled for insults. We came here to deliver this to you.”

She ignored Marshal’s glare of protest and took out a pouch of snacks. Realizing that wasn’t what she’d meant to pull out, she put it back into her pocket and pulled out a letter.

“That handwriting!” Susha leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

Mikaela chuckled and responded.

“Yep, it’s a letter from Naiz-san. Creme-chan delivered it moments ago.”

“Th-Thank you very much, Mikaela-sensei.” Susha bounded out of her chair and grabbed the letter, her cheeks flushed. Yunfa followed after her, practically squealing.

“It’s a letter from Naiz-sama!”

Mikaela was one of the Liberators’ information department’s most vital members. She also happened to be Susha and Yunfa’s tutor, which was why

they called her sensei. Mikaela's smile widened as she watched her two cute disciples jump up and down in excitement.

"Already...? Tim's awesome. Or maybe I guess it's Creme who's awesome."

"Creme-chan's super cute and super awesome."

Ruth and Corrin sang Creme's praises. Miledi and the others had traveled much further west since their last letter. It was entirely possible they'd reached the western coastline by now. Meaning Creme must have flown at an unbelievable speed to cross the entire continent in what had likely been just a few days. The children couldn't help but be amazed at the speed at which they'd received a reply. Though they were getting used to the various powerful special magics most members of the Liberators possessed.

"So then, why are you here, Captain?"

Two people weren't necessary to deliver a letter.

"Because I'm curious, obviously."

"Oh."

Most Liberators were interested in hearing about what kind of person their newest ancient magic user was, and how his relationship with the two young sisters was developing. Plus, they wanted to know if their leader and glasses-wearing Synergist had finally gotten together or not. Miledi sent her own reports of course, but they wanted to hear things from an uninvolved third party like Naiz. Diligent as always, Naiz made sure to address his letters to the two sisters, and usually included tidbits of their daily lives in them.

"Fufu, Susha. What did Naiz-san have to—" Mikaela's words died in her throat when she saw Susha's expression.

"Oh, Naiz-sama... That just won't do..."

Goosebumps rose on her arms. Susha was smiling, but that smile didn't reach her eyes. She tapped her cheek thoughtfully and glared at the letter in her hands.

"Uh oh, Sue-nee's going over to the dark side again. I need to bring her back before it's too late..." Yunfa muttered.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What’s wrong, Susha?”

Her student’s occasional episodes terrified Mikaela to no end. Susha wordlessly held out the letter for everyone else to read. Mikaela, Marshal, Ruth, and Corrin all crowded around it. As far as they could tell, there was nothing strange written in the letter. Just an account of how Oscar and Miledi’s antics always got on Naiz’s nerves, and some comments about the tasty food and interesting sights they’d seen in the villages they’d passed along the way. There were a few sentences about how very annoying Miledi was, and how very impressive Oscar’s inventions were.

There was also a section where he talked about how he wanted to know just how Susha and Yunfa always happened to know everything about the exchanges he had with any woman, no matter how trivial. However, from the way he joked about the two of them maybe awakening to a new kind of special magic, it seemed he wasn’t really mad. Most of it was normal, though the final section did seem to have an undercurrent of fear to it.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything strange here?”

“Y-Yeah. Everything looks fine. Oniichan and Miledi-oneechan look like they’re having fun too.”

Susha silently shook her head and pointed to a single paragraph. Confused, Marshal read it aloud.

“Umm, let’s see here...‘Have you ever had frozen dessert in the desert? Oscar made us some sweets made of ice and fruit syrup when we stopped at an oasis. All of the flavors were great.’ Huh, must have been nice to eat cold stuff in the desert... So, what’s wrong with this bit?”

“Indeed, he even mentioned how he would like to let you two try them sometimes.”

Everyone turned to Susha in confusion. Susha’s pupils were like dark pools, and for a moment it looked like her eyes had turned into a pair of Miledi’s gravity spheres.

“Fufu, don’t you think it’s strange that Naiz-sama knows how all of the flavors taste?”

“Huh? Doesn’t that just mean he tried them all?”

“Naiz-sama would never be able to eat three portions by himself. Meaning he must have tried Oscar-san and Miledi-san’s flavors.”

“Umm, is it bad if they all shared? I share with my friends all the time.”

“Had they just shared their dessert, that would have been fine... but knowing Miledi-san, she probably spoon-fed him.”

Shaking, Mikaela asked a simple question.

“How can you be sure?”

After all, Naiz’s letter hadn’t mentioned anything about how he’d tried all the flavors.

“Because this event is the only one he hasn’t described in detail. For every other thing they saw or did, he wrote a detailed description of what Miledi-san and Oscar-san thought, and what his own impressions were. But here, he just wrote a few simple sentences.”

The group read through the letter again, and now they noticed the irregularity that Susha had pointed out. That particular paragraph was as dry as a textbook’s. And it certainly seemed like Naiz had been a little nervous when he’d written it.

“Meaning Naiz-sama did something naughty with Miledi-san.”

The only “naughty” thing that came to mind was Miledi feeding Naiz some of her dessert.

“I guess I need to write a reply.”

Susha ignored the others, who were standing stiff and sat back down at the table.

“Oh Naiz-sama... and Miledi-san... you shouldn’t be so naughty...” she muttered in a flat voice.

There was no doubt that the first sentence of her reply would read, “Naiz-sama? Why did you let Miledi-san feed you?” And there was no doubt that her accurate prediction of what Naiz had omitted would leave him paranoid about

how she'd found out.

"Sue-nee. Is it okay if I play some music while you write?"

"Of course, Yunfa. Please play something gallant, something that reminds me of Naiz-sama."

"Okaaaaaay."

Yunfa's song was most likely intended to bring Susha back from the darkness. Before, she'd used her words alone to bring her sister back to normal. Now that she had access to instruments as well, it was an easy task to dispel the dark aura that possessed Susha.

"I-I'm starting to think that... there's nothing more for me to teach Susha when it comes to information analysis," Mikaela whispered, her voice trembling.

No one knew what to say to her. Corrin, Ruth, and Marshal exchanged glances. They were all thinking the same thing. *Just what kind of monster did Miledi bring us?*

"Aaah!? Where!? Where are you watching me from!?"

"Naiz, what's going on!? Are they still chasing us!?"

Naiz suddenly shouted as the party made their way through the slums of Andika. Oscar looked at him blankly, then glanced around, searching for pursuers. After fleeing the casino, Oscar and the others had run all the way to the slums in the outer districts. They should have long since shaken off the black-suited goons chasing them, but Naiz's sudden exclamation had Oscar worried.

"Oh, sorry. It's nothing. I just felt a sudden chill. Think it's just exhaustion kicking in, though."

"If you say so... Though now that you mention it, we've been running around ever since we washed up on shore. I'm pretty tired myself." Oscar prided himself on his stamina, but this had been one draining day.

"At any rate, it looks like we finally managed to get away..." Naiz looked down

at the girl in Oscar's arms, an exasperated frown on his face.

"....." Still in her dress, Miledi was doing her best to make herself invisible. In order to avoid not her pursuers' attention, but Oscar's. Though the fact she was in his arms made that impossible.

"Oh yeah, I guess I can put you down now Miledi." Oscar gently lowered Miledi to the ground, his tone surprisingly normal. She blinked a few times, then looked hesitantly up at him.

"Umm... O-kun? Aren't you mad?"

"Of course I'm mad."

"Oh, okay."

There was no way he wouldn't be after what had happened. Oscar smiled mirthlessly, and Miledi broke out in a cold sweat. She averted her gaze, unable to meet his eyes. However, Oscar continued silently intimidating her for a few minutes. The moonlight reflected off his glasses, making it difficult to see what they looked like right now. But not knowing only terrified Miledi more.

"O-Oscar, I'm sorry. I ended up losing all of my money as well." Naiz looked down despondently. At his age, there was nothing more embarrassing than admitting he was penniless.

"Don't worry, I only gave you guys money I was okay with you losing. I'd specifically set it aside for us to have fun, so it's no big deal if it's all gone. As long as you had fun, Naiz, I don't mind."

"Hmm... I see."

While he may have been egged on to bet all of his winnings and lost them in the end, it had been Naiz's first time at a casino, so that was forgivable. Besides, it seemed he'd had quite a bit of fun.

"However, losing all your money and going into debt to keep betting are two different things."

"I'm sooo sorry!" Miledi dropped to her knees and prostrated herself before Oscar, heedless of the dirt smearing her pretty dress.

Oscar folded his arms and glared down at her. Every few seconds, Miledi lifted

her head a few inches to take a peek at Oscar's expression, then instantly pressed her forehead to the floor again when she saw he was still glaring.

"Miledi, do you feel bad about what you did?"

"I very do much." Her reply was so emphatic that she mixed her words up, but it at least conveyed to Oscar the sincerity of her apology. Sighing, Oscar stopped glaring and held a hand out to Miledi.

"O-kun?"

"I still think you went overboard, but as long as you reflect on your actions, I guess it's fine."

"O-kuuuuuun!" Miledi attempted to hug Oscar, but he grabbed her face and held her at arm's length. He then shrugged and went on.

"Besides, this time it's not entirely your fault."

"Huh?"

"Hm? What do you mean, Oscar?"

Oscar smiled wryly and replied.

"Miledi, they were cheating you."

"What!? Seriously!?"

Oscar explained how there had been faint traces of mana hanging around the table Miledi was playing at. The man playing across from her and the dealer had both been covered in a thin veil of mana, and that had likely been how the man had been able to get the cards he needed each time.

"Ugh. I can't believe I fell for something like that!" Miledi stamped her foot angrily, and Naiz gave Oscar a thoughtful look.

"I see... Is that why?"

"Why what?"

"Well it just seemed to me you were more merciless than usual to the security staff chasing after us. Was that because you were angry at how they'd swindled Miledi?"

“Huh? Really, O-kun?”

Oscar adjusted his glasses. It certainly had pissed him off how smug that man had looked as he’d cheated Miledi out of all her winnings.

“It’s what they deserved for messing with my friends.”

An aura of pure malice flared up around Oscar. *You want me to pay off her debts? How dare you even suggest that after cheating Miledi! You deserve getting your casino smashed up for that, you hear? You’re mad that I beat up your security staff? Don’t get the wrong idea here, we’re the victims and you’re the aggressors. That was just self-defense. We went too far? There’s no such thing as too far when it comes to protecting yourself.*

“O-O-kun? Calm down. L-Look, we’re all fine so there’s no need to get that mad. Nacchan, help me out here!”

“Y-Yeah, Miledi’s right. It was a learning experience so it wasn’t all bad.”

Oscar might be the most suited to living here... Naiz and Miledi both thought as they desperately tried to calm him down. Realizing he was starting to sound like a villain, Oscar cleared his throat and changed the subject.

“Well, anyway, we probably shouldn’t go back to the central district anytime soon. Let’s find an inn around here for tonight.”

Miledi and Naiz breathed sighs of relief.

“Actually, I’m hungry from all that running around. Let’s get dinner before looking for an inn.”

The group headed back to the main street and started searching for restaurants. As they strolled down the avenue, Miledi walked up behind Oscar and spoke directly to him.

“Hey, O-kun.”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks!” *Thanks for carrying me out of there. And thanks for getting mad for my sake.*

Oscar looked over his shoulder and found Miledi grinning at him. He turned

back around and continued walking forward.

“Your welcome, I guess.”

He heard Miledi snickering behind him as he said that. Pretending not to hear her, he hastened his footsteps.

“Seriously... It never gets boring with you two around.” Naiz suppressed a chuckle as he followed after the pair.

Though all of the shops in the outer ring were dingy, they were quite lively. They’d fled straight west from the casino, so right now the party was in the Arrogan district, which was known for its craftsmen and workshops. Most of the people walking on the main street did look to be craftsmen of some kind, and most of them looked more diligent than the drunks Oscar had seen in the first district he’d walked through.

Furthermore, he saw nearly as many boats in the harbor as he had in the Avid District one, which was known for its port. However, most of the ships here were permanently docked for repairs or to be dismantled. There were also a couple of docks where ships were in the middle of being built. Oscar felt his spirits soar as he heard the familiar sounds of hammers clanging against metal and the spirited shouts of blacksmiths. This district felt like home. It had been a long time since he’d heard the symphony of journeymen practicing their craft. He could tell from the sweat dripping off the workers’ brows that they were all earnest about their art.

“Hey, hey, O-kun! Stop making googly eyes at the workshops and get in here! I’m starving, and the delicious smell coming from in here isn’t helping!”

Miledi grabbed Oscar’s arm and dragged him into the restaurant they’d picked out. The trio had changed out of their fancy clothes and were wearing simple travelers’ garb again. Oscar had decided to keep the tuxedos and dress they’d borrowed as consolation for being cheated, and had stored the clothes in his Treasure Trove. Neither Miledi nor Naiz had said anything for fear of once again awakening his evil side. Miledi’s stomach gurgled as the party passed underneath a sign that said “Wanda’s Inn.” It appeared the inn doubled as a restaurant, which was why the inside smelled so good. The reason they’d

picked this one, in particular, was because it looked the cleanest out of all the buildings they'd passed.

"Welcome! Pick any table's that open!"

A girl with tanned skin welcomed them inside. She appeared to be around Miledi's age, and had shoulder-length dark blue hair. Her most distinctive feature was the two bunny ears growing out of her head though. She weaved between tables, a couple tankards of ale in each hand, and served customers with a grace that came with years of practice. Her tail twitched a little every time she spun past a table. She was both a very cute and very lively girl. The back of the room had been converted into an open kitchen, and the guests could watch the chef at work. This restaurant's chef appeared to be a musclebound, bearded man with an eyepatch. He looked more like a pirate than a cook, but he was grilling a fillet of fish with consummate skill. Next to him, a woman poured beer into tankards with a speed that made Oscar question how she never spilled a drop. The woman also had bunny ears and a tail.

It appeared this particular inn was a family-run business. Though it was quite rare to see a human and a beastman couple.

"I see..." Miledi watched the pair with a smile on her face as she picked her way to an empty table.

The group ordered whatever seemed interesting, and before long their food and drink were brought to them. Oscar guessed that since this was the craftsmen district, there were a lot of short-tempered customers around, hence why this restaurant had learned to serve fast. As the trio wolfed down their piping hot meal, the bunny girl server walked up to them with a smile.

"Are you guys newcomers? Have you found a place to stay yet?"

"No, not yet. We were planning on looking after we ate."

The bunny girl's eyes sparkled at Oscar's response.

"In that case, why don't you stay with us? All of our long-term guests up and left a while back! And most of the people who come to eat here are locals, so they don't stay the night."

She winked invitingly. At that moment, one of the older customers catcalled her.

“Kiara, I’ll stay the night if you sleep with me!”

The bunny girl called Kiara picked up Oscar’s tankard and threw it at the man. It hit him squarely in the face, and the old man toppled out of his chair. The other customers cheered, making it clear this was both a common occurrence, and that this man wasn’t the most loved.

I’d heard rabbitmen were peaceful people who disliked fighting, but... I guess if you’re born and raised in a place like this, you’ll end up tough whether you like it or not.

“Why don’t we, O-kun? It’s going to be a pain to try and find another inn this late. Plus, this place seems nice.”

“Nice assist, girl! No wonder you’ve got these two guys wrapped around your finger!”

“Aww, you’re making me blush.”

Instead of denying it, Miledi grinned. Kiara seemed to approve of her response and chimed in once more.

“As you might have guessed, I’m Kiara. We practically never get outsiders, and never ones the same age as me! If you pick our inn I’ll give you a discount! Besides, you like the food, right?”

Kiara started massaging Miledi’s shoulders, intent on persuading her any way she could. Miledi, too, seemed enamored with Kiara and so didn’t see any reason not to pick her inn.

“Fufu... If we pick this inn, will I get to stroke your bunny ears!? Because there’s no way I can say no if so!”

“M-My ears? That’s a bit embarrassing... Oh well, if that’s what it takes to get customers! Plus, you’re a girl! You drive a hard bargain, you thief!”

Kiara hugged Miledi from behind and flopped her ears down to Miledi’s face. Panting, Miledi buried her face in Kiara’s ears and started rubbing them all over. Her ears smelled of the sun and the sea. The regulars watched on in awe.

“Kiara let her rub her bunny ears even though they just met...?”

Apparently, this was a rare occurrence.

“O-kuuuuuun! They’re so fluffy! I’m staying here forever!”

“Man, you look like an idiot... Umm, Kiara-san, was it? How much does it cost to stay here per night? And how many nights can we reserve?”

“Just call me Kiara, Oniisan. Honorifics just make me feel weird!”

She then gave Oscar a quote which he found more than reasonable. He found no problem with staying here and turned to Naiz to get his opinion. Mouth full of food, Naiz nodded emphatically. Once that was settled, Kiara blushed slightly and asked a question.

“W-We do have two rooms open, but... what would you prefer?”

“Hm? One room should be fine right? Or are the rooms too small for three people?”

The three of them always slept next to each other when they were camping, so Miledi was hardly embarrassed about sleeping in the same room now. However, Miledi’s nonchalance was a bit too stimulating for Kiara. Her bunny ears flit back and forth and she stammered her words.

“M-Miledi, you’re so bold. I didn’t think those two really were both part of your harem...”

“Huh?”

Kiara clapped her hands around her cheeks and blushed even brighter.

“You’re so refined, like those nobles in the central district... A poor country girl can’t ever hope to be as popular as you...”

“U-Umm, Kiara-chan?”

“I know, I know, Miledi! Don’t worry, we have three-person rooms! And you can be as loud as you want, we won’t mind!”

“Hey, I think you’re misunderstanding—”

“Though I’d prefer if you keep your voice down when we’re trying to sleep... Actually, forget it! Sorry, feel free to have as much fun as you want!”

“Okay, you’re definitely misunderstanding something here. Hey, wait—”

Squealing, Kiara ran up the inn’s staircase. She was likely setting up the room for her new guests.

“Miss... try not to be too rough, okay?”

Miledi looked up and saw the innkeeper’s wife grinning at her. She looked around and noticed the other customers were grinning at her as well.

Miledi blushed to the tips of her ears. She opened her mouth to protest, but she was so embarrassed no words came out. Lips flapping soundlessly, she turned to Oscar and Naiz for salvation. They exchanged glances, then grinned. It was rare to get an opportunity to tease Miledi like this.

“Hey, Miledi, don’t you think you could just let us sleep for tonight?”

“We’ve been going at it all week, and I’m starting to reach my limit...”

“Wha—”

Her only allies had betrayed her. Of course, the three of them weren’t actually having orgies every night, but none of this inn’s patrons knew that. They yelled their approval and patted Miledi on the back. She’d become one of them in the span of a few minutes. Beet-red, Miledi trembled in her seat and screamed at the top of her lungs.

“We’d like two rooms, pleaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaase!!!”

Ten days had passed since Miledi became famous in a certain corner of Andika for having a harem of men. The party had made Wanda’s Inn their temporary base and were in the process of gathering information. They’d had a bit too much fun on the first day, but now they were back to focusing on work. Today they were searching the Night District in the south. It was wedged in between the district where they were staying, the Arrogan District, and the Gadaf District. The Night District was full of small-scale casinos, and the Gadaf District that it bordered held the city’s famous gladiator rings, so it saw a lot of traffic.

“The sun’s already set. Let’s go back to Kia-chan’s inn before someone tries to pick a fight with us again. I need my daily dose of fluffy ears.”

Miledi spread her hands out to keep her balance as she hopped from one breakwater to the next. She had on a fake mustache, an eyepatch, a black and white pirate's hat, a sturdy leather belt, a frilly blouse, knee-high boots, and a skirt that was longer on the right side than the left. On top of that, she was carrying a fancy cutlass in her right hand. This morning, she'd told Naiz and Oscar that she'd wanted to be a pirate today. According to her, it would be easier to gather information if she looked more intimidating. However, she'd looked cuter than imposing as she'd run around the district flailing her arms wildly and asking people if they'd knew anything about the saint. Her endearing attitude had made her easily approachable though, and she'd technically succeeded in making it easier to gather information. Oscar and Naiz shook their heads sadly as they watched their pirate-leader frolic atop the breakwaters.

"She's really getting along with that bunny girl."

"For whatever reason, weirdos love Miledi."

"Hey Nacchan, what's that supposed to mean!?"

Exactly what I said. Miledi twirled around on the breakwater and insisted, "Kia-chan's a nice, normal girl with really fluffy bunny ears!"

Oscar and Naiz sighed simultaneously.

"Miledi. Do you have any idea how many times Kiara-chan's tried to peek into our rooms?"

"She even rappelled down from the roof once to try and look through our window. Do you have any idea how terrifying it is to see an upside-down head glued to your window in the middle of the night?"

"Uh..."

"And that's not all. One time she hid underneath our bed."

"She also attempted to camouflage herself as part of the wall."

Her attempts were made even more terrifying by the fact that she was extremely skilled in hiding her presence. Most of the time Oscar and Naiz only noticed her because she'd let her delusions get the better of her and started panting. If it wasn't for that, even they wouldn't be able to sense her. At any

rate, she was very much a weirdo. Just like Miledi. Oscar could see how they'd hit it off so well.

"A-Ahem. Anyway, what do you think of that rumor we heard?"

"Changing the subject I see."

"Changing the subject, huh?"

"Can we please just talk about the rumors!?"

Oscar and Naiz grinned to each other. Oscar then looked off into the sea and mentally organized the information they'd gathered these past ten days.

"So we've got a bunch of people who were attacked either on the island or out at sea by pirates. But even though their ships were sunk and they were nearly killed, right before they lost consciousness they heard a gentle saint's voice. Then the gentle lapping of waves lulled them to wakefulness, and they found themselves wrapped in the luminous safety of Andika's bosom, their wounds healed and the pirates vanished like the morning mists..."

"You should become a poet, O-kun."

"You certainly have the talent for it."

Oscar blushed and adjusted his glasses.

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but I stole those words from the guy who told me that story. It left an impression on me, which is why I still remember it. Anyway, it looks like this saint really does exist. Most of the stories we heard are too detailed to be mere rumor, and besides..."

"We have a few firsthand accounts."

Indeed, Miledi and the others had run into a few sailors who'd been saved personally by the saint. Just knowing that she really existed made this entire trip worthwhile. However, oddly enough, no one knew anything about this mysterious saint. Even those who were saved by her didn't remember what she looked like. Both those who'd been attacked by pirates on the sea and those who'd been raided on land and then kidnapped had only vague memories of the entire ordeal.

The only thing all of them remembered was hearing a woman's gentle voice,

then waking up in Andika completely healed. Oscar folded his arms and chimed in.

“Supposedly her healing powers are enough to even restore missing limbs... It’s hard to believe. At the very least, no healing magic I know of is capable of that. Of course, everyone’s memories are fuzzy, so it’s possible they exaggerated how badly hurt they were, but...”

“If what they’re saying is true, then... she’s definitely one of us.”

“A wielder of ancient magic.”

The three of them nodded to each other. Considering there was a strong possibility the person they were searching for really was a wielder of ancient magic, they couldn’t help but be a little excited. Oscar was especially hopeful, since this saint’s powers seemed capable of saving his two younger siblings.

“O-kun, we’ll definitely find her.”

“No matter what.”

Blushing, Oscar adjusted his glasses again.

“Thanks,” he whispered, then got back on topic.

“What really interests me is the other rumor that’s almost as popular as the saint’s.”

“You mean that ghost ship that everyone’s calling the bane of pirates?”

As one could guess from the name, it wasn’t a very friendly rumor. Miledi’s expression grew serious, and Oscar nodded in affirmation.

“Those rumors are even vaguer than the ones about the saint. All we know is a bunch of fishermen and traders are claiming it exists.”

“Supposedly when they were about to be attacked by pirate ships a deep fog rolled in, swallowing the pirate ship whole,” Naiz added. Miledi picked up where he left off and said, “And once the fog has them, the pirate ships never come back out. On top of that, no one ever sees or hears of those pirates ever again. From what I heard, plenty of famous pirate brigades have been wiped out by this mysterious bane of pirates. It feels like one of those ghost stories you tell to scare children.”

Goosebumps rose on Miledi's arms, and she shivered. Unlike the stories of the saint, these rumors were a lot scarier. *I know how you feel,* Oscar thought with a wry smile.

"Normally I'd just write it off as unrelated... but considering all the pirates who kidnapped people the saint saved ended up vanishing..."

"They're definitely connected."

"Indeed. It's a shame we can't dig for more information in the central district. I imagine they would know more about these missing pirate ships and how the two rumors are related."

The central district was where the rich gathered, and they were far more interested in the current state of the pirate crews roaming Andika. Their wealth was directly affected by how safe the waters were, after all. Most people in the outer ring weren't interested in anything past their immediate concerns of making enough money to get through the day, so they didn't pursue these rumors too far. For them, swapping stories like these was just a way to pass time. They didn't have the time or the money to investigate them at length.

"Ugh... I'm sorry." Miledi hung her head, her once light steps now heavy with regret.

The group still occasionally spotted men in black suits combing the central district looking for them. It appeared they really wanted their money back. Thanks to the strict security, gathering information in the central district wasn't feasible. The only silver lining was that the residents of the outer districts hated those living in the center, so even if word got out that Miledi was wanted, no one would turn her in. However, it was only a matter of time before they were discovered. Feeling a little guilty, Oscar did his best to cheer Miledi up.

"Don't look so depressed, Miledi. It's partially my fault for being so rough with them too. Besides, if we have to, we can always just kidnap someone from the central district and torture them for answers."

"Umm, O-kun? Recently I've noticed your suggestions have been getting a bit extreme. Did you really just suggest kidnapping and torture?"

"What's so strange about that?"

“Everything! O-kun, you’ve let Andika’s ideals poison you! Remember the kind O-kun you once were! The O-kun I know and love was a gentleman, not a monster!”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting so worked up about...”

“Nacchan, there’s no time to lose! We need to find the saint right away and get out of Andika before the city corrupts O-kun any further!”

“I’m pretty sure he was always like this, and the city just gave him the opportunity to show his true colors...”

Naiz and Miledi were a former soldier and noble respectively. On top of that, they’d spent a long time in seclusion after leaving their old lives behind. On the other hand, Oscar had been born and bred in a large city’s slums, where he’d lived until just recently. While many of his acquaintances had been kind people, there had been many others who’d tried to exploit him. They’d thought him easy prey, since he’d come from an orphanage. Had Oscar let his guard down on the streets, he would have been eaten alive. If he’d shown any weakness, he would have been ripped to shreds.

From the start, he’d been raised differently than Miledi and Naiz. That was why he came up with some truly nasty suggestions from time to time. Plus, he knew there were some people who just responded better to threats than to polite words.

“C-Come to think of it, O-kun does tell me ‘I’ll fucking kill you’ a lot...”

“That’s your own fault.”

Miledi ignored Naiz and gave Oscar a sincere look. She held her hands up to her chest as if praying and said, “O-kun, even if you are a vicious monster deep inside, I’ll never abandon you! But even if you’re a merciless brute, I still think it’s important to keep up your facade! I’ll help rehabilitate you, so let’s work on getting that fake gentleman act back!”

In response to Miledi’s insulting offer, Oscar pushed up his glasses and said his trademark phrase.

“Miledi, I’ll seriously fucking kill you.”

Miledi grinned and dashed off, a renewed spring in her step. Oscar pushed a button on the frame of his glasses, readying his blinding beam. Before he could unleash it though, Miledi came to a halt and spoke up.

“Hey, O-kun, Nacchan. Is it just me, or does it look weird over there?” Miledi pointed into the distance. The streets were oddly bright in the direction she was pointing, backlit by a fierce orange glow.

“Miledi, use these!” Sensing something dangerous, Oscar whipped off his glasses and threw them to Miledi.

Miledi grabbed them and put them on as she jumped into the air. She activated the glasses’ night-vision and farsight abilities to get a better look at what was going on. From the looks of it, whatever the oddity was, it was located somewhere near the Arrogan District’s coast. Right around where their inn was.

“It’s Kia-chan’s inn, guys! The whole area’s on fire! It might be a pirate attack!”

The moment he heard Miledi’s shout, Naiz chose their course of action.

“Let’s go,” he said. Then, he picked up Oscar with one hand and teleported into the sky next to Miledi. And after that, he took her arm as well and teleported all three of them to the street in front of the inn. As they’d feared, the inn was on fire. However, it had just started to burn, and the building hadn’t taken much damage yet.

“Tch... O-kun, take care of the flames! I’ll go make sure Kia-chan and the others are safe!”

“Roger!”

Oscar unfurled his umbrella as Miledi dashed into the building.

“Umbrella Arts ability number three, Genesis Torrent!”

It unleashed a downpour of rain, dousing the flames licking at Wanda’s Inn.

“Oscar, I’m going to go take care of the other fires. Give me all the healing potions you can.”

“Gotcha! Take this with you too!”

Oscar handed Naiz one of his Silver Slates along with a handful of healing potions. Naiz took them all with a nod, then vanished. As he watched Naiz disappear through his portal Oscar pulled out a spare pair of glasses. He then leaped as high as he could and used his boots to create a foothold in mid-air. Once that was done, he examined his surroundings.

“This is awful...”

Fires were burning all over the district, and the agonized screams of injured residents filled the air. However, the perpetrators of this attack where nowhere to be seen. Or so he thought, but as Oscar swept his gaze over to the pier, he spotted a group of figures running toward a boat. He activated the night-vision mode on his glasses to get a better view and saw that they were regulars of Wanda’s Inn. Most of them were injured, and the boat they were pointing and shouting toward was already slipping out to sea. If it went much further, it would be lost under the cover of night.

“Now that’s cliched. What is it with pirates and skull flags?”

Oscar then turned to another section of the pier and saw a small knot of men trying to push a small boat off the dock. It appeared some of them had spent a little too long looting. From the looks of it, the boat was one of the jet-propulsion types powered by magic. They were quite fast, so once they cast off the pirates would be able to catch up to the rest of their crew in no time. They finished prepping the boat, then calmly headed out to sea.

“They’re about two hundred meters out, and there’s a slight tailwind. I can do this.”

Oscar pointed the tip of his umbrella at the small boat, his right hand holding the handle while his left hand supported the shaft and made minute angle adjustments. A second later, he unfurled the fabric again. There was a creaking noise, like that of a bowstring being drawn back.

“Let’s put you to sleep, shall we.”

Oscar twisted the umbrella’s handle, and with a twang, an arrow shot out of its tip. The arrow flew true, and it slammed into the boat’s stern with a loud thud. The pirates turned around in surprise, but before they could even process what had happened, lightning snaked out of the arrow, electrocuting the entire

boat. The pirates stiffened, then collapsed.

Oscar had only recently added this sniping feature to his umbrella. He'd used the durable yet flexible web of a spider monster they'd run into during their travels to fashion the bowstring that launched his arrows. Because the mechanism inside his umbrella drew the string back far further than any human could, it could fire arrows over a greater distance than a regular bow. That gave him an effective sniping range of 200 meters, and a total flight range of 500. On top of that, the increased force meant that at close range, his arrows could pierce through multiple knights equipped with plate armor and tower shields. Its biggest downside was that he could only load one shot at a time. However, a single powerful shot would be far more useful than a dozen weak ones against an apostle. After confirming the pirates were down for the count, Oscar fell back to the ground and headed into the inn after Miledi.

He found her right away. She was healing Marcus, Kiara's father. He was slumped atop the bar counter, blood pouring out of his chest and head.

"Those bastards took... Kiara... and Vera..."

"Don't worry, we'll bring them back to you! Just save your strength!"

Miledi's healing spell gave off a sky-blue glow. She'd also fed Marcus a healing potion, and his wounds rapidly faded. From the looks of it, he'd just narrowly escaped death. Reassured by Miledi's confident tone, he nodded weakly. Freed from his worries, he closed his eyes and let unconsciousness take him.

"Miledi, I found the pirate ship responsible. They've got a pretty big ship and only a slight tailwind, so they won't be going too fast. There was another group trying to escape in a small boat, but I stopped them already. If we leave now, we can still catch up to them."

"Nice going, O-kun. Let's fuck their shit up!" Miledi turned back to Oscar, her eyes brimming with fury. He matched her gaze with one just as intense, and nodded.

"What about Nacchan?"

"He's putting out the rest of the fires. He can teleport seawater from nearby, so that shouldn't take long, but there'll probably be a couple injured people he

needs to heal too. He can handle it all on his own, but it'll take some time..."

"I see. We'll leave things here to him then. Meanwhile, let's ruin those pirates' day, O-kun."

"Sounds good. I gave Naiz a few healing potions and a Silver Slate. He'll know where to find us once he's done."

"Thorough as always, I see."

The two of them dashed out of the inn and headed for the pier.

"Miledi, that's the boat!"

"Okay, get ready to fly!" Miledi used gravity magic to lift them up. They soared through the air, passing the dumbfounded regulars of Wanda's Inn, and landed on the pirates' small boat.

Three unconscious, filthy men were lying inside it. As Miledi and Oscar were short on time, they unceremoniously dumped all three of them into the ocean. The pirates fell in with a splash.

"*Cough... Cough...* What the hell was that!?"

It appeared swallowing a mouthful of seawater had been enough to wake them up. Still a little stiff from the jolt Oscar had given them, the three pirates flailed back to the water's surface. Though they seemed perilously close to drowning, their exceptional swimming skills saved them.

"Wh-Who the hell are you guys!?" One of the pirates yelled when he spotted Oscar and Miledi on his boat. The pair had considered killing the pirates, but when they'd seen the murderous glint in the eyes of the inn's customers, they 'd decided to leave the pirates fate to them. Dealing with the inn's customers' resentment would be punishment enough for the pirates.

Miledi twirled her false mustache and tipped her pirate's hat toward the real pirates.

"Sorry, but we're taking your boat! Try your best not to drown!"

While Miledi was taunting the pirates Oscar got its jet propulsion system up and running. He sent the boat racing off at top-speed, hitting the pirates with a blast of water as he sped forward. The pirates watched helplessly as their boat

was stolen from them. Mistaking Miledi for a real pirate, the three of them screamed.

“You damn pirates!”

Smiling at the irony, Miledi and Oscar made their way toward the pirates’ main ship.

“They’re almost past the horizon so... maybe about four kilometers away? It shouldn’t take us long to catch up.”

Thanks to his glasses, Oscar was able to make out the pirate ship’s mast, even though it was miles away. Considering the difference in speed between their crafts, he estimated they’d be able to catch up in around ten minutes. Miledi breathed a sigh of relief, then noticed that Oscar was still wearing a pair of glasses. She took out the pair he’d given her from her pocket—she’d put it away when she’d started treating Marcus—and looked down at it with trembling hands.

“Th-There’s two O-kuns...”

“How many times do I have to tell you, my glasses aren’t me.”

Oscar snatched his glasses back from Miledi and glared at her.

“I didn’t know you had two pairs of glasses.”

“I have a lot more than just two.”

Oscar fished inside his pocket and pulled out multiple pairs of glasses, which he spread out in a fan-shape like he was holding a hand of cards. All in all, he had ten identical pairs of glasses.

“I will *never* run out of glasses. And now that I have my Treasure Trove, I’m making an extra spare per day.”

“What’s the point in having that many?”

Since they were all the exact same design, they didn’t even serve as a collection. *Why’s O-kun so obsessed with those glasses?*

“Actually, if you have that many, give me a pair. Your glasses are super handy.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m the only one allowed to wear this style of black glasses. That’s the only way to preserve the superiority of my design. If I’m the only one wearing the ultimate glasses, then that makes me the supreme king of glasses.”

“Sorry, I have no idea what you’re saying anymore.”

This was one of the few sides of Oscar Miledi just couldn’t understand. His obsession with maid outfits was another. The pair continued chatting about similar such nonsense as a way to distract themselves from the rage burning in the pits of their stomachs. After a while, the moon slipped behind some clouds, and the sea turned black as pitch. It felt to Oscar like the ocean was trying to swallow them whole. He used his night-vision enchanted glasses to peer through the dark and make sure their quarry was where he expected them to be.

“Hm...? Is that fog?”

“What’d you see, O-kun?” Miledi cocked her head in his direction.

“It looks like there’s a fog rolling in. You should be able to see it yourself now, it’s pretty thick.”

“Hm? Oh, huh, you’re right. It’s making it pretty hard to see the pirate... Wait, O-kun! There’s something weird about this fog! What if...”

“No, there’s no way that...” Oscar’s expression stiffened.

Like Miledi had said, the fog was behaving in an erratic manner. It was wrapping itself densely around the pirate ship as if trying to hide it and only it. In mere seconds, it had completely eclipsed the pirates.

“O-kun, we gotta hurry!”

“I’m going as fast as I can! We should be there in another minute!”

Oscar had initially kept his speed slow to avoid being spotted by the pirates and have hostages used against him, but this was no longer the time for stealth. Oscar quickly transmuted a stabilizer to allow the boat to handle higher speeds, then used Godstorm to push them forward. The prow tilted dangerously upward from the force propelling them, but Miledi used gravity magic to keep

the boat from capsizing. It didn't take even a minute for the boat to reach the fog.

"Ugh, this fog really is dense. I can't see anything."

It'd be a pretty sad state of affairs if they came all this way to rescue Kiara only to ram into the pirates' boat and sink. But it was hard to navigate through this dense fog. In fact, it was so thick Oscar, who was at the back of the boat, and Miledi, who was at the front, could no longer see each other. It felt like they'd wandered into the afterlife. Just in case, Miledi walked over to where Oscar was and clung to the sleeve of his shirt.

"Don't worry Miledi. My glasses can detect heat too."

"How many features do your glasses have?"

The heat sensors in Oscar's glasses displayed the information they picked up in infrared so he could see just fine even through fog. *I kind of want to know the list of everything those glasses can do now,* Miledi thought absently to herself.

As they approached the pirate ship, Oscar picked up a number of human-shaped heat signatures.

"There they are! I see a bunch of people on a boat... Wait, they're under attack!?"

"Hey, O-kun! This has to be that bane of pirates ghost ship or whatever, right!? They're the only ones who attack pirates in the fog!"

"No doubt about it, yeah. Looks like your luck at sea's still holding up, Miledi."

"Why did it have to be the ghost ship!? Why couldn't it have been the saint!" Miledi whined. A second later though, her expression grew serious. She could hear the screams and shouts of the combatants on deck. The fog parted a little, and she realized that Oscar had brought the boat up right beside the pirate ship. It appeared the area directly around the ship wasn't as thickly covered in fog. That made it obvious it was man-made. The fog was clearly designed to give the attackers an advantage.

"The ship isn't *really* piloted by the spirits of the dead, right!?"

"I guess this is our best chance to find out."

First things first though, we have to rescue the kidnapped townsfolk. While it was possible the saint and the ghost ship were related, there was no proof yet. Meaning there was no proof this ghost ship would be as nice to the hostages as the saint supposedly was. Oscar used his boots' Footholds of Light to leap up the side of the ship while Miledi used gravity magic to float up. They alighted on the deck to find most of the pirates either incapacitated or in the midst of fighting a losing battle. Interestingly enough, their assailants were neither ghosts nor spirits of the dead though. Whatever the nature of the ghost ship was, its crew was made up of flesh and blood humans. In the distance, Oscar could make out a ship even larger than the one they were on. Judging by the skull and crossbones flag it was flying, the mysterious ghost ship was a pirate ship as well.

"Umm, O-kun? Does this mean both sides are our enemy?"

"Only beat down anyone who comes at you. We're still not sure what the ghost ship's objective is. If it looks like we can negotiate with that side, we should. But first, let's go to the hold. We need to make sure Kiara-chan and the others are safe before we do anything else."

One of the pirates spotted Oscar and charged at him with a gap-toothed snarl. Oscar sent him flying with a flick of his umbrella as he explained the plan to Miledi. She nodded in agreement and started looking for the door leading to the ship's interior. During her search, she spotted a group of pirates carrying people across boarding ladders. They were carrying this ship's prisoners back over to the ghost ship.

"Ah!"

Just then, Miledi spotted a familiar rabbit-eared figure. Kiara's face was red, likely from being beaten, and blood dripped from the corners of her mouth. She was slung across the shoulder of a tough-looking pirate who was attempting to scale the ladder back to his ship. Seeing her friend's unconscious form, Miledi completely snapped. Oscar's comments about the ghost ship being someone they might be able to negotiate with completely vanished from her mind.

Only beat down anyone who comes at you? Screw that! Miledi dashed forward.

“Milediiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

“Huh?”

The pirate carrying Kiara turned toward the unfamiliar voice. He saw a furious girl flying toward him, completely disobeying the laws of physics. She had her legs in the air, posed for a kick.

“Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiick!”

“Bwah!?”

Miledi’s foot slammed squarely into the pirate’s face, knocking him off the ladder and into the ocean. He let go of Kiara as he fell, and Miledi floated the unconscious bunny girl into her arms. She carried Kiara bridal-style as she watched the pirate splash into the water below.

“Nedddddddddddddddddddddddddddddd!” one of his comrades screamed. Another exclaimed, “Someone kicked Ned off!” Yet another screamed, “What the hell was that!?”

“How dare you do that to Ned, bitch!”

One of the nearby pirates raised his cutlass and charged Miledi. He balanced himself perfectly on the precarious ladder and lashed out with a well-aimed slice at Miledi’s legs.

“Piss off, you molester!”

Miledi somersaulted forward, Kiara still in her arms. The pirate watched in surprise as she performed an acrobatic feat that defied the laws of physics, all while carrying someone. His swing struck empty air, and Miledi doubled her weight as she fell, hitting the hapless pirate on the skull with a marvelous dropkick. His eyes rolled up inside his head and he staggered off the ladder.

“She got another one!”

“She’s no ordinary wench. Surround her!”

The ghost ship’s pirates swarmed the ladder.

“Miledi!”

Oscar tried to rush to her aid, but the moment he took a step forward, he felt

a chill run down his spine. He instantly deployed his umbrella behind him. A second later, something hard and metallic slammed into it.

“What the!? How did an umbrella stop a knife!?”

“When did you get behind me!?”

Oscar was just as surprised as his attacker. He’d moved on instinct, but he hadn’t even noticed her circling behind him. He warily turned around.

“A catgirl, huh...?”

She looked to be in her early twenties and moved with feline grace. Her tight leather corset and short white pants accentuated the curves of her body well. Cat ears poked out from her short white hair, and her white tail swished behind her. Her wine-red eyes burned with a fierce determination.

“I’ll get you next time!”

It appeared she took offense to the fact that Oscar had blocked her first blow. She arched her back, then launched herself at Oscar with unbelievable agility.

“Damn, you’re fast!”

“You’re just slow!”

In less than a second, the catgirl had closed the distance between them. She stabbed forward with twin daggers, aiming for Oscar’s stomach and leg. He wouldn’t be able to dodge in time, and she was too close for him to block with his umbrella. So instead, he used his coat.

“Wha—!? What the hell’s with that coat!?”

Her surprise was understandable. After all his coat had moved like a living creature and blocked the catgirl’s daggers with its sleeves. Oscar tried to wrap his coat’s sleeves around her daggers and wrench them from her grasp. He was freely controlling his coat using wires enchanted with gravity magic embedded in the fibers, but to the catgirl, it looked like his coat was alive. She involuntarily shrunk back and shouted.

“God that’s creepy!”

In response, Oscar merely tutted and uttered a few simple words.

“Now that’s mean.”

Seeing his attempt to steal her weapons had failed, Oscar backflipped to gain some distance and adjusted his glasses.

“What’re you getting all high and mighty for!? You’re just a bunch of lowlife scummy pirates! Don’t think being handsome gives you a free pass to do whatever the hell you want!”

“You’re the pirates, not us... And wait, did you just compliment me?”

The catgirl didn’t deign that with a response, and she bent her legs as if preparing to pounce. A second later, pearl-grey mana enveloped her body.

“I’ll end this in one blow! No one can keep up with my speed!”

“You can use magic!? And without an incantation!?”

Oscar was stunned. Beastmen were a race that was supposed to be magicless. Some mixed-race beastmen could use magic, but usually not with much proficiency. Using magic like this without an incantation was unheard of. Before he could recover from his shock, the catgirl vanished. By the time he heard footfalls behind him, the catgirls daggers were already aiming for the tendons in his legs.

This catgirl possessed the unique magic Acceleration. Acceleration boosted not only her physical speed, but the speed of her thoughts and reaction times as well. That was the power of the unique magic this catgirl pirate, Kyaty Cougan, possessed. Naturally, no one would ever guess that a catgirl of all people was capable of using unique magic. Kyaty had been banking on that shock as well and had expected to slice through Oscar’s legs with ease. However, Oscar wasn’t normal himself. There was another loud metallic clang.

“No way!”

Oscar had blocked one dagger with his umbrella, while he’d guarded against the other using the metallic plate embedded in his boot.

“Sorry, but no one’s fast enough to escape my glasses.”

Indeed, his glasses were glowing with a faint light. This was another one of the features embedded within them... perception enhancement. Speeds normal

people wouldn't be able to follow were nothing in the face of his glasses. Oscar crushed one of the daggers underfoot and looked up at Kyaty. She attempted to leap backward, but before she could—

"Sorry, but I'll need you to stay put for a while!" Chains shot out of Oscar's sleeves and bound Kyaty. Oscar then had the remaining length of chain wrap itself around one of the mast's spars and then hoisted Kyaty into the air.

"Kyaaa!? You pervert! How dare you, you four-eyed bastard! Let me go!"

Oscar shrugged his shoulders in response to Kyaty's insults. Though he looked outwardly calm, he was sweating inside. If he hadn't fought against Hearst, he wouldn't have been at all prepared for that final Acceleration Kyaty had used. It was entirely possible he might have lost there. However, he'd noticed she'd never once aimed for his vitals, so he, in turn, had decided to incapacitate her instead of killing her. Even the attack aimed at his stomach hadn't been meant to kill. Upon closer inspection, Oscar realized none of the pirates these ghost ship pirates had defeated bore any fatal injuries. *These guys are definitely people we might be able to negotiate with.*

"Now then, let's see how Miledi's—"

Just then, Oscar heard a loud clang. Someone had cut through his Metamorph Chains. Kyaty fell onto her butt and squealed in pain.

"Hey, Chris, that hurt!"

"Come on, Kyaty, is that what you have to say to the guy who just saved your hide?"

A grizzled old man with blue hair and a blue beard walked up to the Kyaty. He looked to be in his late 40s and had a longsword strapped to his waist.

"First mate!" Someone called out.

Ah, that explains it. No wonder he can cut through azantium chains with such ease. Plus that look in his eyes isn't ordinary. Oscar mused.

"Hey there, handsome four-eyes. You're pretty tough. And you've got quite a few crazy magic artifacts on you. Who the hell are you?"

Finally, someone who's willing to talk... Oscar opened his mouth to explain

their situation.

“Gaaah!?”

But before he could, he was interrupted by someone slamming into the mast at unbelievable speed. *No way.* Oscar couldn’t believe his eyes. There was no way she’d lose to mere pirates. But slumped against the mast was none other than Miledi. Worse, she was bleeding all over. Before Oscar could process what had just happened, a torrent of water flooded toward her, making Oscar pale, forced to watch on in horror.

Let us turn back time to a few moments ago. While Oscar was dueling Kyaty, Miledi had to deal with all the pirates who’d surrounded her. Still carrying Kiara, Miledi lightly leaped out of the way of their sword strokes.

“What the fuck is with those movements!? They’re not normal!”

Miledi’s movements were clearly disregarding the laws of physics. She looked down at the pirates surrounding her and unleashed words filled with rage.

“What did you lowlife pirates do to this girl’s mother!? If you spit it out, I might just forgive you!”

“Shut up, you scummy pirate! Like hell we’ll tell you anything! Now, let that girl go!”

“Who do you think you’re calling a pirate!?”

“You, obviously! What are you, if not a pirate!?”

Indeed, Miledi was currently dressed up as a pirate. She’d taken off her eyepatch and fake mustache, but she still had the rest of the outfit on. Both sides continued insulting each other, too enraged to think straight. Miledi was pissed because she thought the ghost ship pirates had hurt Kiara, while the pirates were pissed that Miledi had knocked their allies overboard. Tired of the standoff, one of the ghost ship pirates unleashed a blast of wind, while another sent forth chains of ethereal light.

“Die.”

With that single word, Miledi obliterated all the attacks heading toward her.

The pirates surrounding her stood there in shocked silence; a fatal mistake. Miledi took the opportunity to reverse their gravity and sent them shooting off into the distance. She watched with a satisfied smirk as the magic wore off after a while and the crew splashed into the ocean. After letting off some steam she calmed down enough to finally realize something.

“Wait... they were being awfully careful not to hurt Kia-chan.”

Thinking back on it, she realized the pirates had held back to avoid hurting Kiara. Even though they’d possessed more deadly attacks, they hadn’t used them.

“Am I misunderstanding something here maybe?” But before Miledi could take that thought any further, she was attacked again.

“Torrential Burst.”

A calm, gentle voice rang out, and a second later a massive sphere of water was floating overhead. Even Miledi, who was a genius when it came to magic, was shocked at the speed her assailant had weaved their spell.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself!” Miledi cast the advanced-level wind spell Godstorm to deflect the massive deluge of water. The compressed storm of wind she’d cast at lightning speed clashed with the giant ball of water. The two spells collided with the force of meteors and canceled each other out, exploding in a blast of wind and water. Droplets rained from the sky, the only remaining remnants of the Torrential Burst.

“Hah, how do you like—”

“Tetragrammaton!”

The massive sphere of water reformed, completely unscathed.

“Wha?”

Before she could even react, the deluge swallowed her whole. The force of the torrent knocked the air out of her lungs. For a moment she blacked out as the varied currents of water within the sphere buffeted her. Though Miledi tried to keep Kiara safe in her arms, the water snaked around her like a living creature and tore the bunny girl from her grasp. Finally, Miledi managed to cast

Hallowed Ground and secure her footing.

"*Cough...* Kia-chan!" Miledi coughed up water as she frantically searched for Kiara. However, she needn't have worried. Kiara was safely nestled within a pocket of air sitting in the center of the water sphere. Though the water elsewhere was raging violently, the area near Kiara was calm.

"Such precise control..."

Miledi couldn't help but be impressed. However, that didn't stop her from using her magic to break apart her liquid cage. Once she was free she dropped down onto the ghost ship's deck, water splashing behind her. In front of her was a woman. She was sitting on an arch of water and gently carrying Kiara in her arms. She had wavy, emerald-green hair, and narrow, jade-green eyes. Her gaze was resplendent with kindness and mercy.

From what Miledi could tell, she was in her early twenties. She was wearing only a bikini to cover her voluptuous chest and had on a thick belt and mini-skirt. Strapped to her belt was a beautiful saber with an elaborately-designed crossguard. Most striking, though, were her gill-shaped ears. Unbelievable as it seemed, this master mage was a dagon.

"You're quite skilled, my cute little pirate."

Her smile was so soothing that it could probably stop wars all on its own. So much so that Miledi almost blurted out "You're the cute one here, Oneesan!" Miledi shook her head, clearing her thoughts, and glared at the beautiful dagon woman.

"What are you going to do to that girl?"

"I have no reason to tell you, now do I?"

The pirate's smile grew wider, and she cupped her cheek in one hand and tilted her head. The gesture suited her so well that it irked Miledi. It was extremely rare for Miledi, who was always the one annoying others, to be annoyed herself. Part of the reason she was so ticked off was that this strange woman had far larger breasts than she did. Miledi opened her mouth to argue, but was interrupted before she could.

"Cap'n, we've rescued all the captured townsfolk! All that's left is to mop up

these pirate bastards!”

“My, well done. Can I ask you take care of this girl as well?”

A jet of water branched out from the woman’s arch, and she sent Kiara sliding down it. Miledi tried to dash toward the bunny girl, but the dagon woman shot out a dagger of water, forcing her to back up. Judging by the fact that the other pirate had called her “Cap’n,” it appeared this unassuming, gentle young woman was the ghost ship’s captain. Though she didn’t look the part at all, her magical ability was the real deal. Miledi could see why she’d been chosen as their captain. Right now though, she was at a loss for what to do. If these ghost ship pirates had truly been evil, she would have been able to fight them without reservation. Their captain’s abilities were certainly powerful, but nothing short of an apostle could stop her when she unleashed her gravity magic at full power. So long as they weren’t in space, none could escape Miledi’s gravity manipulation. The reason she wasn’t going all-out was because now that she’d calmed down, she’d realized they were being extremely gentle toward Kiara. It was possible these guys weren’t actually evil.

Come to think of it, didn’t O-kun say we should try parleying with the ghost ship crew if possible? Crap, he’s gonna be so pissed... Maybe he should be the leader instead of me... Miledi avoided dwelling on that thought for too long and turned to the ship’s captain. But before she could ask for a parley—

“Now then, there are quite a few things I’d like to ask you, and I have no intention of letting you escape, so...”

“Wha?”

“Sorry, but I won’t be accepting your surrender. You need to be punished for what you did to my men.”

Still smiling, the captain got to her feet and drew her saber. Despite the gentle look in her eyes, the things she was saying sounded quite dangerous.

“H-Hold up!”

“The time for talk has long since passed. I won’t forgive anyone who hurts my family. I’ll have you repent for your sins by whipping you until you’re a squealing pig!”

“You look nice, but you’re really a huge sadist, aren’t you!?”

The arch the captain was standing on began to squirm like a snake... No, it was more like an uncoiling dragon. She jumped onto the dragon’s head, her sword held out in front of her. More dragons made of water shot up around the sea, all of them swirling around her.

“Fine, if that’s how you want to play then I’ll get serious too!”

I’ll flatten them all with gravity magic! She raised her hand high, gathering her mana.

“Wh-What!?”

But a second later, the captain was sitting on the arch again, Kiara held in her arms. Panicking, Miledi quickly canceled her spell. She couldn’t possibly let Kiara get hit by it too. A sense of foreboding washed over her, and she instantly deployed defensive magic around her. Miledi’s hunch paid off, and a second later the captain’s saber slammed into her barrier.

“My, you have good reaction times.”

Despite the fact that she’d just tried to cut Miledi in half, the captain’s voice was still gentle. Sweating profusely, Miledi asked a question.

“What was that illusion just now? Did you do that?”

“Whatever could you be referring to? Fufu, you cute little thing. You look like you just saw a mirage.”

“You little—” Miledi raised her hand again to cast a gravity spell, but the captain reversed her dragon’s current and put some distance between her and Miledi. At the same time, she sent five other water dragons after Miledi. The speed they were traveling at, they possessed as much force as a ten-ton boulder. Furthermore, they were coming at Miledi from all directions.

“Heavensfall!”

A malefic black sphere appeared above Miledi’s head. The water dragons all changed course toward the sphere, as if they were being sucked into it.

“That’s quite the interesting ability you have there.”

Something whistled through the air, and Miledi leaped backward. A second later, a whip of water cracked onto the deck where she'd been standing. The whip wasn't made of just water either; there were dozens of shards of metal swirling around within it. Perhaps it was more apt to call it a shrapnel whip. Had that hit Miledi, it would have shredded her clothes and skin.

"That's my line!" Miledi looked up to see that the captain's sword was missing from the hilt up, and instead had a long whip of water extending from the guard. Meaning the shards of metal within the whip were actually pieces of her saber. The captain raised her hand and a large amount of seawater surrounded Miledi again. Though the wall of water obstructed her view, Miledi was able to make out the captain well enough to throw a black sphere at her. This was a new gravity spell, Onyx Blast. It fired off a tiny cannonball of gravity, compressed to the point that it possessed the force of a charging battering ram. However, the silhouette turned to be an illusion and disappeared the moment the ball passed through.

"Tch, not again."

"You realize you're aiming where I was two seconds ago, don't you?"

Miledi heard the captain's voice from behind her. As she whirled around, she saw the dagon's saber bearing down on her. It had returned to its original, unbroken form.

"Ah!"

At this point, she'd lost track of how many times this captain had surprised her. Knowing she needed to be fast, Miledi cast a beginner-level barrier. Though it didn't have much defensive power, it was still able to deflect the slash aimed at her shoulder.

"To think you would block even this... You truly are amazing. I find it difficult to believe you're a member of the Brayed Pirates. When I investigated them some time back, I never heard anything about a girl like you being among their ranks... In fact, I doubt you're a pirate at all."

"I-I know I'm dressed like one, but I'm not a pirate, I swear!"

Sparks flew off the captain's saber as it dug into Miledi's barrier. Despite the

fierce fighting, the dagon never once lost her soft smile. Fending off the captain's series of unfathomable attacks had left Miledi in a cold sweat. But at the same time, she felt joy welling up within her heart. The magic this dagon woman used was far too abnormal for it to be combinations of the known elemental spells. Meaning that this ghost ship's captain was the one and only—

"That beautiful blonde hair, those refined features, and that impressive display of magic... You definitely seem more like a noble than a pirate."

"Ah!" Miledi gasped.

Then, the captain narrowed her eyes and continued.

"I know not what a princess like you is doing here, but... I suppose this is a fitting punishment for a noble such as yourself. Suffer the wounds of your past!"

"Huh?"

The captain stopped pushing down with her saber. What shocked Miledi wasn't her words or the fact that she'd stopped attacking. No, her surprise was because the dagon had gently placed her hand over Miledi's own. *Maybe she's finally willing to hear me out?* Miledi thought hopefully, wondering if the captain would hug her next.

"Now then, show me how badly you have suffered in this past year. Revival Reversal."

A second later, Miledi was drenched in blood.

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

For some reason, the captain seemed just as shocked as Miledi. Though the dagon had shown no sign of attacking, Miledi was covered in numerous wounds. The largest of them was a deep gash that ran from her shoulder to her chest. The cut was so deep it could only have been made by a greatsword. There were plenty of other smaller cuts and bruises as well. Along with numerous burns and welts. Each and every one of them was an injury Miledi had received during the fight with an apostle.

“Gah— Obsidian Vortex.” Miledi coughed in agony, but still managed to cast a gravity spell. Though she couldn’t understand how her old wounds had been reopened, she knew she needed to put some distance between her and the captain as soon as possible. She fell backward, not even checking to see what was behind her. Because of that, she didn’t notice that she’d gone all the way back to the Brayed Pirates’ pirate ship and slammed into its mast at full speed.

“O-Oh my! This isn’t good!”

For some reason, the ghost ship’s captain seemed flustered, despite being the one who’d done this to Miledi. Her gentle smile crumbled for the first time, and she quickly shot a jet of water toward Miledi. This jet of water wasn’t made of seawater, but water she’d created herself, and was crystal clear. Judging by her expression it didn’t appear to be an attack, in fact, it seemed more of a way to heal Miledi. However, a certain Synergist, who’d only seen the part of the fight where Miledi slammed into the mast, had no way of knowing that.

“Miledi!” Oscar moved faster than anyone could follow, putting himself in between Miledi and the torrent of water. He unfurled his umbrella and activated Hallowed Ground. As the torrent hadn’t had much force behind it to begin with, Oscar’s barrier deflected it with ease.

“O-O-kun...”

“Don’t worry, Miledi I’ll heal you right away! Ability eleven, Benison Aura, maximum output!”

Healing light rained down on Miledi, closing her wounds.

“Your wounds are dire, it’ll take some time for them to heal.”

“Gah... I’m sorry. Be careful, O-kun. That woman’s probably—”

Before Miledi could finish, the ship’s captain alighted on the deck in front of Oscar. Looking around, Oscar realized that all of the Brayed Pirates had been defeated and that they were surrounded by the ghost ship’s pirates.

“Hey, Meiru. Be careful. That kid over there’s more dangerous than he looks.”

“Yeah, he’s a weird guy who has all these weird items!”

Chris and Kyaty shouted out warnings to their captain. However, she paid

them no mind and walked over to Oscar.

“Would you be so kind as to move out of the way?”

“You really think I would?” Oscar met the captain’s gaze, his resolve unyielding. Then, he spread his legs slightly apart and tightened his glove, glanced at the other pirates surrounding him, and proclaimed his intent.

“Prepare yourselves. If you try and hurt another hair on Miledi’s head... I won’t let any of you leave here alive.”

“H-Hey, O-kun?”

Oscar’s voice had gone as cold as ice. The pirates flinched, and Miledi hurriedly called out to him. She could tell he was on the verge of snapping.

Originally, Oscar had wanted to talk things over with the ghost ship pirates, especially after he’d seen how reasonable they’d appeared. However, the injuries the ship’s captain had inflicted on Miledi were nearly fatal. Seeing his partner on the verge of death had blown away whatever rational thoughts he’d had. In response to his threat, the captain smiled and sheathed her saber.

“No one who can make an expression like that would be part of this pirate crew.”

“Huh?” Oscar gave her a confused look, and the captain smiled at him. She had the same gentle air about her that she’d had before.

“I’m sorry for injuring your precious comrade so badly. I would never have imagined that such a dainty girl had experienced this much pain in the span of just one year.”

“I don’t get what you’re trying to say.”

The captain nodded, as if that was understandable, and walked forward. Oscar held a gloved hand out threateningly. However, the dagon didn’t slow her pace.

“If you wish to kill me, I won’t stop you. But if you let me see that girl, I will be able to heal her much faster than you.”

“.....” Oscar silently blocked the captain’s path. However, he seemed to be hesitating. In the end, it was Miledi who convinced him to step down.

“O-kun, it’s fine.”

“Miledi... But these pirates are way stronger than your average thugs. If we’re not careful, you...”

“It’s alright, I promise.” Miledi grimaced in pain, but she still forced those words out of her throat. And so, after a brief pause, Oscar relented.

“I understand... Please heal her.”

“You may count on me.”

Oscar stepped to the side and watched as the captain placed a hand against Miledi’s bloody cheek.

“You’re quite the cute pirate. And quite the reckless one, too.”

“Hehehe. The easy way out doesn’t suit me! Owowow!”

Sweating, Miledi forced herself to smile.

“Tetragrammaton.”

“Whoa.”

Bright orange mana the color of the setting sun enveloped Miledi. A second later, all of her wounds vanished as though they’d never existed. On top of that, even the blood she’d shed vanished, and her soaked clothes became dry again. That wasn’t something mere healing could do.

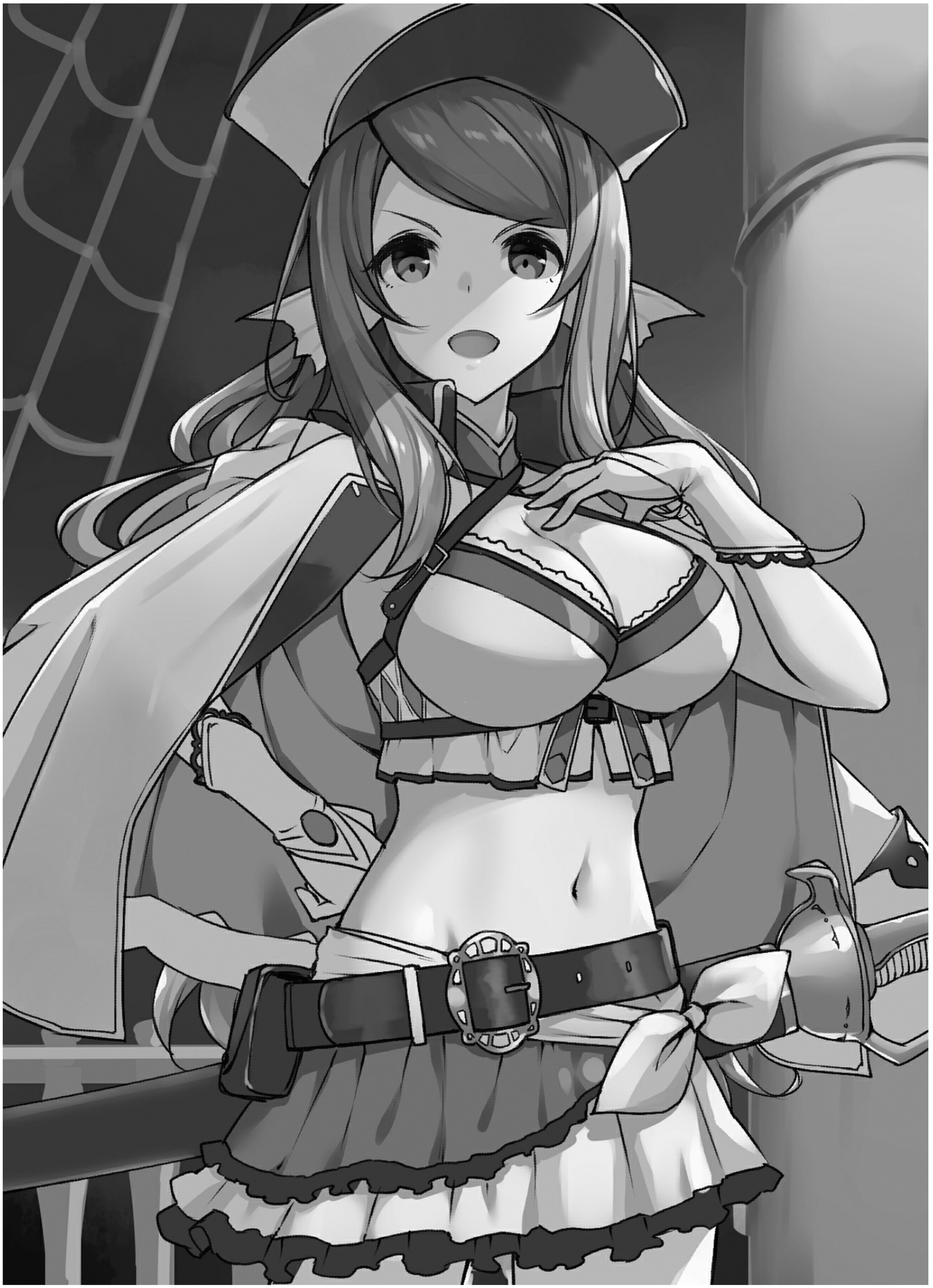
“R-Restoration!?” Oscar exclaimed.

Miledi looked down in shock, experimentally poking her healed injuries.

“Who on earth are you?”

The captain stepped back and smiled gently at Miledi and Oscar. She held out her hand, and one of her subordinates brought her a coat and pirate hat. After that, she donned the coat and hat with a flourish and spoke up.

“My name is Meiru, leader of the Melusine Pirate Crew.”



She seemed rather proud of the fact that she was leading a band of pirates. Her crew of tough-looking men and women all smiled fearlessly as she made her declaration. Clearly, they were just as proud of the fact that they were part of her crew. Oscar found it hard to believe they were a group of evildoers. The glimmer in their eyes had far too much kindness in it. At any rate, it appeared the “ghost Ship” that had become the bane of pirates everywhere was actually Meiru Melusine’s crew. On top of that, the fact that she used magic that surpassed normal limits meant that—

“Can we ask you something?”

Miledi’s expression grew serious as she said that.

“What do you plan on doing with the kidnapped townspeople?”

“Before I answer, I would like to ask you a question of my own, my cute pretend pirates. What do *you* plan on doing with them?” The reason Meiru had decided not to resume fighting wasn’t just because she’d seen the sincerity in Oscar and Miledi’s gazes, but also because she’d realized pushing them any further would be dangerous.

Oscar had been serious. Even if she’d been able to survive a duel with him, she was almost certain some of her comrades would get killed in the crossfire. Moreover, Meiru had realized Miledi hadn’t been fighting against her seriously.

Miledi looked away awkwardly, her words catching in her throat. The whole reason this misunderstanding had started was because she’d dressed up as a pirate.

“Umm, sorry for deceiving you. This is just a costume, I’m not really a pirate. We’d finally made it to Andika, so I wanted to try dressing up as one. It was just a little joke.”

Next to her, Oscar rubbed his temples. He could feel a headache coming on.

“O-Oh...” Meiru’s pirates muttered.

“Sh-She’s so cute...” Kyaty squealed, blushing. Everyone gave Miledi a sympathetic look.

“Ahem. Allow me to explain. We’re guests at Wanda’s inn, and the hostess

and her daughter have been very kind to us, so when we heard they'd been kidnapped by pirates, we went to rescue them."

"I see. I take it that bunny girl you fought so hard to protect is the innkeeper's daughter?"

"That's right! Her name's Kiara-chan, and she's my friend!"

"In that case, I suppose I can understand why you kicked Ned into the sea."

"I'm sorry..." Miledi grimaced, clearly regretting her actions. Upon closer inspection, Ned, the man she'd kicked overboard was among the crowd of pirates surrounding them. He looked sheepish, as though embarrassed that a girl had managed to kick him off the ship. For some reason, Meiru blushed a little as she watched both Miledi and Ned squirm. However, after a few seconds, she cleared her throat and spoke.

"Very well, I shall believe you. And to answer your previous question, we were planning on returning the captives to Andika."

Still a little suspicious, Oscar questioned her.

"After healing them?"

"Fufu, but of course."

Oscar and Miledi exchanged glances, then nodded to each other. In a trembling voice, Oscar muttered one final question.

"Are you the Saint of the Western Seas?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

Though Meiru played dumb, Oscar and Miledi could tell from her amused grin that she was the one. The leader of the ghost ship, which actually turned out to be Melusine's Pirate Crew, was indeed the Saint of the Western Seas. She rescued people kidnapped by pirates and sent them home after healing, no, restoring their injuries. And she was one of the people Miledi had been searching for. Miledi beamed at that revelation.

"O-kun! We did—"

"I've spent so long searching for you!"

“Oh my?”

Oscar ignored Miledi’s hi-five and ran over to Meiru. The pirates warily raised their weapons, but they put them back when Oscar grabbed Meiru’s hands and gave her a pleading look.

“Umm, would you mind not getting so close—”

“Meiru-san.”

Meiru’s smile stiffened as Oscar pushed his way into her personal space. She tried to back away, but Oscar took one step forward for each one she took back. The pirates seemed confused, while Miledi stared at Oscar in shock. However, right now, Oscar had eyes for no one but Meiru. He spoke passionately, his cheeks flushed and a strange fervor in his eyes.

“My name is Oscar Orcus. I’ve wandered the continent looking for you.”

“H-Huh? You were looking for me? But aren’t you and that girl—” Flustered, Meiru looked over at Miledi.

“Forget about Miledi! There’s something important... I need you!”

The other pirates shot Miledi a sympathetic look. They’d misunderstood and thought Oscar had dumped her.

“Look, we don’t have that kind of relationship!” she yelled, but the pirates didn’t buy it.

Oscar ignored the drama going on behind him and cornered Meiru at the ship’s railing.

“Meiru-san.”

“Y-Yes?”

“Please come back with me to the continent! I need to introduce you to my family! Please, I’m begging you!”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?”

The pirates watched on in awe.

“H-He just proposed. That four-eyes just proposed to the Cap’n!” “Wow, I can’t believe he’d try and hit on another girl when he already has such a cute

girlfriend! This is why I hate hot guys... Fucking playboys, the lot of them!” “Whaaa!? I can’t believe that perverted brat’s trying to make a pass on Meiru!” “Interesting... I underestimated you, boy! You’ve got guts!”

Amidst the chaos, Miledi finally snapped.

“Miledi kick!”

“Gaaah!?”

Miledi slammed her heel into Oscar’s head, using gravity magic to up the force of her attack. Oscar fell to the ground and Miledi landed right on top of him.

“Oh shit, the girl’s lost it!” “Course she has! You go, girl! Beat that good-looking bastard to a pulp!” “Meiru, don’t let this chance escape! There aren’t many guys who’ve got the guts to confess to you! If you let this guy go, you’ll be single for— Bwaaah!” Cheers, jeers, and some rather rude comments directed toward Meiru filled the air.

“Umm, sorry about all that... I’m Miledi. Miledi Reisen. The beautiful genius mage!” Miledi lifted one leg, made a peace sign, and winked. That was her signature pose. Oscar groaned as she did a little twirl, and the other pirates all exclaimed in admiration.

“And this perverted four-eyes I’m stepping on is Oscar Orcus, also known as O-kun.”

“Who’re you calling a pervert!?” Oscar shook Miledi off him and got to his feet.

Miled lightly jumped to the side to land next to Oscar. Seeing how easily she defied the laws of gravity, Meiru once again exclaimed “Oh my.” Oscar adjusted his glasses and took a few steps backward, embarrassed at how heated he’d gotten. He then let the leader, Miledi, take the floor. Miledi placed a hand on her chest and declared her intent.

“We are the Liberators! A group dedicated to fighting the church and freeing the continent from the gods’ grasp!”

The pirates broke out into an uproar for an entirely different reason this time.

And while Meiru's smile didn't budge, the expression in her eyes changed. Miledi and Oscar hadn't come to Andika to flee the church. No, in fact, they were a group dedicated to fighting them. Considering how unknown their group was, it was hardly a surprise that most of the pirates looked at them like they were crazy. However, Miledi unflinchingly met Meiru's gaze and continued her pitch.

"Moreover, we're just like you."

"How so?"

"We, too, can use ancient magic."

"....." Meiru had suspected that was the case. She narrowed her eyes, but remained otherwise unfazed.

"We came here because we wanted to confirm whether the rumors of the Saint of the Western Seas were true or not. Because if they were, it might mean there's another user of ancient magic here."

And this time, Miledi's bet had paid off. The saint was real. Though Miledi had never in her wildest dreams imagined that she might be the captain of a pirate crew.

"We came here with two objectives in mind. The first was to convince the saint to join our group. The second... regardless of whether she joined us or not, was to get her to heal O-kun's little brother and sister."

"Brother and sister, you say?"

Meiru cocked her head toward Oscar. He eventually nodded and responded.

"Sorry I got overexcited back there. The truth is, my younger brother and sister were experimented on by the church, and now they're both stuck in a coma. No healing magic or medicine I've tried has been able to cure them. So, we thought maybe the Saint of the Western Seas might possess powers we don't... which is why we've been looking for you."

"I see..."

A somber silence followed Oscar's explanation. As he'd initially thought, the Melusine Pirates were no scoundrels. Meiru muttered "Brother... Sister..."

quietly to herself as she lapsed into thought. A few minutes later, she looked up and told Oscar the news he'd been wanting to hear for months.

"You guessed right. With my abilities, I may be able to cure them. You see, my magic isn't recovery magic, but restoration magic. It restores things to their original state."

"Then—" Oscar's eyes glimmered with hope. However, that hope was soon dashed.

"But just because I can, doesn't mean I will. I have no interest in joining your Liberators, nor will I travel to the continent." Meiru flat-out rejected both of Miledi's requests.

"Why!?"

"Is it not obvious?" Meiru spread her arms wide and looked around at her men.

"This here is my family. And we have our own lives to live."

"But—" Oscar was desperate. Dylan, Katy, and all the others experimented on by the church were stuck in an eternal coma. Without Meiru's help, they'd never recover. Oscar opened his mouth to argue further, but stopped when Miledi clutched his sleeve. Realizing he was letting his emotions get the better of him again, Oscar adjusted his glasses and took a step back to calm himself down. He knew it was best to let Miledi handle this conversation. But before she could say anything—

"Ah! Below us, Cap'n! There's—"

One of the pirates nearest the railing paled as he looked down into the sea. Before he could finish his warning, a huge shockwave rocked both pirate ships. The Brayed Pirates' ship began to tilt. It seemed as if something had ripped out the bottom of the hull, as the ship suddenly began taking on water.

"This is... You two, suppress your mana!" Meiru shouted toward Miledi and Oscar. However, neither of them understood what she was getting at. Confused, they watched as the Brayed Pirates' ship continued to tilt even further. At the same time, white smoke began rising up around it. On top of that, the water around the boat began to churn, as if something was lurking

underneath it. Eventually, Chris grimaced and yelled.

“Meiru, we’ve got trouble! It’s the Hell Eater!”

“Very well. You’ve finished rescuing all the civilians, correct? Dump those pirates somewhere on our ship. We’re retreating immediately.”

“Aye aye, Ma’am!” The Melusine Pirates sprung into action. They slung the unconscious Brayed Pirates over their back and tossed them onto the deck of their ship. Once they were done, they made preparations to set sail. But before they could weigh anchor, their own ship, the Melusine, began to tilt. White smoke rose around it as well. A second later, Miledi and Oscar realized what was going on. The churning waters swelled, and an extremely familiar jellyfish-shaped monster rose to the surface. Miledi and Oscar both screamed.

“Not this agaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiin!”

Indeed, this was one of the same monsters that had made Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz’s journey to Andika so difficult. It appeared it was called a Hell Eater, and from the looks of it, it very much wanted to eat Miledi.

Why is it always me!? Miledi thought despairingly. To her surprise, Meiru provided an answer.

“You know, if you don’t suppress your mana while crossing the ocean, monsters will flock to you, right? They’re drawn to mana like moths to a flame.”

“I wish someone had told us that earlier!” Miledi groaned and held her head in her hands. *So it really was all my fault!*

Aquatic monsters had much better perception skills than terrestrial ones. They needed them to hunt down prey in the vast expanse that was the ocean. While normal mages didn’t emit enough mana for it to be a problem, wielders of ancient magic possessed such a large mana pool that if they didn’t conceal their presence, monsters from all over would be drawn to them like a beacon.

“Shit, this isn’t good, Miledi! Kiara-chan and the others are on that ship!”

“It’s already starting to sink...”

Miledi paled. Meiru leaped onto the deck of her ship and cast restoration magic on it. In seconds, the sinking ship had returned to its original, magnificent

form.

“Miledi-chan, Oscar-kun. Could you please hold off that monster for us? I know it’s dangerous, but... I cannot allow my ship to become a battlefield while there are civilians onboard! Don’t worry, once we’ve evacuated, I’ll come back to help you! I know a good way to drive this fiend off!” Some of the giant jellyfish tentacles leaped out of the water toward the Melusine. Meiru fended them off with blasts of water magic as she spoke. Still on the sinking Brayed Pirates’ ship, Miledi replied.

“Leave it to us! We won’t let it get close to you! Asura!”

A ring of gravity magic encircled both ships. The rising seas were pushed back down as Miledi put pressure on the sea surrounding them. At the same time, Oscar dug into his Treasure Trove and pulled out a number of enchanted blades. More specifically, his Ice Dagger artifacts. He threw them into the sea, freezing everything except the Melusine’s path of retreat. Even Meiru couldn’t help but be surprised at the scale and power of both Miledi and Oscar’s magic. Miledi was constricting the sea itself, while Oscar was burning through waves of Artifacts, each powerful enough to be a national treasure. Miledi turned to Meiru and made a peace sign. Oscar twirled his umbrella and covered Miledi’s rear. The two fought back to back, fearless smiles adorning their faces.

“Monsters like this are a piece of cake for us!”

“If we’re the ones who called it, then we’re the ones who should take care of it. That being said, I’d still prefer it if you come back soon to help us, Meiru-san.”

Meiru smiled kindly at them and manipulated the current around her to speed her ship up. As the Melusine pulled away, she gripped the ship’s wheel.

“Thank you so much. I promise I will never forget you two!”

“Hm?” Oscar and Miledi both cocked their heads. Meiru’s choice of phrasing was a bit odd. But before they had time to dwell on it any longer, the Hell Eater melted the frozen ocean and began assaulting the ship once more. Oscar and Miledi bombarded the Hell Eaters with spells, determined to keep the monsters’ attention focused on them. After a while, Meiru waved merrily at them and shouted.

“As for your brother and sister... If you bring them to me, I might heal them for you, depending~”

“D-Depending on what!?”

“You’ll find out when you bring them here~”

Her tone was far lighter than one would expect from someone fleeing sea monsters, but thanks to her expert steering, the ship quickly sailed toward safer waters. At the same time, the thick mist began to vanish. The Hell Eater was too interested in Oscar and Miledi to bother giving chase to The Melusine.

However, the Brayed Pirates’ ship was on the verge of capsizing. There were so many holes in the hull that parts of the Hell Eater were pouring through them and breaking through the deck to attack Miledi and Oscar.

“A-At any rate, let’s try to stay alive until Meiru comes back, O-kun!”

“Y-You got it. I certainly have no intention of dying here!”

The pair began their life and death struggle against this seemingly invincible monster. This time, though, they couldn’t afford to run. If they left, it might chase after The Melusine. Miledi fired off blasts of gravity magic one after another, pushing the Hell Eaters into the sea again and again. Meanwhile, electricity and flames shot out from Oscar’s umbrella in quick succession, burning through swathes of the Hell Eater. He also periodically threw Heater Knives down into the ocean, causing steam explosions that blasted through the bits of the monster still in the ocean.

However, it attacked relentlessly. Assuming the Hell Eater was a monster, it shouldn’t have an infinite amount of jelly to draw from. But no matter how much of it they destroyed, it just kept regenerating. To make matters worse, the ship was seconds away from sinking. Both were already fighting in the air.

“Ngh, this guy’s so goddamn persistent!”

“Don’t complain, Miledi! Look, Meiru’s ship is already pretty far away! She should be coming back to help us, so—”

Oscar looked over at the ship, using his glasses’ farsight ability to make it out. He spotted Meiru watching them from a telescope. For a second, it felt like

their eyes met. No, they definitely did. Meiru lowered the telescope and smiled benevolently. She then waved her hand, as if waving goodbye.

“Miledi.”

“What!? Whoa, that was close. Like hell I’m letting you strip me again, you bastard!”

Oscar turned to her and spoke quietly.

“Just now, Meiru said ‘I promise I will never forget you two,’ right?”

“What of it!?”

“Also, she told me to bring my brother and sister back to her, right?”

“Yeah, so what!?”

The Hell Eater grazed Miledi’s skirt, dissolving parts of it. She fought with all her might, fiercely protecting what little of her dignity she had left. Oscar adjusted his glasses and revealed the truth to her.

“Thinking about it now, doesn’t that mean she’s not planning on meeting us again anytime soon? Meaning she’s just going to run away and leave dealing with this thing to us?”

“Ah!? What’s she doing right now!?”

“Smiling and waving at us. Oh, she just went back to the ship’s wheel...”



She isn't coming back, is she? Hell, she probably planned on abandoning us from the start, meaning there's no way to drive this stupid monster off either. A loud rumble interrupted Oscar's thoughts. He and Miledi turned around slowly, a shiver creeping up their spines. Behind them rose a wall of seawater a good 300 meters high. The Hell Eater hated nothing more than prey that wouldn't let themselves be eaten. At the same time, The Melusine disappeared beyond the horizon. Miledi and Oscar's lips twitched, and they screamed simultaneously.

"You damn piraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaates!"

They wouldn't forget this betrayal. Unfortunately, they had a 300-meter tall wave to deal with at the moment. Just before they were swallowed up by it, however—

"Sorry for the wait guys, Void Fissure!"

The space around them twisted, and a hole opened up in the center of the wave. The three of them passed through the newly created tunnel, safely evading the tsunami.

"Nacchaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!"

"Naiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiz!"

Their savior appeared in the nick of time, and Miledi and Oscar hugged him with all their might. Confused, Naiz looked down at his two comrades.

"That bitch played me for a fool!"

"And she crushed my hopes and stepped all over them!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but for now, please come back to your senses, Oscar."

Naiz peeled Miledi and Oscar off him, then turned toward the giant jellyfish preparing another wave of water.

"This guy again?"

"Yep. But now we know why he's after us." Miledi explained how sea monsters were attracted to mana and how it would leave them alone if they suppressed their leaking mana.

Still, while three of them were well-versed in emitting large amounts of mana, they weren't nearly as practiced in holding that mana in check. Figuring it out in the middle of battle wouldn't be easy. Though they knew they needed to master this new skill, or they'd bring the Hell Eater straight to Meiru when they chased after her. And so, the three of them nodded to each other and focused on the mana swirling within them.

Around the same time—

"Oh my. Those two are impressive. They're actually fighting on even footing with the Hell Eater."

Meiru watched Oscar and Miledi fight through a retractable telescope. Her first mate, Chris, sighed as he spoke.

"Meiru... you're a horrible person, you know that?"

"I simply chose the right people for the job. Besides, those kids don't want the rescued townspeople to come to harm either."

"I'll give you that much at least."

Under his breath, Chris added, "But that's why even though you're over twenty, you don't have a single suitor." The rugged old man had looked after Meiru for a long time and was like a surrogate father to her. Meiru ignored him and muttered "Oh? Can they actually see us from all the way over there?" She cocked her head, then smiled and waved goodbye.

"I'll say it again, you're a horrible person, Meiru!"

Chris felt a twinge of sympathy for the handsome bespectacled youth and fake pirate girl. After a few minutes, the ship pulled far enough away that the battle with the Hell Eater passed beyond the horizon and out of sight. Meiru turned back to her subordinates like nothing had happened and clapped her hands together. Everyone turned to look at her.

"Now then, while we might have had a few hiccups, I'd say this operation was a success. Good work, everyone. We can't leave the poor townspeople unconscious forever, so let's hurry back to port and return them home."

Her crew cheered.

“As for the pirates we captured, let’s subject them to the usual punishment~”

The cheers faltered. Quite a few members of Meiru’s crew were former pirates who’d only joined her after suffering her “punishment.” Amidst the cheers, Kyaty timidly raised her hand and asked a question.

“H-Hey, Meiru. Are we really just abandoning that four-eyes?”

It appeared Chris wasn’t the only one with a conscience among Meiru’s pirates. Meiru smiled warmly and spoke in a confident voice.

“Those two will be just fine!”

“Where’s that confidence coming from!?”

She probably doesn’t even believe what she’s saying! Kyaty grew even more worried about the pair still fighting out on the ocean. Most of her fellow pirates seemed to be thinking the same, judging by their expressions. Meiru shrugged her shoulders as she replied.

“Look. If those two aren’t able to handle that monster and look like they’re about to be defeated, that’s when it’ll be our turn.”

Our turn to save them, right!? Kyaty thought, her eyes sparkling. Chris, on the other hand, just groaned and massaged his temples.

“Our turn to pray for them.”

“You can’t just watch them die!”

Kyaty was much kinder than she looked. Incidentally, she was also Meiru’s childhood friend. The pirates were used to this attitude of Meiru’s so they just waved it off, muttering things like “Well, that’s the Cap’n for you,” and “When’s all said and done, she’ll probably do something about it anyway,” and returned to their posts. Satisfied, Meiru nodded and said, “Alright, now that that’s settled, let’s head back to—”

But Meiru never got the chance to finish her sentence.

“Like hell we’ll let you escaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaape!”

“Ah!?”

A girl had latched herself onto Meiru's back.

"You're mine!"

"Hiii!?"

No one had ever heard Meiru shriek like that before. That was how terrifying Miledi, who was currently clinging to Meiru and glaring wildly into her eyes, looked. In fact, Miledi wouldn't be out of place in a horror movie right now.

"Sheesh, we finally got that monster off our tail... That took forever."

"It'll probably take some time before we're used to suppressing our mana."

Oscar and Naiz conversed casually as they landed on the deck behind Meiru. Chris stumbled backward with a yelp. He could have sworn no one was there a second ago.

"H-H-H-How did you catch up!?"

Frantically trying to calm her pounding heart, Meiru asked what everyone was wondering. Miledi grinned evilly and declared her beliefs boldly.

"No one escapes from me!"

Everyone present privately thought, *Holy shit, Miledi-chan's scary...* Miledi had her arms wrapped tight around Meiru's neck, while her legs held Meiru's stomach in a death grip. No matter how hard Meiru tried, she couldn't peel Miledi off. Miledi looked ready to cling to Meiru for life, but they wouldn't get anywhere like this so Oscar tore her away.

"Um, it's not what you think, I promise. I wasn't planning on abandoning you."

Meiru's crew glared coldly at her. *Didn't you just say you were going to pray for their souls?*

"Don't worry, we don't care about that. It was our problem to deal with in the first place. But you better hear me out this time! Don't even think you can run! No matter how far you go, there'll always be a Miledi-chan chasing you!"

"Please don't make it sound like there's more than one Miledi-chan, that's a terrifying thought."

Meiru looked away awkwardly as Miledi puffed her chest out proudly. Naiz stepped forward and added his thoughts.

“By the way, I’m Naiz, a fellow Liberator. Let me warn you now, I’m also able to use ancient magic. My particular magic allows me to control space. That’s how I brought everyone here.”

“I-I see... I suppose it would be quite hard to escape from someone who can teleport.”

Cold sweat poured down Meiru’s back. She had no way of running from someone who could cross vast distances in the blink of an eye. That was practically cheating. Granted, her own powers were broken enough in their own right, but now she was beginning to see that the world was much larger than she thought. Her crew looked flustered as well, but Naiz wasn’t done yet.

“That’s not what you should be afraid of. What I’m trying to get at here is, even though I can teleport freely, even I couldn’t escape from Miledi.”

Meiru and her crew fell silent. Few things could faze the dagon captain, but that sentence was enough to leave her speechless.

“You... can teleport at will, correct?”

“Yeah. I even used my powers to teleport Miledi and Oscar far away from me, but...no matter where I sent them, they’d always be waiting for me when I got back home. To be honest, it was a little traumatic.”

Holy fuck, Miledi-chan’s scary... The Melusine Pirates all thought. Miledi and Oscar looked away sheepishly. They never knew Naiz had been that scarred by their persistence. Thinking back on it now though, they realized they’d probably gone overboard. The normally dour-faced Naiz gave Meiru pitying smile.

“You said your name was Meiru, right? I’m telling you this for your own good. Just give up and accept your fate.”

Though his words sounded like a threat, Naiz’s tone was gentle.

“I-I see. Well, my sleep magic will wear off soon, so can we return the kidnapped townspeople to the harbor first?”

Meiru decided to put off answering Miledi’s request for now. She’d realized

too late that this fake pirate was far more troublesome than she looked, and now she needed to buy time to come up with a strategy.

And so, the Melusine changed course and turned toward Andika with Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz still on board. The lone pirate ship sailed through the moonlit sea. It made good time thanks to Meiru's water magic speeding them along. Miledi and the others went down to the hold to make sure Kiara and her mother, Vera, were safe. Once they'd confirmed both girls were fine, they returned to the deck and whiled the time away. Oscar and Naiz watched inquisitively as the crew went about their tasks. They were sitting with Chris at the edge of the boat, enjoying the night breeze. Meanwhile, Miledi was hovering around Meiru, who was at the helm of the ship.

"Hey, Meiru. How do you use water magic to make a current like that?"

"Hey, Meiru. How'd you make that whip-sword thing?"

"Hey, Meiru. What's that? A compass? How does it work?"

"Hey, Meiru. How'd you get your boobs to grow so big?"

"Hey, Meiru. Where do you guys live? And what are those conditions you wanted us to fulfill? And what are you guys going to do with the pirates you captured? Hey, Merumeru~ Answer me~"

This girl is unbelievably annoying. Meiru thought to herself. The crew was stunned to see Meiru, who was always wearing such a composed smile, look so blatantly annoyed.

Before long, Andika's coast came into view. Meiru used her magic to cover The Melusine with a deep fog as they approached. The pirates then began rolling stacks of lumber into the sea. Meiru stripped off her coat and hat, then dived elegantly into the sea. She touched the stacks of lumber one after another, using restoration magic to turn each into a small boat. It appeared Meiru usually kept her boats dismantled to make them easier to store, then remade them with restoration magic when she needed them. The pirates carefully stowed the sleeping townspeople on the boats.

Once they were all on board, Meiru created a sphere of clear, pure water. She then sprinkled droplets of that water on the sleeping townspeople. As she did

so, she poured her sunset-orange mana into the droplets, using them as a medium to carry her magic. It appeared this was the way in which Meiru was able to grant her restoration magic longer range. She'd healed the more gravely injured civilians earlier, but now she removed even their minor wounds, like the bruise around Kiara's eye.

As Kiara and the others began to awaken from their magically-induced sleep, Meiru wrapped them all in a thick fog and whispered something to them. She then used water magic to send the boats off to the pier. With this, Kiara and the others would begin to spread rumors of the Saint of the Western Seas as well.

"Hmm, I want to be there when Kia-chan wakes up, but..."

"In that case, feel free to go back with her."

Meiru gave Miledi a pleading look, silently begging her to leave.

"Sorry Merumeru, but I can't do that. I won't leave until you've heard me out!"

"Could you please not give me such a childish nickname. I am older than you, you know?"

"Alright, I'll call you Meru-nee then!"

Miledi was expecting a comeback or retort of some kind, so she was surprised when she saw Meiru's reaction. For some reason, Meiru looked completely stunned.

"U-Umm, Meiru? Is Meru-nee no good either?"

Flustered, Miledi checked to see if Meiru was angry. To her surprise, Meiru smiled and shook her head.

"No, you can call me Meru-nee if you wish... However, I would be utterly delighted if you would just leave me alone forever."

"Not happening!" Miledi made a cross with her arms. Meiru sighed and dropped her gentle smile. She turned to Miledi with a serious expression and spoke her thoughts.

"No matter how many times you ask, no matter what you tell me, I, and the Melusine Pirates, will never join you. This is the life we've chosen, and we have

no intention of changing that.”

Miledi grew serious as well, her clear eyes sparkling with bottomless determination.

“That’s fine. But at the very least, tell me why. I want to know more about you all. We didn’t come all this way just to be turned away without a good reason.”

Oscar and Naiz drew closer to Miledi as if backing her up. Their gazes were just as solemn as hers.

“Saint of the Western Seas, Melusine Pirate Crew. Allow me to formally introduce myself.”

Miledi placed a hand on her chest and said in a voice loud enough to reach Andika, “I am the Liberator, Miledi Reisen! One who fights against this world’s gods!”

Miledi knew she was asking a lot. She wanted Meiru and the others to abandon their current life and rush headlong into danger with her. Despite knowing the gravity of her request though, Miledi did not back down.

“I want you to join me from the bottom of my heart. This warped world, where not even children can smile in peace, needs to change. And I need your help to change it.”

No one said a word. It was easy to claim you wanted to change the world. But these pirates, outcasts, and outlaws who’d been driven from the continent, knew just how difficult such a task would be. And yet the girl standing in front of them was seriously trying to do just that. The group of burly pirates sucked in their breath, overwhelmed by this tiny girl’s resolve. After a moment of silence, Miledi relaxed a little.

“So if nothing else, please allow us to accompany you for a while.”

Miledi had laid everything bare to Meiru. Unable to handle her sudden sincerity, Meiru struggled to find a reply. She was surprised at how much of an impact Miledi’s words had had on her. Meiru had thought she’d easily be able to refuse Miledi’s request, or at least sidestep it with her usual evasiveness. Even if she knew Miledi would chase her down, she hadn’t had any intention of

saying yes. Meiru thought back to the time she used her restoration magic to bring back Miledi's old wounds. *Just what kind of opponent could do that to someone who's capable of using ancient magic?* As Meiru was hesitating, an unexpected ally came to Miledi's aid.

"Why not let them stick around, Meiru? It's not like we can run from three users of ancient magic even if we wanted to. Plus they seem like decent kids. They might turn out to be just what we needed. Either way, if you don't decide soon, someone in Andika is gonna notice we're here," Chris said with a knowing smile. Meiru put a hand to her chin and considered the proposal. Or rather, appeared to consider the proposal. She'd long since come to a decision

"Haaah... Fine, if you insist. We'll take you with us. But you must swear not to reveal our secrets to anyone else. If you ever betray us, I—"

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay! Thank you so much Meru-nee! We did it, O-kun, Nacchan! We're pirates now!"

Miledi was already on cloud nine. She didn't even pay attention to Meiru's warning as she jumped up and down with joy. The Melusine Pirate Crew watched her with a smile, and the atmosphere grew too festive for Meiru to repeat her warning.

"This is the first time I've ever met someone so exhausting to deal with," Meiru said with a sigh.

"Sorry about our moron of a leader. Don't worry, I swear we won't betray you. Though I guess just my word doesn't really mean much..."

"No, I believe you. Despite appearances, I have a good eye when it comes to people. And you look like people I can trust."

Meiru gave Oscar a defeated smile and shrugged her shoulders. She then put on her coat and cape and returned to the helm of the ship. The Melusine vanished into the night, leaving as quietly as it had come. It was time for the Melusine Pirates to return home.

As Meiru watched Miledi easily mingle with the rest of her crew, an old memory resurfaced. It was a memory from long ago, long before she had started this pirate crew. A young Meiru gripped the iron bars barricading an

underground room's window.

On the other side, inside the room, sat an even younger girl with the same color hair as her. Meiru would never forget that girl's tear-streaked face or the hand she'd desperately reached out to Meiru. But most of all, Meiru would never forget the promise she made.

"...Meru-nee, was it?"

Meiru chuckled to herself. The fog disappeared, and Meiru steered her ship across the calm waters. *She's a bit too much of a tomboy to be my sister though.* She thought as she turned the ship's wheel.

A magnificent corridor, supported by intricate pillars, stretched on for what seemed like eternity. The pillars were thick enough that it would take 4 people to wrap their arms all the way around one, and each had ornate carvings running down its length. In the middle of the hallway lay a lush, crimson carpet, on which a single man walked. He wore a white priest's robe, indicating that he was a member of the church and a high-ranking one at that. He had a stern expression, and deep wrinkles lined his aged face. From his gait, it was clear he was more of a warrior than a priest. After walking for quite some time, the man finally reached the end of the hallway.

"Laus Barn, reporting for duty."

The man, Laus Barn, bowed reverently at the foot of a winding, marble-white staircase. At the top of the stairs was a shrine, and in that shrine sat an ostentatiously decorated throne. On the wall behind the shrine was a massive, ten-meter wide painting. The painting depicted a figure with soft features. It was impossible to tell if the figure was a man or a woman. But that was because the painting didn't depict a human. No, it was a painting of the great creator that the church worshiped, Ehit.

The reason it stood even above the throne was to remind the man who sat in it—the king of the Elbard Theocracy, and the Pope of the church—that even he served a higher power. That being said, the Pope was Ehit's representative, and thus held the most power in all of Tortus.

"Laus, the western seas grow turbulent," the Pope, Lucifer Slaine Elbard, said

in a hoarse voice. Laus said nothing. Questioning the man who represented Ehit's will simply wasn't done. Laus' duty was simply to carry out whatever orders Lucifer had for him. Lucifer was an old man, well into his nineties, and had white hair that extended down to his knees, along with an equally white beard that went down to his chest. His droopy eyebrows hid his mouth, making his expression difficult to read. His thin, bony fingers curled around the throne's armrests and his ash-grey eyes glared down at Laus.

"Andika's existence is a necessary evil for us, and is part of a system Lord Ehit himself approved."

A hint of vigor entered Lucifer's frail voice.

"Those who would disrupt this system are enemies of god, heretics who must be purged."

Therefore—

"Annihilate the filthy pirates who threaten the shores of Andika. Bring down the divine hammer of justice on those heretics."

"As you wish, my lord."

Laus bowed low. After a few moments, he stood back up, offered the customary prayer, and turned on his heel. He was used to this routine. At this point, he didn't even have to think; his body moved on its own. However, it appeared this time Lucifer had more than one order for Laus.

"Laus."

Laus instantly swiveled back toward Lucifer and knelt. He pressed his forehead against the floor in apology for attempting to leave before Lucifer had finished. However, Lucifer didn't mind, as this was something that had occurred to him just now.

"We have received no reports."

"....."

"And yet, there exists within Andika a saint. She is one of God's Children, an Atavist. Bestow upon her the wisdom of Ehit, and teach her what it means to be a believer. That is both the fate and the supreme bliss that awaits all of God's

Children.”

Lucifer frowned.

“And yet, I was not told of this saint’s existence. That man seems to have forgotten the debt that Andika owes us... Laus. Tell him this: ‘Is there not something you need to report to me?’”

“As you wish, my lord.”

Certain Lucifer was done this time, Laus got back to his feet again and walked out of the audience chamber.

Elbard’s palace sat atop the peak of an 8000-meter-tall mountain—the divine mountain. The palace had been carved directly out of the mountain’s face, and it’s soaring towers rose another 600 meters from the mountain’s peak. Elevators facilitated movement within the palace’s different wings, and aerial walkways connected the various towers and keeps. The walkways had been built using architectural techniques that made them appear and disappear with shifts in lighting angles. Those living in the capital at the foot of the mountain spent every day looking up at the palace’s sprawling majesty.

Laus walked down one of the palace’s aerial walkways toward the east wing. He furrowed his brows, deepening the wrinkles that lined his forehead. He’d swapped out his priest’s vestments for a military uniform, so he looked even more intimidating than usual. On top of his white battle garb, he wore gauntlets, greaves, and a breastplate.

Despite the wrinkles on his face, Laus was still only 32 and in the prime of his life. He had been born and raised in the Theocracy, to a noble family that had for generations produced exemplary templar knights for the church. Naturally, Laus had been indoctrinated with the church’s ideals from a young age. Unfortunately for him, he’d always had his doubts about whether the church’s methods were truly correct.

Like Miledi and the others, Laus too could use one of the ancient magics, spirit magic. It was a dangerous branch of magic that allowed him to interfere with the souls of others. He could use it to speak to the spirits of the dead, strengthen his own soul, or control the minds of others. But most impressive of all was the fact that under certain conditions, he could even revive the dead.

Naturally, the Barn family had been overjoyed when they'd learned that Laus was an Atavist. After all, that meant the next head of their family had been chosen by Ehit himself. The church, too, had been happy to hear the news. That a famous family such as the Barn's had produced a wielder of ancient magic was something to celebrate. Because that meant that Ehit had answered the church's prayers. With the birth of Laus, the church's followers became even more fanatical than before.

However, Laus himself wasn't brainwashed by the wave of religious fervor like everyone else was. He couldn't shut his eyes to the contradictions he saw between what the church preached and what it practiced. And so, he began to have his doubts, both about the church's creed, and the organization itself.

The reason Laus was able to maintain his sanity where all others could not was because no one, not even Ehit himself, could control Laus' mind. But despite being able to see clearly, Laus did not oppose the church. He wasn't that foolish.

He knew objecting to the church's doctrine would avail him nothing. Not only would it drag him into a pointless war he couldn't win, the church would almost certainly target his family, friends, and comrades—all people he needed to protect. There was nothing to gain in picking a fight with the church, whose influence spanned the entire continent. But there was a lot to lose.

Speaking from a purely utilitarian view, protecting the happiness of the majority was the most efficient solution. That would mean ignoring the plight of the minority, but happiness came at a cost. That was how Laus convinced himself to continue following orders. He didn't resist. He didn't object. He didn't even let himself think too deeply on his doubts. He became a pawn of Ehit, an emotionless, unthinking machine who did what he was told.

"I will once again snuff out the light of freedom. That's the only way to preserve the happiness of the majority."

Laus Barn frowned as he turned that statement over in his mind. Though he'd told himself those same words hundreds of times, they only served to strengthen his misgivings. Brow furrowed, Laus looked down at the theocracy's capital. He didn't know what possessed him to do so. But when he spotted the

darkness shrouding a corner of the city, he stopped walking.

“.....”

He focused his gaze on a winding alley on the outskirts of the capital. He thought back to the only seditious deed he had ever committed in his life.

“I wonder... what that girl is doing now.”

There had once been a divine priestess in the church, but she had been abandoned by god. When she had still been in the church, Laus had once happened to overhear her say “I pray that humanity will one day be free...” He had just coincidentally been passing by the terrace she was on at the time. But perhaps that was why. Why he’d felt compelled to save her.

Even he hadn’t known what was driving him back then, but before he knew it he’d gone to the gorge where she’d been tortured, branded a heretic, and executed. He’d found her body and used all the magic at his disposal to try to revive her. By the time he’d returned to his senses, he’d come back to the capital. He’d expected to suffer the same fate as the girl. After all, he’d defied Ehit’s will. He was a rebel, a heretic.

He’d returned to the palace, fully prepared to be executed. Yet the divine punishment he was expecting never came. In fact, no one even mentioned the fact that he’d revived a heretic.

Perhaps Ehit isn’t as all-knowing as he would like us to believe...Or perhaps he simply let this transgression slide... Sighing, Laus shook his head. Thinking about this wouldn’t solve anything. Just then, one of his men came running up to him.

“Laus-sama! I finally found you!”

The young templar knight was carrying a huge mace in his arms.

“The airship is ready to launch at any time, sir.”

He proffered the mace to Laus as he said that. Laus took it without a word, easily lifting the oversized weapon with one arm. There was a slight whoosh of air as he slung it across his shoulder.

“Our mission this time is to eliminate a large band of heretics, isn’t it? This is a perfect opportunity to show our devotion to Lord Ehit. I can hardly wait to get

started!”

“Yeah...”

The eager look in his subordinate’s eyes terrified Laus. And yet, he too was one of the people Laus wished to protect. However, Laus couldn’t bring himself to meet his gaze. The madness and hunger in his men’s eyes wasn’t something he could bear to look at. Laus turned to the horizon and watched the sunset. The crimson sky slowly faded to blue as the sun dipped below the horizon. The sight seemed symbolic to Laus, a representation of someone’s hopes fading away. As the light of the sun faded, a massive object rose up from below the aerial walkway. It looked like a large galleon, but it was floating in the sky.

This was the templar knights’ airship, a vessel created specifically to hunt down heretics. It was also a symbol of the church’s might. With a loud rumbling noise, the airship came to a stop in front of Laus. A gangway extended out from the deck, connecting the aerial walkway to the ship. Without batting an eyelid, Laus marched up the ramp and onto the deck. A squad of fully armored templar knights saluted him as he passed. Laus walked over to the prow of the ship and gazed at the horizon for a few minutes longer. When the sky had turned from navy blue to pitch black, he turned to his men and spoke with feigned coldness.

“We have our orders, men! Annihilate the heretics infesting the western seas! As knights of God, it is our duty to mete out divine justice!”

With a spirited yell, Laus called for his men to partake in the same madness he personally found unforgivable. Laus pointed his mace toward the west and talked in a voice loud enough to echo down to the capital below.

“Holy Templar Knights, move out!”

At his command, the church’s strongest fighting force advanced toward the western ocean. Those in the capital cheered Laus’ departure. Laus kept his gaze fixed firmly westward, toward the city where those who loved freedom resided.

“Let’s see you resist Ehit’s will...” Laus’ quiet voice sounded more like a plea than a threat.



Chapter III: Divine Punishment

The ocean spread out in all directions, stretching as far as the eye could see. And in the middle of that vast expanse sat a tiny island. Not a natural one, but one made entirely of wood. More specifically, it was an island made by chaining a number of large ships together. Some ships were old while others were new, but they were all connected to each other with the same uniform metal poles. Wooden ladders spanned the space between decks, allowing people to move from boat to boat without going through the water.

Roughly 20 ships made up the entirety of this artificial island. They'd been arrayed in a grid formation, with all their sails removed. The empty masts had been converted into walkways, creating a second story to the island. The pathways connecting masts were lined with ropes on which laundry was hung out to dry. Most of the ships' decks were stacked high with household goods such as soap, cleaning supplies, and the like. The whole island was bustling with activity; women chatted with each other as they went about their errands while men repaired the ships' hulls or trained in the various combat arenas. Crow's nests were filled with those on break, most of whom were smoking long tobacco pipes. People of all ages and races mingled freely with each other.

It was this island village that served as the Melusine Pirate Crew's operating base. Incidentally, the reason Meiru had named her crew Melusine was because the word meant "master of the stormy seas" in a local dialect, and it was the name of the very first ship they'd commandeered. Most pirate crews took on the family name of their captain, but most dagons didn't possess family names to begin with. Since Meiru hadn't had a family name to name her crew after, someone had suggested naming themselves after their ship, and the idea had stuck. Though most of the ship island was peaceful, there was one section near the end that was filled with suffering. Twitching bodies lined the deck, their agonized screams forming a chorus of the damned.

"Curse you, you vixen! How dare you!"

One of the men with a bit of life left in him howled in rage. He got to his feet, picked up his cutlass, and charged. Meiru's gentle smile didn't even falter as she watched him approach.

"My, someone's lively."

She moved her right hand slightly. A whip of water appeared out of nowhere and lashed the man's cheek.

"Bwaah!?"

The force of the blow sent the man spinning backward. He performed a beautiful triple axel as he turned, more on accident than anything. Once he finished his revolutions the man collapsed onto the ship's deck, exhausted. He'd been forced to continue this one-sided fight since dawn. The man sprawled out onto the ground and started to bawl his eyes out. Meiru looked down at him with a gaze filled with mercy and said, "My, how pathetic. To think you'd start crying after only a morning's worth of fighting. You should be ashamed of yourself, you worthless pig."

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Though her tone was gentle, Meiru's words were scathing. Unable to bear her berating, the man completely broke down.

"It's been eight hours, you know. Normally anyone would start crying after being forced to fight for that long without a break. Especially since you kept restoring him every time he got beat up just so you could do it again." Miledi muttered quietly as she watched from the circular observation platform on the mast directly above Meiru's torture grounds. Next to her, Oscar watched with the same stiff expression.

"She's a pirate alright. No one else would torture their captives like that. It's just scary because she looks so gentle while doing it..."

"Indeed. She resembles a saint in appearance, but only in appearance. Women are terrifying..."

"Hey, Nacchan. Please don't put me, the very incarnation of cute, in the same category as Meru-nee."

“You’re pretty terrifying yourself, you know that?”

“What’s that supposed to mean!?” Miledi turned to Naiz, pouting. Chris smiled ruefully as he listened Miledi and the others discuss Meiru’s sadistic streak. He had a cigar in his mouth, which accentuated his rugged good looks.

“Well, I get where you kids are coming from. But this is something we’ve gotta do, so don’t judge the cap’n too harshly for this.”

Oscar adjusted his glasses and thought back to what they’d told him last night.

“Because this is how you haze all the new members of your crew, right? No wonder all the pirates the Ghost Ship attacked vanished.”

“So you press-gang all the pirates you capture into your own crew? I guess it makes sense that Meru-nee has to teach them who’s boss before letting them join...”

Indeed, the men scattered across the ship’s deck were the former Brayed pirates Meiru had captured last night. In order to incorporate them into the Melusine Pirate Crew, Meiru was in the process of fixing their rotten personalities via a rather harsh training regime. Naturally, some pirates were rotten to the core, and those Meiru couldn’t rehabilitate, she released. She’d put the incorrigible pirates on a small boat and send them off to sea. If they were lucky, they made it back home alive. Meiru’s crew was neither a police force nor a peacekeeping one. Naturally, they had no interest in judging criminals. If someone was too evil to let into their crew, they let the ocean judge their fate.

“I’m amazed you can trust your new comrades after torturing them like that, though. Aren’t you worried some of them are only pretending to be one of the crew while secretly waiting for a chance to get revenge?”

Naiz’s question was a valid one. In response, Chris jerked his chin toward where the Brayed pirates lay.

“Just kill me already, you bitch! End it, damn you! I know you’re not planning on letting me leave alive anyway!”

The sobbing man desperately pleaded for death. Meiru’s smile vanished,

replaced by a troubled expression. She walked over and squatted next to the sobbing man. Then she gently patted him on the head. “Huh?” he mumbled, confused. Meiru’s saintlike smile returned, and she caressed the desperate man’s cheek.

“Everything will be alright, don’t worry.”

She cast a healing spell on the pirate.

“I know it was tough, but you really hung in there.”

“Y-Yeah? Wait, what?”

Meiru enveloped the pirate in a loving embrace, healing him in both body and mind. Though he was confused, the man was too overjoyed at being freed from hell to give Meiru’s actions much thought.

“You’re such a brave, strong man. Why did you turn to piracy?”

“Huh? So... So I could feed myself obviously. Why else would anyone become a pirate?”

“Why don’t you tell me what happened to you? Maybe I can help.”

Meiru healed the other pirates lying sprawled on the deck as well. They, too, were confused by her sudden kindness but they still obediently told her the story of how they became pirates. She listened to their tale with a sympathetic ear, and when they finished gave them the most benevolent smile Miledi had ever seen.

The effect was multiplied by the fact that Meiru happened to be quite a beautiful young woman. Her looks alone were enough to captivate the pirates. The combination of her saintlike demeanor and stunning looks was more than enough to move the simpleminded pirates to tears. Once she was sure she had them in the palm of her hand, Meiru’s expression grew stern and she declared, “Listen up, you louts. Join my family and be saved!”

“Huh? Wait, where’d that come from!?”

The pirate who’d hung on for longer than the others asked the question all his men were thinking. Meiru smiled again and replied, “You have nowhere else to go, do you not? Or do you have a home to return to?”

“W-Well...”

The Brayed Pirates had fled to Andika because they’d had nowhere else to go. And they’d found even the city wasn’t welcoming to them so they’d headed out to sea and become pirates. But now that their ship had been destroyed and their crew subjugated, they had nowhere to return to. The men turned to each other with despondent looks. Before they could discuss their options, Meiru spread her arms wide and added, “In that case, why not let me look after you? If you join my family, then you’ll be able to live together with us. And even if it turns out you don’t like it here, you are free to leave at any time. I promise I won’t be harsh on you anymore. And if the time ever comes that you want to leave, I’ll even send you back to Andika.”

“I-I know you’re up to something, bitch! There’s no way you’d make an offer like this if there wasn’t something in it for you!”

His men nodded in agreement. They weren’t used to being treated with kindness, so their suspicion was natural. However, Meiru’s smile just grew deeper and she said, “This place is a haven for those who’ve lost everything.”

There didn’t have to be anything in it for Meiru, that was just what kind of place this island was. That’s the angle Meiru used in her attempt to convince the pirates. Seeing the men falter, she pushed even harder.

“Also.. .if you ever manage to defeat me, you’ll be able to make both me and the Melusine Pirate Crew yours.”

“Ah!” The men gulped. Not only would they become leaders of a huge pirate crew, but they’d also be able to do whatever they wanted with the beauty in front of them. She was already offering to look after them, but if they beat her in a fight they could get to know her on an even more intimate level. All thoughts of refusing fled from the pirates’ minds.

“My, how wonderful! I always love watching my family grow. Now then, let’s all share a meal to commemorate your inauguration.”

The moment she said that, members of her crew started bringing out food. This had obviously all been planned. The pirates hadn’t eaten since last night, and their eyes lit up at the prospect of a proper meal. The leader of the Brayed Pirates bowed his head and said, “Th-Thank you for your kindness, Ane-san.”

With that, the lunch banquet began.

“There you have it.”

Chris’ words brought Miledi and the others back to their senses. Shivering, they voiced their thoughts on the spectacle they’d just witnessed.

“A-Am I the only one who thinks that’s a pretty nasty way to brainwash someone?”

“Not at all, Miledi. I was just thinking the same thing.”

“I-I knew it, women are terrifying...”

First, Meiru had cornered the pirates by showing them the overwhelming difference in strength between them, then given them a tantalizing out. She really was a master of the carrot and the stick. She could be cruel when necessary, but she could also be sympathetic, kind, and understanding. She’d insidiously wormed her way into the pirates’ minds, planting into their heads the idea that they really had nowhere else to go. Finally, to seal the deal, she’d fed them right after they’d agreed, showing off how they were comrades who’d eat and live together from now on. She had such a good grasp of their thought processes that she’d effectively brainwashed them.

“Those guys look like the type that’ll get carried away and try something stupid before long. But even if they do, Meiru’ll just repeat this whole process again. Mark my words, she’ll have those poor saps licking her boots in a month.”

“God that’s scary.”

“Give it a few more months, and they’ll be as trustworthy comrades as the rest of our crew is.”

The truly terrifying thing about Meiru’s modus operandi was that she really did care about her men. She’d never abandon them, she was always there to listen to their worries, and she made sure they always had enough to eat. It was because of that everyone who joined realized that her family really was the best home for them. That was why no one tried to betray her after they’d lived with her for a while. In the end, it was a win-win situation for both sides, so there wasn’t anything really that wrong about it either.

“Women are scary... Women are scary...”

“P-Pull yourself together Nacchan! Sue-chan’s not... okay she’s scary for a different reason but... dammit, how come there aren’t any normal girls around Nacchan!?”

“Miledi, you realize that was a self-own, right?”

Naiz didn’t even respond to Miledi’s comment. He just looked down with dead eyes, wishing he’d never left his cave. In an attempt to lighten the mood, Oscar turned to Chris and changed the topic. Incidentally, Oscar had initially been a lot more polite to Chris since the rugged pirate was older, but Chris had said pirates didn’t care about manners so Oscar had taken to being more casual with him.

“By the way Chris, I’ve noticed a lot of the people living here don’t look like pirates. Hell, there’s kids and stuff too. Where’d they all come from?”

“Oh, most of those guys were with us when we first made this place. Some of the others came here because they couldn’t live in Andika any longer, or were abandoned. Oh, and a few of the kids were born here.”

According to Chris, Meiru had been born in one of Andika’s outer districts. She’d lost her parents at the tender age of 10 and had been forced to eke out a living on the streets. She’d instinctively been able to use magic from a young age, so she’d spent most of her days healing the less fortunate residents and protecting them from thugs and the like.

“But, well, once word got out that her healing magic wasn’t just any healing magic, things got difficult for her back in the city. By the time that happened, we’d gotten as close as family. We had a goal in mind already, so all us louts from the slums decided to go to sea together with Meiru.”

Oscar’s ears perked up at the word “goal.” He asked what exactly Chris was talking about, but the old man just shrugged his shoulders and gave a non-response.

“Ask Meiru if you’re curious.”

He looked down at Meiru, who was enjoying the banquet together with her new family, and at that moment he resembled a father proudly watching his

daughter.

“Frankly speaking, Meiru’s got one shitty personality. She looks like an angel but she’s actually a sadist. And whenever things don’t go her way she tries to play them off with that poker face smile of hers, but she actually sucks at planning. I can’t believe I got saddled with such an airheaded tomboy.”

Chris grinned.

“When all’s said and done though, she’s a kind lass at heart. Her mum taught her to never abandon family, and she’s lived by that principle her whole life. That’s why we work so hard to protect her. It’s why even scum of the earth like us trust her.”

So she takes in all the people who can’t survive in the dog-eat-dog world of Andika, and even rehabilitates the pirates who aren’t too far gone... Though she’d only had 40 followers with her at the start, her hidden base now had close to 500 people living in it. At first, she’d only had 10 or so capable fighters, including Chris and Kyaty, but now her pirate armada was 200 men strong. Her floating island lay directly above an underwater volcanic range, meaning it was teeming with life. Dagons and anyone who could use magic could easily go diving for seafood and other resources. While it was difficult to procure things like spices, clothes, and other household goods, the island’s residents didn’t have to worry about starving at least. A few kilometers out, the ocean’s underwater geography caused violent changes in the ocean’s current, creating a zone of whirlpools and maelstroms. Those familiar with the area referred to that location as the graveyard of ships. Countless ships had been caught in the currents and dragged under, and the seafloor in that area was now littered with their remains. Incidentally, most of the island’s ships were wrecks Meiru had pulled up and restored. Whenever she needed to expand the island, she dredged up another one. Miledi listened to Chris’ explanation with rapt attention, smiling at how proud Chris sounded of Meiru.

“I see. So you all built up this place together. That’s amazing!”

“Hehe, I know, right?”

“It’s really awesome how Meru-nee protects everyone! No wonder they all like her. That’s why everyone respects her as the captain too, right?”

Chris beamed as if it was he Miledi was praising and not Meiru.

“Oh Chris, you shouldn’t reveal all my secrets like that.” Meiru said with a smile. No one had noticed her walk up to the crow’s nest.

“Uh oh, better get outta here before the she-demon starts breathing down my neck.” Chris shivered in an exaggerated manner and hopped off the platform.

“Sheesh, Chris never learns.”

“Fufufu. Chris acts just like a doting father, huh Meru-nee?”

“He really does. I don’t know who my real father is, and Chris looked after me ever since I was young, so I suppose in many ways he is my father.”

Miledi had said that in an attempt to tease Meiru, but she responded with surprising honesty. Meiru grinned and sidled behind Miledi. Without missing a beat, she reached her arms around Miledi and fondled her boobs.

“Hyaaaah!? Wh-What’re you doing!?”

“Exactly what it looks like. Fondling your breasts. They’re quite modest, I see.”

“Shut up! They’ll get bigger soon! Anyway, let me go! And stop staring, O-kun, Nacchan!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Roger!”

Miledi tried to squirm free, but Meiru’s grip was like iron. Too surprised by the sudden development to argue, Oscar and Naiz turned around as asked. But even though they weren’t looking, they could still hear.

“Aaaaagh.”

Neither of them had heard Miledi moan like that before. Oscar blushed.

“C-Cut it out!”

“My, be careful.”

The moment Miledi managed to push Meiru off, an updraft hit the crow’s nest, directly behind where she was standing. The sudden gust of wind lifted up

her skirt, leaving her panties in full view.

“Oh my. I didn’t know you were the type to wear such risque underwear, Miledi-chan. Trying to look older than you are?”

Miledi hurriedly pushed her skirt back down, tears of embarrassment pooling in her eyes.

“Oscar-kun, in case you’re curious, today Miledi-chan’s wearing black--”

“Not another wooooooord!”

Miledi freaked out when Meiru told Oscar the color of her panties. She held out her hand and a wave of gravity pushed down on the dagon. Meiru leaped out of the crow’s nest, and with a wave of her hand called forth a stream of seawater to carry her underwater. Gravity’s power was reduced in the water, so naturally, Miledi’s magic wasn’t as effective on submerged targets either.

“Grrrrrrr!”

“My, what a spirited girl you are Miledi-chan.”

Meiru poked her head out of the ocean and smiled. Miledi cast a water spell to try and expel Meiru from the sea, but unfortunately for her, Meiru was far more skilled when it came to water magic. Meiru hijacked Miledi’s spell and turned it into a water whip that lifted up Miledi’s skirt once more. Miledi was once again forced to push her skirt down, and she stamped her feet in irritation.

“I’ve never seen anyone toy with Miledi like this... Keep going Meiru!”

“Oscar... Actually, I agree. We’re counting on you, Meiru.”

“I can’t believe you two would betray me like this!”

Meiru smoothly slid across the water while Oscar and Naiz cheered her on.

“Gaaaaaaah! Meru-nee! Why do you have to be such a meanie!?”

“Why? Well, because you’re calling me your older sister.”

“That’s your reason!?”

“Isn’t it natural for older sisters to tease their younger sisters?”

“Who decided that!? Also, you’re starting to scare me now!”

“What belongs to the younger belongs to the elder. In fact, younger sisters are their older sisters’ property. Everyone knows that.”

“No, they’re not!”

For quite some time, Miledi was teased, toyed with, and occasionally tricked by Meiru. More than once Meiru looked like she was about to stop and held out the olive branch only to yank it back at the last second and torture Miledi some more.

“Oh my. Perhaps I overdid it.”

A good hour later Meiru looked down at Miledi with a smile. The poor leader of the Liberators was slumped on the floor and quivering in terror. *Chris wasn’t lying when he said Meiru was a sadist.*

“Meiru, stop bullying the kids you like. You’re not 5 anymore.”

Kyaty walked up to Meiru with a plate piled high with seafood. Her cat ears twitched and she sighed as she saw the state Miledi was in. She’d changed out of the short pants she’d been wearing during the attack on the Brayed pirates and was now wearing a light pareo.

“Are you jealous that I’m not bullying you anymore?”

“Like hell I am. And you never ‘bullied’ me!”

Seeing as her ears and tail were standing on end, Kyaty’s reply didn’t seem very convincing. It was obvious she’d been toyed around with by Meiru in the past as well. She’d been the only girl around Meiru’s age and her longtime friend, so Meiru had usually teased Kyaty the most. Kyaty harrumphed and brought the plate of food over to Oscar and Naiz. It appeared she’d wanted to make sure they were fed.

“Thank you, Kyaty-san.”

“Sorry for making you bring our food all the way out here. It looks delicious.”

Oscar thanked Kyaty with a smile, then took out his umbrella and began transmuting the handle. In seconds, he’d turned it into a makeshift table. He carefully put the plate of food onto his umbrella-table.

“That’s a pretty handy umbrella, four-eyes.”

“My name’s not four-eyes, it’s Oscar.”

“Mmm. F-Fine I’ll call you by your name, but only if you stop putting -san after mine! It feels weird!”

“Weird? I just thought it’d be rude to not use any honorifics with you.”

“Wh-Who cares about that! Look, just drop the -san alright!”

“If that’s what you want, Kyaty.”

Kyaty harrumphed again and looked away, but her tail was swishing back and forth in excitement.

“Oh my, Kyaty. I didn’t realize you had a crush on Oscar-kun. I suppose you always did have a thing for the intellectual types. Oh, you’re such a cute little kitten.”

“Wh-What!? Who would ever have a crush on that gloomy four-eyes!?”

“Can you please start using my name already?”

Oscar adjusted his glasses as he said that. Though Kyaty didn’t respond, her tail started swishing back and forth again. Handsome young men with an intellectual air about them were rare among pirate crews, and it was a fact that they were Kyaty’s type, so it was hardly surprising that she was showing an interest in Oscar.

“Oi, what’s going on here? Is that damn brat making a pass on Kyaty? This is why I fucking hate good-looking dudes. I wish they’d all die.”

“I don’t really care about him, but I’d love to see that Miledi girl wearing a maid outfit.”

Some of the other Melusine Pirates started to gather around Oscar’s group. The man who kept professing his everlasting hatred for good-looking guys was the same one Miledi had kicked off the ship when she was rescuing Kiara.

His name was Ned Peak. He had unkempt black hair and a scraggly beard. He also had a short, muscle-bound frame. However, his face was lined with wrinkles and though he was only 30, he looked like he was 50. Hence why he hated people with good looks. It was a constant habit of his to curse them out.

The man gazing longingly at Miledi was the demon Mania. Like all demons, he had dark skin and red eyes. No one knew his real name, so they called him Mania on account of his crazy maid uniform fetish. Despite being a pervert, he was also a highly skilled mage.

The two of them, along with Kyaty, were some of Meiru's best fighters and served as her sub-captains. Oscar ignored Kyaty, who was mumbling something about how he wasn't making a pass at her and walked over to Mania. He adjusted his glasses and said, "Are you a fellow maid connoisseur?"

"!"

Mania, who was known for his poker face, widened his eyes in surprise. He felt an inexplicable kinship with Oscar, and his soul began to quiver. Oscar, too, felt something stir within him. The two knew instinctively that they were comrades. Fellow explorers searching for the same grand truth. Oscar opened his Treasure Trove and withdrew his most prized possession.

"What do you think of this?"

"I-It's beautiful..."

What Oscar had pulled out was a picture. A picture of Miledi. More specifically, a picture of Miledi posing in a maid outfit. Her expression was a little stiff, but that wasn't important. She'd originally bought it to use in teasing Oscar, but she'd failed to anticipate that he was also a maid outfit aficionado. When Oscar had started praising her she'd been so terrified of his passion that she'd tried to change out of it right away, but he'd stopped her. They'd gone back and forth for a while until Miledi had finally convinced Oscar to let her change out of it on the condition that he could take some pictures of her. Everyone else watched on, bewildered, as Mania basked in the joy of finally meeting a fellow comrade.

"I have a collection of outfits in my room. Would you like to see them later?"

"Indeed I would."

The two men exchanged a firm handshake. They'd already forged a deep friendship over their shared love of maid outfits.

"O-Oh no, he's a pervert..."

Kyaty's crush withered as quickly as it had blossomed. She gave Oscar a look of disgust and backed up a few steps. On the other hand, Ned seemed to have warmed up to Oscar a little more. Likely because he'd felt an affinity with the young Synergist. In truth, Ned was also a maid lover.

"Sorry I kept telling you to die, pretty boy."

"Heh. I'm in a good mood right now, so I don't mind forgiving you."

"Oho. I thought you were a pretty uptight guy, but you're alright, kid."

"Hmph. I'm nothing more than another wanderer, searching for truth."

"No, you're a Synergist," Naiz retorted in exasperation. Oscar ignored him and started chatting with the two pirates. Indeed, maid outfits were a wonderful thing that transcended racial boundaries and linked the world together.

"I'm sorry about him."

Naiz turned to the girls and bowed his head in apology. Oscar didn't mind though, because he knew that Naiz too had a picture of Susha and Yunfa posing in maid outfits. Though Naiz had been so terrified when he'd first received the letter that he'd nearly chucked the photo, Oscar knew that deep down, Naiz also had a deep appreciation for maid outfits. Naiz was just hiding his love, that was all.

"Hey, why are you guys all having fun without me?"

Miledi had recovered enough to start complaining about being left out. However, she was still slumped on the ground and looking toward the prow of the ship. She'd only recovered enough to scoot closer to everyone.

"Oh my, Miledi-chan. I never knew you were so starved for attention. I can play with you some more, if you'd like?"

"I'm not, so don't!"

"Seriously Meiru, cut it out already." Kyaty cut in with an exasperated sigh. It appeared Meiru was quite fond of Miledi. The young dagon woman snuck up behind Miledi, who was still pouting and pinched her cheeks.

"My, such soft cheeks. Shall we see how far they stretch?"

Meiru pulled Miledi's cheeks outward with a smile. Miledi had long since given up and put up no resistance. Seeing Miledi's lack of reaction, Meiru apologized.

"Sorry, Miledi-chan. I went too far. Won't you please forgive your clingy older sister?"

"Ish not very convinshing when you apologishe while shtill pinching my cheeks."

Miledi turned to glare at Meiru, tears pooling in her eyes. Meiru finally let go of Miledi's cheeks, but the playful twinkle in her eyes was still there.

"Now now, Miledi-chan. There's no need to look so scared. I promise I'm a nice older sister."

"No one who calls themselves nice is ever nice."

Kyaty nodded emphatically from the sidelines. As someone who'd also suffered under Meiru's tyranny, she felt a lot of sympathy for Miledi. Meiru put a finger to her lips and thought about how to improve Miledi's mood.

"Oh, I know. Miledi-chan, I'll listen to any one thing you ask, so please cheer up."

"Please join the Liberators."

"Not happening."

"You said you'd listen to anything I'd ask!"

Miledi got up and started stamping her feet again. She couldn't believe Meiru would go back on her word that easily.

"There are limits to everything, you know. Just how greedy are you, Miledi-chan?"

"Screw you!"

"You're hopeless, you know that? I suppose because I'm so nice I can at least give you a consolation prize."

Meiru was just saying whatever she wanted at this point. But Miledi was too tired to care. However, Meiru's next words grabbed her interest.

“I’ll tell you what the Melusine Pirate Crew’s ultimate goal is.”

“Wait, you will!? I thought it was supposed to be a secret!”

“It is, but I suppose it won’t matter too much if you know.”

“Can you really just decide that all by yourself!?”

“Of course. I’m the captain. And the captain’s word is absolute.”

Miledi shot Kyaty a sidelong glance. *You hear your captain?* Kyaty ruffled her hair and shook her head. It appeared she’d already given up on trying to deal with Meiru.

“You see. Our ultimate goal is...”

Meiru nodded to Ned and snapped her fingers. He hurriedly rolled over a barrel and started slapping his hands against it to make a drumroll noise. Though it was cliched, it still served to heighten the suspense. Meanwhile, Mania used dark magic to obstruct the sunlight, then used light magic to cast a spotlight on Meiru. The two of them were in perfect sync. That got the attention of not just Miledi, but Oscar and Naiz as well.

“To take over Andika~”

Meiru dropped a bombshell in her usual laid-back tone.

“T-Take over? What? Why? How?”

Meiru answered nonchalantly, as if she was just talking about what to cook for dinner.

“Because I want more power. I want a city all to myself.”

“How can you say that so calmly!?”

“But no matter how nicely I asked, the man ruling over Andika wouldn’t hand over his city. Quite stingy, wouldn’t you say?”

“I think that’s pretty normal! If someone gave up their city just because someone asked there’s something wrong with them!”

“Since he won’t hand it over quietly, I have no choice but to take it from him by force.”

Meiru boldly restated her Pirate Crew's goal. *So the reason she was capturing and converting all these pirates was to build a force large enough to invade Andika.* Meiru went on to explain that the reason she'd been doing "saintlike" things was so that the people of Andika would accept her as their ruler when she took over. Based on her past deeds they'd be convinced that there was a good reason she'd done it. After all, everyone thought she was a kind, gentle soul.

After hearing the whole story, Miledi was at a loss for words. Seeing her shock, Meiru extended a hand and said, "I would like your assistance as well, Miledi-chan. What do you say? Would you be willing to join my family? I'll reward you with riches beyond your wildest imagination."

"No way."

Miledi rejected Meiru's proposal right away. Meiru shrugged her shoulders and tried a different tack.

"In that case, won't you conquer Andika for us and gift it to me as a present? If you do, I might even think about joining the Liberators."

"O-kun, Nacchan. I'm too tired for this. I can't tell what we should even be doing anymore."

Miledi turned to her two comrades, the tears from earlier streaming down her cheeks. She'd never dreamed Meiru would ask her to take over a city as her condition for joining the Liberators. Meanwhile, Oscar and Naiz were once again reminded of the fact that when all was said and done, Meiru was still a pirate. Meiru turned to the boys with a gentle smile.

"Well, Liberators? Will you give me Andika, or not?"

She was way more than any of them could handle.

That evening. Miledi and Meiru huddled together on the Melusine's observation deck. They were gazing out at the moonlit sea. Miledi had let her hair down and was clad in a simple one-piece dress. That was what she used as her pajamas. She'd wanted to have a proper talk with Meiru before going to sleep, so she'd called her out right before bed. Both of them were sipping

tankards filled to the brim with alcohol. Miledi wasn't a fan of liquor so her tankard was more 9 parts juice and 1 part alcohol though. Meiru watched warmly as Miledi held her tankard in both hands and took tiny sips, much like a child would.

"It's not what you think! I'm an adult too, you know. I just felt like drinking juice, that's all!"

"Of course, of course. You're a full-fledged adult, Miledi-chan. I know."

Meiru patted Miledi with her left hand while she downed her tankard. The alcohol she was drinking was so strong it'd burn if you lit it. Embarrassed, Miledi turned away and took another few sips of her drink.

"So what is it you wished to discuss with me?"

"Well, I was thinking I should tell you about our journey until now."

"I see..."

Meiru thought back to the wounds she'd recreated on Miledi's body during their fight the other night. Despite her noble demeanor and soft features, Miledi had fought battles far fiercer than any Meiru had seen in her years as a pirate. *What's driving her that she's willing to suffer such injuries and still keep fighting...*

"Very well. In fact, I was curious as well, Miledi-chan. I want to know the path you've walked."

"Then let me tell you!"

Miledi grinned and started recounting the tale of her past. She talked deep into the night, telling in full the chain of events that had led to her arriving in Andika. Once she was finished, Meiru heaved a long sigh. The feelings Miledi's tale had stirred within her were too much to process at once.

"That sounds like a painful journey..."

That was all she could think of to say.

"Well, it was. But it's thanks to that journey that I met O-kun and Nacchan. So personally I think it was a wonderful journey too."

Miledi smiled and looked down at the deck. Oscar and Naiz were no doubt in the process of telling Chris and the others the very same story. She then turned to Meiru, her eyes reflecting the radiant brilliance of the moon.

“Won’t you join hands with me, so that we can change the world together?”

Miledi held out her hand, but Mieru ignored it.

“I’m afraid I must decline.”

“Ahaha, thought so.”

Miledi instantly retracted her hand.

“Hey, Meru-nee. Why don’t you tell me more about you now?”

“You heard my story from Chris already, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but I want to hear it from you.”

Seeing Miledi’s innocent smile, Meiru smiled ruefully and muttered some words.

“You really are a handful...”

In a way, Miledi was perfectly suited to being a conman.

“Alright. I suppose I can tell you a little more about myself. The truth is I’ve got the blood of a vampire flowing in me!”

“What!? No seriously, what!?”

Vampires were few in number and were known for their solitary nature. Most of them resided in the Dastia Kingdom that lay in the southwestern tip of the continent, within the deep wetlands known as the Azure Bogs. Miledi hadn’t heard of any vampires leaving their borders in living memory. Vampires were known for being even more proficient with magic than demons, so while their country was small, no one dared invade it.

“D-Does that mean you suck people’s blood too, Meru-nee?”

“Fufufu.”

Meiru dropped her gaze down to Miledi’s neck and licked her lips. Miledi shrieked and backed away a few steps.

“At the very least, my mom told me that my father was a vampire. The only things I inherited from him were his magical affinity and these red eyes.”

In other words, she didn’t possess any of the vampires’ unique traits. But that did explain why a dagon like her not only was capable of using ancient magic, but was extremely proficient in all other elements as well.

“Umm, so who was your dad?”

“My mother never told me the details, but apparently he went back home long ago.”

“H-He sounds like a deadbeat...”

“From what I gathered, it was my mother who abandoned him, not the other way around.”

“What were you thinking, Meru-nee’s mom!? Did she really hate him that much!?”

Meiru smiled sadly. According to her, her father had been a respected noble among the vampires and had been prepared to take Meiru’s mother, Reej, who’d been pregnant with Meiru at the time, back with her to Dastia regardless of the consequences. However, after many twists and turns, Reej was forced to part with her husband, both for his sake and for the sake of her child. She left the continent and fled to the remote city of Andika.

“Your mom sounds like an amazing person.”

“Indeed... She was both strong, and kind.”

However, she passed away when Meiru was but eight years old.

“After that, I lived in the slums. Thanks to my skill with magic I was able to survive, and after meeting Chris and the others, I was able to make a decent living for myself.”

“But then you became a pirate.”

“That’s right. I despised the way Baharl ran the city. He encourages the residents to compete with each other, which is why the city has devolved into a lawless mess where only the strongest survive. Those who suffer, those who die, those who are tricked ‘deserve’ it because they are weak. That’s the kind of

city Andika's become."

Andika's creed was that everyone was responsible for themselves. Even Meiru didn't think that was wrong. However, the family she'd encountered after being orphaned had all been people who'd been oppressed by those with more power, all in the name of that creed.

"If power is all that matters, then I will use my strength to make Andika a place where everyone can live in peace. A city where both the strong and the weak are protected. Anyone who cannot manage at least that doesn't deserve to rule the city of freedom."

Meiru's lips curled into an arrogant smile, and Miledi shook her head in admiration. *She's going to be hard to convince, that's for sure. But I won't give up!* Miledi instinctively felt that there was more to Meiru.

"Create a city where even the weak can live in peace, huh? But Meru-nee, that's not the only reason you want Andika, is it?"

"Hm? Whatever do you mean? Oh, are you referring to my earlier statement about wanting power and money? I want those too, of course. I am still a pirate after--"

"No, not that. It just feels like there's another wish you desperately want to grant."

"...But of course? There are hundreds of things I still desire. As I said, I'm a pirate."

Meiru realized she'd hesitated a bit too long before replying. She wasn't sure if she'd fooled Miledi or not, so she awkwardly averted her gaze. It was rare, but Meiru occasionally met people like Miledi. People who could see further than most, despite normally being thickheaded.

I suppose she is someone with the guts and tenacity to pick a fight with the whole world. Cold sweat poured down Meiru's forehead. It wasn't that Meiru didn't trust Miledi. She was simply keeping her other wish a secret because Miledi was a Liberator. On the off chance that the worst happened and Miledi was captured...

"I see."

However, that was all Miledi said in reply. Meiru looked up and saw that the young girl was grinning like usual. Meiru knew. It wasn't that Miledi hadn't noticed, she was just willing to wait until Meiru opened up of her own accord.

What a girl... Meiru smiled ruefully, her expression matching the one Miledi had had just a few moments ago. Miledi then changed the subject and the pair continued talking late into the night. Despite the short length of their acquaintance, the two really looked like close siblings.

This was one of the rare times where Diene was allowed to spend the day in Baharl's palace. It was Ace's birthday, and only Baharl's closest subordinates, such as Kelvin, were there to celebrate it. Because Kelvin and Ace's birthday parties were always small affairs, Diene was usually allowed to attend. Diene was inside Baharl's office, waiting for him to finish up his work. She was standing next to the window, craning her neck to try and get a better look at the world outside. She looked adorable as she braced her hands against the windowsill and tried to lift herself up a few more inches. Ace and the others in the room smiled as they watched her.

"That being said, it's true that the abnormal weather patterns have begun to decrease recently. Moreover, the nearby monsters are acting like usual again. And that concludes my report, Boss."

Baharl lit his cigar and nodded thoughtfully.

"So the ruins are related after all. We've left them completely destroyed for now. It's a shame we can't harness this island's weapon, but it's too dangerous to weaken the seal... I still want to gather more information in case an emergency arises, but we'll go carefully from now on."

Baharl shot a sidelong glance at Diene. Noticing his gaze, she turned to him, then meekly looked away. While Baharl had said it was to prepare for emergencies, Diene couldn't help but worry. If there was no immediate danger, she'd rather just leave the ruins alone. Besides, she knew the real reason Baharl wanted to keep going was to find a way to weaponize the creature sealed beneath.

"Got a problem with that?"

“N-No, I didn’t...”

Diene twitched and hung her head despondently. Baharl clicked his tongue and returned to work. The awkward atmosphere continued for quite some time until finally, someone’s stomach rumbled and everyone looked up. They exchanged glances, thinking it was about time to start the feast. But before anyone could say anything, an unfamiliar voice interrupted them.

“Are you Baharl Devault?”

“!?”

No one had noticed the newcomer enter the room. He was just suddenly there, standing quietly in front of the door.

“Who the hell are you!?”

Baharl’s bodyguards snapped back to their senses upon hearing their boss’ voice and surrounded the intruder. Diene was too stunned to react and just stood there.

“I’m the commander of the Templar Knights, Laus Barn.”

“Did you just say Templar Knights?”

Baharl broke out in a cold sweat. A dozen questions popped up in his mind. He almost unconsciously looked toward Diene, but stopped himself in the nick of time. Laus ignored Baharl and the others’ surprise and said what he’d come here to say.

“I’ve come here to eliminate the pirates threatening the safety of Andika.”

“Those guys, huh? They’re a real piece of work. Sorry we’re so useless, *Your Eminence.*”

Baharl’s words were dripping with sarcasm; he guessed that the pope had sent Laus out because he’d determined Baharl couldn’t wipe his own ass. However, Laus didn’t rise to the taunt.

“Is that all you came here for?”

“I brought a full division. The matter should be settled in a few days. Once I’ve completed my business here, I’ll come meet with you again. Make sure you’ve

remembered where your loyalties lie by then.”

“What are you talking about...”

“These words come directly from His Eminence the Pope. ‘Is there not something you need to report to me?’”

“Tch... Can’t say there is. But if that’s what the pope has decreed, I’ll try and remember by the time you’ve returned.”

“For your sake, I hope you do.”

Laus swept his eyes across the room. Nervous, everyone followed his gaze. A second later, Laus had vanished. No one had heard the sound of the door opening. It was as if he’d never even been there at all.

“F-Father...” Diene called out in a trembling voice. Her face was pale, and she was clearly flustered.

“By pirates, did that man mean the Ghost Ship?”

“Huh? Of course he did.”

Baharl narrowed his eyes. Diene shrunk back, remembering the Templar Knight’s words. She’d originally assumed that the thing Baharl had forgotten to report on was her existence, but there was something nagging at the back of her mind, telling her that wasn’t it. That being said, she had no time to dwell on it.

“Diene, return to your room.”

“Okay...”

Escorted by Baharl’s guards, Diene left the office. She paid no heed to the furious conversation that broke out after her departure and hurried down the hallway. Clutching her hands to her chest, she said in a small voice that no one picked up, “Please be safe, Nee-sama.”

A month had passed since Miledi and the others had started living on Meiru’s island. They’d integrated themselves so seamlessly with the Melusine Pirate Crew that it almost seemed as if they’d been a part of it from the start. Miledi especially had made herself at home. She spent most of her days being teased

by Meiru, saved by Kyaty, and doted over by all the old ladies living on the island. Over time, she'd naturally risen to the position of the Melusine Pirate Crew's idol.

Oscar and Naiz had become rather friendly with the pirates as well, just in different ways. Oscar had been spending a lot of time with Meiru alone in her room, so rumors had started to spread that he'd finally seduced her. Many of the island's older women were secretly rejoicing that Meiru, who had such a nasty personality that she'd had no suitors before, had finally managed to snag a man. None of them actually knew what Oscar and Meiru were doing behind closed doors, but they thought it rude to ask, so they didn't. Unfortunately, that just deepened the misunderstanding.

In truth, Oscar was simply getting Meiru to help him create artifacts imbued with restoration magic. Since Meiru wasn't willing to go to the continent, this was his backup plan to heal Dylan and Katy. He also gave Meiru one of his tracking devices. That way, if his artifacts didn't work he'd be able to bring Dylan and Katy to her without having to search the sea. Thanks to Naiz's teleportation abilities, it wouldn't be a difficult task at all.

Eventually, though, the misunderstanding got resolved when Miledi barged in and yelled, "O-kun, what are you doing with Meru-nee every night!?" When the rest of the island learned they were just making artifacts, the men breathed a sigh of relief and the women seemed crestfallen. They'd also raided a few other pirate crews in that month, and part of the reason Oscar and Naiz were so loved was because of how much they'd contributed to those fights. Oscar especially had completely lost it when they'd had a run-in with a pirate crew who'd treated their prisoners more cruelly than most. He'd blinded everyone with his glasses and started tossing his enchanted daggers everywhere. On top of that, he'd used his metal wires to slice through their ships' masts and used his umbrella's fire and lightning spells to blow through their hulls. During his rampage, he'd single-handedly sunk three galleon-sized ships, earning him the respect of Meiru's crew.

Like all pirates, the Melusine Pirates revered strength. Many of the younger crewmembers had taken to calling Oscar Boss.

Naiz, too, had made a name for himself. He'd often flaunt his power by

blasting enemy ships with spatial magic, or teleporting the Melusine into the enemy's blind spot and ramming them from behind. But unlike Oscar, who was easily riled up, Naiz remained calm no matter the situation. Thanks to his cool demeanor and mature charm, he was a huge hit with the ladies. All the unmarried women on the island were after him, and Naiz was having trouble getting away from them all. Frankly, all the action had him terrified of what he might find in Susha's next letter to him.

"It's already been a month, huh...?" Naiz muttered to himself. He was sitting on the edge of one of the ships, a fishing rod resting in his hands.

"What's on your mind?" Oscar, who was fishing next to Naiz, asked.

"I was just wondering if maybe we were taking it too easy."

"Yeah, I get what you mean. We achieved our original goal, and the situation hasn't really changed at all in the time we've been here."

Oscar felt a tug on his line and pulled the rod up sharply. After confirming he'd gotten a bite, he reeled in his line and unhooked the small fish he'd caught. Once he was done he shrugged and continued to talk.

"We know what Meiru's after. And we also know what kind of person she is. Same goes for Chris and all the other pirates."

"Yeah. They may be pirates, but they're good guys."

Over the course of the past month, Oscar and Naiz had learned what the Melusine Pirate Crew was like. Normally when one heard the word pirates, they thought of a group of bloodthirsty brigands. However, Meiru's pirates had shattered that misconception for Miledi and the others.

"But we can't call it quits just yet. Miledi won't accept Meiru's refusal until she learns everything about her."

"I suppose you're right."

The two of them looked out into the ocean. Mileidi was frolicking around in the water with a group of kids. From the looks of it, they were playing tag. Except this was a variant where everyone but Miledi was "it." However, even with all of them combined, the kids couldn't catch Miledi. Likely because Miledi

was immature enough to boost her swimming skills with magic whenever it looked like she was about to get caught. She'd taken a liking to Meiru's current manipulation magic and had been working on reproducing it the past few weeks.

Oscar smiled warmly as he watched Miledi swim circles around the kids.

"And besides, it's nice here. I don't see anything wrong with taking it easy until our glorious leader is satisfied. You've had a pretty hard life until now Naiz, so why not think of this as a little vacation?"

"A vacation, huh? I guess that doesn't sound too bad. As always, we can leave our next course of action to Miledi's whims."

The two men nodded to each other, then turned their attention back to their fishing. They were both hoping to beat their personal bests for the largest fish caught this month.

Unfortunately, a commotion from below interrupted their fishing contest. Looking down, they noticed there was something strange going on with Miledi. She'd been swimming with ease moments ago, but now it looked like she was floundering.

Did she get a cramp or something? Oscar thought absently. But upon closer inspection, he realized that wasn't the case. The sea around Miledi had begun to swirl. And a second later—

"Whoaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!?"

"Wha!? Miledi!?"

A pillar of water shot Miledi out of the budding whirlpool, sending her spinning to where Oscar and Naiz sat. Oscar quickly tried to backpedal out of the way, but got distracted when he noticed there was no one sitting next to him anymore. Turning around, he saw that Naiz had teleported only himself to safety. Surprised, Oscar missed his chance to get out of the way.

"Bwaaah!?"

Miledi cannonballed directly into Oscar, sending him skidding across the deck. A wave of water followed, soaking him to the skin.

“Owwwwww... Damn you, Naiz, how could you abandon your friend like that?” Oscar grumbled as he lay face-up on wooden planks. However, his complaints were soon forgotten as he noticed something soft pressing against his shirt.

“Oof... Damn you, Meru-nee. Why do you keep doing this to me?”

“.....”

Miledi rose to a sitting position atop Oscar’s stomach. As she’d been playing in the water, she was naturally in a swimsuit. Specifically, a red bikini that Meiru had made for her. Miledi had complained about how revealing it was at first, but now she’d grown rather fond of it. Apparently, the reason Meiru had groped Miledi so much their first day on the island was so she could take Miledi’s measurements. However, the top that she’d so lovingly crafted had been stripped from Miledi’s body.



“Miledi!”

“Hwaaah!? O-O-kun!? What’s gotten into you!? When did you get so bold!?” Miledi attempted to brush her hair back, but was stopped when Oscar hugged her tight. From afar, it looked like she’d pushed Oscar down and was now sticking to him, so it was rather embarrassing.

“It’s not what you think! Just don’t get up! Or I’ll be able to see everything!”

“Huh?”

Oscar’s panicked voice alerted Miledi to the situation she was in. She turned beet red as she realized why the area around her chest had been feeling so breezy.

“Hweh!? Hweeeeeeeeeeeeh!? I-It’s gone, O-kun! My chest’s gone! Wait no, I don’t mean that I don’t have any boobs, I just mean my bikini’s gone!”

“You don’t have to explain it to me! Naaaaaaiz! Find Miledi’s bikini please!”

“I already found it...” Naiz said as teleported next to Oscar and Miledi. Then, he held out Miledi’s bikini while firmly keeping his gaze pointed in the other direction.

“Waaah, thank you, Nacchan.”

“No problem. Just don’t tell Susha or Yunfa about this.”

He’d been saying that to Miledi a lot recently.

“Oh, what’s up missy? Giving the boys here a show? In that case, I hope you don’t mind if I join— Bweh!?” Chris walked over, grinning. But before he could get any closer, a black umbrella came flying out of nowhere and smacked him upside the head. Oscar watched Chris dive facefirst onto the deck as he called back his umbrella and spread it open to hide Miledi from view.

“Hurry up and change before someone else shows up, Miledi.”

“Thanks, O-kun.”

Teary-eyed, Miledi started putting on her bikini. Naturally, Oscar looked as far in the other direction as he could while she changed.

“O-kun.”

“Yeah?”

“I can hear your heart pounding.”

“...I guess you don’t need this umbrella anymore.”

Oscar folded his umbrella, and Miledi hurriedly finished changing. She’d recovered from her earlier embarrassment, however, and was now grinning at Oscar.

“Sorry, Miledi-chan. I just wanted to let you know it was time for lunch, but I guess I overdid it a little.”

“Why do you keep doing crazy things like this to tell me it’s time to eat!? I hate you, Meru-nee!”

Meiru was wearing the same gentle smile as always and didn’t look the least bit remorseful. Miledi folded her arms and turned her back to Meiru.

“Oh my. But I made the steamed clams you love so much, Miledi-chan. Don’t you want them?”

“I do!”

The mention of food instantly improved Miledi’s mood, and she ran over to Meiru’s side.

“I love that simpleminded side of you,” Meiru replied with a wicked giggle.

“Oho. Now that’s a sight for sore eyes. Wouldn’t you agree, Oscar, Naiz?”

Chris got to his feet and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He was, of course, referring to Meiru and Miledi, who were both in their swimsuits. Meiru’s swimsuit was an ocean-blue, and it struck a pleasant contrast with Miledi’s crimson one. Meiru’s bikini barely covered any skin, and it felt like her boobs were about to spill out of it at any moment. The revealing outfit accentuated her stunning figure.

Now then, while it may have seemed that he was talking about how sexy they looked, the truth was different. Oscar could tell from the look in his eyes that what he was so captivated by was how much like siblings Meiru and Miledi seemed, not how hot they looked. He really was a doting father. Seeing the warmth in Chris’ eyes, Oscar adjusted his glasses and presented his answer.

“Indeed it is.”

During his month with the pirates, Oscar had learned to be more honest with himself. So much so that he’d even tried to convince Miledi to wear a maid outfit.

“Hoho. I see you’re an honest kid, Oscar! I knew you were a real man! How about you Naiz, what d’you think?”

“No comment.”

“What a wimp.”

It wasn’t that Naiz didn’t want to tell Chris his real thoughts, he was just terrified that if he voiced them Susha and Yunfa would hear about it.

“O-kuuuuuun! Nacchaaaaaan! What’re you waiting for? It’s lunchtime!” Miledi waved with both hands at Oscar and Naiz.

“Chris~ What are you telling those innocent boys? Do I have to kill you?”

On the other hand, Meiru waved at Chris with her water whip. It appeared she’d overhead their conversation.

“Oh shit!” Chris exclaimed as he made a run for it. Oscar and Naiz exchanged glances, then nodded to each other.

“Those girls really do act like siblings.”

That evening, the sunset had dyed the sky a brilliant orange; the same color as Meiru’s mana. The ocean reflected the sun’s waning light, creating a streak of orange that stretched into the horizon. Though Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz had seen the same sunset for a month now, it never failed to amaze them. The three of them were sitting on the Melusine’s crow’s nest, their legs dangling in the air. Miledi was sitting in the center, with the two guys flanking her. For someone who was supposed to be enjoying the view, her expression was rather glum. While the sunset purportedly made people lonely and nostalgic, Miledi’s depression seemed too severe to be explained away by just that. After a few minutes, she finally spoke.

“Let’s head back to Andika for a while.”

Oscar and Naiz exchanged glances from above Miledi's small head. The Synergist eventually adjusted his glasses and asked her the question on both their minds.

"Have you decided to accept Meiru's refusal, then?"

"Nope. Not one bit."

Apparently, Miledi's desire for a temporary return was part of a bigger plan.

"We've gotten a lot closer, and I've learned so much about Meru-nee. But there's one last thing she won't tell me."

As Oscar had suspected, Miledi thought there was more to Meiru's goal than she'd stated.

"I don't think she was lying when she said she wanted to conquer Andika and make it a city where people can live in peace."

"I agree. She was definitely telling us the truth, but I think there's more to it than just that."

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't really have any basis for thinking that, but..."

Even after they'd come to learn more about each other, Meiru had continued to refuse Miledi's invitations. At this point, Oscar was thinking it was best if they gave up. Meiru wasn't a loner like Naiz had been. She had a family she needed to protect. She wasn't in need of saving, and even if she was hiding something from Miledi, she was free to divulge or not divulge whatever information she wished.

Meiru wasn't the only one disinterested in joining either. None of the other pirates had shown any desire to join the Liberators. Oscar had gotten to know most of them at this point, and they were all deeply attached to their family. If they tried to be any more pushy about their solicitation, they'd start encroaching on the free will of these pirates. That was why, even though Oscar knew this was an insensitive question, he had to ask it.

"You've gotten pretty close Meiru this past month. Are you sure you just don't want to part because you've started seeing a bit of someone else in her?"

“Ah—” Miledi turned to Oscar in surprise. And then, she replied to him in a shaky voice.

“Close? She’s just messing with me all the time. And who would she—”

“Miledi. You don’t have to act tough in front of me or Naiz. I may not understand you completely, but I’d like to think I know you at least a little. After all, you won both of us over by opening your heart to us.”

“O-kun...” Miledi’s expression grew troubled. Though the glare from the sun hid Oscar’s face, she had the feeling he was smiling kindly at her. She turned to Naiz, only to find that he, too, was smiling at her. No matter what Miledi said, the two of them would never be disappointed in her or think her worries and fears were pathetic.

I really must be an open book... Miledi thought wryly to herself. But she was a little glad her comrades understood her so well. She curled her legs up and rested her chin on her knees. Her expression grew distant as if her mind was somewhere far away.

“The first time we talked, I did think Meru-nee was a lot like her— Like Belle, I mean.”

Belle, also known as Belta Lievre, was the girl who’d been responsible for restoring Miledi’s humanity. Miledi had loved her like her own sister and had cared more for her than for her own flesh and blood family.

Sure, Belle had looked nothing like Meiru, but Meiru’s constant smiles, her penchant for yanking people around her little finger, and her kindness were all so similar. It was because of that that Miledi had so easily let herself be spoiled around Meiru. Oscar had rarely seen Miledi sulk or pout, yet she did all the time now. It was little wonder that Miledi had started seeing something of Belle in Meiru. Had Belle survived, this might have been how they’d spent their time together.

“I’m pathetic, aren’t I? Even though I’m the leader of the Liberators, even though I swore to fight against this world, I’m wasting time here chasing after an illusion of the past that I know isn’t real.”

“If you’re pathetic, then I’m an abject failure. I spent ten years lamenting my

past, remember?”

“Nacchan...”

“So don’t worry about it,” Naiz added with a self-deprecating smile. Miledi smiled back in turn, and let the tension drain from her body.

“Miledi. You’re human too. Hell, you’re still in your teens. Neither of us is going to blame you for feeling a little lonely. Whether you want to leave or stay, we’ll be with you every step of the way.”

“Thanks...” Miledi said as she buried her face into her thighs. Then, she stayed like that for a while. Oscar and Naiz saw no reason to rush her, and they quietly watched the sunset while they waited for her to sort her feelings out. Time slowed to a crawl. Finally, when the sun had sunk below the horizon, Miledi quietly looked up at her two comrades.

“Thank you, O-kun, Nacchan. You’ve helped me realize. Meru-nee isn’t Belle. I kept on pretending like she was, and started dragging my feet, but that’s over now. However, there’s one last thing I want to do. I want to find out what Meru-nee’s real—sorry not real, other—wish is. And I have a feeling we’ll find that answer somewhere in Andika.”

“What if it turns out Meiru really did tell us everything? Or if her decision doesn’t change even if we help grant that other wish of hers?”

“Then I’ll give up for real! I’ll support Meru-nee’s choice to live as she pleases. I’d never take away the Melusine Pirates’ free will.”

Miledi slapped her cheeks and rose to her feet. Then, she looked down at her comrades with renewed determination.

“So there you have it! O-kun, Nacchan, we’re leaving first thing in the morning tomorrow!”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

“Roger.”

With Miledi’s decision made, the Liberators once again began to move.

The next morning, as expected, Meiru didn’t object when Miledi told her they

were departing. Oscar had thought some of the pirates might have been worried they'd leak the island's location to those in Andika, but it seemed the Melusine Pirates trusted them completely. Just as Miledi and the others had learned about the Melusine Pirates in their month here, the pirates had, in turn, learned much about Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz. Both sides trusted each other. In fact, since Oscar possessed his Treasure Trove, many of the pirates had asked him to buy things for them while he was in Andika.

"I should have known pirates have no manners..." Oscar looked wearily down at the notebook in his hands as he walked down the Arrogan District.

"Ahaha, don't be too mad, O-kun. Aside from the stuff they steal from pirates, they don't get many chances to get their hands on spices or clothes or other daily necessities."

Normally, when they needed to do some shopping, the Melusine Pirates snuck into Andika or another port city under the cover of night, bought everything from the most inconspicuous store they could find, then crept back to their ship. Naturally, that limited the number of things they could carry with them. Fortunately, the sea was teeming with all the fish they could eat, and they'd packed a few of the island's boats with soil to create makeshift farms. Still, everything aside from food was hard to procure on an artificial island.

"Anyway, we can do our shopping later... First, let's go to Wanda's Inn!" Miledi proclaimed as she trotted on ahead of the group.

The party's destination was, as Miledi had stated, Wanda's Inn. Since they'd been traveling with Meiru ever since rescuing Kiara and her mother, they hadn't seen them since the attack. Miledi, of course, wanted to check up on her friend, but there was also the fact that Wanda's was the inn everyone wanted to stay at.

"Oh, there it is. Looks like business is booming."

Relieved, Miledi led the group through the inn's doors.

"Welcome! Pick any seat you—"

"Yo, Kia-chan! It's good to see you're doing well."

Kiara stiffened when she saw it was Miledi who'd walked through the

doorway. Heedless of her shock, Miledi casually greeted Kiara. Marcus, Vera, and all the inn's regulars seemed just as stunned as Kiara. After a few seconds, Kiara's brain rebooted and she rushed toward Miledi.

"M-M-Miledi!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"Gwah!?"

Kiara barreled into Miledi at full speed and bowled her over. The two rolled across the ground and came to a stop with Kiara on top of Miledi. Kiara grabbed Miledi, who was half-unconscious already, by the collar and started shaking her.

"You stupid, stupid, fool! You're so stupid! Where have you been!? When you never came back after dad said you ran off to save us I thought you'd—Waaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Thank goodness you're alive! Stupid Miledi!"

Every time Kiara shook Miledi the back of her head slammed against the floor. At this point, Miledi had already lost consciousness. Even though she was the leader of the Liberators, a genius mage who'd fought off even an Apostle of God, she stood no chance against an enraged bunny girl.

After a while, Kiara finally started to calm down. But that just gave the rest of the inn's patrons an opportunity to get their own two cents in. Everyone remembered Naiz, who'd helped put out all the fires and heal the wounded, and Oscar, who'd helped Miledi rescue Marcus and then went off to chase the pirates with her. As thanks, Marcus and Vera cooked the group a feast, and though it was still midday, everyone started drinking in celebration.

Later, Miledi asked Kiara about what had happened after she was kidnapped, but like everyone else who'd been saved by the Saint, Kiara barely remembered the incident. However, Kiara must have subconsciously picked up on some details since she asked Miledi a rather startling question.

"Hey, Miledi. Do you have a special attack called Miledi Kick?"

If word got out that Miledi and the others had been involved in Kiara's rescue, people would start bugging them about the saint, so Miledi made up some story about what had happened to them. However, that didn't seem to convince Kiara, who continued to speak.

"Then how come the words Miledi Kick keep popping up in my head?"

At any rate, Miledi and the others had successfully secured a base of operations, and could now renew their investigation.

“If Meru-nee’s after something else, then it’s probably got something to do with Andika’s central district.”

A few days had passed since they’d began their search. They’d once again gone around the city’s outer districts hunting for rumors, but they’d turned up nothing. Meaning if there were any clues to be found, they were in the central district. Still, returning there would take preparation. Even though it had been a month since the incident at the casino, there were still men in black suits looking for them. In fact, the “fake gentleman with evil glasses” had become an urban legend within the city. There were also wanted posters that said “If you see a bespectacled youth, please report it to the authorities. Do not engage him, he *will* strip you.”

“Unbelievable...” Oscar had muttered the first time he’d seen one of them.

In order to hash out a plan, the three of them were holding a meeting in a dilapidated bar a short distance from the central district’s entrance.

“Entering the central district’s going to be risky...”

Naiz looked down thoughtfully and for a while before responding.

“However, it’s possible that we might stand out less if we make it inside the casino. There are so many people there I doubt anyone will recognize us.”

“We’ll still have to deal with those bodyguards standing at the entrance, though. Should we wear disguises?”

Miledi, who’d been deep in thought thus far, looked up and joined in on the conversation.

“Most people try to bury their secrets underground. Everyone says the tunnels running underneath the city are like a maze. If there’s anything hidden here, I bet it’s down there.”

“You’ve got a point there. So, does that mean you want to—”

“Yep. Why don’t we try investigating the underground tunnels?”

At the very least, exploring the underground would be more productive than

trying to sneak into the central district. The problem was how they'd get into the tunnels.

"We've never been there before, and because it's an enclosed area it's too dangerous for me to teleport when I don't know the tunnels' precise locations."

It'd be pretty bad if Naiz accidentally teleported them into the wall or something.

"About that. Remember how everyone said this island's enchanted so that water doesn't enter the holes that open out to the sea? Apparently, those holes are only sealed with a few flimsy iron bars."

In other words, Miledi wanted to swim underneath the island, find one of those openings, and either have Oscar transmute the bars, or Naiz teleport everyone through them.

"Hmm... At present, that does seem our only option. I'm for this plan."

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained, as they say. Let's do it."

The three nodded to each other, sealing the deal.

That night, Miledi and the others dived into the cold, moonlit sea. The three huddled close together, and Oscar opened his umbrella above them. By using his black umbrella's Hallowed Ground, he was able to push out the nearby water and create a mini-submarine. Miledi then used the current-manipulation magic she'd learned from Meiru to propel the submarine.

"Ugh, it's hard to control this as well as Meru-nee."

"I wouldn't compare myself to her godlike skills if I were you. Besides, you've gotten pretty good already, Miledi."

"Yeah, but there's no point if I can't beat her! I don't want to lose to Meru-nee."

Despite her grumblings, Miledi was doing a pretty good job of accurately steering the Hallowed Ground bubble. Meanwhile, Naiz created a sphere of light to illuminate their surroundings.

"Hm? You two, take a look at that."

Naiz focused his sphere, lighting up a section of the island's cliff face. The part he was pointing to had a small hole in it, which was gated with a latticework grille. As they drew closer, the group saw that the water was indeed blocked from entering the grille through some invisible barrier. The dim passage leading into the island's depths was completely dry. Naiz grabbed his two companions' shoulders and teleported them all inside.

"Whoa, this is weird."

Spurred by her curiosity, Miledi walked back to the grille and poked the water that was being held at bay. Oscar grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and dragged her to his side.

"Hey, O-kun! Not so rough—"

"Shut up! There are people here!"

Miledi looked up and saw that the lenses of Oscar's glasses were glowing faintly. She guessed that he was using his glasses' heat sensors to look past the corner.

"Hmm, what should we do? There's nowhere to hide."

"Leave that to me. Naiz, come closer."

Oscar dropped to one knee and unfurled his umbrella. Naiz and Miledi hid behind it as instructed.

"Umbrella arts ability number 12, Prismatic Haze!"

Oscar's umbrella grew translucent. Or rather, it looked translucent to the people kneeling behind it. From the outside, it looked like part of the wall.

"Thanks to Naiz's help, I was able to put a bunch more abilities into my umbrella this past month. This skill lets me warp the space around the umbrella and project a field—"

"O-kun, please use words normal people can understand!"

"It's a camouflage spell that makes us invisible to anyone outside the umbrella."

"Wow! That's amazing, O-kun!"

Oscar was a little miffed at having to abridge his explanation, but before he could voice his complaints the person he'd spotted rounded the corner.

"Hm? I could have sworn I heard someone's voice from over here."

A stoic man in a black suit poked his head down the hallway. Though he was a scant five meters away from Oscar, he didn't see a thing. The man shrugged his shoulders and continued walking down the hallway. *Guess he went back on patrol.*

"Looks like they're keeping a close eye on the tunnels too."

The group nodded to each other, then carefully started exploring the sprawling underground maze. They occasionally ran into other patrols, but they avoided them each time by using Oscar's camouflage, or by using Miledi's gravity magic to cling to the ceiling. The network of tunnels turned out to be more complex than any of them had expected. To make matters worse, there were multiple floors of tunnels. The sheer size of the place stymied their investigation. While they did find a few suspicious-looking rooms, none held any clues.

"We're getting nowhere. And these tunnels are huge. We won't be able to cover them all in a day."

"If only we had an idea of where to look..."

"Logically, the most important things will probably be on the deepest level, but..."

They'd gone pretty far down already and hadn't found anything. Miledi groaned to herself, wondering if maybe this plan had been too reckless. Just then, they sensed someone approaching from the opposite hallway, and the group flattened themselves against the wall. Thinking it was another black suit on patrol, Miledi peeked around the corner.

"O-kun, Nacchan... I think I found something."

Miledi turned to her two companions with a grin. They both shot her questioning glances and she explained that the there was a door at the end of the hallway, guarded by two men in black suits.

“They’re guarding something instead of walking on patrol...? Sounds suspicious.”

“Right? Hey, Nacchan. I’m pretty sure there’s a corridor directly behind that room. Even if you haven’t seen what’s behind the door, you can teleport us into the room now that you know where it is, right?”

“Of course.”

The three of them nodded to each other and then circled around to the passage behind the room. From there, Naiz teleported them inside.

“Ah.”

“Huh?”

Inside the room was a little girl. Miledi and the girl’s eyes met, and they both gasped in surprise. The girl’s jaw dropped, and she stood there, her back to the door. After a few seconds though, she recovered. Her throat began to tremble; she was obviously about to scream.

“Not on my watch!” Naiz teleported behind the girl and wrapped one arm around her mouth. With the other, he pinned her in place. After that, he brought his face to her ear and whispered into it.

“Quiet. Don’t you dare scream.”

“Huh!?”

While he had saved their asses, Naiz actions were borderline criminal. Oscar’s lips twitched, and he hurriedly tried to calm the girl down.

“Sorry about that. Uh, look, we’re not anyone suspicious... Well, actually, I guess we are considering we just broke into your room without reason, but... we don’t want to hurt you. Promise. Won’t you please listen to what we have to say? Without screaming?”

There were tears in her eyes, but the girl carefully studied Oscar and weighed her options.

“Sorry we scared you. We didn’t mean to, promise!” Miledi added with a gentle smile. The girl looked from Miledi to Oscar, then finally nodded.

Slowly, Naiz let go of her. She didn't scream. Instead, she simply hugged herself and spoke in a rather hesitant manner.

"Please don't strip me, Mr. Fake Gentleman with Evil Glasses."

Oscar dropped to all fours, devastated. Being told that by a girl barely ten years old on their first meeting had crushed his spirit.

"U-Umm, O-kun won't strip anyone, so you don't have to worry."

Even Miledi couldn't help but feel sorry for Oscar.

"But Mr. Fake Gentleman with Evil Glasses stripped... Father's men... I saw it all... Plus, I even saw..."

The girl blushed and shot a quick glance at Oscar.

"It's not what you think. That wasn't part of the plan. It just happened. Please, believe me. Also, please stop calling me Mr. Fake Gentleman with Evil Glasses."

"Ah, okay."

Oscar genuflected to the girl. Overwhelmed by his seeming desperation, the girl nodded meekly. Meanwhile, Miledi started as she realized what the girl had just said. *The guards, the underground room, "father's men," it all makes sense now!*

"Excuse me. But is your father Baharl?"

"Ah... yes. My name is Diene."

Diene looked at this unknown group of people with renewed wariness and fear. Upon getting a closer look at Diene, Miledi felt a strong sense of deja vu. Diene had long, luxurious emerald-green hair and a gentle demeanor that reminded her of a certain someone. More than anything though, Diene also looked to have gill-shaped ears.

Squirmed in the face of Miledi's probing gaze, Diene began questioning the group.

"U-Umm, who are you guys? It's dangerous. If Father finds out you're here, you'll be in trouble..."

Despite the fact that these people might mean her harm, Diene was still more

worried for them than for herself. That alone taught Miledi that this young girl was far too kind to survive in this dog-eat-dog city that was ruled with an iron fist.

“Ah, sorry. We’re... Well, how do I put this?”

Obviously, Miledi couldn’t give Diene their real names. As she was wondering how best to respond, Oscar stepped in and answered in her place. It appeared he’d recovered from the blow Diene had dealt him earlier.

“We’re pirates.”

When in doubt, pin all the blame on pirates. Despite disliking the nickname he’d been given, Oscar was living up to it rather well. That being said, naming themselves pirates was the rational choice. They were searching for Meiru’s secret, and pirates were about the only people who’d skulk around looking for hidden treasure or secrets. In order to not terrify Diene, Miledi quickly opened her mouth to add, “But don’t worry, we’re good pirates, I promise.” Before she could though— “Pirates!? Then, then does that mean you know about the Ghost Ship!? Do you know how to reach the people on it!?”

Diene ran up to Miledi and clung to her skirt. Everyone was too surprised by her sudden reaction to do anything. No one had expected such a quiet girl to have such vehemence within her.

“Oi, what’s going on in there!? What’re you yelling for!?” One of the guards yelled. Since the door was locked from the inside he couldn’t get in right away. But judging by the fact that he then yelled “Someone bring me the key!” it was only a matter of time.

“Ah...”

Diene paled. She’d obviously not intended to call the guards. Miledi exchanged glances with Oscar and Naiz. They’d subdue the guards and get back to their conversation with Diene. However, Diene didn’t know that Miledi and the others were much stronger than her father’s guards, and feared she had no time left. Panicking, she hurriedly explained why she wanted to contact the Ghost Ship.

“Please, you have to tell them to run! The Ghost Ship’s in danger!”

“Wait, calm down. What do you mean, in danger?”

“The templar knights are after them! They’ll find them any day now!”

“Ah!”

Everyone knew who the templar knights were. They were one of the pillars of the church. One of the Theocracy’s most powerful military forces.

“I’ll do anything you ask. But please, let them know! They need to run! They have to survive!”

The door rattled as one of the guards fit the key into the lock. Miledi had a mountain of questions for Diene. However, if the templar knights were on the move, there wasn’t a moment to waste. So for now, she said only what needed to be said.

“Don’t worry, we’ll let the Melusine Pirate Crew, and Meru-nee, know!”

“Ah... You’re...”

Miledi shot Diene a fearless grin, then turned to her companions.

“We’re going back, O-kun, Nacchan!”

“You got it! Hold on tight, you two!”

Miledi and Oscar grabbed onto Naiz’s cloak, and a second later, the three of them were gone. Not a moment too soon, as the black suit bodyguards piled into the room right after. They yelled something at Diene, but she wasn’t listening. All she could think about was the faint ray of hope she’d finally found.

“Nee-sama...” she whispered, in a voice too soft to hear. It almost sounded like a prayer.

Naiz teleported the group to the harbor, and they piled into the small boat Oscar had transmuted. Once everyone was in, he teleported the whole boat further out to sea. They reappeared far out at sea, and Naiz started guzzling down mana potions. The moment he’d recovered enough, he teleported them again. During one of their brief stops, Oscar turned to Miledi and questioned her.

“Miledi, you said you investigated the church’s grand cathedral before, right? That time you got found out by one of God’s Apostles and had to run away? Did you see any Holy Templar Knights when you snuck in?”

“Not only did I see them, I fought them too. Though I was only up against a single squad at the time. Still... they’re strong.”

Elbard had two primary military forces. The first was their crusader army. That wasn’t too different from the armies of other countries. The other, however, was the templar knights. They reported directly to the church and were comprised of elites, each at least as strong as five normal men. Their captains and commanders were as strong as entire army divisions. Above even them stood the three special orders of templar knights, known collectively as the Three Pillars of Radiance, who answered only to the pope, and were ostensibly the strongest humans alive.

The first of those orders was the Paladins; they were responsible for guarding the pope and other important religious figures. Each Paladin could hold their own against an army. Though they were the smallest of the orders, each member of the Paladins possessed powerful special magic that could rival even ancient magic.

The second of the three orders were the Paragons of Light. They were in charge of capturing, taming, and raising the powerful beasts the other orders used as mounts. They were the weakest of the three pillars, but also the most versatile.

Last, but not least, was the order of the Holy Templar Knights. Their commander could supposedly use ancient magic, and each of his men possessed unbelievably powerful special magic abilities. Furthermore, they were highly skilled in using their atavistic powers. Altogether, the Holy Templar Knights were around 300 men strong. The fact that they’d begun to move meant that god himself had decreed this purge. After all, the Holy Templar Knights were the incarnation of god’s will, his merciless hammer of retribution.

“I have no idea how many of the Holy Templar Knights the church sent, but they almost never mobilize the full force. If they only sent a single squad, Meru-nee should be able to handle them. If it’s a brigade, then with our help she

should still be fine. But if they sent a force larger than that... I'm not sure we'll be able to protect all of Meru-nee's family."

The Holy Templar Knights had a unique organization system separate from other armies. Because of how powerful each individual knight was, their groups were all smaller denominations. A platoon was around 4-6 people, a troop around 12 people, a squad about 25, a brigade around 50, and a division 100. Above that was the full force of 300. A shiver of fear ran down Oscar's spine as he saw how worried Miledi looked. Burning with impatience, he tapped his feet as he waited for Naiz's mana to recover. Finally, Naiz finished his mana potion and prepared to teleport them the final stretch to Meiru's island.

"Nacchan. To be safe, teleport us into the air."

That way, they'd be able to see if the fight had already started before joining the fray. Naiz nodded.

"Understood. Are you two ready?"

Oscar and Miledi nodded back, and Naiz initiated the warp. The three of them reappeared high in the air. Looking down, they saw the island of ships engulfed in a sea of flame. Most of the Melusine Pirates were lying on the ground, unconscious and bleeding. The remaining pirates had been cornered by a contingent of knights. Off to the side stood a stern man clad in pure white armor. He held aloft a mace, ready to slam down onto Meiru, who was kneeling on the deck in front of him, covered in blood.

"Ah!"

Images of another blood-soaked girl flashed through Miledi's mind. Even now, she remembered every detail of Belle's death.

"Damn you bastaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaards!"

Miledi snapped.

A few days had passed since Miledi and the others had left the ship island. Though the Melusine Pirates were as boisterous as ever, there was an undercurrent of melancholy running through the island. The children especially looked down. Not only had they lost their favorite playmate, but the kind older

brother in glasses was also no longer around to give them all these strange toys. Plus, the nice guy who'd always teleport them wherever they wanted to go had left too. Little wonder they were feeling depressed. That evening, the kids were swimming forlornly in the ocean. Clouds rumbled in the distance, heralding the coming of a storm. The turbulent sky was a perfect reflection of the children's mood.

"Those kids really are a handful. They've only been here a month and it already feels like they're part of the family."

Chris rested his chin on the ship's railing and smiled sadly as he looked down at the children playing in the water. Meiru walked up next to him and replied, "It sure does," with the same gentle smile as always. Though she tried to sound disinterested, Chris had known her for long enough to know what she was really thinking.

"You're pretty fond of that missy yourself, aren't you?"

"I suppose so. Miledi-chan certainly is cute."

"Almost like a younger sister."

"....."

It was a bad habit of Meiru's to try and brush things off with a silent smile. Chris knew that, and a sardonic tinge entered his smile.

"From the looks of it, that missy's been mistaking you for someone else too. Her name was Belta, right? Anyway, I can't believe that missy was *the* scion of the Reisen family."

"You used to live in the empire long ago, right Chris? I've never been there so the word Reisen doesn't really mean much to me. But they must have been quite the family if you were that scared of Miledi-chan when you learned where she was from."

"C-Cut me some slack, alright? I'm trying to pretend those few days never happened."

Chris had originally been an imperial soldier. Though that had been almost 30 years ago. He'd been unable to accept the church's forceful ways and had

deserted. After wandering the continent for a while, he'd ended up in Andika. That had been 20 years ago. However, even now the mention of the empire's famed executioners sent a shiver of fear down his spine. He still found it hard to believe that the Reisen family had been destroyed by one of their own and that she was now leading an organization of heretics. At first, he'd been so scared of Miledi that he wouldn't even face her, but after hearing her story and seeing how cheerful she always acted, he'd slowly begun to warm up to her. Naturally, Meiru and his mates had teased him relentlessly about his timidity. Chris awkwardly cleared his throat and changed the subject.

"That missy still hasn't given up on you though, you know? She only went back to Andika to find a way to convince you."

"I understand, but my answer will not change."

"Her question might, though."

"Do you think she'll find it?"

"Course she will. She's too smart not to discover the real treasure yer after, Cap'n."

Meiru considered the implications of that. If Miledi and the others did find that girl, what would she tell them? Meiru was surprised at how little the thought of the meeting bothered her. Not only had Meiru let Miledi into her heart, but Miledi had also let Meiru into hers as well. Miledi was certainly spontaneous, and more expressive than was normal, but she was also serious about the things that mattered and straightforward to a fault.

While her mom may have passed when she was still young, Meiru remembered her well. And though she never knew her real father, Chris had taken his place. On top of that, all the other people living in the slums had been like her family. She'd even had childhood friends.

On the other hand, Miledi had spent a childhood as an executioner. In order to keep herself from going insane, she'd killed her own emotions. But thanks to her miraculous encounter with Belta, she'd been able to recover her humanity. However, even that hadn't lasted, as her own family had mercilessly slaughtered Miledi's only friend. It was then that Miledi had decided on her own path, and resolved to tear down this unjust world.

“Won’t you join hands with me, so that we can change the world together?” Meiru recalled the conversation they’d had that night. Back then, she’d casually rejected Miledi’s invitation. Despite that, Miledi had just laughed and said, “Ahahaha, thought so.” She’d acted tough, but Meiru had seen the loneliness reflected in Miledi’s eyes. But that loneliness had quickly vanished behind an even firmer resolve. Meiru would never forget that forlorn but determined look. To use one of Oscar’s phrases, she’d been captivated by Miledi.

“Why not be honest with yourself and ask for their help? Having three ancient magic users would make taking Andika a lot easier.”

Chris’ voice broke Meiru out of the vortex of her own thoughts. She looked up at Chris and shook her head.

“I couldn’t do that. Those children are Liberators, not conquerors.”

Meiru had no intention of getting them mixed up into her own personal struggle. She’d joked to Miledi that she’d consider joining if they gifted her Andika, but if those three actually did that, she’d still need to make it look like she retook the city by force. Because that way she’d be hailed by the populace as the hero who saved the free city of Andika from a group of renegade heretics. More importantly, that would be how it looked to the church as well. For the safety of her own comrades, and for the safety of the girl she treasured most in this world, she could not be seen joining hands with the Liberators.

“Our paths are destined to drift apart.”

“So that’s how it’s gonna be? Well, I guess the world’s a tough place.”

Meiru kept her mouth shut, signaling an end to the conversation. Chris heaved a troubled sigh and took his chin off the railing. Just then, one of the pirates on watch yelled down from the crow’s nest, “Cap’n! There’s something approaching from the sky! It’s comin’ in from the east! I dunno what it is, but it’s huge!”

From the sky? I could understand if a ship or something were approaching from sea, but... Meiru looked up quizzically. If it were an aerial monster, the pirate on watch would have recognized it, so it couldn’t be that.

Meanwhile, Chris sprang into action. He cast body strengthening on himself,

then ran vertically up the mast. Normally that wouldn't have been possible even with body strengthening, but he had incredible balance to boot. He hopped into the crow's nest and looked out in the direction his subordinate was pointing in.

"Oh shit..."

The pirate gave Chris a worried look. He'd never seen the Melusine Pirate Crew's first mate look this pale. Before he could ask what was wrong, Chris screamed, "Meiru, it's the church!"

Meiru could guess what that meant. The church's crazed followers had finally come to deliver their "divine retribution." Meiru raised a giant ball of seawater into the air and made it burst directly above the center of the ship island. Droplets rained down with a thunderous roar, grabbing the attention of all members of the Melusine Pirates.

"All hands, prepare for battle! The enemy has found us!"

Her voice was lacking its usual calmness. That alone told everyone just how dire the situation was. The pirates burst into action at once.

"Meiru! No one but the Holy Templar Knights uses an airship! You have to evacuate all the civilians; we're gonna be in for a rough fight!"

"I know! Chris, get everyone who can fight together and buy me some time!"

"Yer one hell of a slave driver, you know that!? We're up against the church's elite here!"

Despite his words, Chris grinned fearlessly and started barking orders to the other pirates. A second later, a huge wave hit the Melusine Pirates. It wasn't a wave of water, though. It was a wave of pure darkness, and it passed through the island of ships in less than a second. The pirates were shaken to their very souls.

"Ah—" Meiru staggered, the wave taking her by surprise. A second later though, she recovered her wits.

What was *that?* Meiru looked up and her eyes widened as she saw a huge number of her pirates, most of them noncombatants, lying unconscious on the

ground.

“Tetragrammaton!”

A ripple of sunset-orange light spread out from Meiru. Using restoration magic over a wide area like this, without transporting it using water as a medium, took a considerable amount of mana. However, the effects were instantaneous. All of the unconscious pirates woke up.

“Get moving!”

The dazed pirates reflexively reacted to their captain’s command.

“Meiru!”

“Chris, do you have any idea what that was just now?”

“Not a clue. But it was enough to knock out our weaker guys. Even for a Holy Templar Knight, that’s—”

—Heretics, listen well. I am Laus Barn, commander of the Holy Templar Knights.—

A voice echoed in the Melusine Pirates’ minds, as though someone was speaking directly to their soul. Meiru narrowed her eyes as she listened to the words of the grim reaper who’d come to snuff out their lives. Next to her, Chris cursed to himself. “Fuck, it just had to be him...”

This was the worst possible situation. The Holy Templar Knights’ commander himself had come to eliminate them.

—For disavowing your faith and abandoning your god, Ehit has decreed your demise.—

Meiru could see the knights’ airship even from her position on the ship’s deck now. It was a magnificent vessel, a man-made testament to god’s might. And at its prow stood the man feared as the mortal incarnation of Ehit’s wrath.

—Regret your actions and repent, foolish heretics. Your lives end tonight.—

A volley of fireballs shot out from the airship, marking the start of the battle.

“Torrential Bulwark!”

Meiru cast at lightning speed, creating a dome of water to protect her island.

No normal mage could cast such a large-scale spell that quickly. However, the knights Meiru was up against were no normal knights either. Their fireball barrage was more deadly than it appeared. After the first few fireballs fizzled out against Meiru's dome, the remaining ones clumped together and transformed into a hail of massive javelins.

While Meiru's barrier was able to stop most of them, these spears excelled in penetrative force. A few dozen slipped through the cracks. Most of them hit the edges of the outermost ships, where Meiru's barrier had been weakest. Pirates screamed in terror as the ships caught fire. To make matters worse, the fire spread at an unnatural rate, as though it were a living beast.

"Not bad, for a bunch of religious freaks."

Mania, who was the best mage in the crew after Meiru, extinguished the fires with a series of water spells. At the same time, the Holy Templar Knights started jumping out of the airship.

"Here they come! All noncombatants, hurry up and evacuate! Ned, Mania, your squads are in charge of protecting them! Everyone else, get ready for a fight!"

Meiru shouted orders one after another. Seeing that she was the pirates' commander, the knights targeted her with a barrage of lightning bolts, which she deflected with a water barrier. She then turned her barrier into a spear and shot it up at the knights. Despite the considerable amount of force she'd put into her offensive, the knights appeared unfazed.

"I suppose it won't be that easy." Meiru muttered as she watched them stop in mid-air, then disperse to either side, easily avoiding her spear. All members of the Three Pillars of Radiance had the same base equipment. Iron boots that were enchanted to let them freely maneuver in the air were part of that set.

"This is Ehit's will!"

"Who gives a shit about your god!" Chris yelled back as one of the knights fell into the crow's nest he was standing in. He drew his longsword and parried the knight's greatsword. Then, in the same motion, he swung up at the knight. Scoffing, the knight brought his sword back in a guard position. But to his surprise—

“What!?”

Chris’ sword cut through the knight’s like a hot knife through butter. It didn’t stop there and sliced through his armor as well. The knight grunted in shock as Chris’ sword bit deep into his flank, and he reeled backward. As there was nothing to break his momentum, he careened right off the crow’s nest.

Chris possessed the special magic Vorpal Slash. No matter how a dull a blade was, his magic turned it into a razor-sharp weapon that could cut through space itself. Since his slashes rent dimensions, they were unblockable.

“A filthy pirate like you doesn’t deserve such powerful special magic!”

Another knight landed on the crow’s nest and charged Chris. This one wasn’t wearing a helmet. His cheeks were sunken, and he was unbelievably thin. But despite his wimpy frame, he didn’t seem the least bit afraid of Chris. In fact, there was a fanatic fervor in his eyes that scared the old pirate. It appeared the fact that Chris possessed something as holy as special magic while being a heretic galled this knight to no end. Chris readied himself to cut down this knight as well, but just then his battle-honed instincts warned him to retreat.

“Not good!”

He kicked his subordinate out of the crow’s nest and leaped out right after him. A second later, some invisible force struck the platform, gouging deep furrows into the wood.

“Guess he’s got magic like mine.”

Chris’ guess was spot on. That particular knight possessed special magic known as Sacred Beast Fangs. Incidentally, his name was Saleos Holt, and he was a squad captain.

“How dare you disgrace Ehit’s gift like this, you heretic!”

Space twisted around Saleos. He swung his sword downward, sending the jaws of an invisible beast after Chris. Chris drew his sword in midair and swung upward. The sword that could cut through anything and the jaws that could tear through anything clashed.

“Gaaaaah!”

A spray of blood danced through the night sky as Chris howled in pain. Though Chris' Vorpal Slash had cut through Saleos' Sacred Beast Fangs, it hadn't destroyed all of the magic jaw's teeth. Those that remained tore through Chris arms, legs, and shoulders. Chris lost his balance and was about to crash onto the deck when a torrent of water buoyed him up. It then passed through him and turned into a whip that assaulted Saleos. Looking down, Chris saw Meiru fending off multiple knights at once with her shrapnel whips. Despite facing so many opponents, she'd still had the leeway to send assistance his way.

"Cheeky little bitch!"

Saleos unleashed his Sacred Beast Fangs again, swallowing up one of Meiru's whips. His attack wasn't even slowed by the water-metal whip, and the beast's jaws bore down on Chris once more.

"Full strength Vorpal Slash!"

"Nnngh!"

Chris' full-power invisible slash shot through the air, and this time it cut right through Saleos' fangs and struck him directly. However, he wasn't one of the Holy Templar Knights' twelve captains for show. Saleos shot out another, smaller Sacred Beast Fangs and let the impact of it crashing into Chris' Vorpal Slash push him backward. The Vorpal Slash grazed his shoulder and hair, but his maneuver succeeded, and he avoided taking damage.

"You damned pirates!" Saleos screamed as he landed on the ship's deck. His eyes widened in shock as he saw that Chris was completely unhurt. Not only that, even his clothes had been repaired.

"What kind of trick did you pull, heretic!?"

"Who knows? Why don't you try asking your all-knowing god if you're so curious?"

Chris smiled fearlessly and tapped his shoulder with his longsword. Despite his bravado, he was breaking out in a cold sweat. He'd expected to kill Saleos with that attack. *These damn knights are even stronger than I thought!* Chris had thought the knights were only feared because they all possessed special magic, but that last exchange had made it clear to him that they didn't just rely

on the overwhelming power of their magic. They were all physically fit, outstanding swordsmen, adjusted to the situation as necessary, and were well-coordinated. One after another, the Melusine Pirates began to fall.

“You dare insult our great lord...? I will make sure to give you a painful death, heretic.”

Saleos’ tone was deathly quiet. His pupils had contracted, and his body trembled with a silent rage. He was well and truly in the grip of insanity.

“Is this really where we die? Damn it all...”

Cursing to himself Chris readied his blade. This time, he charged forward first. He needed to end this battle quickly so he could go to his comrades’ aid. A short distance away, Kyaty was having her own fierce duel with a group of knights.

“Umm, would you please be so kind as to accept your fate and die?”

“You’re really starting to piss me off, you know that!?”

The first knight was a weak-looking girl with chestnut-brown hair. She was wearing glasses and seemed more like a librarian than a knight. On top of that, she couldn’t have been older than 18. She kept timidly asking Kyaty to please die, which only served to irritate the catgirl. Strapped to her back wasn’t a standard issue greatsword, but rather a massive claymore. However, she looked weak enough that Kyaty was confident her Acceleration could win her this fight. Unfortunately for Kyaty, appearances could be deceiving. This girl’s name was Pell Allby, and she too was a squad captain. Kyaty instantly dashed behind Pell, but she used another knight as a shield and put some distance between them. Pell was surrounded by a knot of four other knights, making it difficult for Kyaty to approach. Even if the knights couldn’t keep up with her speed, they could still serve as meat shields. And because they didn’t fear death, there were no gaps in their wall. To make matters worse, unless Kyaty could kill them instantly, they’d just keep getting healed back up.

“May your loyalty be rewarded.”

Every time Pell offered up a prayer, all the knights were instantly healed. Not only that, Kyaty was weakened as well.

“Nngh, not again!”

Kyaty staggered as a large chunk of her mana was drained. Pell's special magic was Devotion. By offering up a prayer, she could drain mana from any one target. And in Pell's case, she then used the mana she drained to heal the knights Kyaty was fighting.

Out of the corner of her eye, Kyaty watched as one of her comrades was cut down, and another group blown away by a blast of lightning. She longed to help them, but she knew if she took her eyes off Pell for even a moment, she'd be killed. All she could do was grit her teeth and focus on the enemy in front of her.

"Umm, as you can see, your comrades won't last long. Please just give up and accept Ehit's judgment! Resistance is pointless!"

"You looking down on us, huh!?"

Pell shrunk back in response to Kyaty's retort, but her timid attitude only angered Kyaty further.

"Like hell we're giving up here! Who gives a shit about your god's stupid judgment!? Pah!"

Kyaty secretly hoped her provocations would get the knights angry enough to break formation. However, her taunts produced a rather unexpected result.

"What the fuck did you just fucking say about Ehit you little bitch?"

Pell's attitude did a complete 180. Her pupils contracted, and her mouth quivered in rage. She grabbed the claymore strapped to her back.

"Wh-What the hell's gotten into you all of a—"

Pell interrupted Kyaty with a crazed yell.

"How dare sub-human scum like you take my lord's name in vain!"

A second later, there was an earthquake. In her rage, Pell had struck the boat with her claymore. It was hard to imagine such strength could come from such tiny arms, but the shockwaves rocking Kyaty's ship were real. While Kyaty was still off-balance, Pell rushed forward while simultaneously draining Kyaty of more of her mana. Kyaty tried to dodge to the side, but Pell's sword was already bearing down on her.

“Die, you half-breed!”

“Ah!”

Pell’s side slash had more than enough force to cut Kyaty in half. Kyaty barely managed to cross her daggers in time to block the blow. They cracked ominously under the force of the swing, but gave Kyaty enough time to dodge backward. Though she’d tried to redirect as much of the blow’s force as possible, Pell’s swing still managed to shatter both of Kyaty’s knives and the bones in her arms. Before she could scream, Kyaty flew backward and barreled into a stack of barrels. There was a loud crash and chunks of splintered wood flew into the air. This time, Pell had used the mana she’d stolen to cast body strengthening on herself. In truth, Pell was much more skilled at using strengthening magic than recovery magic, which was why she could strike with such force despite her slender frame.

“Repent, you godless heretic,” Pell spat, her voice dripping with venom. She was acting like a completely different person, but the knights around her didn’t seem surprised in the slightest. In fact, they were praising her for her loyalty to Ehit. However, that arrogance would lead to their downfall.

“Acceleration!”

“Huh?”

The young knight who’d been extolling Pell the most turned around in confusion. That was the last word he ever spoke. Kyaty stuck a knife into the back of his head, killing him before Pell had a chance to heal him.

“You cretin! How did you heal so fast!?”

Pell’s eyes widened in surprise. Not only was Kyaty completely unhurt, but her shattered knives had also been restored to their original forms. It was as if she’d never been hurt at all.

“I thought I was a goner there.”

Kyaty wiped a bead of sweat off her chin as she kicked aside the young knight’s corpse. All of the other pirates the knights had defeated rose to their feet once more as well and resumed their assault.

“Impossible...”

Despite her confusion, Pell once more raised her claymore. With a fierce battle cry, she threw herself at Kyaty.

“Meiru. Hurry up and beat these guys’ boss already...”

Of course, Kyaty knew just how hard that was. She braced herself and fought against Pell’s massive claymore using only her two knives and her Acceleration ability. Meanwhile, Ned and Mania, who were in charge of getting the civilians onto the escape lifeboats were having a hard time too.

“Tch. These guys sure have some fancy gear!”

“Just think, it’ll all be ours once we beat them.”

Though they were bantering back and forth, both Ned and Mania were covered in wounds. Most of the other pirates were either wounded or unconscious as well, and that number was only growing.

“Repent your sins!” A bald knight, Troop Sergeant Baltos Goldy, charged Ned, his greatsword held overhead. Ned grimaced. Baltos possessed the special magic, The Weight of Responsibility, which allowed him to freely manipulate the weight of anything he touched. The amount at which he could alter something’s weight was dependent on how much mana he poured into it so he could only gradually adjust objects’ weight during battle. However, he was a tricky opponent to deal with for Ned, who was a close-combat fighter. Ned had already had to drop his gauntlets because Baltos had made them too heavy. Mania shot off a flaming javelin toward Baltos in an attempt to back Ned up. It traveled faster than Baltos could react, and the spear struck him squarely in the chest. However, Baltos rolled with the impact and quickly regained his footing. The impact had winded him, but nothing more.

“No matter how much stronger I make its piercing power, it’s not enough.”

Mania frowned. The reason his magic was so ineffective was because of the breastplate of nullification all knights that belonged to the three orders wore. It was a powerful Artifact that came equipped with a magic barrier. Each knight was also issued a gauntlet of nullification and a shield of nullification. Their weapons were also strengthened and granted their wielders automatic affinity

with light magic. Most knights chose between claymores, greatswords, spears, and bows, though some had custom weapons as well.

“You don’t have time to be worrying about your friends, heretic.”

A huge knight hurtled toward Mania. He was nearly three meters tall, far taller than any human had a right to be. To Mania, he looked like a hulking wall of armor and muscle. His tower shield was the size of a normal human, and his claymore looked like a greatsword in his hands. Mania shot off a barrage of lightning blasts, instantly casting the advanced level lightning spell Thunderstorm. Despite how it seemed, he’d been keeping an eye on the giant the whole time. And his own special magic allowed him to cast incantations in his mind, so he didn’t need to say them aloud. While it seemed he’d cast that spell on a dime, he’d completed the full incantation so it had enough power to vaporize a normal person. However, Holy Templar Knights were made of sterner stuff.

“Hmph!”

“Wha—!?”

A second before the lightning spheres hit him, the knight wrapped himself in an aura of mana. The aura extended to his equipment, including his shield. This man was Boutice Vaan, a brigade commander. His particular special magic was Rampart. The combination of his sturdy build, special magic that raised his defenses, and high-level equipment made him nigh-invincible and he was known among his men as the indomitable fortress. True to his name, Boutice took Mania’s barrage without flinching. Though the spell forced him to stop his charge, it didn’t push him back at all. And the moment Mania’s barrage ended, he resumed his rush. With his tower shield held out in front of him, he looked like a moving wall. Mania was so surprised by the ease with which his spell had been repelled that he was a moment late to react. The fact that he was still able to erect a barrier in time was proof that he was a master mage, even for a demon. But even that wasn’t enough to stop Boutice.

“Guwaaah!”

He hit Mania with the force of a battering ram, sending the demon flying along with his barrier. Mania screamed in pain as he slammed into the mast

behind him. Boutice didn't stop his assault and rammed Mania again with his tower shield. Cracks formed in Mania's barrier as it struggled to absorb the impact. Trapped between the mast and Boutice's shield, it was only a matter of time before he was crushed.

Mania's men charged Boutice in an attempt to save their leader.

"Witness the strength bestowed upon those who follow the faith!"

Boutice expanded the aura of mana surrounding him, making it look as though he'd just exploded. In effect, he'd basically unleashed a shield bash in all directions. Mania's subordinates were blown away, and either fell into the ocean or slumped unconscious against the ship's railing. Boutice's mana explosion completely destroyed the ship's mast as well and sent Mania flying.

"Gaaaah! *Cough*"

He slumped to his knees and coughed up a lungful of blood. Though he'd barely managed to escape with his life, he was in no condition to fight.

"Maniaaaaaaaa!"

Ned ran over to Mania, pale-faced.

"How pointless."

He stopped as he heard a girl's emotionless voice right next to him. A second later, a thin longsword shot out toward his side. Ned desperately tried to dodge, but the girl read his movements and changed the trajectory of her thrust, stabbing through his flank.

"Gaaaaah! Don't think you've won, you bitch!"

"How pointless."

She repeated her earlier words, and Ned turned to see a sharp-looking girl wearing glasses looking down at him. Ned tightened his muscles, trapping her sword in place, and swung his fist at her. While he didn't possess any special magic, Ned had trained his body strengthening magic until his bare fists were strong enough to punch through armor. Ned had hoped that by taking some damage he'd be able to trap his foe and land a clean hit on her, but things didn't go as planned. The knight easily read the trajectory of his punch and

dodged out of the way while easily pulling her sword out of Ned's body. Before he could correct his stance, she stabbed him from the other side. Ned flinched from the pain, and this time the knight aimed her thrust directly at his face.

"Fuuuuck!"

Ned swung his head to the side while simultaneously raising his leg for a kick.

"I told you, it's pointless."

The knight sidestepped Ned's kick and angled her thrust downward to stab into his leg instead. She then stepped into his guard and readied the finishing blow. Ned gritted his teeth and sucked in a huge breath.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Ah!"

All he'd done was yell in a loud voice. But at this distance, his scream was loud enough to rattle the knight's eardrums. She reflexively covered her ears, and her movements dulled for a moment.

"Hehehe. You're a weird girl, that's fer sure. It's such a waste, you've got the looks but ya never even smile."

Ned smiled through his pain. Unfortunately, both wounds on his side were serious. His legs were trembling from the effort of standing, and despite the short reprieve he'd earned himself, he could see no way of winning this fight. The knight glared down at Ned through the lenses of her glasses.

"It's pointless to try and act tough. I can tell you're on the verge of death."

This knight's special magic was Revelation. It gave her the power to instinctively sense the best move to make in any given situation. It wasn't as clear as seeing the future, but rather more of a vague feeling of what to do.

"So long as I make the optimal moves, you will not survive. Hence, your death is inevitable."

The young knight, Squad Captain Apri Erobos, leveled her thin blade at Ned while she drew the short sword at her waist. Out of the corner of his eye, Ned spotted Mania leaning against the ship's railing, struggling to remain conscious. Boutice was bearing down on the battered demon with his massive claymore.

They were in a tight spot, no doubt about it. Just then, water started welling up from underneath the ship's deck. It pooled around Ned, Mania, and all the other fallen pirates in small enough puddles that Apri and Boutice didn't notice.

"Sorry missy, but the Melusine Pirates are a lot tougher than you think!"

"Meaningless drivel."

Tired of Ned's posturing, Apri stepped forward to attack once more. She believed it would be easy to dispatch Ned, who could barely even stand.

"Hmph!"

"Wha!?"

Ned trapped Apri's sword with his fists, then wrenched his arms to snap her thin weapon in half. Then, with a vigor that seemed impossible considering the injuries he should have, he launched a kick at Apri. She let her instincts guide her and ducked under the blow.

"I figured you'd be a tough nut to crack."

"What is going on..."

Apri couldn't believe her eyes. Ned's injuries had disappeared as if they'd never existed. Not only that, all of Ned's subordinates had recovered as well, and were now pressing the knights back.

Their revival was accompanied by a thunderous roar, and a second later a blazing ball of fire appeared in the sky. Mania had taken advantage of Boutice's momentary surprise to cast another powerful spell. Boutice looked up in confusion, wondering why Mania hadn't tried to hit him directly, but a second later he clutched his throat and started gasping. Sensing danger, he used his AoE shield bash to push Mania away and gain some distance. He then dropped to one knee and sucked in lungfuls of air.

What Mania had done was simple. He'd created a fireball large enough to suck up all the oxygen around Boutice. Had he stayed in that spot any longer he would have fainted, but he wasn't one of the Holy Templar Knights' six brigade commanders for nothing.

Ned backstepped until he was back to back with Mania. Apri was worried

about the strange spell Mania had cast, and so didn't pursue him.

"Yo Mania, you think we can win this?"

"Hell no."

"Seriously!?"

"That right there was my best spell, and all it did was stagger the guy. I'm weeping right now."

These knights were far stronger than Mania had anticipated.

"Haha. Can't blame ya, I guess. But hey, we gotta at least hold out long enough for the kids to get out."

"Naturally. I'll guarantee their escape, even if it costs me my life."

The two bumped their fists together, cementing their resolve to fight to the death. It was a rare sight, a human and demon fighting side by side like this. Both Boutice and Apri were disgusted by the blasphemy in front of them.

"How far will you filthy heretics fall!?"

"I can't stand breathing the same air as you mongrels!"

Ned, Mania, and all the other pirates scoffed at the knights' insults. They knew this would be where they died, yet they charged forward without hesitation.

While all the pirates were struggling with their respective opponents, Meiru was in the middle of her own grand battle. However, Meiru was taking on far more knights than any of her men. In fact, she was fighting a third of Laus' division all on her own.

"So this was all your doing. But to think..." Division Commander Araym Orcman muttered bitterly to himself as he watched all of the fatally injured pirates rise to fight again, their wounds healed. No normal recovery magic was that powerful. That would inevitably mean that Meiru had to be using some kind of special magic, but from what Araym could tell, this recovery magic was too strong to be even that. When he realized what that must mean, Araym's face twisted into a frown. Unable to accept the reality before him, he glared at Meiru with a mixture of hatred, rage, and madness.

“Impossible! This can’t be! No filthy pirate, no worthless *heretic* could possibly be using Ehit’s gifts!”

Lying around Meiru were the corpses of three of Araym’s knights. Despite that, she still had a gentle smile on her face.

“Tch. I’ll purge you myself! Divine Blaze!”

Araym created a whirlwind of white flames. The whirlwind then split into a hundred lances of fire, all of which hurtled toward Meiru, scorching the air as they passed.

This was Araym’s special magic, Divine Blaze. It was this magic that had elevated him to the position of division commander. Not only was it a peerless spell, but it also granted Araym unparalleled affinity for fire magic.

A torrent of fire rained down on Meiru. It was hard to believe a single person had been responsible for the barrage. Though Araym had cast it with the ease one might cast a beginner-level spell, each flaming spear had the force of an advanced-level Crimson Javelin.

“That wasn’t a very good idea.”

Meiru nonchalantly raised a barrier of water. The flaming javelins created a thick curtain of steam as they crashed into the wall of seawater. A few managed to pierce through the water, but Meiru was already somewhere else, riding the current of her own barrier. By the time the knights realized she wasn’t there, it was too late. One of the knights tried to block the wave of water heading toward him with his tower shield, but the moment he shifted his focus Meiru’s saber stabbed him in the neck from behind. Another knight dispersed the fog using wind magic, but as he did so a current of water swept his feet out from under him. The current then rose around him, attempting to drown him. He activated his boots’ ability to escape, but the irregular flow of the current followed him wherever he went. Worse, water kept on forcing its way through his nostrils and into his lungs.

“Bluaaagh!?”

No matter how rigorously one trained themselves, no matter how calmly they could deal with any situation, no one, not even a Holy Templar Knight, could

handle a torrent of water going up their nose. When all of the fog had cleared, another two corpses littered the ship's deck.

"You made a mistake, attacking me on sea. This is my domain. Your fire has no power here."

"You bitch!"

"Two of your men died because of your mistake, and all you can think of is insulting me? My, what an irresponsible knight."

Still smiling, Meiru taunted Araym. She looked like she was handling the knights with ease, but her composure was a facade. Araym's Divine Blaze was more of a threat than Meiru was willing to admit. He could fire it off any time, and her barriers weren't powerful enough to block all of the spears. If any of them hit her ships the wood would catch fire, and water alone wouldn't be enough to put out those magicked blazes. Unless she countered his Divine Blaze with a massive wave of water each time, her island would be reduced to cinders. It was for that reason that she was trying to provoke him into making a careless blunder. Unfortunately, he wasn't that simpleminded.

"You're right, it's pathetic that I allowed a heretic to ever best me. However, those noble men died martyrs. They could have wished for no better end."

"I suppose I should have expected that. You clergy love taking things to extremes."

Araym didn't feel even an iota of sorrow for his lost comrades.

"Indeed, our faith is nothing if not extreme!"

Araym once again created a legion of spears. The moment Meiru turned her attention to them, she heard wind whistle past her ear. She bent backward on instinct, and a glowing arrow shot through the space her head had been a second ago. To her surprise, the arrow curved in midair and shot back toward her again.

"My arrows are the incarnation of Ehit's divine wrath. Prepare to be judged!"

The one who'd shot that arrow was the other brigade commander who'd come on this expedition, Lelaie Argeson. Her special magic, Arrows of

Atonement, allowed her to shoot arrows that chased their target to the ends of the earth. Lelaie fired off two more homing arrows, then joined the remaining knights in charging Meiru. In response, she wrapped herself in a veil of water. The knights didn't hesitate in the slightest and stabbed at the veil. At the same time, Meiru wrapped another knight a short distance away in an identical veil.

"Bweeeh!?"

"Sorry, but that's the old me."

Shocked, the knights whirled around. The knight Meiru had trapped in the second veil had a saber sticking out of his neck. Meiru mercilessly yanked her saber out of the poor knight's neck and used a tiny current to wipe the blood off it. At the same time, the saber shattered into a dozen pieces and merged with the current. After transforming her sword into her shrapnel whip, she lashed out at yet another knight. Lelaie and Araym once again bombarded her with arrows and fire. This time, Meiru didn't even attempt to dodge. She focused on maintaining her offensive, allowing the barrage to hit.

"Nngh."

An arrow pierced her chest while a flaming spear incinerated her left arm. At the same time though, her shrapnel whip gouged out her target's eyes. He staggered backward, and Meiru followed up with a water lance. It shot toward him at blinding speed and pierced through the tiny gap in his armor, creating a fist-sized hole in his heart. Meiru didn't bother to stick around and watch his demise. Instead, she rode the current to safety, avoiding Araym and Lelaie's next barrage. Grimacing in pain, she launched a torrent of water at Araym and the other knights. While he was dealing with the flood, Meiru healed herself and changed targets to Lelaie. She'd returned her saber back to its original form, and she slashed at the brigade commander with it.

"Why!? Why is it that you turned from god despite having received his blessings!? You could have been one of his beloved children!"

Despite being an archer, Lelaie skillfully blocked Meiru's slashes with her bow and arrow. Meiru smiled kindly and replied, "Because I didn't want to end up like you."

"Curse youuuu!"

Lelaie parried Meiru's stroke with an arrow, then nocked it and fired at point-blank range. Meiru tilted her head to dodge, but the arrow instantly turned in midair and bore down on her again. Meiru had expected that, however, and used one of her currents to put a knight in between her and the arrow.

"I wonder if your supposedly invincible arrows can pierce through your fellow knight's armor?"

Meiru didn't have to wait long to get her answer. While the knight's armor did manage to reduce the arrow's force, it still punched right through and pierced his heart. It kept going, and exited the knight's back, still heading for Meiru. Meiru stopped her flurry of attacks and dodged to the side. It grazed her harmlessly as it passed, and continued onward toward its owner.

"Ah!"

Lelaie gasped, but managed to just barely catch the arrow before it hit her. She then nocked it once more and drew her bow back. Before she could loose it though, Meiru grabbed onto her wrist.

"Revival Reversal."

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Blood spurted from every part of Lelaie's body. Meiru had used one of her trump cards and revived Lelaie's past wounds. She'd wondered how effective it would be against the church's elite knights, but from the looks of it even if they didn't participate in combat often, their training was far harsher than any battle. Lelaie dropped to one knee. Meiru didn't miss a beat and quickly sliced down at the knight's neck. Before her attack landed, though—

"Soul Shock."

Meiru was hit by an impact that bypassed all defenses and struck directly at her soul.

"Argh!?"

Meiru gritted her teeth, the pain helping her just barely hang on to her consciousness. She quickly cast restoration magic on herself and backed away to safety. That reflexive reaction of hers had saved her life. A second later there

was a huge boom, and the ship she'd been on was rocked by a massive shockwave. Looking over, Meiru saw a stern-looking man hefting a mace larger than him. The shockwave had been caused by him slamming it down as he'd landed. The dark grey mace was almost a full meter wide and even its handle was the thickness of a child's bicep. It was hard to imagine anyone could even hold such a thing. The impact had, of course, shattered the ship down the center, and it was slowly beginning to sink. *A single mace was able to do that!?*

"Commander!"

"Laus-sama!"

Lelaie and Araym looked up at the man with reverence.

"I do not wish to lose any more of my precious knights. I will handle this woman."

Laus lightly swung his mace, causing a shockwave of wind to shoot outward. Originally he'd just been watching from aboard the ship, as his men had pleaded with him that there was no need for someone of his stature to personally deal with a band of pirates. However, now he'd decided to take to the battlefield. Araym opened his mouth to protest, but Laus silenced him with a single glare. He then turned to Meiru, who even now was wearing her usual smile.

"Not only can you use ancient magic, but your skills with normal magic are also exceptional as well. You were able to take on two of my captains while both healing your comrades and protecting the noncombatants..."

There was a hint of admiration in Laus' voice. He was the only one who'd noticed that she'd been doing all of that while also fighting Laus' best men. Unfortunately, a few of the pirates had died before she could restore them, but none of the civilians had been harmed yet. While the pirates were in no shape to launch the escape boats, it was thanks to Meiru's constant restoration that they were able to keep them safe from the knights. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that Meiru was single-handedly carrying the pirates.

"Oh my. It's quite an honor to be praised by the esteemed commander of the Holy Templar Knights."

“Hmph, as if you actually mean that.”

“Fufu. Say, Commander. If you really think I’m so impressive, why not just leave? If you enter the fray, I’ll have to get serious, and no one wants that.”

If Meiru focused only on attacking, casualties among the knights would grow. The number of dead knights had already reached the double digits. The Holy Templar Knights hadn’t lost this many men in decades. They had expected to be up against an unruly mob of heretics, but they’d found themselves facing a score of special magic users, along with a wielder of ancient magic. This was definitely beyond their calculations. In truth, a temporary retreat should have been an appealing option for the knights. However, Laus didn’t respond to Meiru’s expectations.

“That’s not an option.”

“Whyever not?”

Meiru’s expression darkened. Laus replied in a deadpan voice, “Because we have yet to be put at a disadvantage. But even if we were, that would be no reason to retreat. So long as there is a chance of our mission succeeding, we will fight. You say you’ll have to get serious? So be it. Show me what you’re made of. Resist with all your might!”

Laus’ final shout shook the air. Meiru narrowed her eyes as Laus looked coldly down at her.

“Ancient magic is not something you can use endlessly. Captain of the Melusine Pirates, Meiru. How long will you be able to resist?”

With that, Laus leaped forward. The two halves of the ship he’d destroyed had already tilted to the point of being vertical. Their orientation meant Laus was basically leaping off a wall, which gave added thrust to his charge. The other knights went to find easier prey, while Meiru once again jumped atop her current and faced Laus.

“Forever, I imagine.”

She smiled fearlessly in an attempt to hide her growing panic.

About an hour after the battle began, the clouds grew thicker, and a powerful storm buffeted the battlefield. The flames roaring through the ships were the only illumination in the dark sea.

“Haaah, Haaah...” Meiru’s labored panting mixed with the sounds of fire crackling around her. She held her saber in one hand as blood dripped from the numerous cuts on her body.

“You seem to be nearing your limit,” Laus stated, his voice flat and emotionless. Though he was sporting his fair share of wounds, he was still in much better shape than Meiru. Normally, Meiru would have retorted with a light quip, but she no longer had the energy to. She gritted her teeth, forcing herself to remain standing on pure will. Laus had spoken the truth; Meiru was at her limits. At the edges of her hazy vision, she could see her defeated family members. Kyaty had been forced to her knees, while Ned hung limply from the gunwale. Mania lay on the floor, unmoving. Lastly—

“Gaaah!?”

Chris, too, fell. An invisible mouth ripped off his arm, then a point-blank blast of white fire sent him flying. He hit the deck some distance away, and lay there, unmoving.

“Will you not surrender to us?”

“...What are you planning?”

That hadn’t been a command, but a request. Confused, Meiru glared suspiciously at Laus.

“It would be a waste for you to die here. Not only because of your ancient magic, either. If you repent and swear fealty to Ehit, I shall plead your case to the pope.”

The knights around Laus didn’t seem too thrilled by that.

“How could you show such mercy to heretics!?” Araym yelled. But after thinking about it for a few seconds, he realized Laus was right. It would be a waste to lose such powerful ancient magic. Meiru’s abilities had impressed the knights so much that they momentarily forgot about their fanatic desire to slaughter heretics.

In response, Meiru sized up Laus, then questioned him.

“What will become of my comrades?”

“They will receive divine punishment, of course. Understand that you are the only one deserving of special treatment.”

There was no room for negotiation. But of course, that wasn’t acceptable to Meiru. She spat at Laus’ feet, enraging the knights around him.

“How dare you disrespect Laus-sama’s mercy, you bitch! Laus-sama, these heretics are vile beasts. They deserve nothing less than death!”

Laus raised his hand to silence Araym.

“I see your eyes are still brimming with hope... but did you really believe I didn’t notice?”

For the first time since the battle started, Meiru’s gentle smile faltered. Laus waved a hand, signaling to some of his knights.

“Ah!”

“Only a fool would embark on a naval campaign without bringing along someone skilled in water magic.”

They hauled up the children of the Melusine Pirates, who they’d trapped in a prison of water. It didn’t stop there either. On the next ship over, another group of knights hauled up the other noncombatants, who they’d trapped in a similar prison.

“To think you even prepared underwater crafts for their escape. You can never underestimate the seafaring races.”

The people who’d been trying to escape by ship had all been fakes. Though Meiru had erected a barrier around them, and Ned and Mania had risked their lives to protect them, the truth was all of the noncombatants had secretly attempted to escape using submarines Meiru had prepared for them. Once they’d reached a safe distance, Meiru had planned on dispersing a thick fog and escaping with her men. However, the knights had proved too strong to escape from. Worse, it turned out that not even the noncombatants had been able to escape.

“How...” Meiru couldn’t fathom how they’d managed to see through her decoys.

“No matter what tricks you use, you cannot hide a person’s soul. Nothing escapes my sight.”

Since Laus could detect the locations of people’s souls, no amount of camouflage worked against him.

“There is no hope left for your friends. Now decide, will you live, or die?”

Chills ran down Meiru’s spine. She knew that Laus had no intention of bargaining their lives for her servitude. There was a single, simple reason he’d brought them alive before her, instead of finishing them off. He wanted to crush her spirit, to drive home the point that Meiru, captain of the Melusine pirates, was powerless. And, at the same time, to show that there was no resisting the church.

Right now, there stood on the airship a knight who possessed special magic that allowed them to recreate everything they saw as a projection. There was no way the church was going to let such a huge heretic purge remain an unknown battle in the middle of the open sea. This execution would serve as a deterrent to other potential heretics. And the spectacle would have even more persuasiveness if the heretics’ leader, a powerful wielder of ancient magic, submitted to Ehit’s rule. It was for that reason that the knights were willing to defy Ehit’s judgment in this matter. Moreover, the knight who was recording everything could edit the projection, so they could easily cut out anything that painted them in a bad light.

“Now choose. Will you submit, or perish with your foolish friends?”

“You fiends are rotten to the core.”

Laus silently hit her with a Soul Shock. Weakened as she was, Meiru couldn’t withstand the attack. Screaming, she dropped to her knees, her saber slipping from her fingers. Two knights grabbed her by the arms and lifted her up. Vision hazy, Meiru watched as the prison holding the children melted away. The kids trembled in terror as knights surrounded them, their swords drawn.

“Stop, please! They’re just children!” Meiru pleaded desperately, all traces of

composure gone.

Araym and his men sneered. Nothing was more enjoyable to them than watching heretics break.

“I believe I told you. This is divine punishment.”

Laus stepped forward and shouldered his mace. His eyes were cold, devoid of emotion. The knights holding her pushed down on her shoulders, forcing her head forward.

I can’t afford to die here! Not like this, not with my family still in danger! However, the calm part of Meiru knew she no longer had any cards to play. No matter how she struggled, there was nothing she could do.

“I’m sorry, everyone. I’m sorry... Diene...” Meiru whispered in a voice too small to hear. All she could do for her precious sister was apologize. Just then, thoughts of another girl, one who’d been just like a sister to her, flashed through her mind. The blonde-haired tomboy who’d sworn to fight against the world. Her lips twitched, and her usual gentle smile returned. The knights holding her reflexively took a step back, while Laus narrowed his eyes.

“One day.”

Despite the fact that Meiru had no strength left, the knights didn’t silence her. Though she already had one foot in the grave, the dazzling force of her will kept them rooted to the spot.

“You will bear witness to the true radiance of freedom.”

Meiru thought back to that girl who shone brighter than the sun and the comrades who supported her.

“Prepare yourselves. That radiance is more than you can handle.”

Meiru chuckled, and the knights looked at her in disbelief. Laus, however, just observed her silently. After a few minutes, he said,

“Even so... the church and Ehit are absolute.”

He lifted his massive mace. And as he brought it down—

“Damn you bastaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaards!”

By the time the knights looked up, it was already too late. Every Holy Templar Knight on the deck, even Laus, was crushed under immense pressure. They didn't even have time to scream. The ship's deck, weakened from battle, shattered in an instant. All of the knights were hurled straight down and slammed into the hull. None remained on what was left of the deck. Since the attack had pinpointed only the knights, the deck was riddled with holes like some Frankenstein whack-a-mole machine.

Meiru's eyes widened in shock as a girl alighted on the deck in front of her.

"Miledi-chan?"

"Meru-nee! Thank goodness. I made in time. This time, I wasn't too late."

With tears in her eyes, Miledi hugged Meiru. After a few seconds, Meiru overcame her shock and hugged Miledi back. She clung to Miledi as tightly as a child would to their mother.

"Meru-nee, are you okay!? Meru-nee!"

"I'm fine, Miledi-chan. Just fine."

The two girls released each other looked each other over. Despite being the one who'd done the saving, Miledi was crying as though she were the one who'd been saved. Meiru gave her a smile filled with boundless affection, this one genuine, and hugged Miledi again.

While the two were rejoicing in their reunion, an explosion rocked the airship overhead. Smoke rose from the stern and it slowly fell to the ground a short distance away. Oscar and Naiz had brought down the ship. Miledi turned her head up and hollered at them.

"Nacchan, we need a portal!"

"Understood. Here you go!" Naiz alighted a short distance from the ship island and opened a massive portal.

"Meru-nee, leave things here to us! You focus on healing everyone!"

"Miledi-chan, the three of you alone can't—"

Miledi's tearful face transformed into a confident smile, and she puffed her chest out proudly.

“We’ll be fine!”

A second later, Meiru’s body started to float. The other Melusine Pirates joined her. It was as if all the pirates had suddenly been freed from the planet’s gravity. Not just them either, the whole ship the Melusine was floating as well. Surprised, Meiru looked over to see Miledi grinning at her. As she was floated onto the Melusine, Meiru gritted her teeth. It pained her to watch Miledi stay behind and fight while she was whisked off somewhere safe, but she didn’t know how to express her frustration in words. Still, she tried her best to convey the elusive feelings welling up within her.

“You can’t die, Miledi-chan!”

That was as cliched a line as they came, but Miledi nodded with a smile.

“Don’t worry, I’m immortal!” Miledi shot Meiru a thumbs-up, and Meiru’s expression relaxed somewhat. A second later, a shockwave that tore at her soul swept Miledi off her feet. Scowling, Miledi regained her balance in the air. It appeared she’d failed to finish off the knights with her surprise attack. Though she’d pushed them all the way down to the ocean, the water had mitigated the pressure. Unfortunately for Miledi, the sea wasn’t the best place for her to fight. After freeing himself from Miledi’s attack, Araym unleashed a tsunami of fire that charred half the ships on its path toward the Melusine. His assault was followed by a barrage of arrows, a legion of thunderbolts, blasts of wind, and a series of shockwaves.

“Don’t get in my way.”

Naiz swung his arm down, creating a spatial earthquake. The flood of attacks was silenced by a single spell.

“You won’t escape us!”

The Devotion user, Pell, shot out from the side of a ship and leaped toward the Melusine. However, a figure descended in front of her, blocking her path.

“Actually, I’m afraid they will.”

“Outta my way!”

Pell swung her massive claymore to the side, intent on cutting Oscar in half.

“Ability number two, Wall Blast!”

The umbrella’s reactive armor, combined with Oscar’s spell and all the body strengthening he could put into it, was more than enough to block Pell’s claymore. Oscar then pulled ten exploding knives out of his treasure trove and threw them at Pell.

“What!? Where did you—” Pell backed up and tried swat the daggers down, but they possessed far more force than she’d expected, and their explosions sent her hurtling into the sea.

“My glasses won’t lose to anyone else’s!” Oscar said as he adjusted his glasses.

Naiz joined him, and together the two guarded the Melusine as they glared at the island below. At the same time, Oscar pulled out a bag filled with recovery items and threw it to Meiru. As Meiru caught the bag, she rushed to the ship’s stern and yelled at them.

“Oscar-kun, Naiz-kun! You better not die either! I’ll come back once I’m healed!”

Both men kept their eyes fixed below, but they brought their hands back and gave her a thumbs-up. Just then, knights started climbing out onto the decks of the burning ships. They glared angrily up at Meiru, but they were too late. The Melusine floated through Naiz’s portal and was teleported out of sight. A brief silence followed. There were 80 knights, up against just three Liberators. However, each of the three was a master of their respective abilities.

“Three new wielders of ancient magic? Who are you people?”

From what Laus could tell, they weren’t pirates, yet they’d clearly come to the pirates’ aid. He scowled in confusion. Miledi walked over to where Oscar and Nai were, then flashed Laus a grin.

“Just now you said Ehit was absolute, right? Well, guess what, we’re heretics who hate your absolute bullshit god!” Miledi declared proudly, making her intentions clear. In response, Laus narrowed his eyes and questioned her angrily.

“So you mean to defy the church?”

“That’s right. You better prepare yourselves, dogs of Ehit. Because you’re gonna pay for hurting my friend. And just so you know, I’m pretty tough!” Miledi smiled fearlessly and stuck her middle finger into the air. When he saw that, Laus closed his eyes. A second later, he opened them again and glared at Miledi.

“In that case, you too shall receive divine punishment, heretic.”

“Hah! I’d like to see you try!”

Miledi jumped down the same moment Laus leaped up. Oscar and Naiz smiled ruefully at Miledi’s unusual aggressiveness. However, they were just as pissed as she was. The Melusine Pirates were their friends too.

“So those are the church’s strongest knights. Who do you think’ll be harder to beat, them or apostles?”

“We were bound to cross paths with them eventually. We may as well see how tough they really are.”

Oscar and Naiz’s smiles matched Miledi as they leaped down after her. The first to strike was Naiz. He teleported out of sight, causing the knights to blink in surprise. A second later, he reappeared behind the rearguard, which was made up of knights specializing in long-range attacks.

“Void Fissure.”

Four knights were sent flying, their bodies bent at impossible angles. They hadn’t even had time to scream.

“You little—”

Saleos unleashed his Sacred Beast Fangs. At the same time, Boutice unslung his sword and swung diagonally downward. Both the invisible jaws and the massive blade stopped inches from Naiz’s face.

“Huh. That’s an interesting spell. I think it goes something like this?”

“Wha!?”

Saleos’ jaw dropped as he saw the jaws of a massive beast bore down on him. Compared to this overwhelming spell, his Sacred Beast Fangs looked like a puppy’s play-bite.

“Saleos, keep it together!” Boutice fired a shockwave from his tower shield to knock Saleos away to safety. A second later, Naiz’s spell gouged out the deck where he’d been standing.

“Watch each other’s backs! Surround him and finish him off!”

The knights under the two captains spread out around Naiz, following Boutice’s command. But when they made to close in, Naiz narrowed his eyes dangerously, and Boutice sensed danger.

“Wait, don’t get any closer!” Boutice shouted. Unfortunately, the knights had been too hasty to attack, and their eagerness led to their downfall. By the time the knights tried to retreat as their commander had ordered them, they’d already been trapped inside Naiz’s spatial barrier.

“Void Shatter.”

The four knights were cut in half. Blood spurted from their torsos as their bisected corpses hit the ground. Void Shatter was a spatial spell that could slice through anything by sliding the space around a target. Naiz had developed this spell to deal with the God’s Apostle the next time they faced her.

After mercilessly slaughtering four knights, Naiz’s gaze shifted to Boutice and Saleos. The two of them instinctively sensed that they were about to die.

“Hmph!”

Just before Naiz could unleash his spell though, a wave of fire rushed toward him. In order to avoid it, Naiz teleported away.

“Division Commander Araym!”

“Laus-sama is dealing with that weight-manipulating woman! He’s ordered the rest of us to take care of that teleporting guy!”

Looking up, Saleos and Boutice realized that a fierce battle was taking place above them. Ominous black spheres circled around the sky, clashing with shockwaves of midnight blue. Any normal person would be destroyed by the pulses of mana that spread outward with each clash. A shiver of fear ran down Boutice’s spine. Laus was the strongest fighter among the Holy Templar Knights. He stood at the pinnacle of one of the top three pillars of the church. The fact

that there existed someone who could go toe to toe with him terrified the knights to no end. Araym admonished his men for their fear, then summoned a barrier of flame to protect them. While he searched for Naiz, he prepared to give out his next set of orders.

“They may be wielders of ancient magic, but they’re— Gaaah!?”

“Hmm. I guess the Holy Templar Knights at least have good equipment.”

Naiz had appeared behind Araym and hit him with the powered up version of Saleos’ spell that he’d used earlier. The only reason Araym had survived was because his armor had protected him from being ripped apart. Still, Naiz’s attack had shredded Araym’s armor and left him badly wounded. However, it hadn’t been so much damage that it couldn’t be healed.

“Gaaah, damn you, heretic!”

“What an irksome foe.”

Araym wrapped himself in a curtain of fire, then sent that fire shooting out in all directions. Naiz once again teleported to safety. Naiz raised an eyebrow as he watched another knight run to Araym, their hands glowing with healing light.

It seems this new spell, Void Fangs, isn’t as fast as my Void Shatter. If one were to compare it to sword strokes, it was the difference between a clumsy slash and a practiced stroke. The former was just slow enough that an opponent had the time needed to pour mana into their armor and strengthen their defenses.

“I need more practice with this spell... Though, I suppose that will have to wait until later.”

Naiz blocked the storm of spells headed toward him with a space-severing barrier, then cast another new spell.

“Void Flash!” Naiz swung his hand like it was a sword, creating an invisible blade that shot forth. It passed through a knight who was about to launch a lightning spell, cutting him in half.

“It seems like sharpness is what matters most against that armor.”

The remaining knights dashed through the sky in pairs of two, heading for

Naiz. Naiz unleashed another Void Flash, but this one they dodged. Naiz changed tactics and prepared to cast another Void Shatter, only to be interrupted by another wave of fire. He once again teleported to dodge, then attempted to finish off another group of small fry. However, now that they were working in pairs, it was harder to catch them unawares. They'd already adapted to Naiz's fighting style. He evaded the Celestial Flashes the knights fired at him and unleashed another Void Fissure. The knights swiftly fell into defensive stances, but they were unable to withstand the impact and were sent flying. Though they'd been hurt bad, none of them had died.

"Tch... I suppose I should have known the church's strongest knights would know how to adapt!"

At this rate, it'll be some time before I'm finished here. Worried, Naiz shot a quick glance at Oscar to see how he was doing. But he needn't have worried.

Just how many of those did he make? Oscar was firing off enchanted daggers one after another, filling the sky with a veritable meteor storm of them. Pell, Apri, and Baltos were all doing their best to try and dodge in midair, but seeing that they were faring better than the others, Oscar concentrated his barrage on them. Expressionless, he pulled out a countless number of daggers from his Treasure Trove and let them loose. Not only was he using artifact-level items as though they were disposable potions, he was firing off consecutive blasts of powerful magic from his umbrella while also using its sniping feature to shoot through the foreheads of hapless knights. Those that survived tried to seek shelter in the safety of what remained of the ship island, but his daggers continued to find their mark. Knights screamed as they blew up, had their armor melted, were frozen, electrocuted, or petrified. It was only thanks to their equipment that they survived at all, but Oscar showed no openings as he continued to mercilessly wear them down. All while using his free hand to adjust his glasses. While none of the captains or lieutenants had been downed, a number of grunt knights were no longer moving. They were likely dead.

When did he have the time to make so many... Naiz thought to himself. Just then, Pell managed to use her Devotion to steal Oscar's mana and heal herself. After recovering, she charged Oscar.

"Don't get cocky, you heretiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiic!" Screaming loud enough

for the whole battlefield to hear, Pell slashed at Oscar, her eyes bloodshot. Oscar responded by pressing a switch on his glasses, firing off a beam of light.

“Aaah!? My eyeeeeees!”

Blinded, Pell staggered and covered her eyes with both hands. Oscar then gripped his umbrella in both hands and swung it back like a baseball bat. Naturally, the ball he was aiming to hit was Pell’s head. He lifted a leg, twisted his body, then used his Onyx Boots to give him a boost as he swung at Pell. *Thwack!*

Fifteen kilograms of reinforced metal slammed into Pell’s face. Though she was a girl, Oscar had shown no mercy. Her nose and glasses broken, Pell flew through the air, trailing blood as she went. Oscar then shouldered his umbrella and adjusted his glasses, as if to emphasize that his glasses were superior to hers.



“Looks like I don’t need to worry about him...” Naiz shook his head in disbelief, then focused his attention on the enemy before him. While Oscar and Naiz were keeping the grunts busy, Miledi dueled with Laus.

“How dare you hurt Meru-nee like that, baldy.”

“.....”

Miledi fired off an Onyx Blast, sending a ball of super-compressed gravity hurtling toward Laus. With how much power her Onyx Blasts had, an average Holy Templar Knight would faint upon eating one head-on, even with their armor to protect them. And this one packed even more of a punch. It could easily obliterate a person, leaving nothing left. However, Laus managed to knock it aside with a single swing of his mace. The mace he wielded was known as the Divine Arbiter and was quite possibly the church’s strongest artifact. Not only had it been strengthened to the utmost limit, but it also had magic reflecting properties, its weight could be manipulated freely, and it even unleashed shockwaves of mana when it struck.

“I don’t care if you’re the commander or not, you’re going down baldy!”

“.....”

Miledi pressed down on him with a wave of gravity. Laus fell as the pressure assailed him, but as he did so he swung his mace, unleashing a shockwave of spirit magic. The hit stunned Miledi, canceling her spell.

“Nnngh! Annoying baldy!”

“I’m not bald.”

Oh? Miledi hadn’t been particularly trying to provoke Laus. If anything, she’d just been venting her anger at seeing her friends beat down. She knew she needed to stay calm, since blind anger led to fatal mistakes. She’d expected him to ignore her childish insults, but it appeared she’d hit a nerve, since he was arguing back. Miledi grinned.

“Yes, you are! I can see your receding hairline clear as day! Oh, sorry, I didn’t realize it was a sensitive subject for you! I’m a good girl, so I won’t do it again. Don’t worry though, most people over 50 go bald!” Miledi knew full well that

Laus was in his late thirties at most. Annoyed, Laus unleashed a lightning-fast magical assault. He fired off spells from all different elements, each at least an advanced-class spell. The barrage was powerful enough to bring down five galleon-sized ships. However, Miledi blocked it with a Spatial Severance. The swirling black sphere absorbed all of Laus' spells, compressed them, and was about to shoot them back, but—

"Nnnnnngh."

The amount of mana Laus had packed into each of his attacks was abnormal. Miledi's favorite reversal spell pulsed, struggling to contain the force of all the spells.

"Oh shit."

Miledi fell sideways, putting as much distance between her and her Spatial Severance as possible. A second later, it exploded. It sent out ripples of mana, similar to Naiz's spatial bombs as it dispersed. Though the explosion happened twenty meters in the air, it was powerful enough to create a crater in the water for a short while. As the water rushed back in, it caused a huge wave that rocked the nearby boats.

"I'm still 32."

"Wah!?"

Laus had managed to get above Miledi without her realizing. He swung his mace down, intent on cracking her head open. She fell backward, dodging his blow by a hair's breadth. Shockwaves spread out from the mace, chasing after Miledi. She blocked them all with an Onyx Blast. Ripples spread out from where their attacks clashed.

"Don't think you've won yet! Asura!"

"Soul Shock."

Laus once again attempted to nullify the threat bearing down on him by using spirit magic.

"The great genius Miledi never falls for the same trick twice!"

Miledi gritted her teeth and withstood the shock without losing track of her

spell.

“Impossible. How did you learn to endure it so fast!?”

What Miledi had done was simple. She’d started circulating mana inside her body, raising her resistance to magic. But what was impressive about that was that it was about the only way to resist spirit magic, which ignored barriers and armor. The fact that she’d been able to instinctively understand the properties of Laus’ magic, and then come up with a countermeasure in such a short time was proof that she really was a genius. Unable to escape the gravity field Miledi had trapped him in, Laus was pushed all the way down to the sea.

“Haaah, haaah, you’re pretty tough. But I’m tougher!”

Miledi smiled fearlessly. A second later though, she heard a voice in her mind.

—Spirit magic, limiter one, release.—

A pulse of midnight blue mana blew the sea away, and Laus shot up from the water. His speed had clearly increased.

“Onyx—”

—Behind you.—

The moment she heard that voice, Miledi sensed someone behind her. Chills ran down her spine, and she whirled around, but there was no one there. This was the spirit magic Phantom. It created a fake soul that fooled people’s senses.

“You’re looking in the wrong place.”

“Shit—”

Laus’ upward swing connected squarely with Miledi’s body. She erected multiple barriers at the last minute, but they were all blown away. Still, she had enough time to leave Laus a parting gift before she was smacked aside. This was one of her newest spells, one that combined gravity magic with regular magic.

“Whirling Sapphire!”

A powerful sphere of gravity-compressed fire magic shot out toward Laus as he came in for a follow-up attack. It exploded with the force of a small sun, A huge shockwave hit the ocean, rocking Meiru’s ship island. It even blew away

some of the knights Oscar and Naiz were fighting. Miledi's spell was so powerful it broke through Laus' defenses and the protection of his armor. He felt a few of his ribs crack, and his lungs burned from the heat.

"To think you were this powerful. It seems I have no choice... Spirit magic limiter two, release!" Laus' speed increased even further. His attack had done about as much done to Miledi's ribs as hers had done to him, but despite the fact that she was still injured, she fired off a barrage of composite gravity spells. The air shook and the seas parted as bursts of sky blue and midnight blue mana clashed over and over. Their battle was so fierce it looked like a natural disaster in action.

"Why? Why do you resist?"

This fight was proving to be the most exhausting one Laus had fought in decades. Panting, Laus continued swinging his mace as he pressed Miledi for answers.

"You should know you'll never be able to win, so why don't you just submit and live quietly!? Why is it you rush foolishly to your death!?"

There seemed to be a hint of pleading in Laus' voice. Miledi was just as exhausted as Laus, and she panted heavily as she evaded his mace and fired a counterattack of Onyx Blasts. But the moment she was able to catch her breath for a moment, she realized how strange Laus' question was. Normally, this far into the fight someone from the church should have gone crazy with fanatic fervor. Thinking back, Miledi realized this whole fight had been a little strange. Laus had been missing the crazed devotion to Ehit she'd seen in other clergy members. It was for that reason that Miledi decided to answer Laus seriously.

"Because we're human."

"What!?"

In response, Miledi howled.

"A life of servitude is no life at all! Slaving away for the gods isn't a real life!"

Overwhelmed, Laus fell silent.

"You can only truly say you're living if you can choose your own future! If

you're free to choose your own beliefs! Unless you can decide for yourself, you can't say that you're truly living your life! That's what it means to be human!"

Though she was exhausted and bleeding, Miledi's mana shone as bright as ever. She gathered her strength and fired off another Onyx Blast with a yell.

"If we can't be free, what meaning is there in living!?"

"If you can't... be free?" Laus suddenly stopped moving. There was a look of disbelief on his face.

I pray that humanity will be one day be free... That girl's words flashed through his mind. The sentence itself was something anyone might say, so it was entirely possible this was just a coincidence. In fact, that was the more plausible explanation. But that didn't stop help Laus from thinking that the girl in front of him had the same bright eyes as the girl he'd seen back at the church. By the time he'd returned to his senses, Miledi's Onyx Blast had slammed into his stomach.

"Gaaah!"

Despite his first-rate equipment, Miledi's magic was powerful enough to pierce his skin. The blow shook him to the core as if he'd been hit by a pure expression of Miledi's will. Laus flew through the air and crashed into the sea. He skipped across the surface of the water and slammed into the side of one of Meiru's ships.

"Laus-sama, are you alright!?" Araym worriedly ran over to his commander. His armor was in tatters, and he'd lost an arm.

"I'm fine. You're hurt worse than I am."

"A single arm is nothing. My faith won't falter from such paltry wounds. More importantly, sir..." Araym didn't even need to finish his sentence. Above the two of them stood Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz. Though the three had taken some damage and were quite exhausted, they were still in fighting shape. Despite being up against 80 knights, they were holding their own. They were real monsters.

Araym reined in his overflowing anger and spoke in a low voice.

“We’ve lost thirty percent of our men. Pell, Saleos, and Baltos have all joined the saints in martyrdom. My humblest apologies for failing you.”

“You were up against ancient magic users, such losses were inevitable.”

Laus jumped up onto the ship’s gunwale. His knights crowded around him. After confirming the extent of the casualties, Laus looked up at Miledi. His ice-cold calmness had vanished, and he looked... lost.

“Laus-sama?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Araym stepped forward, ready to die for the sake of his god’s cause. No matter how disadvantageous the situation, retreating from heretics was inexcusable. The knights were ready to fight until they were all annihilated. Death was preferable to defying Ehit’s orders. Laus closed his eyes, preparing to order his men to their deaths.

“Hm? What in...”

The wind and rain grew stronger, the tempest growing even more violent.

“Wait, you’ve gotta be kidding me? It shows up *now*?”

“If anything, we should have expected this, Miledi. Just think about how much mana we’ve been emitting.”

Miledi looked down in shock while Oscar’s lips twitched. A huge wave approached all the combatants. There was only one creature that could create waves that large... the Hell Eater. Miledi cast her senses downward and noticed that the sea was filled to the brim with monsters. There were more than she could count. Everyone had been so focused on their fight that they hadn’t even noticed. But naturally, an all-out fight between ancient magic users was bound to attract sea monsters.

“Araym, can our airship fly?”

“Sir? I, uh... Well, repairs are complete, so it should be able to fly, but... Laus-sama, surely you aren’t about to suggest what I think you are!? This is a mission granted to us by Lord Ehit, we cannot retreat! Those heretics are exhausted! It won’t be long before we can finish them off!”

As if to deny Araym's words, the situation grew even worse for them.

"Oh? I don't think you'll be able to manage that, though?"

"Meru-nee!"

A section of the violent sea turned into an arch of water. Meiru rose from it like a surfacing mermaid.

"Sheesh. You didn't have to teleport us a whole ten kilometers away. It made getting back here difficult."

Though she acted nonchalant, Meiru's breathing was ragged. It appeared she'd rushed back as soon as she'd finished recovering her mana.

Laus turned to his overeager knights and commanded them.

"Retreat. All hands, return to the airship."

"Laus-sama!?"

"Listen well. We are in the middle of a storm and must face a horde of monsters along with four ancient magic users. If there was any chance that we might succeed in our mission and execute Ehit's will, I would continue the fight. However, if we are eliminated here without succeeding in our task, we will have failed Lord Ehit. My fellow knights, which is more important? Surviving now so we may carry out Ehit's orders another day, or dying here as martyrs?"

Naturally, that was carrying out Ehit's orders.

"We must retreat for now. So that we can eliminate them another time."

"Yes, sir! Understood!"

After a moment's hesitation, Araym shot Miledi a crazed glare, then saluted Laus. Laus trained his sharp gaze on Miledi.

"Unless you would rather fight us to the death here and now."

Miledi flashed Laus a fearless smile. Just as she opened her mouth to say, "Hey, how does it feel knowing you got your ass handed to you by a bunch of heretics? Well, Holy Templar Knights? Not feeling so holy anymore, huh?" Oscar grabbed her from behind and covered her mouth.

"Get out of our sights," he said coldly. Laus gave Miledi one last look, then

took his knights back to the airship. With its engine repaired, it rose into the sky once more.

After the knights were out of sight, Naiz opened a portal. The party fled to the Melusine, escaping the wrath of the sea monsters closing in on them.

The Melusine was a galleon-class ship and spanned over 50 meters from stern to bow. It was large enough to accommodate the 500-odd people living on Meiru's ship-island, though just barely. Of course, conditions were cramped. Were it not for the wind magic Meiru periodically sent through the lower decks, the air would stagnate. Furthermore, there wasn't nearly enough food to feed all 500 people.

"Meru-nee... how many people did you lose?"

A few hours had elapsed since they'd escaped to the Melusine, and the storm had passed. Miledi and the others had congregated around the ship's wheel. Chris and the other high-ranking members of Meiru's crew were there as well.

"Fifty-seven."

Of those 57 casualties, all were fighters. Meiru had had around 200 pirates under her command, and she'd lost close to thirty percent of them in one battle. Even with her restoration magic, she hadn't been able to save them all.

"I'm sorry, Meru-nee. If we'd come back sooner—"

Meiru pressed a finger to Miledi's quivering lips, cutting her off. Smiling, she shook her head.

"You had no reason to come back to save us, Miledi-chan, but you did anyway. You risked your lives for us. There's nothing you need to apologize for."

"Meru-nee..." Miledi sniffled, and Meiru gently patted her head.

"We owe you our lives. That debt must be repaid."

"You don't have to... No, wait. In that case, tell me Meru-nee. What is it you're really after?"

"That could hardly be considered repaying my debt."

Miledi shook her head and gave Meiru a determined look.

“Right now, that’s the one thing I want to know the most. That’s how badly I wanted you in our group. That’s how much I wanted you, and your pirates to join hands with us. I came here searching for the jewel of the sea, and I finally found it. It was you, Meru-nee. You and the Melusine Pirates.”

Knowing Meiru’s secret was the most important thing to Miledi. Meiru, Chris, and the other pirates present all blushed and looked away awkwardly at Miledi’s embarrassing speech. Only Kyaty looked excited and seemed ready to hug Miledi at any moment.

“I’ve never heard such a passionate speech before. Is this how she got you to follow her as well, Oscar-kun, Naiz-kun?”

“Well, I won’t deny that was part of it.”

“It was. She’s quite a handful, wouldn’t you say?”

Oscar and Naiz smiled awkwardly and nodded. Their leader was one hell of a seductress. Chuckling Meiru nodded back to them.

“Why do I get the feeling you three are going to get along so well you all start ignoring me again...”

Miledi glared reproachfully at Oscar as he, Naiz, and Meiru shared a moment of mutual understanding. Her expression grew nostalgic, and she leaned against the ship’s railing. Gazing up at the moon, she answered Miledi’s original question.

“I have a sister...” Meiru went on to explain that they were really half-sisters with different fathers and that she hadn’t seen her in over ten years.

“Remember how I told you my mother died when I was young?”

“Yep. You said it happened when you were eight, right? And you started living in the slums after that.”

“That is indeed what I said. However, I didn’t tell you the full truth. My mother is dead, but she didn’t die when I was eight. She died much later than that. Truth is, she was kidnapped when I was eight, gave my birth to my sister afterward, then died a few years after that.”

“Kidnapped?”

“Indeed. The man who rules Andika, Baharl Devault fell in love with her at first sight.”

Meiru’s normally gentle expression twisted into one of anger, and she gritted her teeth. The memory was obviously an unpleasant one. According to someone who’d witnessed the whole thing, while Meiru had been out playing, her mother Reej had happened to run into Baharl. She’d caught his attention, and Baharl was a man used to getting what he wanted. He was pitiless and greedy beyond measure, which was why he was the most feared man in Andika. There had been no way for Reej to escape his clutches. Though Reej had begged him not to take her, he hadn’t listened.

Reej had been a strong-willed woman. Under normal circumstances, she would never have obeyed someone like Baharl. But she’d needed to protect Meiru.

Despite her youth, Meiru’s talent with restoration magic was already apparent. Had Baharl discovered Reej’s daughter could use ancient magic, he would have captured her as well. Meiru would have been trapped, forced to do his bidding for the rest of her life. Worse, it was possible Baharl’s exploitation of her abilities would be noticed by the church, and they’d force her to serve them for life instead. That was something Reej had wanted to avoid at all costs, so she’d decided to give in to Baharl’s demands before Meiru returned home. Fortunately, Baharl hadn’t known Reej had a daughter.

When Meiru had returned home to an empty house, she’d asked the neighbors what had happened, and they’d told her the story she now told Miledi and the others. Because of Baharl, Meiru had lost the only family member she had. With nowhere else to go, she wandered the slums. But the entire time, her heart yearned for her mother. After six years, with a good deal of help from Chris and her other close friends, she finally found out what had happened to her mother. Both that she’d already passed away, and that she’d given birth to Meiru’s sister.

“Her name is Diene. At first, I resented her. Giving birth to Diene had weakened my mother so much that she eventually passed away. On top of that,

she was the daughter of the man who'd kidnapped my mother."

However—

"Just once, I snuck into the central district to see what my half-sister looked like."

That had been the beginning of everything. When Meiru had arrived in Diene's underground chamber, the first thing Diene had said to her was "Are you my older sister?"

"You see, my mother had told Diene about me. Not only that, she'd told her that one day I would come to see her. Fufu, do you know what she'd said to Diene? 'Your older sister's a real tomboy, so she'll probably break into your room when she comes.'"

Upon seeing Diene trapped inside an underground room, shouting "I finally get to meet you, Nee-sama!" Meiru had understood everything. While Diene had been born into a powerful household, her father had clearly never loved her. Why else would he trap her in this lonely underground room? After losing her mother, the only thing that had given Diene strength was the thought of one day being able to meet her sister. Even now, Meiru wasn't sure how to describe what she'd felt when she'd seen her younger sister reaching out to her through the bars of her window. All she knew was she could never hate Diene. In fact, Meiru had felt a strong desire to protect Diene well up within her, which was why—

"I made a promise. I promised her that we'd live together one day."

Unfortunately, reality was a harsh mistress. Had Diene been an ordinary girl, Baharl would likely have abandoned her without a second thought.

"But Diene could use special magic. Though her uses were limited, she could restore things like me."

Because of that, Baharl would never let Diene go.

"Since Andika is a lawless city, there are plenty of people who wish to see Baharl dead. Most of them wish to take his wealth and power for themselves. But as long as he has Diene's powers, Baharl has no need to fear his enemies."

With Diene's miraculous healing magic, Baharl could easily thwart any assassination attempts. In fact, she had already healed many of his men from otherwise fatal injuries plenty of times. Because of that, she'd been come to be called a saint among Baharl's subordinates.

"Wait? Does that mean the rumors about the Saint of the Western Seas were actually referring to Diene-chan?"

Smiling bitterly, Meiru shook her head.

"The rumors of a saint originated with Diene, yes, but the Saint of the Western Seas specifically refers to me. I needed to make sure my fame was greater than hers, so that if the church ever caught wind of the rumors, they would come to me, not her."

When she'd first met Diene, Meiru hadn't had the strength to protect her either from Baharl, or the church. In fact, it was only thanks to Baharl's influence that the church hadn't taken her away already.

Whenever Meiru had crossed paths with members of the Devault family at sea, she'd stealthily used her magic to view their memories of the past to see how Diene was doing and make sure the church hadn't discovered her. It was through them that Meiru had first learned that people had started calling Diene a saint and that rumors of her powers had begun to spread. That was also when Meiru had created her own legend to overwrite Diene's.

"I see... So what you really want is to take Diene-chan back from Baharl? Wait, but then why do you want to take over Andika too?"

"The reason for that is quite simple. And it is also why I cannot join hands with you, Miledi-chan."

Miledi cocked her head to the side, and Meiru explained.

"You see, Baharl has connections to the church."

"So it's not just that the church is overlooking Andika's existence, he's actually made a deal with them?"

"Precisely. Much of the profits made by the casinos go to the church. Andika is not only a containment island for heretics and miscreants, but also a valuable

source of funds for the church.”

In other words, if Meiru became ruler of Andika, even if the church learned about her and Diene’s abilities, they’d be forced to afford her some measure of freedom.

“In this world, only Andika stands in a position to negotiate with the church. If I can steal Baharl’s position and make Andika mine, me, Chris, Diene, and everyone else will be able to live freely. Furthermore, I will be able to save those like my mother who were abandoned by the city because they were too weak to survive within it. I will make Andika into a city where everyone can live in peace.”

It was for that reason that Meiru couldn’t join the Liberators. She couldn’t jeopardize her position by opposing the church. The path she’d chosen was one of showing her worth to the church, then negotiating her freedom that way.

“I intend to use my ancient magic as leverage when I negotiate with the church.”

Meiru’s determined gaze bore into Miledi. She could see that Meiru wouldn’t be swayed from her path. Miledi looked up at the sky, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath, processing everything Meiru had told her. After a few seconds, she opened her eyelids and gave Meiru a look that was just as determined.

“I understand, Meru-nee.”

That was all she said. But that was more than enough to convey her intentions. The two continued to gaze into each other’s eyes, a gentle breeze passing between them.

That night, Meiru put her plan into action. She went off alone into the moonlit sea, using her currents to carry her to her destination. Upon arriving, she lay down on her back and closed her eyes. If she went through with this, there would be no turning back.

I’m sure it will turn out alright... Meiru told herself. Even Miledi had told her as much.

“I’m sorry, Miledi-chan...” Meiru whispered. A few seconds later, she sensed

someone approach. Meiru created an arch out of seawater and sat on it while she waited for him to arrive.

“Good evening. I appreciate you taking the time to come here.”

Laus had come. Off in the distance, Meiru could see his airship.

“How did you find this place?”

“My magic allows me to peer into the past. I simply had to follow the trail you left behind.”

“I see. So your magic has more to do with restoration than recovery...” Laus nodded to himself.

“Did you come here to surrender? To plead for the lives of your comrades in exchange for your own? If so, don’t bother.”

“My, what a curt man you are. Fortunately, I came to do neither. I’m here to negotiate.”

“There will be no negotiating!” Laus flatly refused Meiru. He’d come down because he’d sensed a faint pulse of mana that he knew none of his other knights would have been able to detect. But he’d suspected a trap, not some ridiculous attempt at parley. Laus readied himself to fight.

“What do you think of letting me become the new leader of Andika?”

“Excuse me?”

Surprised, Laus stopped focusing his mana. Meiru explained the benefits of having her as Andika’s boss instead of Baharl. Namely that the church would have a wielder of ancient magic working with them. She even went so far as to explain the specifics of her restoration magic. On top of that, she talked about how the Melusine Pirate Crew would be able to handle situations Baharl couldn’t. Of course, her condition for helping the church was that she and her comrades would be allowed to go free. After she finished laying out her plan, she flashed Laus a confident smile.

“What do you think? Your original reason for eliminating us was that we were a threat to Andika, was it not? In that case, there should be no problem if we become the new rulers of the city. If anything, wouldn’t it be more appealing

for you to be doing business with an ancient magic user than Baharl, who is nothing more than an ordinary man?”

“Ehit’s decree is absolute.”

“My, weren’t you the one who gave me the chance to surrender earlier? I believe you said I possessed that much value. In that case, do you not believe it worth at least discussing with your superiors? I’m sure they’ll find my proposal quite appealing. I will be able to save the lives of my family, and the church will have the power of restoration magic on their side. It will be a mutually beneficial deal.”

“.....”

“Oh, and if you do find my proposal worth bringing to the pope, do tell him this. If you refuse my offer, I will oppose you to the bitter end. I’m sure you don’t want to see what I am capable of when I’m not protecting my crew, right?” Meiru delivered that last line with her usual gentle smile.

Laus thought back to his fight with Meiru. The entire battle she’d been using most of her power to protect her comrades. Despite that, she’d been powerful enough to oppose even him for a time. No matter how many times he’d fatally wounded her or her men, she’d brought them back. They’d been like an immortal army. And if that crew were to fight without any regard for their own lives because they knew they were doomed anyway... Well, Laus didn’t want to think about what defeating them would cost his knights. After a brief moment of hesitation, Laus asked about the one thing that had been bothering him throughout Meiru’s explanation.

“From the way you’ve been talking, you make it sound like you’re the only ancient magic user in your group. But what about those other three?”

“Those three aren’t pirates.”

“What? Then why did they come to your aid?”

“They wanted me to join their group, but I’ve already cut my ties with them. I don’t know all of the details, but they’re part of some organization. I imagine the church is more familiar with them than I am.”

“There exists an organization that possessed three wielders of ancient

magic?” Laus’ expression grew grim. Meiru narrowed her eyes suspiciously. Miledi had told her that she could tell Laus about them if she wanted as long as she didn’t specifically mention the name Liberators. Miledi had assumed that since they’d fought one apostle, the church likely knew about them. That was part of why she’d let Meiru tell the knights about them. She’d wanted to see how far information on the Liberators had spread within the church.

Surprisingly, it appeared Laus at least had no idea about the existence of Miledi’s organization. Despite the fact that his high position meant he should have been one of the first to know.

“So, what do you say, Commander?”

“.....” Laus grunted to himself and stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“Very well. I had intended to give my report to the pope tomorrow morning regardless.”

“Splendid. I await a favorable reply.”

Though she maintained her smile, inwardly Meiru breathed a sigh of relief. She’d feared Laus would order his airship to attack. With this, she’d cleared the first hurdle. All that was left now was to wait. However, Meiru had a feeling that the church would accept her demands. Ancient magic users were that valuable.

“Well then, I shall return here tomorrow at dawn...” Meiru dissolved her arch and prepared to leave, but before she could have her current whisk her away, Laus called out to her.

“Wait, I have one last thing to ask you.”

“Oh, and whatever could that be?”

Laus looked hesitant, which struck Meiru as odd.

“Do you know anything more about that girl who called herself Miledi?”

Meiru grew even more confused. It made sense for Laus to want to know more about the ancient magic users, but in that case, he should have asked about Oscar and Naiz too.

Why is he specifically interested in Miledi?

“Does she have any other comrades? Specifically, female comrades?”

“Female comrades? No, I don’t think so. As far as I know, only those two other guys are part of her group.”

“I see. In that case, forget I ever asked anything. Return here tomorrow morning.”

Laus turned on his heel and flew up to his airship.

What a strange man... Meiru thought as she watched his receding figure. He was the only one who didn’t possess the madness that seemed to grip other devoted servants of Ehit. She was certain half of the reason negotiations had succeeded was that she’d been negotiating with him.

“Well, that’s that. I suppose I should return now.”

By manipulating the current underneath her, Meiru returned to her ship.

The next morning, Meiru left shortly before the dawn and returned long after the sun had risen above the horizon. Miledi and the pirates had both been certain that negotiations would succeed, so they were shocked when Meiru returned not with a smile, but a pale-faced grimace.

“Have you calmed down now, Meiru?”

“Yes, thank you, Chris...” Meiru’s complexion had improved a little after Chris brought her a hot drink and she had a few minutes to calm down.

“Meru-nee, what happened? Did negotiations break down?”

Meiru looked up and Miledi’s worried face and heaved a weary sigh.

“The negotiations themselves were successful. The church won’t help us with the coup d’etat since they don’t want their affiliation with Andika to become public. However, if the Melusine Pirates can overthrow Baharl on their own, they will accept the Melusine Pirates, or rather the Melusine Family as the official rulers of Andika.”

“So then what’s the problem?”

“The church knows about Diene and her powers.”

“So then...”

Miledi, Oscar, Naiz, and Chris all gulped. On the verge of tears, Meiru nodded. She forced a smile and spoke up.

“They want to take Diene for themselves. The church said that there’s no need for two people with similar powers to be in the same place.”

As they didn’t want Diene to get caught up in the coup d’etat and possibly killed, Laus was planning on heading to Andika soon and taking Diene away. Part of the church’s conditions had been that the coup d’etat be postponed until they’d successfully recovered Diene. The church hadn’t levied these conditions because they’d learned about the relationship between Meiru and Diene. In fact, Meiru was someone the church wanted at all costs. Rather than risk her wrath and waste the lives of dozens of knights to capture her and attempt to brainwash her into a loyal follower of Ehit, it was much more efficient to negotiate. There was no guarantee that they’d even be able to successfully brainwash her. In other words, they hadn’t added that condition as a way to test Meiru. They really just wanted to take Diene for themselves. However, that meant Meiru’s ultimate goal was no longer a possibility. Obtaining Andika was meaningless if Diene was no longer there.

“You couldn’t tell them Diene-chan wasn’t on the table if they wanted to negotiate with you...? No, wait, I guess that’d be a bad idea...” Oscar’s expression grew stern as he realized the problem with that.

“Correct. If the church discovers the relationship between us, my position will be compromised. They’ll be able to shackle me by holding her hostage. I’ll no longer be able to negotiate for our freedom. It would be no different than putting the cart before the horse.”

Meiru couldn’t ask to keep Diene without revealing her relationship to her either, since Laus would inevitably ask why. Once he started asking questions, it would just be a matter of time before the truth got out. At this point, Meiru only had two options. The first was to reveal her relationship with Diene to the church, and accept the restrictions that would come with it. The second was to grab Diene before the church could, and run for the rest of their lives. They

would be free, but also in constant danger.

In reality though, only one of those options was viable, but that was precisely what was causing Meiru so much anguish. Choosing the latter would mean abandoning the dream of her fellow pirates.

“Guess there’s only one thing to do. How’re we getting Diene outta Andika?” Chris asked casually. Meiru looked up at him, her eyes wide.

“How strong’s the Devault Family again?”

“How many times have we told you, Ned? They’ve got 100 elites, and 300 soldiers in total.”

“They’ve got a few guys who can use special magic too, don’t they? I coulda swore they had some guy who could transform into a beast or something.”

Ned and the others started discussing how to escape with Diene as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The rest of the pirates got pumped up as well.

“Kidnapping a princess and running away with her sounds like one hell of an adventure, boys!”

Still surprised, Meiru questioned her crew.

“You guys... Do you realize what you’re saying? You’ll lose any chance of living in peace if you do this. You’ll have to be on the run for the rest of your lives. All for the sake of one person.”

“That’s right. All for one’s the Melusine Pirates’ motto, remember?” Chris smiled at Meiru. She’d protected everyone for so long, now it was everyone’s turn to do something for her.

Of course, the Melusine Pirates did want a safe place to live. No one *wanted* to live in constant fear that the church would come down on them at any minute. Still, if doing so meant they’d condemn their boss, and the person their boss treasured most in the world to a life of servitude, then they didn’t need such trifling things as safety.

“There’s no way the church won’t use Diene to force you to do what they want. I don’t know how, but they’ve probably got a few dirty tricks up their

sleeves. No matter how it turns out, it won't go well for you two."

"Exactly. So there you have it, Meiru. We won't accept any objections. We're taking Diene and running to the ends of the earth!"

"Who knows, we might even find a new continent! Hell, we can even go from being pirates to being adventurers!"

"Sounds good to me."

Moved by Chris and the others' immediate reply, Meiru looked up at the sky. She had to, or tears would start flowing down her cheeks. As captain of a pirate crew, she couldn't cry in front of her men. Loud laughter interrupted the pirates' touching moment.

"Ahahahahahaha. I knew it, the Melusine Pirates are great! Ahahaha!"

"Miledi-chan..."

Miledi looked warmly down at Meiru and the others, a playful smile on her face. Then, she tapped her chest and shouted.

"I hope you don't mind us joining in on the fun! Rejoice, pirates! The beautiful genius mage Miledi will lend you a hand!"

Upon hearing that Miledi and the others were helping, the pirates grew even more excited. The three of them had repelled an entire knight division all on their own. Since they'd resolved to fight against the church anyway, so there was no reason to hide the fact that they were friends with the Liberators. In truth, it would have been difficult for the pirates, weakened as they were, to beat Baharl's forces on their own, so having three ancient magic users on their side was reassuring.

"I guess we're doing this," Oscar said with a shrug. He and Naiz hadn't been consulted about Miledi's decision, but it was obvious from their expressions they'd intended to help from the start.

"Miledi-chan... why? I already refused your offer."

"So what? I already told you, Meru-nee."

"Huh?"

“We’re Liberators. There’s no way we’d ignore someone who’s in need of liberating!”

“B-But... even if we rescue Diene, I won’t be able to...”

Meiru and the Melusine Pirates wouldn’t be able to join the Liberators. No matter how much Miledi aided them, they wouldn’t be able to sign their lives away to fight the gods. Meiru looked apologetic, but Miledi didn’t mind at all.

“Who cares about that!” Miledi *was* a little disappointed she wouldn’t be able to walk the same path as Meiru, but that was nowhere near enough of a reason for Miledi to stray from her ideals. She puffed her chest out and smiled proudly.

“I want you to find happiness on the path you’ve chosen to walk of your own free will, Meru-nee! May the Melusine Pirates be successful in all they do!”

The pirates let out a wild cheer. Miledi raised her hands and basked in the attention.

“Miledi-chan...”

She looked like the very incarnation of freedom to Meiru. Bound by no one, with no desire to bind others, she was beholden only to her own heart. Meiru watched blankly as Miledi galvanized her pirates. She felt a warm feeling well up within her. It was different from the love she felt for her family, but it was just as powerful. Though she couldn’t describe it, she had no doubt the two men standing next to Miledi followed her because they’d felt the same thing. And that was why she forcibly put a lid on those feelings. She then called forth an arch of water which she rode until she was sitting high above her ship. Smiling gently, she addressed her pirates.

“Listen up, my lovable pirates. I want to rescue Diene, a precious member of my family. This will likely end up being the last act of piracy we ever do. If we pull it off, we’ll lose any hope of ever living a peaceful life. We’ll be forced to wander the seas forever.”

Meiru used wind magic to amplify her voice until it echoed through the entirety of the ship. The pirates fell silent, hanging on to her every word.

“Those who do not wish to participate in this operation, speak now. As a reward for your services until this point, I shall grant you enough funds to live

comfortably and take you to Andika.”

She would give them a chance to once again claw their way to the top of a city that ran on the rule of survival of the fittest. However, not a single one of the Melusine Pirates stepped forward. They kept their eyes trained on their captain, resolve burning in their eyes. These weren’t the words they were waiting to hear. After making sure that no one was stepping forward, Meiru smiled awkwardly, and nodded to her crew. Then, she pulled out her saber and held it high. The polished blade glinted in the morning light. The sunlight reflecting off it illuminated Meiru’s face, and her troubled smile transformed into a fearless one.

“Very well, my beloved fools! I hope you’re ready to follow your captain to the bitter end!”

All of the pirates let out a massive cheer, rocking the Melusine to its foundations. Even Miledi joined in the cheering. Oscar and Naiz gave her a wry smile, then joined in the cheering themselves.

The Melusine’s flag fluttered from the mainmast, glowing in the morning sun. It felt like, for a moment, the world itself was smiling down on its strong-willed children, praying for their success.

Chapter IV: A Legendary Battle

Oscar stood in the central casino's main floor, surrounded by shimmering edifices of greed. Today, he wasn't there as a customer, but as a waiter. A corpulent man shoved his way over and grabbed a champagne glass off Oscar's tray. Oscar bowed politely, appearing unfazed by the man's rudeness. None of the casino's security guards paid Oscar any mind.

"I don't get it..." Oscar muttered as he went to adjust his glasses, only to find that they weren't there. He hadn't worn any particular disguise. He'd just taken his glasses off, and neither the patrons nor the security guards had recognized him.

"Ahaha, I knew it, O-kun. Your glasses really are your soul!" Miledi walked past, a tray of food held in her hand.

Normally, Oscar would have argued, but he just silently stared at Miledi instead. Like him, she'd snuck in as part of the staff, and so she was wearing a maid outfit as part of her disguise.

"Miledi, you belong in maid outfits. They look great on you."

"Is it just me, or are you even more impressed by this than you were with the dress?"

"The dress was fine, but this is great in its own way. The first time we came here, I thought this place's maid uniform would suit you, and I wasn't wrong. Miledi, you look amazing. That black wig's a good match for your face, too. You should wear this disguise all the time!"

"O-kun. You're starting to scare me..." Miledi backed away, creeped out by Oscar's attitude. Oscar closed in on her, taking a step forward for each one she took back.

"Hey, you two lovebirds! You realize we're here on an *infiltration* mission, right? Stop doing things that'll make you stand out!" Kyaty walked over, trying to break the two of them up. Like Miledi, she was wearing a maid outfit.

A good number of the Melusine pirates were circling around the casino, disguised either as waiters or guests. Their plan to rescue Diene was a simple one. Naiz and Meiru would teleport to the room Naiz had encountered Diene in. Once they had her, they'd teleport back out. They'd take Diene to the Melusine before anyone noticed, which was moored offshore. From there Naiz would teleport the entire ship to where the rest of Meiru's restored fleet was waiting. Then Naiz would continue teleporting the fleet as far as he could, making it difficult even for Laus' airship to catch up.

However, considering how cautious Baharl was, it was possible Diene wasn't confined to the same room each night. If that ended up being the case, Meiru would use her magic to recreate the past and track where they'd taken Diene. Unfortunately, the tunnels underneath Andika were a veritable maze. It was far too optimistic to think they'd be able to reach Diene's new location without being spotted. Which was why they'd need a diversion. If it turned out Diene wasn't in her room, Naiz would contact the others, and they'd create a ruckus in the casino, drawing away most of Baharl's security.

Incidentally, the reason Meiru had been able to sneak so many people in either as staff or as guests was because she'd had a lot of money. Sure, the core members of the Devault Family screened every potential dealer or security guard applicant, but guests could enter so long as they followed the dress code, and less important positions like wait staff could be bought with bribes. It was for that reason Kyaty was also working as a maid, and why she was also trying to get Oscar and Miledi to stop flirting.

"Kyaty, you look wonderful as well. Cat ears and a maid uniform are the ultimate combination!"

"Huh!? Wh-Wh-Where'd that come from!? Flatter me all you want, it won't earn you any favors!"

"It's not flattery. If possible, I'd like to keep staring at you forever."

"Wha!?" Kyaty's ears started twitching, and her tail swished back and forth. A deep blush spread up her face as Oscar's words sunk in. Oscar was about to continue explaining the wonders of a cat-eared maid, but was stopped by Miledi.

“Oscar. If you don’t cut it out, I’m going to get mad.”

“Sorry. I’ll stop now...” Oscar knew she was really mad when she called him by his name. She gave him a threatening smile, and he obediently stopped spazzing out over maid outfits.

Unfortunately, they’d caused a bit of a scene and had caught the attention of a middle-aged man. He scrutinized Miledi for a few minutes, then grinned wickedly.

“What a surprise! You’re that young lady who challenged me a few months ago! Fwahahaha, to think I would see you again here, and in that outfit of all things! ”

Miledi didn’t seem to recognize him, so she tilted her head quizzically, curtsied, and questioned him.

“My humblest apologies, but I believe you’re mistaking me for someone else.”

She kept her tone polite, as befitting a waitress. However, the man wasn’t fooled for a moment.

“You can change the color of your hair, but you can’t fool my eyes. I could never forget those eyes or that noble countenance. Fufufu, did your debt force you go into hiding? Is that why you’re doing menial labor now? But you know missy, you can’t just ignore your debts.”

Miledi scrunched up her face and gave Oscar a puzzled look. *Who the heck is this guy? He’s being really pushy...*

Oscar leaned close and whispered the answer she was looking for into her ear.

“He’s the old fart who cheated you the first time we came to the casino.”

The man continued talking about something or the other. He even mentioned how he hadn’t expected Miledi to vanish like that and had hired private detectives to search for her. From the sound of it, he was obsessed with her.

“You can rest easy now, though. I’ll look after you. Fear not, I have a lot of influence around these parts. Buying up your debt will be no problem for me. Fufufufu.”

“I’m sorry, but I really do believe you’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

The man ignored Miledi and reached for her hair. He was likely planning on taking her wig off. Naturally, Miledi danced out of reach. The man’s eyes narrowed dangerously in response.

“Do you want me to call security? You made an enemy out of the casino. Don’t think they’ll let you off lightly. I can use my influence to protect you, girl, but you don’t want to see what happens if you refuse my goodwill.”

Despite his words, it was clear from his lascivious gaze what he wanted to do to Miledi.

Oscar reached into his pocket to pull out an exploding dagger. But before he could, Kyaty grabbed his arm to stop him. Until Naiz and Meiru rescued Diene, they needed to be patient. Kyaty kept telling herself that as she stepped forward to try and buy time.

“Dear customer. You’re bothering our waitress. It would be impolite to cause a scene here, so if you insist on claiming that she’s the girl you think she is, can we continue this conversation somewhere more private?” Kyaty managed to keep her tone surprisingly polite. The man turned to her in surprise, as if just now realizing she was even here. After examining the smiling, white-haired, cat-eared maid for a few seconds, he grinned.

“Y-You’ve got quite the modest chest yourself. You look a bit older than I would like, but... you’re not bad, girl.”

“.....”

Oscar suddenly realized why the old man was so obsessed with Miledi. He had a fetish for small boobs. Miledi and Kyaty both glared at the man with thinly veiled disgust. Oscar took his hand off his dagger and took a few steps back.

“C-Come, my pretties. We can talk more in that room back there. Hehe!”

The man reached out for Miledi and Kyaty, a disgusting grin plastered on his face. Just then, Oscar received a message on the communication artifact he’d handed a copy of to everyone.

It’s Naiz. Diene’s not in this room. We’ve been discovered by the enemy.

Please create a diversion!

Oscar sent off a brief reply acknowledging the request, then smiled and gave Miledi a thumbs-up.

“Miledi, no need to hold back.”

That was the signal to cut loose.

“No need to be scared. I’ll take veeery good care of—”

“Die, you pervert!” Miledi fired an Onyx Blast into the man’s nether regions. There was a sickening crunch as a sphere with the force of a battering ram slammed into his testicles.

“...”

The pain was so great the man couldn’t even scream. He soundlessly flapped his lips for a few seconds, then his eyes rolled back into his head and he fell unconscious to the floor. The thud of his body hitting the carpet caught people’s attention, and quite a few turned to see what had happened.

Miledi harrumphed and pulled her wig off. Faster than the eye could follow, she tied her blonde hair into a ponytail and pulled out the communicator Oscar had given her.

“Begin the operation, you louts!”

“Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

A second later, a pile of weapons appeared in the center of the room. Oscar had summoned them from his Treasure Trove, and Miledi had sent them to their respective owners with gravity magic. They all caught them with practiced ease and ripped off their stifling uniforms. They charged the security guards, screaming wild battle cries.

In seconds, the casino was filled with the screams of their victims. Most of the rich nobles were panicking. Amidst the chaos—

“You’re that girl from back then!”

“She must be behind all this! Get her!”

A group of security guards rushed Miledi.

“O-kun, I’m counting on you!”

“Roger.”

Oscar grabbed Miledi and Kyaty by the shoulder. A second later, they were wearing their usual clothes. They’d kept them on underneath the maid uniforms, which Oscar had transferred into his Treasure Trove. And at the same time, Oscar pulled a pair of glasses out of his pocket and put them on.

“Wait, you’re the Fake Gentleman with Evil Glasses! When did you get in here!?”

“Damn you! How did you disguise yourself so perfectly!?”

“A-Are you planning on stripping me again!? P-Please, leave me my underwear at least!”

The security guards shrunk back, terrified. It appeared they’d only recognized Oscar after he put his glasses on. His eyes glazed over as he watched their reactions.

“Miledi. Jokes aside, do you really think my soul lives in a pair of glasses?”

“H-Hey, O-kun, cheer up. I know your soul’s really in you. You’re a human, I promise.”

It was rare to see Miledi so at a loss for words.

“Take this seriously, you two!” Kyaty shouted, clearly exasperated.

“Don’t falter, you maggots! You’re men, aren’t you!? What’s the big deal with having your junk exposed!? If he strips you, just capture him naked! Get that four-eyed freak!”

“Y-You’re right. Don’t look down on the Devault Family, you glasses-wearing bastard!”

The security guards changed targets from Miledi to Oscar.

“Grappling with a bunch of naked men sounds like a nightmare,” Oscar said, shaking his head all the while. Then, he summoned his umbrella from his Treasure Trove, caught it in mid-air, and swung it at the security guards. Despite it weighing more than 15 kilograms, he swung it so fast it looked like a black

blur. It struck the guard in front and sent him flying across the casino floor.

At the same time, he activated Wall Blast, blowing away the guards approaching him from the side. He then returned his umbrella to its original position, twirled it around, and hooked the handle around the ankle of a man who was charging him with a knife, hoisting him up by the foot and planting a roundhouse kick into his defenseless back. The magic built into his Onyx Boots gave his kick more power than normal, and this man was sent flying as well.

“Dammit, they’re too strong! The Fake Gentleman with Evil Glasses’ friends are strong too!”

“If you’ve got time to complain, you’ve got time to chant! Get back to casting!”

Half of the security guards rushing Oscar had been taken out by Miledi. They hadn’t even been able to scratch her, and they were starting to get desperate. A few of them managed to finish their incantations and launched the lightning spell Thunder Viper at her. Due to its erratic movements, it was difficult to dodge. However, Oscar just stepped in front of Miledi and Kyaty and unfurled his umbrella again.

“Ability Ten, Hallowed Ground, full power.”

Oscar’s ultimate barrier easily blocked the arcs of lightning, and once the bolts subsided, he went on the offense.

“Ability Six, Godstorm.”

A huge gale erupted from his umbrella. The guards casting spells were flung into the wall and lost consciousness.

“You guys are way too strong. And that umbrella can do anything. I feel useless,” Kyaty grumbled, glaring at Oscar and Miledi. She had her knives at the ready, but no one to use them on.

“We can’t have that, can we? Our goal is to cause as big of a scene as possible, so how about you go somewhere else?”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. Go on, Kyaty, show those losers the power of a cat-eared maid!”

“Don’t call me that, you idiot!”

Kyaty dashed off to find new prey with a red face. She started kneeing and slashing whoever she could find, whether they were a rich patron or one of Devault’s soldiers. Her knife cut through the tendons of dozens of feet as she raced around.

“Now then, we don’t want to cause too much damage to Andika’s leadership, or the city’ll fall apart. Make sure you hold back, O-kun!”

“That’s my line, Miledi. Try not to smear everyone on the walls, alright?”

Oscar and Miledi grinned to each other, then turned around and began fighting back-to-back. And at that exact moment, Oscar’s communicator glowed again.

It’s Naiz. We’ve got a problem. The leader of the Holy Templar Knights is here.

Everyone who received the message stiffened. The pirates had expected the knights to move today. They’d even been prepared to face them if necessary. However, they hadn’t expected them to arrive so fast. The church still wanted to keep its relationship with Andika a secret, so Meiru had assumed the knights wouldn’t bring their airship directly to the city. She was sure her pirates would arrive first.

When they started the operation, the pirates waiting out at sea still hadn’t spotted any knights. If they’d arrived during the fighting, one of Meiru’s lookouts should have spotted them. The plan had been for Miledi and Oscar to hold them off while everyone else rescued Diene.

To think their commander rushed here alone... Not only that, he even managed to find Naiz in that maze of underground tunnels. Oscar couldn’t help but be surprised. Naiz upped the sensitivity of his communicator so it could pick up the conversation between Meiru and Laus.

You pirates and any who’d join forces with you are enemies of Ehit! I shall slaughter you all here!

“Nacchan!” Miledi shouted for a portal as soon as she heard those words. And a second later, one appeared before her.

“O-kun, take care of things here!”

“You got it!” Oscar and Miledi were in perfect sync. He used his Metamorph Chains to bind the guards running toward Miledi, then shot a beam of light out of his glasses to stop the ones chanting spells. And during that brief reprieve, Miledi rushed through the portal to where Naiz and Meiru waited.

Right around the time Miledi and Oscar had started fighting the black suits, Meiru and Naiz left the dim room where Naiz had first met Diene. Meiru cast her magic, and a translucent image of Diene flanked by two bodyguards fizzled into view in front of them. She was walking quietly down the hall, her black-suited bodyguards leading the way.

“.....”

Meiru kept her eyes focused on her sister’s back, which was covered by the same emerald-green hair that she had. Six years had passed since she’d sworn to come back for Diene. Occasionally, she’d been able to capture some of Baharl’s captains when they’d gotten careless and then see how Diene was getting along using her ability to recreate their pasts. However, because of how secretive Baharl was when it came to Diene, that was pretty rare. It had been more than a year since Meiru had last caught a glimpse of Diene.

She’s grown so much... Meiru felt a twinge of loneliness. She wanted to hold Diene in her arms again.

“Don’t worry. We’ll definitely pull this off...” Naiz’s voice was quiet, but determined.

“Naiz-kun... Yes, of course. Fufu, after all, I have three ancient magic users on my side.”

“Exactly. We’re called the Liberators for a reason.”

Meiru hadn’t even realized it, but she’d been tense ever since they entered the tunnels. That was why let herself relax a little, and smiled at Naiz. But a second later, her face fell.

“I’m sorry. After this plan succeeds, I won’t be able to repay you. Not only will this huge debt go unpaid, but you’ll even end up making enemies out of a city

you could have ignored.”

“Miledi offered to help despite knowing all that. Of course, the same goes for us.”

“Yes, I know. But that’s exactly why...” Meiru thought back to the girl who’d become like a second sister to her. If everything went well and the Melusine Pirates were able to escape the Holy Templar Knights, Miledi and the others would return to the continent. It was a distinct possibility that the knights would then target Miledi’s group instead.

When Meiru had brought up that possibility Miledi had brushed it off and said, “We already fought an apostle, so a few knights are no big deal. Besides, they already know about us.” However, no matter how many assurances Miledi gave, Meiru couldn’t help but feel guilty. In prioritizing the safety of her family, she was going to be abandoning Miledi without repaying a single thing. That knowledge pained Meiru so much she had a hard time keeping her gentle smile up.

“You’re worrying too much.”

“Naiz-kun...”

“Don’t misunderstand, we’re not helping you because we want something from you. This is just what we want to do, and that’s the way of life we’ve sworn to follow.”

No one had pressured them into helping. They’d decided to stick their nose in of their own free will. Their pride wouldn’t allow them to abandon Meiru. So long as there were people who needed salvation, so long as there were people who were suffering from oppression, Miledi would continue fighting to liberate them from their unreasonable, unacceptable fate.

“Please allow us to live the way we want to.”

“Now you’re just being unfair...” Meiru gave Naiz a troubled smile. When he put it like that, what else could she do but accept his help?

Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz... Every single one of the new friends she’d made with similar powers to her own was like this. It made her chest constrict, but for different reasons than before. But before she could express her gratitude to

Naiz, she stepped on something.

“Oh my?”

“Hm?”

That something turned out to be a thin wire. A second later, the part of the wall the wire was attached to began to glow red. Meiru had tripped an alarm, it seemed.

Oh no. The moment she thought that, an alarm blared through the hallway.

“This is your fault, Naiz-kun. You shouldn’t have talked to me.”

“Are you seriously trying to pin this on me!?”

What happened to that apologetic attitude earlier?

Meiru averted her gaze, while Naiz pulled out his communicator and told Oscar and the others to start the diversion. They’d planted pirates not only in the casino, but all over the central district, and even in various other parts of the city. At Naiz’s command, they should have all started rioting, hopefully drawing away the bulk of Baharl’s men stationed here.

A group of black suits barged in from a side hallway, and Meiru repulsed them with a water whip.

“If we’re chasing her image of the past, all we can do is push forward. I need to preserve my mana to teleport us out later, so I’ll leave dealing with any enemies to you.”

“Yes, of course. Leave everything to your big sister.”

“Uh, I’m older than you...”

Meiru stuck her tongue out in a cutesy fashion and ignored his comment.

You know what, I think she actually is related to Miledi. I really want to punch that stupid face of hers right now... Naiz thought to himself.

“Don’t worry, I’m strong even on land.”

“I never said you weren’t... Well, I suppose you acting like this is still better than getting depressed.”

Meiru cracked her water whip. The black suits closing in on the duo were sent reeling. Some even got tangled up in the water and were flung into the walls or ceiling. Those that appeared from rooms closer to Meiru were sliced up by her saber or had their balls crushed by a well-placed kick. Despite how gentle she looked, Meiru was more merciless than any yakuza.

“You’re making sure not to kill them, right?”

While the plan had called for keeping as many of Baharl’s men alive as possible, these were the same people responsible for keeping Diene confined. It wouldn’t have been surprising for Meiru to let her temper get the better of her, but for now, she was keeping herself in check. Though having their balls crushed might have been a fate worse than death.

“Of course not, Naiz-kun. Even I wouldn’t be so cruel as to leave Andika without a government simply because I no longer have any desire to take it for myself. Besides...”

“Besides what?”

“Imagine what would happen if the first thing Diene sees when we’re reunited is a mountain of corpses. I want her to like me, not fear me.”

Considering how she smothered Miledi with affection as well, Naiz was starting to think Meiru might have a sister complex.

“I-I see... I think it might be too late not to come off as fearsome if you’re already crushing people’s balls...” Naiz muttered quietly as he distanced himself a little from Meiru.

It seemed the diversion was working, since the number of enemies they ran into was sparse. They continued following the image of Diene’s past for a few more minutes, when suddenly a massive tremor shook the tunnels. There was a loud, primal rumbling. Meiru and Naiz had to stop and lean against the nearby walls for balance. After a few seconds the tremor passed, and the two of them sighed in relief.

“That was a big one.”

“Indeed. I have a bad feeling about that quake. Let’s hurry.”

“Agreed. I didn’t like the sound of that one bit.”

After another two minutes, they saw Diene’s image being pushed into a room by her pair of black-suited bodyguards.

“She must be inside!” Meiru ran forward and burst into the room.

“There’s no one here...”

“They must have moved her again. Meiru, cast your spell again.”

Though she couldn’t hide her disappointment, Meiru nodded and held out her hand. The translucent image showed Diene reading for a few minutes, after which Baharl rushed into her room. He hurried over to Diene, flanked by a few of his most trusted men, and yelled at her.

“We need to move. Now!”

“Huh? Father? What’s happening?”

“There’s no time to explain! Just come with me!”

“Ah!” Diene scrunched up her face as Baharl grabbed her arm and pulled her to her feet. He then stalked out of the room, half-dragging Diene behind her.

“That bastard!”

“Calm down, Meiru.”

Meiru furrowed her brows in anger. However, this meant it was likely Diene was with Baharl now. They’d arrived too late.

“If only I hadn’t tripped the alarm...” Meiru bit her lip.

However, Naiz didn’t think this was Meiru’s fault. It had been scarcely ten minutes since the diversion had begun. Baharl had acted far too fast. And he’d been fleeing at full speed. Naiz doubted a mere alarm being tripped could cause him to panic this much.

“There’s no point in worrying about all the what-ifs. We’ve got more important things to be doing right now.”

“Yes. Yes, you’re right. I’m sorry...” Meiru mentally berated herself for losing her cool at this critical juncture. And as she was about to continue the spell to see where Baharl had taken Diene, a voice interrupted her.

“What are you doing here?”

“Ah!? When’d you get here!?”

The man standing in front of the door was none other than Laus Barn. Meiru and Naiz’s eyes widened in surprise. However, Laus simply remained expressionless and repeated himself.

“Answer the question. What are you doing here?”

“Well...” Meiru faltered, which made Laus glance over to the image of Diene that she was still powering with her mana.

“I believe I told you that I would contact you after I had secured the girl with the power of renewal magic. Our agreement was that the coup d’etat would only take place once that was completed.”

“.....”

“Could it be that from the start your true goal was the girl?”

Though he’d phrased it as a question, Laus’ voice was filled with conviction. He’d likely seen Meiru chasing after Diene instead of Baharl. That had clued Laus into the unnatural importance Meiru placed on her.

“I see... That hair, your similar powers, and the fact that you’re both from the same race. I should have realized it sooner. She’s a relative of yours, isn’t she?”

“So what if she is?”

“I have but one question for you. Do you plan on honoring the terms of our pact?” Laus knew the answer to this question too. He turned his gaze toward Naiz. The ancient magic users Meiru had claimed she’d cut ties with were assisting her in this revolt. It was obvious from their presence that Meiru hadn’t intended on keeping to their agreement. There was no excuse she could make here.

“Nope!”

If it meant losing Diene, Meiru had no need for the church’s backing. Diene was the one thing she would never give up.

The fierce glint in her eyes made clear to Laus that this freedom-loving

woman would resist to the very end. He closed his eyes, but only for a moment. And when he opened them again, he'd cleared his minds of whatever doubts he might have had.

"You pirates and any who'd join forces with you are enemies of Ehit! I shall slaughter you all here! The power of the church is inexorable! I will show you here and now that none can escape its absolute will!"

Meiru and Naiz could feel their thoughts growing muddled under the effect of Laus' piercing glare. *Oh no!* They both thought simultaneously. But a second later—

"You know, I hate those words more than anything else!" Miledi appeared from the portal Naiz had placed behind Laus. Her trademark Miledi Kick slammed into the back of Laus' head, and—

"Huh!?"

Miledi hurriedly used gravity magic to regain her balance, landing with cat-like grace.

"I see. This isn't your real body, huh? No wonder we didn't sense your approach."

Naiz was right. Laus wasn't really there. However, what they were facing was no simple illusion either. This fake Laus had a presence and even emitted mana. Furthermore, he could conceal any aspects of it, including the visual one, at will. And it could even cast dark spells that affected one's mental state.

This was the spirit magic Solid Specter. Put simply, it was a spell that let it's user have an out-of-body experience. It separated the caster's soul from their body, and let them then freely control their separated soul.

"Hmph, I see you're as sneaky as always, baldy! But you know what, I get the feeling you can't use too many attacks like that. And our magic attacks can still hurt you, can't they? Am I right? Am I?"

Grinning mischievously, Miledi stretched a hand out toward Laus.

"How perceptive. I suppose I need to use my real body to carry out your divine punishment. But first, I'll start with those foolish pirates rampaging

above ground."

"Hey, wait!" Miledi launched an Onyx Blast, but Laus vanished before it hit.

"That bald fucker! Nacchan, make me another portal! They're probably on their airship, so connect it to the sky!"

Naiz nodded and promptly deployed a portal. But as Miledi was about to walk through it, Meiru called out to her.

"Miledi-chan!"

"Doooooon't worry! I'm the strongest, cutest mage alive! You just focus on finding Diene-chan, Meru-nee!" Miledi flashed Meiru a thumbs-up, and Meiru once again had to clamp down on the feelings that began to well up within her. Once she was in control of herself, she gave Miledi a faint smile, then returned the thumbs-up.

"Beat the shit out of that baldy for me!"

"Aye aye, ma'am!" Miledi said as vanished through the portal.

"Let's go, Naiz-kun."

"O-Okay."

Meiru dashed off, and after a moment, Naiz chased after her. He felt a slight twinge of sympathy for Laus. Sure, he had a receding hairline, but he was still far from bald. *I'm still safe from being called a baldy, right?*

Around the same time, the entire central district had fallen into chaos. Not only because pirates had suddenly engaged the black-suit army in combat. Plenty of opportunistic looters had come out of the woodwork, and plenty others had a grudge against the Devault Family or the residents of the central district and had been more than happy to join in the fighting. Because of how muddled things had gotten, they were confident they'd be able to push all the blame onto the pirates later.

The riot had reached critical mass, and waves of chaos were washing over the entire island of Andika. And those waves didn't just originate from just the central district either. The island's primary port in the northern Avid District had

become another hotbed for conflict.

“Listen up, you scallywags! Don’t let a single one of those black-suited bastards reach the central district! It’s time to go wild!”

“Aye aye, first mate!”

Outside of the central district, Avid’s port was where the Devault Family’s influence was the greatest, and where a large portion of their men were stationed. They were needed to maintain and guard the Devault Family’s ships, as well as keep an eye on the outer districts. Chris and his men had engaged the black suits in the area to keep them from providing the central district with any reinforcements.

“You fuckers! Don’t think you’ll go home alive after picking a fight with the Devault Fa—”

“Full Power Vorpal Slash!”

“Whoa!? He just cut a ship in two!”

While the ship Chris had destroyed had been a caravel and not a galleon, the fact that he’d done it with a single slash left the black suits making expressions that looked like Van Gogh drew them. The reason Chris had picked a smaller ship as his target was because he didn’t want the fast caravels casting off to raid the Melusine, which was moored a short distance away. The caravel’s prow and stern tilted skyward, and the sailors on board screamed as they jumped into the sea. Another group of black suits tried to run for the central district, but were swallowed up by a massive wave of electricity. Screaming, the men fell to the ground, where they lay twitching.

“First mate! Can I go to the casino now!? I can’t hold myself back any longer!”

“If you try to leave your post, I’ll slice you in half. Do your damn job.”

“Whyyyyyy!? The eternal paradise I dreamed of is just a stone’s throw away! This is the only chance I’ll have to see Miledi-kun and Kyaty in maid outfits! Why must you do this to me!?”

“You realize that the moment the diversion began they probably changed back into their normal clothes, right?”

“No, it can’t be...”

Mania blasted another fifty of Baharl’s men as he lamented his misfortune. Inwardly, he prayed to his sworn comrade Oscar.

I beg of you, brother. Please take at least one picture of that wonderful utopia.
A short distance away, Ned dispatched a black suit with a haymaker and turned to Chris with a worried look on his face.

“First mate, we’ve got trouble! Look west!”

“Hm? Tch... They’re already here, huh?”

An airship was approaching from the western skyline. More specifically, the Holy Templar Knights’ airship.

When Andika’s residents spotted it, they started to panic. Everyone living in this city had come here to flee from the church. All of them knew what that airship represented. Despair washed over them. Though some still couldn’t believe the church had finally come to judge them, they couldn’t deny what they were seeing. A moment later, a massive earthquake rocked the island.

“Whoa!”

Even Chris, who had a monstrous sense of balance, was forced to his knees from the severity of the tremor. Quite a few ships slammed into the pier and had their hulls smashed up. The quake was accompanied by a loud rumble that sounded like the roar of some primordial beast, striking terror into the hearts of Andika’s residents. That rumble felt like a sign that the end was finally here.

“Dammit, what the hell’s going on?” Chris cursed as he got back to his feet. As soon as the tremors stopped he turned to Ned and Mania.

“Ned, Mania, give me a hand! We gotta slow down those knights!”

“You’re asking for the impossible, man!”

“If stopping them means I’ll get to witness Miledi-kun, Kyaty, Captain, and Diene-kun in maid uniforms, then I will gladly give my life for the cause!” Mania smiled ruefully, while Chris glared up at the airship.

“Sorry, but O-kun gets scary when I wear maid clothes, so I’m never wearing them again! But in return, I’ll take care of those pesky knights for you! You guys

get back to the diversion!” Miledi’s words rang out through everyone’s communicators.

Chris ignored Mania’s wails of sorrow and watched as Miledi popped out of a portal that had suddenly appeared in the air. At the same time, Laus’ knights began dropping from the airship.

“Hey, you sure you’ll be alright alone?”

“Nothing’s impossible for the great Miledi-chan!” Miledi replied confidently. The residents of Andika also saw Miledi bravely facing the church’s knights alone.

“Is that... Miledi?” Kiara whispered as she looked up at the sky from outside her inn. Marcus and Vera hugged her tight, while all of the inn’s regulars’ jaws dropped open. Before they had time to recover from their shock, Laus used the spirit magic form of telepathy to broadcast a message to all of Andika’s residents.

“We are one of the Three Pillars of Radiance, the Holy Templar Knights. The reason we are here is to pass judgment on the group of heretics known as the Melusine Pirate Crew. Any who aid them will be punished! If you value your lives, do not resist!”

On the flip side, that meant that so long as they didn’t help the Melusine Pirate Crew, none of Andika’s residents or Miledi and the others would be killed. It was Laus’ way of trying to stop them from getting in the way of his crusade. In response, Miledi stuck her middle finger into the air.



“Clean out your ears and listen up, baldy! My name is Miledi. Miledi Reisen! The leader of the organization that will destroy the church and create a world where people can live freely, the Liberators!”

Her announcement caused a stir not only among the knights, but also Andika’s residents. Each and every one of them were lawless heretics, but they were also cowards who had fled. That was why they couldn’t fathom Miledi’s words. Never before had they encountered anyone like her, who instead of running had chosen to fight against this unfair world head-on.

“Wherever you go, I will always be there to oppose you! I’ll fight against you and your shitty god to the very end!”

To the people of Andika, Miledi was a dazzlingly bright star. Even against the church’s strongest force, she had the gall to taunt them. The people down below couldn’t bear look directly at Miledi, that was how bright she was. Those who’d only seen Miledi’s silly side, such as Kiara and the regulars of her inn, were stunned speechless by this version of her.

“Come at me if you dare, puppets of god. I’ll teach you what it means to be human!”

Miledi stuck her hand out and curled her index finger backward tauntingly. Her smile was as fearless as always... No, perhaps even more so. Laus looked down at her with ice-cold eyes and swung his mace onto his shoulder.

“Very well. Prove to me that you can achieve what you claim. Prove to me that humans have the power to oppose Ehit by crushing me, Holy Templar Knight Commander Laus Barn!”

The two of them clashed, sending overwhelming waves of mana rippling across Andika.

Let us rewind time to when Naiz signaled the start of the diversion. Baharl, who was sitting in his office, heard the fighting right away.

“What’s going on!?”

One of his men checked the telestone plates connected to the casino floor

and reported to Baharl that pirates were raiding the central district.

“Pirates, now? Tch, goddamn outlaws!”

He ordered all of his men to suppress the riots as he belted on his saber and rushed out the door.

“Kelvin, take five of your best guys and follow me! And where the hell is Ace!?”

“Ace went down to the tunnels a while back. No one’s seen him since. Anyway, Boss. Where’re we goin’?”

“To Diene. Someone get me Ace!” Baharl replied with a grimace. And then, he hurried onward without waiting for a reply. His unusual haste made it clear to Kelvin and the others that this was no ordinary situation.

Using multiple shortcuts, Baharl and Kelvin arrived at Diene’s room in just a few minutes. Baharl didn’t bother to knock, and kicked the door open. Without explaining a thing, he pulled Diene to her feet and dragged her out of the room.

“Kelvin, you take Diene and leave the island. Use the emergency escape ship. Until things settle down, keep running as far west as you can. Don’t get anywhere near Andika, or the continent. You five, go with Kelvin.”

“I’ll do ask you ask, but, Boss? Don’t you think you’re getting too worked up over a few pirates?”

Though he agreed to Baharl’s request, Kelvin was understandably confused. Baharl’s emergency escape ship was located in one of the tunnels, and it exited directly underwater, after which it used a combination of magic to rise to the surface. It was his most prized vessel. If Kelvin took it, Baharl would have no escape route were anything to happen.

Baharl ignored Kelvin’s question and continued barking out orders. Surprisingly, it was Diene who interrupted his frenzied shouting.

“Father, please explain! What on earth is going on!?”

“Shut up! Just do as I say!”

Normally, this would be when Diene shrunk back and quietly apologized. But not today.

“No!” Diene wrenched her arm free from Baharl’s grasp. The strong light glimmering in her eyes gave Baharl a moment’s pause. Kelvin and the others were surprised as well. This was the first time she’d been so direct. Normally, she was always timid and quiet.

“I won’t go anywhere until you give me an explanation.”

“Know your place, brat!” Baharl slapped her with all his might. Diene had always been a small and frail girl. That slap should have been enough to send her sprawling, but though she staggered back she braced herself and regained her balance. She then glared at Baharl, her gaze so powerful it felt as though it had a physical force behind it. Baharl involuntarily gulped.

“Please explain, Father. Otherwise, even if you force me onto your boat, I’ll jump off and swim back here.”

“Goddammit. Why’s it only times like these that you act like her?”

Diene gave him a confused look. Though she still had no intention of backing down. For her, waiting here was of paramount importance. After all, this was where her sister would look when she came for her. Diene couldn’t just leave the island for no good reason. Overwhelmed by her unwavering determination, Baharl clicked his tongue a few times, then grabbed Diene’s arm again.

“I’ll explain. But we’re running out of time, so you’ll have to listen while we run.”

“Ah, o-okay...” Diene trotted behind Baharl, amazed that he’d actually caved in to her demands. Kelvin and the others couldn’t believe it either. They looked even more surprised than they had when Diene had talked back. Baharl ignored all of them and started explaining.

“Listen up, right now there’s pirates rampaging all over the city. It’s those Ghost Ship bastards.”

Diene yelped in surprise, but Baharl didn’t seem to notice.

“Those church knights still haven’t killed ’em, and now those upstart pirates are attacking us? The church sent the Holy Templar Knights’ commander himself to deal with those guys. There’s no way they couldn’t handle it. But not only did they let those pirates go, they’re also allowing them to attack us. Like

hell I'll just take that lying down!"

Kelvin's expression grew bitter.

"Does that mean the church abandoned us?"

"That's right. I dunno how those pirates managed to convince them, but it looks like the church thinks they'll have an easier time dealing with Andika if those pirates are ruling it."

"But, Boss, shouldn't we just kill those pirate fuckers? This is just an ordinary revolt, ain't it? Can't we just wipe 'em out like we did everyone else who opposed us?"

Baharl shook his head.

"It's true if we want to survive, we've gotta fight. We've gotta win, so we can show those high and mighty bastards we're more useful than those pirates. But whether we win this fight or not, one thing's for sure..." Baharl turned to Diene, who was struggling to keep up with his long stride, but listening intently all the same.

"The church wants her. And they won't take no for an answer."

"They want me?"

When Laus had first visited, he'd made it obvious the church knew of Diene's existence. He'd hinted that Baharl should offer her up to show his loyalty, but it appeared he was done with such subtle tactics. Since the church wanted Diene, they wouldn't allow her to be killed in the confusion following the pirates' raid on the city. Meaning they would without a doubt come to steal her away before the pirates reached the tunnels.

Still, they're being clumsier about this than I thought. I woulda figured they'd have stolen Diene the moment the pirates started their raid... That was the reason for Baharl's impatience. Fortunately, he'd been able to secure Diene before the church found her. It was possible there was a traitor among his ranks, or someone from the church keeping an eye on him, meaning that rather than panicking and going to Diene it might have been better to let her remain hidden and pretend as though nothing was wrong. But now that he'd come this far, he had no choice but to bet on her escaping.

“Kelvin, I’m counting on you. Run and run and run until you can’t run anymore. I dunno if that’ll be enough to escape those bastards, but this is the last request I’ll make of you. Please, keep Diene safe.”

“Boss, don’t jinx yourself like that. But don’t worry, I’ll never let the church get their mitts on her.”

Diene’s head snapped up at the words “last request.” However, they’d already arrived at their destination. In the middle of the vast, dome-shaped chamber they’d walked into was a spring. Atop the spring sat a small, expertly-crafted boat. One end of the dome opened out into sea, and the water being held at bay made up one of its walls. Before Kelvin could usher Diene in, a massive earthquake rocked the island. Cracks appeared in the dome’s ceiling, and small pebbles rained down. The party dropped to their knees and covered their heads. Surprised, Diene turned to Baharl.

“F-Father?”

“Shut up.”

Baharl had protected her instead of covering himself. After a few seconds, the shaking subsided. And then, Baharl met Diene’s confused gaze and spoke to her.

“Listen up, you better prepare yourself too. Run like your life depends on it. Don’t give up, not even at the very end. Never let yourself become a pawn of the church. No matter how bad things get, even if you have to eat dirt to survive, don’t let them steal your free will. You’re Reej’s daughter. The proud daughter of Andika’s strongest woman. Don’t lose that spirit you showed when you stood up to me! Understood?”

“A-Ah, okay. B-But, Father... does that mean...”

Does that mean you loved me and mom all along? Before she could ask, Baharl pulled her to her feet and shoved her toward the boat. Diene was conflicted. If what Baharl said was true, her sister might be on her way right now. In which case, she shouldn’t escape. She should shake off Baharl and run back to the underground tunnels. However, Baharl had protected her earlier, which was making her hesitate. As she watched Kelvin and the others ready the boat, she inwardly thought *Wait... Please wait just a little bit.* For the first time,

she resented how skilled Kelvin was at sailing.

In minutes, the ship was ready to set sail, and Baharl dragged her over to the boarding ramp. Her current indecision, and her promise with her sister whirled around in her mind, creating a vortex of emotions. Fortunately for her, an unforeseen event delayed their departure.

“Sorry I’m late!” Ace shouted, jogging up to the group.

“Ace! What took you!? I wanted you to go with Diene too!”

“Is that so?”

There was something off about Ace. His reply had been in a monotone, and he said nothing else. Furthermore, he walked right past Baharl and Diene, then blocked their way onto the ramp.

“Oi, Ace. What’re you doing? Get on already!”

Ace was supposedly one of Baharl’s most loyal subordinates, but he just stood there, looking blankly at nothing.

“Oi, Ace! What the hell’re you spacing out for!?”

Ace mumbled something in response, but it was too quiet make out. Diene couldn’t be sure, but it sounded like he’d said “As you wish.” Chills ran down her spine. She involuntarily squeezed Baharl’s hand.

The sensation brought Baharl back to his senses, and his expression grew guarded. Ace had been Baharl’s first follower, and he trusted Ace more than anyone. Logic told him he had no reason to doubt Ace, but his senses, keenly honed in the brutal shadow wars that had seen him rise to the position of Andika’s dictator, were screaming at him that something was wrong.

“Ace. I’m only gonna say it one more time. Get on the damn—”

“Boss. May I suggest we take the young lady to the ruins instead?”

“What the hell’re you saying!?”

“We should have her remove the seal. If we unleash the monster of Andika, we can eliminate both the pirates and the church with ease.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? We can’t even control that monster! We’re

more likely to get ourselves killed doing that than anything! There's a reason they call it a *monster!*"

"I see... But we can't have that."

"Ace, what the hell's gotten into you?" Baharl stepped forward to put himself between Diene and Ace. Ace was clearly acting abnormally. Sensing something was wrong, Kelvin and the others jumped off the boat and gathered around Baharl. They gave Ace a confused look and he spoke in a flat, emotionless tone.

"I simply wish to do as my god commands."

"Kelvin—" Goosebumps rose on Baharl's arms, and tried to order Kelvin to kill Ace. With that one sentence, Baharl had put it all together. Ace was the traitor who had told the church about Diene. Baharl didn't know when, but at some point he'd fallen into the church's hands. Before he could finish the rest of his sentence, he felt something hard hit his gut.

"Huh?" Diene muttered, her eyes open wide. She couldn't understand what she was seeing. There was a blood-red hand sticking out of her father's back.

"Gah!"

As Ace pulled his hand out, Baharl vomited blood and dropped to his knees.

"Damn you, Ace!" Kelvin yelled, and activated his special magic, White Claw. A moment later, his arms grew to the size of a man's torso, and white fur sprouted from his skin. He covered the thirty-centimeter long claws that grew from his nails with wind and slashed at Ace.

Ace casually swung his arm and cut Kelvin's arms off with his bare hand. Kelvin didn't even have time to be surprised. In the time it took the five black suits behind him to draw their weapons, Ace had lopped all of their heads off. All this, still using a single hand as his weapon.

"Boss... I'm sorry."

Ace stabbed Kelvin through the stomach, and the light dimmed from the young man's eyes.

"Goddammit!" Baharl rasped through gritted teeth, then turned back to Diene. She'd fallen backwards and was trembling in fear. His sharp gaze brought

her back to her senses, and she quickly tried to cast renewal magic on him and Kelvin. However—

“I was unable to release the seal on my own, meaning your powers are necessary. I cannot have you wasting them here.”

Ace grabbed Diene’s arm and gazed into her eyes. They glazed over, and she stopped struggling. He then slung her limp body over his shoulder and returned to the corridor.

“Wait... you bastard... Leave Diene... Leave my daughter alone!”

“Desist. You’re only wasting your breath.”

“Fuck you!”

Despite having a hole in his stomach, Baharl struggled to his feet and drew his saber. Ace watched him with cool eyes. A second later, Baharl was hit by a wave of dizziness. He felt as though he’d downed a gallon of vodka.

“O king of puppets. Fall into slumber and disappear together with your tiny kingdom.”

Baharl’s eyes glazed over as well, and he slumped to the ground. Ace turned around resumed walking.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

But then, he stopped when he heard a scream behind him. Surprised, he turned around. Baharl had once more gotten to his feet, his eyes blazing with determination.

“To think you would manage to resist my charm...”

Baharl swung his blade down, and Ace blocked it with his hand. Baharl felt a jolt, as though he’d just swung into a boulder. He screamed and pushed down harder, the pain of his gouged-out stomach all but forgotten.

“Andika will never fall. We’ll never let you bastards snuff out the last light of freedom. Now, give me back my daughter!” Baharl’s fierce glare pierced through Ace. However, Ace just casually glanced into Baharl’s eyes.

“How futile.”

He cut through both Baharl's ramblings, and his body. A diagonal gash appeared on Baharl's torso, and he fell to the ground, his saber cut in two.

"Dammit..."

Ace looked down at Andika's king one last time, who was slowly drowning in his own blood. He then walked off without another word.

A few minutes later, Baharl's dimming consciousness registered the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Ah—"

They were followed by a small gasp. Squeezing out the last of his strength, Baharl opened his eyes. What he saw stunned him.

"R-Reej?"

He heard another gasp. Standing in front of him was none other than Meiru. However, she looked just like Reej had in her youth. The resemblance was so uncanny that Baharl thought Reej had come to guide him to the afterlife. But a second later, he berated himself. There was no way the woman whose life he'd made miserable would come for him. It was then that he realized what the missing puzzle piece was. What the secret Reej had never told him was.

"So that's how it is..."

The woman who'd been headstrong even on her deathbed had eventually come to understand Baharl. But in the end, she'd never trusted him. That was why she'd hidden her greatest treasure from him. Of course, Baharl knew he had no right to blame her for that. It was his own fault for being so weak. Smiling in self-deprecation, Baharl barked a question at her.

"What's... your name?"

He could feel himself growing cold. He had a few minutes of life left, at best, but he still squeezed out what little strength he had left to ask that question.

Meiru stepped closer to Baharl, her face a mixture of hatred, wrath, and confusion.

"Meiru. I'm the girl whose mother you stole."

“You look... just like her.”

An avalanche emotions welled up within Meiru. *How dare he talk about my mother!* She unsheathed her saber and raised it high.

“Go ahead. Kill me... I don’t mind giving my life... to you.”

“Shut your mouth! You have nothing to give me, you monster!”

Naiz put a hand on Meiru’s shoulder in an attempt to calm her.

“Listen well... you must be wary of Ace. I leave the ruins... and Diene... to you.”

“Not another word!” Meiru couldn’t stand Baharl’s tone. It sounded as if he were worried about her, and about Diene. But as far as Meiru was concerned, Baharl was the despicable dictator who’d stolen her mother away. *How dare he try and act like a good man now that he’s on death’s door!* The only thing stopping Meiru from swinging her saber down was the fact that she’d kept her past reenactment spell going.

“...What is this?”

She watched as Baharl protected Diene from falling rocks, attempted to let her flee, was betrayed by Ace, then fought with all his might to try and rescue Diene.

“You stole my mother from me!” Meiru repeated those words, as if trying to convince herself.

“You’re a greedy, merciless, brutal, disgusting man! A beast wearing the skin of a human! Don’t try to tell me you actually had a heart all along, that you actually cared about my mother, about Diene! It’s too late to act like a good guy now!” Meiru’s screams echoed throughout the chamber, her years of pent up hatred, resentment, and anger clawing their way out of her throat.

“You ain’t wrong there...” Baharl didn’t try to deny her accusations. He closed his eyes, exhaustion washing over him. He barely even knew what he was saying anymore, but he spoke the first words that came to mind.

“I just... didn’t know how else... to live.”

He’d never been loved before, so he didn’t know how to love. He’d lived in a

world of violence, so he only knew how to govern with violence. At the end of his turbulent life, there was only one thing he understood.

“I was never able to get my hands on... the one treasure... I truly wanted...” Baharl hadn’t been able to learn all of Reej’s secrets. And he’d brought her daughters nothing but misfortune. In the end, he couldn’t even call himself a villain. That was an insult to real villains. He was just a pathetic fool who’d thought himself the biggest fish around because he hadn’t realized he was living in a pond.

“You can have it all... my family... my people... my daughter... I’m sorry I took Reej from you.”

His heartbeat began to slow. He didn’t even have the strength left to talk. His life was hanging by a rapidly unraveling thread.

“Father?” Meiru watched as past Diene looked at past Baharl with confusion. She gritted her teeth, her gentle smile nowhere to be seen. Then, she clenched her fists so tight that her nails dug into skin and drew blood. Her chance to end her hated nemesis had finally come, but she was conflicted.

“Once you’re dead, it’s over. There’s nothing left.”

“Naiz-kun?”

Though he’d remained quiet the entire time, Naiz finally spoke up. Meiru turned around to see him staring intently at her, a serious expression on his face.

“Is this really what you want?”

“I...”

Baharl’s heartbeat faded.

“I... Aaaaaaaaaaah I don’t know anymore! Tetragramaton!” Meiru called forth her ancient magic with a scream. Tetragramaton, restoration magic’s greatest recovery spell, could even bring people back from the brink of death. So long as they weren’t dead, it would heal them. Meiru’s sunset-orange mana illuminated the chamber and Baharl’s wounds vanished.

“What? This... You...” Baharl’s eyes snapped back open, and he looked

dumbfoundedly down at his healed and invigorated body. His surprise grew larger as he looked up and realized Meiru was the one who'd miraculously healed him. Of course, it wasn't the extent of Meiru's restoration powers that surprised him, but the fact that she of all people had chosen to heal him.

"I will never forgive you."

"....."

"But... Diene might. She might wish for a future with you in it. I'm simply protecting that future. You say you don't know how else to live? Don't act like such a spoiled brat. Figure one out, and face Diene again!"

The sunset glow around Baharl faded, and a moment of silence followed. He looked up, and his gaze met Meiru's. The two glared at each other for a few seconds. Baharl was the first to look away. He grinned to himself and muttered something.

"You really are just like her."

"Say that again, and I *will* kill you." Meiru was glad to know she was like her mother, but she didn't want to hear that from Baharl.

Baharl's grin grew bitter and he pushed himself to his feet and walked over to Kelvin. After confirming there was no pulse, he turned questioningly to Meiru. She shook her head, and he nodded in understanding. He knelt next to Kelvin and closed his eyes.

"Good work, ya damn brat. Wait for me in hell. I'll be there soon."

Meiru watched Baharl, not knowing what to make of him. Once he was done praying for Kelvin, Baharl stood back up, intending to guide Meiru to the ruins. But before he could—

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

A massive howl split the air. There was nothing but resentment and hatred contained in that roar, and it felt as though it tore through the island itself. Those with weak wills fell unconscious upon hearing it.

"Gah, you alright, Meiru?"

"Y-Yes. But what was that..."

Naiz shook his head in response. He didn't understand what had happened any more than she did.

"Was that... the monster of Andika?" Baharl whispered, his eyes wide. Before Meiru could ask what he meant, a huge impact hit the bottom of the island. It was so powerful it felt like the whole island rose up a few feet. More quakes rocked the island, with loud roars interspersed between each tremor. The island creaked, as if it, too, was terrified.

"Baharl, what's going on!?" Meiru shouted, her voice nervous.

"Come with me! I'll explain on the way! Diene should be there too!" Baharl dashed off. Meiru and Naiz exchanged glances, then nodded to each other and chased after him. Along the way, Baharl told them about the ruins they'd discovered by accident, the mythical beast supposedly slumbering beneath the island, and how the ruins' fresco served as its seal. The group arrived at the ruins right around the time he finished his explanation. Baharl kicked open the door to the chamber and they rushed inside. Diene lay at the foot of the ruins' altar, the fresco completed above her. Atop the altar stood Ace, his back to the group.

"Diene!" Meiru ran forward and lifted Diene up to check if she was hurt. A cursory glance showed that she'd just lost consciousness after overtaxing her mana. However, Diene's mana pool wasn't large enough to allow her to restore the fresco all in one go. Meiru guessed that Ace had done something to her to push Diene past her limits, which explained why Diene was even whiter than a sheet.

Meiru hurriedly cast restoration magic on her. Fortunately, it seemed whatever had happened to Diene was something that restoration magic could reverse.

"Mmm..."

"Diene!"

Eyelashes trembling, Diene opened her eyes. When she saw Meiru her eyes widened in surprise. She stroked Meiru's cheek, as if trying to make sure she was really there. Meiru softly grasped Diene's hand and hugged her sister close. It was then that Diene finally accepted that she wasn't seeing things.

“Nee-sama! Nee-sama!”

Joy welled up within Diene and she hugged Meiru back. Meiru squeezed Diene tight, trying to convey years’ worth of emotion in a single gesture.

“I see. So you were saved by the restoration magic user.”

Like before, Ace’s voice was utterly devoid of emotion. Meiru glared up at him, Diene still in her arms. And at the same time, Baharl shouted at him.

“I don’t have time to deal with your traitorous ass. You guys, hurry up and destroy this room! We might be able to reseal the beast!”

Naiz acted immediately. He raised his hand to blast the fresco with a series of spatial bombs. But before he could get his attack off, Ace jumped at him.

“Wha— Gaaah!”

Ace jabbed Naiz in the gut, sending him flying. He crashed into the wall with such force that the air was driven from his lungs. If he hadn’t erected a spatial barrier at the last second, Ace’s attack would have pierced right through him.

“Naiz-kun!”

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that!” Meiru shot out her shrapnel whip, but Ace jumped behind her faster than her eyes could follow and launched a kick at her back. She managed to cover Diene in time, but the two of them were sent flying from the force of the blow. Baharl caught the two of them before they crashed into the wall, minimizing the damage. Unfortunately, that meant he ended up absorbing the impact instead, and a few of his ribs cracked.

“You who wish to resist. You who live in a false paradise. You who wander the seas. And you who wish to annihilate them all. When all of you come together, the age-old disaster shall awaken...” Ace pulled a hooded black robe out of seemingly nowhere and wrapped it around himself as he walked over to the altar.

Both Meiru and Naiz had been momentarily stunned by his unexpected display of power. Once he reached the altar, Ace looked over his shoulder at them.

“The time is nigh. The monster of Andika, the ancient beast that was once

sealed away by the power of the island, the ruler of the sea, shall be revived. Come, Divine Beast Leviathan!”

Another roar rang out, this one far louder than all the others. It shook the island to its core. Even those who were still underground could tell that the ancient monster had revived.

“Andika is the seal restraining the divine beast, and it is the power of the divine beast that keeps Andika afloat. With the seal removed, the island will sink to the depths of the sea.”

The deep rumbling of the island proved that Ace’s claims were no bluff. Andika had begun the slow descent to its doom.

“Now, pitiful humans. Continue to fight against each other upon this crumbling world of yours. Show me the desperate struggle of man...” Ace condensed a massive amount of mana into his right hand as he said that.

“I won’t let you!”

“You won’t escape us!”

Naiz unleashed a spatial blast while Meiru launched a spear of water at Ace. However, Ace erected a barrier that blocked both spells. It was a glowing, silver barrier that looked nothing like any of the spells Meiru recognized.

“Wait... The color of your mana. You’re—”

“Everything is for the sake of my lord...” Ace ignored Naiz’s surprised shout and loosed a burst of light from his right hand. The light drilled into the wall, leaving a human-shaped hole in the fresco. The hole blew all the way to the sea, and water started rushing in, despite the fact that Andika’s unique properties should have prevented that. The speed of the water caused a flash flood through the tunnels, sweeping everything away. However, Ace seemed unaffected by the water pressure, and he started walking against the current.

“For now, we have to retreat to the surface!”

Baharl and Meiru were too shocked by the powers Ace had displayed to react, so Naiz ran over to them and teleported the whole group aboveground.

Up in the air, Miledi was still dueling Laus and his knights. The course of the battle had taken them eastward, and they were now above Andika's shoreline. Before, Laus had been able to fight on equal ground with Miledi, but this time he was being pushed back, even with his knights' help. In fact, a few of them had already been killed. The reason for this discrepancy was simple. They were fighting on land now. Here, Miledi's gravity magic exhibited its full potential. And that wasn't all...

"What frightening talent..." Laus muttered, unable to hide his amazement. Neither his favorite spell, Soul Shock, nor his Phantom had any effect on Miledi anymore. Furthermore, Miledi was able to counteract each and every one of his mind-altering dark spells. Her ability to analyze spells and choose the perfect response every time, along with the speed at which she was able to construct different types of magic, was on a completely different level than his own.

"You godforsaken monster!" Araym yelled, his breathing ragged. The rest of the knights were thinking the same thing. There'd been 80 of them against a single opponent. And yet, Miledi had managed to kill 10 of them thus far. Laus couldn't even afford to send a detached unit to stop the pirates.

"Haaah... Haaah... Now that's just rude! How can you call such a pretty girl a monster? Well, how does it feel, knights? You said all those high-and-mighty things about how you'd pass judgment on us, but you're getting beat by one little girl! Aren't you supposed to be the church's strongest force? Hey, tell me, how does it feel? Hey, hey, say something!"

"You biiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiitch!"

"Fool! Stay back!"

One of the younger knights was unable to keep his temper in check and he rushed forward, ignoring Laus' warning. The moment he closed in on Miledi, a reverse gravity field enveloped him and flung him up into the air. At the same time, a razor-sharp blade of wind fell on him like a guillotine. Disoriented by the sudden shift in his gravity, the knight wasn't able to react in time and the blade of wind mercilessly lopped his head off.

Miledi's skill with magic was unparalleled. The knights grimaced and faltered at the sight.

“Calm yourselves. Her mana will run out eventually. Until then, focus on deflecting and evading her attacks. Utilize our numbers to exhaust her.”

Inwardly, Miledi clicked her tongue. Laus had reasserted control over his troops faster than she’d hoped. As she surveyed the knights, she felt a drop of water on her cheek.

“Rain?”

She’d been so focused on her battle that she hadn’t even noticed that the initially clear sky had become full of dark clouds. They spread across the horizon at an unnatural rate. It was a guerilla storm. Miledi frowned. She had a bad feeling about this. A second later, there was a thunderous boom.

“Whoa, wh-what was that!?”

Right after that, a deafening howl split the air. The soul-shaking roar reminded Miledi of Laus’ Soul Shock. As the howl faded away, the clouds burst open, dumping a torrent onto the earth below. Lightning forked across the sky, a powerful gale begin to blow, and waves dozens of feet high rose up. That wasn’t all. As Miledi looked down at the island, she noticed something strange.

“Huh? Is the water level rising?”

But her guess was off. Laus’ eyes went wide, and he corrected her.

“No, the island... is sinking!”

“Wh-What, why!?”

Confused, Miledi attempted to contact her comrades. But before she could, the source of the island’s problems revealed itself.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

With a piercing cry, something rose from within the sea. The first thing Miledi saw were the razor-sharp fins jutting out of its back. Each one was the size of a small hill, and they rose in and out of the sea as the creature swam. It was then that Miledi realized she was looking at a living creature. *But that’s impossible!* Whatever that was, it was far too big to be alive.

Wh-What is that...”

“What is the meaning of this? What just happened?”

Miledi and Laus forgot their battle and gazed dumbly at the ocean. They couldn’t even tell where the creature began and where it ended. At the very least, it was longer than Andika’s western shoreline. Meaning it had to be 1000 meters long, minimum. Its body broached the surface of the water for a few seconds, revealing that it was thicker in diameter than a galleon.

As everyone watched in amazement, the Divine Beast reared its head. It looked as though a mountain was rising out of the ocean. Water cascaded from its body, creating a dozen waterfalls originating at the crown of its head. Once the water fell away, Miledi realized its head alone was three hundred meters long.

The massive creature was covered in black, metallic scales and looked vaguely serpentine. Each of its scales was the size of a tower shield, and its mouth was filled with two layers of razor-sharp fangs. Its entire body was wreathed in a faint, dark red aura, and its eyes glimmered with a hellish crimson light. One of its massive eyes swiveled over to Andika, observing the island as a whole.

Everyone watching could tell instinctively that the serpent’s gaze was filled with overwhelming malice. It despised Andika for keeping it sealed this long.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The serpent roared its defiance. This time, the roar was accompanied with a dark red shockwave. As the wave passed over Andika, Miledi shivered. But to her surprise, the wave had no adverse effects on the people it touched. They just continued watching the serpent, dumbfounded.

However, a second later, Miledi realized what the aura had done. The island sank another few feet further into the water. The sea had bared its fangs, and it wanted to swallow Andika whole.

“No... No... This can’t be happening... Noooooooooo!”

If the island vanished, thousands would die. Miledi screamed in despair and shot off toward the island, her mind refusing to accept the reality before her. Laus shouted something as well, but Miledi was no longer paying attention to him. The only thing on her mind was figuring out a way to save those people.

She fell toward the center of the island, burning mana faster than she ever had before. Sky blue mana surrounded her, making her look like a comet streaking through the sky.

“Asura!”

Asura was a spell that created a wide-area gravity field. Until now, she’d only been able to create unidirectional gravity fields, but this time she created a reverse field that spread out horizontally in every direction. Her sky-blue mana enveloped the entire island.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Screaming, Miledi spread her arms wide, struggling with all her might to hold the spell together. A dark sphere appeared around Miledi, and a pillar of mana rose above her, connecting the heavens and the earth. It shot up so far that it parted the clouds. Eyes bloodshot, veins bulging, Miledi gritted her teeth so hard they cracked.

She poured everything, body and soul, into this one spell. Impossible as it sounded, she was trying to raise the island all on her own. A lone girl was fighting the ocean itself.

Impossible. This cannot be. No human should be capable of such a feat... Laus thought as he caught up to her.

“Impossible... The sinking has slowed down?”

Andika should have sunk completely in just a few minutes. But as Laus watched, it began to slow its descent.

“Laus-sama! The sea is...” Araym muttered in awe. Laus’ jaw dropped open as well. A wall of seawater swirled around the island. An invisible force was preventing more water from flooding the various holes in it. Miledi’s ironclad will to keep every single one of Andika’s citizens safe was making the impossible possible.

“How can this be...” Laus was at a loss for words. He unconsciously brought a hand up to his chest. Though he didn’t know what compelled him to do so, he felt as though a small fire had been lit in his previously frozen heart.

“Laus-sama, this is our chance! Right now we can pass Ehit’s judgment on that heretical monster!”

“What did you say?” Laus reflexively thundered.

However, a second later he remembered that doing so was the correct course of action for a templar knight. Turning back, he could see the fanatical light in his subordinates eyes.

“Yes. Yes, you’re absolutely right...” Laus once again buried his thoughts and emotions, then brandished his mace at Miledi.

Her pupils were dilated. It was clear she was so focused on the task at hand that she wasn’t paying attention to her surroundings. Killing her now would be a simple task. Even if that meant hastening Andika’s demise, it was clear her miraculous feat wouldn’t last much longer. In truth, Miledi’s mana was already running out, and Andika was starting to sink once more. Telling himself that it made no difference either way, Laus stepped forward. He swung his mace downward, intent on destroying both Miledi and Andika’s future.

“I won’t let you lay one finger on her!”

A black blur jumped in front of Miledi right in the nick of time. It was Oscar, and he unfurled his black umbrella and stopped Laus’ mace. At the same time, he took out his enchanted daggers and threw them at Laus from point-blank range. The knight commander was forced to leap out of the way.

“Are you people insane!? What do you think you’re doing in the middle of a crisis like this!?” Oscar screamed. He covered Miledi as he glared furiously at the knights. Laus and the knights responded in the way Oscar had, in some respects, been expecting.

“We are simply completing our holy mission. What is so strange about that?”

“From the start, Andika was a containment settlement for heretics. Its destruction is no great loss.”

It was clear from their tone that human life was worth nothing to them. Before Oscar could reply, another howl ripped through the air. He glanced over at the divine beast, and saw it’s maw was open wide. The island wasn’t sinking as fast as it wanted, and that had irked it.

“Oh shit,” Oscar muttered.

“Men, evacu—”

There was a dark red flash, and jets of water shot toward the combatants faster than the eye could follow. Despite the size of the serpent’s mouth, the jets it shot out were both small and precise. They cut through the air, aiming for the spot Miledi was in. Oscar instantly deployed his umbrella’s Hallowed Ground. There was the sound of shattering glass, and Oscar felt a huge impact jar his arms.

“Gaaah! It destroyed my focused Hallowed Ground with a single blow!?”

Had Oscar’s umbrella not been made of the hardest alloy in existence, the serpent’s water jet would have cleaved right through him. His expression stiffened as he looked up and saw the triple trident towers, the symbol of Andika, crumble to the ground.

“Impossible... It shredded through our armor like it was paper...”

The knights hadn’t come out unscathed either. A full third of their number had been sliced in half.

“O... eva... every...”

“Miledi!”

Miledi’s voice was faint, but Oscar could tell she was trying to say “evacuate everyone.” She wouldn’t be able to hold the island much longer. But in this situation, evacuating anyone would be difficult. The divine beast launched its second wave of attacks. Oscar once again deployed his Hallowed Ground, pouring even more mana into it.

“Have the airship fall back! All men, deploy as many barriers as possible!”

At Laus’ command, the knights deployed as many barriers as they could, moving with admirable haste. The serpent unleashed its water breath attack again. But this time, it fired multiple waves in rapid succession. Jets of water pounded on Oscar’s barrier, an endless stream of attacks that seemed as if they’d continue forever.

“Gaaah! I can’t keep this up much longer!” Oscar gritted his teeth,

desperately protecting Miledi with everything he had. Her eyes were slowly beginning to glaze over, meaning that she was about lose consciousness from mana deprivation.

“Miledi-chan!”

The one who saved them from their predicament was none other than Miledi’s self-styled big sister. Meiru fashioned herself a current out of the falling rain and rode it over to Miledi’s side.

“Meru...”

“Don’t speak! Just focus on keeping your spell going for as long as you can! Transient Infinity!” Meiru’s sunset-orange mana surrounded the black sphere Miledi was in, making it look like she was in the center of a solar eclipse. Transient Infinity was a spell that preserved something in its current or original state.

“This should keep your spell going for a while longer...” Meiru said as she pulled Miledi out of her sphere and hugged her close. Barely conscious, Miledi let herself be pulled out without any resistance. Meiru quickly cast restoration magic on her to restore her mana.

“Mmm... Meru-nee! We have to evacuate everyone!”

“We already have a plan for that!”

Just then, as if to support her words, Baharl’s voice echoed across the island.

“This is a message from Baharl Devault to all residents of Andika! The island’s sinking into the sea. There’s not much time left! If you don’t wanna die, run either to the nearest port, or the palace courtyard! If you see an oval membrane anywhere, jump into it! Get moving, you louts!”

Baharl was using a magic device to amplify his voice. As he finished his speech, massive portals opened up in places across the city, starting with the northern port.

Naiz was running around Andika, creating gates that connected to the main port. His plan was to teleport everyone onto ships, then teleport the ships to safety. The members of the Devault Family stationed at various outposts in the

outer districts had already begun guiding the residents.

Dark clouds covered the sky, fierce winds and torrential rains buffeted the island, thunder rumbled in the background, and the divine beast's roars shook the air itself. In the midst of it all was an island sitting in a giant hole in the sea, slowly sinking to the bottom. The wall of water towering over the island grew larger with each passing second, heralding the coming end of the world.

However, despite the overwhelming despair they faced, the people fought on. Through it all, they'd found the strength to continue. Despite being a city of criminals and outlaws, Andika's residents held their hands out to each other, the strong helping the weak. Those who were physically fit carried the children, elderly, and the impaired. Many even checked inside houses to make sure no one was left behind. The reason for their newfound hope was the girl who'd shot through the sky a few moments earlier. The azure comet who'd lamented their plight. The dazzling hero who'd connected the sky and earth.

All of Andika's residents knew instinctively that that girl had protected them. That she wanted them to live. Even now, her black sphere floated in the air, defying fate. That, the portals appearing all across the city, and Baharl's desperate efforts were all part of an attempt to save Andika's people. The city's residents had been abandoned by the world and exiled to this godforsaken rock in the middle of nowhere, but even then there were still people out there who cared about them. Knowing that, they couldn't bring themselves to sit idly by. They couldn't just give up when others were fighting for them. Rather than wallow in despair, they chose to fight. Just like the girl who'd shone brighter than the sun in this dark storm. Galvanized, the people of Andika rose up.

"Ah..." Miledi choked up with emotion as she watched Andika's people take their fate into their own hands, but she knew this wasn't the time to be getting all sappy.

"Gaaah!" Oscar screamed in pain as he was blown backward.

"O-kun!" Miledi and Meiru caught him together, cushioning the impact. It appeared he'd just barely been able to defend against the divine beast's wave of breath attacks. His Black Umbrella was full of holes, and his chest had been battered. Were it not for his Ebony Coat, the Leviathan's attacks would have

killed him.

Meiru quickly cast restoration magic on him, reversing his injuries.

“Thanks, Meiru. How’s Diene-chan?”

“She’s safe. Thank you for protecting us, Oscar-kun. But we still have to—” Meiru glanced over at the serpent, which was continuing its irritated howling. Miledi and Oscar glanced over to it as well, and Miledi finished Meiru’s sentence.

“Beat the shit out of that oversized snake.”

“Monster hunting isn’t my strong suit. I’ll take care of our uninvited guests.”

Oscar jerked his head toward Laus and the other knights as he repaired his umbrella using transmutation. Despite the situation, or perhaps because of it, the knights were still eager to fight. To them, this was the best opportunity they would have to pass down divine punishment. Though at this point, their numbers had been whittled down to barely thirty. They truly were insane zealots. If it meant fulfilling Ehit’s will, they didn’t mind becoming martyrs. In fact, they considered it an honor.

“You two go, Miledi, Meiru!”

“Gotcha! Take care of things here for us, O-kun!”

“We’re counting on you, Oscar-kun.”

Miledi and Meiru shot off toward the divine beast. The knights attempted to chase after them, but Oscar blocked their path.

“Sorry guys, road’s closed.”

“Are you a Liberator as well?” Laus asked.

“That’s right. I’m Oscar. Oscar Orcus, the Liberator. I’m just your average Synergist. Actually no, that’s not quite right...” Oscar shook his head. Then, he adjusted his glasses and flashed Laus a fearless smile.

“I’m a Synergist who’s stronger than the strongest Holy Templar Knight.”

“Let us see you prove that claim.”

“Gladly. I’ll prove it to you by beating you all senseless. Come at me, if you

dare!” Oscar said as he gestured provocatively at the knights, just as Miledi had done a while back.

Laus started things off with a Soul Shock. Invisible shockwaves of magic assailed Oscar.

“Sorry, but I’ve already seen through that one!” Oscar frowned as the magic hit him, but that was all. He maintained his focus and calmly deployed a Hallowed Barrier to guard against Araym’s Divine Blaze which followed right after. After the fight on Meiru’s island, he’d heard about Laus’ magic’s properties from Miledi, and enhanced his coat to defend against it. As Araym’s flames cleared, Oscar saw Laus bearing down on him. Laus swung his mace with what he believed was enough force to smash through Oscar’s barrier, but his attack never connected.

“What!?”

A figure clad head to toe in black armor appeared out of nowhere and blocked Laus’ attack with its huge tower shield. Laus looked up in surprise. The figure swung its huge greatsword down, forcing Laus to retreat. Boutice, who’d circled around Oscar to attack him from behind, was sent flying by a second black-clad figure which was identical to the first. Thanks to his Rampart, he’d avoided taking damage, but he was still shaken.

“Are those golems!?”

“Astute observation...” Oscar wiggled the fingers on his left hand as he said that. He was wearing his Sable Glove, the artifact he’d originally used to control a series of super-strong metal wires. Right now, those wires were attached to the two figures that had appeared. They were another one of his artifacts, the Shadow Knights. They were golems he controlled by transferring mana through his threads. The golems were made of pure azantium, and had been enchanted with nearly as many spells as his umbrella.

The two Shadow Knights arrayed themselves protectively around Oscar, floating in the sky using the same ability that his Onyx Boots did. However, a deluge of arrows weaved between the two guardians and headed straight for Oscar.

“I suppose I have to fight numbers with numbers. Sorry, but your arrows

won’t be following me!” Oscar summoned a countless number of his enchanted daggers and sent them flying toward the arrows.

“I can see right through you.”

“I believe that’s my line.”

Apri dodged the barrage and closed in on Oscar. She used her Revelation to read his moves and swung her thin sword with pinpoint accuracy. However, the sleeve of Oscar’s coat moved on its own to block Apri’s strike. It didn’t stop there, either.

“What was your favorite line? Oh yes, even if you can see my moves, it’s pointless...” Oscar manipulated his glove, sending a net of wires at Apri. She dodged out of the way, but in doing so ended up walking right into the lightning strike Oscar shot out of his umbrella.

“Fools, don’t let your guards down!”

“My humblest apologies, Commander!”

Laus dashed over just in time to block the lightning strike with his mace. The knights then moved at once. Some tried to surround Oscar, others attempted to use their special magic on him, while yet others ignored him and tried to chase after Miledi.

Oscar’s shadow knights blocked most of the attacks while he launched his own counteroffensive with his umbrella, and used his wires to keep the knights at bay. On top of that, he sent a barrage of enchanted daggers after the knights who tried to approach Miledi, forcing them back.

“You know, your arrows are really starting to get annoying.”

“Wha— Impossible.” Brigade commander Lelaie stiffened in fear, her bowstring still drawn. The reason for her unusual hesitation was the array of blades Oscar had summoned above him. Instead of enchanted daggers, there were enchanted swords.

Those were another one of his new artifacts, Mage Blades. Naturally, the swords were far more powerful than the throwing knives he’d been using earlier. He pointed all of the swords at Lelaie and let them loose.

“Get out of there, Lelaie!”

Unfortunately, Laus’ warning was too late. Oscar’s daggers already possessed terrifying destructive power, but these swords were easily ten times their size.

“Not today!” Boutice jumped in front of Lelaie and activated his Rampart. Oscar’s newest weapons slammed into the Holy Templar Knights’ greatest defender. There was a resounding explosion that sent the nearby raindrops flying and illuminated the clouds high above.

“Gah...”

The winds blew away the smoke of the explosion, revealing a barely-conscious Boutice. His shield and armor had been obliterated, and he was covered in blood. Oscar wasn’t sure whether to be impressed that he’d managed to shatter the church’s strongest shield, or depressed that the weapons he’d developed to take down apostles hadn’t even been able to kill a human.

“I suppose that means there’s still room for improvement...” Oscar pointed the ferrule of his umbrella at Boutice and fired his sniper arrow. It shot out with a hiss and pierced Boutice’s heart. Then, to make extra sure he was dead, it sent a blast of electricity through his body. His punctured heart went into cardiac arrest, and Boutice plummeted to the ground.

“Men, assume Oscar Orcus is as formidable a foe as Miledi Reisen!” Laus shouted.

Oscar didn’t possess the godlike talent for magic that Miledi had, nor was his ancient magic capable of unleashing incredibly powerful attacks. However, he more than made up for those shortcomings with his inventiveness and craftsmanship. Oscar Orcus was a monster too, just a different kind than Miledi Reisen.

“Things are about to get a lot more tough...” Despite how confident Oscar was acting, he was sweating inside. It had been a stroke of luck that he’d been able to take down a brigade commander while Laus and the others had still underestimated him. However, he had used up all of his Mage Blades, exhausting one of his trump cards. Furthermore, he hadn’t had time to replenish his supply of enchanted daggers, so he couldn’t use too many more.

And his Shadow Knights were still prototypes, as well.

These knights were a group even Miledi had had trouble with. If he let his guard down for even a moment, Oscar knew he'd be killed. He steeled himself and swept his gaze over the remaining knights. Just as the battle was about to resume—

"Vorpal Slash!"

"You're mine!"

A powerful shockwave cut through the deluge while one of the knights who'd circled behind Oscar fell to the ground, a knife sticking out of the back of his head.

"Chris! Kyaty!"

"Don't forget about us!"

Ned flew up behind Oscar, along with the Melusine Pirate Crew's best fighters. Oscar had given them all pairs of Onyx Boots, which had proven to be a smart choice. Among them was one person he hadn't expected to see though.

"You're..."

"Hello, Oscar-sama. My name is Diene. Leave healing to me!"

One of the pirates was carrying Diene, but it was clear from the look in her eyes that she was the one who'd asked to come. Though Diene's uses of her special magic were limited, she was also skilled in normal healing spells. While her assistance was certainly appreciated, Oscar didn't want to let the girl Meiru had worked so hard to protect fight on the front lines.

"I won't just sit back and watch while the people who saved Nee-sama's life fight for me!" Diene created her own foothold in the air and dropped onto it as she said that. When he saw the deep resolve in her eyes, Oscar was struck by how similar Diene was to Meiru.

"Rest easy, comrade. I will protect Diene-kun with my life. I still need to see her in a maid outfit, after all!" Mania smiled fearlessly. The other pirates also gathered protectively around Diene.

"We can argue about this later! Right now we've gotta get rid of these knights

so we can go help Meiru!”

“Kyaty’s right, Oscar. Don’t worry, if Meiru gets angry about this, I’ll take responsibility as the crew’s first mate.”

“I can’t believe you guys... Fine. Diene-chan, I’ll be counting on you to heal everyone.”

“Okay!”

Thanks to the trustworthy allies who’d come to his aid, Oscar was no longer worried. On the other hand, the knights seemed even more enraged. They glared at the pirates, eyes full of unbridled hatred.

“So what if there’s more of you? We’ll just purge you all at once!”

Their brief intermission ended, and round two began. Oscar and the knights’ battle raged on through the thunder, the wind, and the rain. Unfortunately, the pirates weren’t strong enough to take on even normal knights one on one, and naturally they couldn’t hold a candle to the knights’ officers. However, no matter how many times they were beaten down to the brink of death, Diene healed them back up. She didn’t have the overwhelming power of restoration magic that Meiru did, but she was still a first-rate healer.

Diene was also fully aware that the knights needed to capture her alive, and so didn’t hesitate to use herself as a hostage. Whenever one of the knights tried to launch a finishing move, she’d put herself in harm’s way, forcing them to stop. Standing up to her father had seemingly given her the guts to do anything.

Meanwhile, Oscar handled Laus on his own. As he fought, he glanced back at Diene and smiled to himself.

“I can definitely see how they’re related now...”

That fearless smile suited Diene far better than a timid frown. To Oscar’s surprise, his mutterings elicited a question from Laus.

“There is one thing I would like to ask you.”

Both Oscar and Laus were panting heavily, their equipment damaged and torn. The island had already sunk a hundred meters into the ocean, the wall of water surrounding it threatening to crash over everything at any minute.

Amidst the roaring storm, Oscar could still hear the shouts of people as they struggled to escape. It was probably because all the background noise made it impossible for anyone else to overhear that Laus was willing to give voice to the thoughts he'd buried deep in his heart.

"'A world where people can finally be free.' Was that a phrase that Miledi Reisen invented on her own?"

Oscar's breath caught in his throat. That was the last thing he'd expected Laus to ask about. But despise his confusion, Oscar felt that this wasn't a question he should deflect. It was one he needed to answer honestly. Though Laus was his sworn enemy, something inside Oscar told him this was important to answer honestly.

"No. Miledi inherited those words from the woman who saved her from darkness, a woman who was like an older sister to her."

"Someone who was like an older sister to her? Her name! What was her name!?"

"Belta. Belta Lievre."

"Ah...!" Laus' eyes widened in surprise. The strength drained from his body and let his mace hang limply by his side. Though Oscar had sensed there was something deeper behind Laus' question, he hadn't expected a reaction like this.

"You said inherited, correct? Does that mean..."

"Yeah. She's dead."

"I see... I understand now... That girl... inherited..." Laus had lost all will to fight. Before Oscar could ask what Laus meant, a maelstrom of mana rippled through the air. That sky-blue glow unmistakably belonged to Miledi.

"O-kun! Nacchan! A little help would be appreciated!" Miledi's strained voice rang out from their communicators. Oscar grinned fearlessly as he listened to what she needed. There was no denying a request from their valiant leader. Besides, if Miledi needed help, Oscar would come without fail.

"Naiz, warp me!"

“You got it!” Naiz responded instantly, his thoughts in perfect sync with Oscar’s.

“Laus Barn, if you care at all for the future of humanity, then let us go just this once!”

A portal appeared beside Oscar. He headed toward it without a backward glance. Even if there was no reply, Oscar was confident Laus Barn would not give chase.

Let us return to a few moments ago. Miledi and Meiru floated high above the sinking island of Andika, struggling to keep the divine beast at bay.

“You little— Azure Javelin!” Azure Javelin was another one of Miledi’s composite spells. She’d used gravity magic to compress three Azure Blazes into a single sharpened lance. Her blazing lance slammed into the lower part of the serpent’s head, but despite being one of Miledi’s most powerful spells, it did little more than scratch its scales. The divine beast howled in response and sent a barrage of thunder at Miledi.

“Miledi-chan!” Meiru deployed a barrier of clear water above Miledi. The lightning was conducted through the barrier and redirected into the sea.

“Meru-nee! What should I do!? My attacks aren’t working!”

“If only we had Naiz-kun’s Void Shatter...” Meiru knew she was asking for the impossible. Naiz was still needed down below to help all the residents evacuate. And Miledi and Meiru couldn’t go down to help the evacuation because if they left the serpent alone it’d use its full strength to crush the island. While Meiru was lamenting what they didn’t have, the divine beast opened its jaw. The inside of its mouth began to glow a bright crimson.

“Oh shit!”

“Oh my...”

Miledi put down her strongest barrier. A second later, her entire world turned red as the serpent breathed a blistering wave of fire. The rain around them evaporated from the heat. The serpent had used this breath on them before. Last time, Miledi had realized a Spatial Severance alone wasn’t enough to

absorb all of the flames. That was why she used a barrier this time, which Meiru restored every time it got close to breaking.

“Ugh, my mana’s...”

“Don’t worry, I can take care of that too.”

An orange glow enveloped Miledi, rejuvenating her mana and stamina.

“Thanks, Meru-nee! Man, this is a lot easier with a healer around.”

“Fufu, glad to be of service. But unfortunately, I’m nearing my limits as well.”

As the serpent’s breath attack ended, Meiru downed her final mana potion. A moment later, the clouds above began to swirl. The wind around Miledi and Meiru picked up until it transformed into a whirlwind so powerful it started sucking up seawater.

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that.”

Unwilling to be outdone in the realm of water manipulation, Meiru attempted to dispel the hurricane that had formed around them. Miledi let Meiru take care of the tornado and prepared to use her final trump card.

“I’m about to dispel it, Miledi-chan. Are you ready?”

“Of course. I’ll end it with this! Event Horizon!”

Meiru stilled the water’s current, destroying the tornado. Miledi then stepped forward, her body covered in a blue aura.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

A black sphere covered the divine beast’s head. Miledi’s spell had created a pseudo-black hole that had enough pressure at its center to crush anything. For the first time since awakening, the serpent felt pain. It let out an agonized screech as its eyeballs popped and the scales on its head began to crack.

“It’s working!” Miledi gritted her teeth as her mana drained away at a tremendous rate. However, she was confident if she could keep it up, she’d be able to end the fight.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaawr!”

But a second later, a dark red wave of mana blasted out from the serpent.

The sphere surrounding it was blown away by the force of the mana, and a huge crater formed in the sea around it. Not only that, it blasted a hole through the clouds and sent Miledi and Meiru flying. Both of them coughed up blood as they were flung backwards, their internal organs damaged. Though Meiru healed the physical damage right away with her restoration magic, both of them were still mentally reeling.

"You've gotta be kidding me. It destroyed my Event Horizon with brute force!"

A single ray of light shone down from the hole in the clouds. Lit by the sun, the serpent began covering itself with seawater. A second later, its crushed eyes and scales began to repair themselves.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

It lifted its head toward the skies and roared again. Looking at it in the light, it really did seem like a mythical creature from the age of the gods.

"Meru-nee. Do you think your ability to revive past wounds will work on that thing?"

"If you're referring to damage from centuries past and not the damage you just dealt to it, I'm afraid that's impossible."

The further back in time Meiru went with that spell, the more mana it cost. And the Leviathan had been sealed for centuries. While Meiru's mana pool was vast, it wasn't infinite.

"Figures. They must have weakened it a lot when they sealed it, but I guess reviving those wounds'll be impossible. So, how do we beat it?"

Miledi watched as the hole in the clouds closed up and the serpent unleashed a barrage of lightning bolts at them. It also conjured a series of tornadoes, which it used to box the pair in.

"Whoa! Heavensfall!"

"Torrential Bulwark!"

Miledi's wall of gravity pushed the tornadoes aside while Meiru's water barrier deflected the electricity. The serpent followed up with another blast of

fire, which Miledi and Meiru weathered by using a regenerating barrier. Though they were surviving, they had no openings to counterattack.

“Don’t most of the fairy tales say that to slay a beast you must enter its stomach and kill it from within?”

“Are you saying I should let it eat me? Meru-nee, you fiend!”

Despite the severity of their situation, Miledi and Meiru were still joking around. The reason they could remain optimistic was that they had absolute confidence in each other.

As long as I have Meru-nee by my side, I’m unstoppable! So long as Miledi-chan is with me, I have nothing to fear! The two of them shared a bond stronger than words could express. They really felt like actual siblings.

Meiru regained her composure and smiled gently.

“But you know, Miledi-chan. We need a way to break through those metal scales, or our chances of victory are nonexistent.”

“I know. Ugh, do I really have to jump into that thing’s mouth... Hm? Wait, Meru-nee, what did you just say?”

“That our chances of victory are nonexistent. Much like your breasts, Miledi-chan.”

“Hey! They’ll get larger with time! And I thought we were talking about strategy, not my boobs!”

“Oh, my apologies. Going back to strategy, I was talking about how the odds are stacked against us.”

“No, I mean what you said before that!”

“That we need a way to break through those metal scales?”

“Yeah, that! Man, how did I not realize something so simple!?”

Poor Miledi-chan, the constant barrage of fire, water, and lightning must have made you go crazy... Meiru gave Miledi a pitying look.

“What’re you looking at me like that for, Meru-nee!? Didn’t you forget!? We’ve got a metal master on our side!”

“Oh my...” Meiru blinked a few times as realization washed over her. Since neither of them had faced a monster coated in metal before, it had taken them a moment to notice the obvious.

“Nyufufu. Just you watch, you oversized snake! It’s finally time for our counterattack!”

“I love that vulgar expression of yours, Miledi-chan. It’s simply wonderful!”

“Glad to hear—Wait.” Miledi paused as he realized Meiru hadn’t been complimenting her, but then decided to let it slide and explained the plan.

“Alright, let’s do this, Meru-nee!” Miledi shot a fearless grin at Meiru.

“Ready when you are, Miledi-chan!” Meiru returned Miledi’s smile.

A moment later, the serpent’s breath petered out. Miledi took the opportunity to fall higher into the air, while Meiru descended to the sea. As she rose, Miledi created the largest Spatial Severance she could. The serpent attempted to shoot her down with a storm of lightning, but all of the bolts were sucked into the dark gravity sphere. Seeing as lightning wasn’t enough, the Leviathan also fired off jets of water at Miledi. She let them graze her, since she didn’t have the time to dodge or defend. Everything was riding on her Spatial Severance. With time, the serpent’s jets grew more accurate, and a few pierced her shoulders, sides, and thighs. Her blood spilled to the ground together with the rain.

“You won’t beat meeeeeeeeeeee!” Miledi gritted her teeth against the searing pain and continued her breakneck ascent. Finally, she shot into the clouds.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The inside of the storm clouds was a hell worse than what waited below. Lightning arced everywhere, and Miledi was barely able to keep herself safe with her Spatial Severance. This high up the rain was cold as ice, and the winds were strong enough to scrape her skin. Miledi lost even more blood as numerous cuts appeared on her skin. She was nearing critical condition. However, she kept her hand held high and continued moving. She had to save Andika, so she wouldn’t falter. No matter how much it hurt, she refused to let

go of her lightning-saturated Spatial Severance.

“Nnnnnnnnnnnnnngh!”

It was taking all of her willpower to keep the gravity sphere from bursting apart. However, her herculean effort proved worthwhile. Her lips cracked into a smile, and she connected her communicator to Oscar and Naiz.

“O-kun! Nacchan! A little help would be appreciated!”

She did her best to keep her desperation out of her voice, and briefly explained what she needed. Though there was no reply, she was confident that no matter the situation he was in, Oscar would come without fail. She released her gravity magic, and began plummeting toward the ground.

“Meru-nee!”

Right on time, Meiru jumped up from behind the serpent. She rode her current up to the serpent’s head and laid a hand on it.

“Revival Reversal!”

She poured mana down her arm, and the serpents eyes were crushed once more. Screeching, it thrashed about as it lost its sight.

“O-kun, Nacchan!”

As Meiru passed over the serpent’s head, a portal appeared above it. Oscar’s prized Metamorph Chains snaked through it and wrapped themselves around the cracked scales of the serpent’s head. The moment they made contact, bright golden-yellow sparks ran down their length. So long as it was classified as an ore, Oscar could transmute it. It didn’t matter if it had mana-sealing properties or not. The world’s most powerful Synergist ripped off the Leviathan’s armor with ease.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The serpent wrapped itself with mana and attempted to repair the damage, but it was too late. Its fate was sealed. Miledi shot toward the opening, her black sphere of doom still in her hands.

“Graviton Burst!”

A pillar of mana rose up from Miledi. She summoned a multitude of lightning spheres and condensed them into a single superdense orb. Then, she brought her Spatial Severance next to it. Together, she had all the lightning she'd created along with the lightning she'd absorbed.

"This really will end it! I won't let you kill anyone— Spatial Severance, release!"

Without the gravity to hold it, the countless arcs of lightning shot down toward the serpent. At the same time, her own lightning orb fell as well, adding its own force to the barrage. There was so much electricity that the entire ocean lit up. Dazzling light blotted out everything, even sound. Everyone, from those who'd evacuated Andika to those who were still on the sinking island, was able to see the blinding blast of light. And none of them turned their eyes away. Awed, they watch it expand like a supernova. Though none of them had any way of actually knowing, they were all certain that light was protecting them. That it had been unleashed by the person who'd wanted to protect them most of all.

Eventually, the light began to fade, and sound and color returned to the world. The remaining electricity fizzled out, leaving nothing behind. The rain stopped, the clouds parted, and the seas calmed. The Leviathan sat in the center of the sea, white smoking rising from the length of its body. After a few seconds, its corpse began to sink, sending huge waves in all directions. Because of how clear the sea was, the people still on Andika were able to watch as it sunk past them, all the way to the bottom of the ocean.

They were dumbfounded that a creation of god's could be killed. And they weren't the only ones, either. The twenty-odd remaining knights were speechless as well. But they weren't watching the divine beast's descent. No, they were staring at Miledi, the girl who'd taken it down. A single ray of sunlight fell down, illuminating her this time. The sight of her captivated the knights, even though she was their enemy. She remained floating for a few seconds longer, but then began to fall as her mana ran out.

"Miledi!" Oscar wanted to run over to her, but he couldn't afford to ignore Laus and the others for any longer. And so, he gritted his teeth and turned back to the knights.

Chris and the others returned to their senses as well, and readied their weapons. However, the knights, or rather their commander Laus, was still captivated by the sight of Miledi. He looked like a man who'd been imprisoned in darkness for decades and had finally seen the light of the sun.

"We're retreating."

After a few seconds, Laus uttered something unbelievable. Naturally, Araym and the others tried to argue.

"L-Laus-sama!? But what about our mission!?"

"As we are now, we cannot complete it. Their power is too great for us."

"Do you fear martyrdom!?"

"You misunderstand, Araym. We cannot allow them to roam free. We must report to the pope, gather a stronger force, and annihilate them for good. For that reason, we must retreat. Or are you saying you would rather martyr yourself than enact Ehit's will?"

"Th-That's not what..." Araym understood Laus' concern. But right now Miledi and the others were exhausted. In fact, he was confident the remaining knights could defeat them. The reason Araym hesitated to obey Laus' orders was because he felt as though Laus was looking for an excuse to let them live. The other knights looked like they agreed with Araym as well.

"That's an order, men. I'll take responsibility for any punishment the pope deems necessary. Now retreat!"

"Y-Yes, sir!" Araym shot Oscar one last, hateful look, then turned and headed to the airship.

"Do you wish to give chase?" Laus asked Oscar. Oscar observed Laus for a few seconds, then shook his head.

"Please wait! Could it be that you actually..." Oscar began to speak to Laus as he turned to leave. However...

"I am the Holy Templar Knights' commander, that's all... I'm a mere slave to Ehit..." Laus denied Oscar's unfinished question without turning around, and leaped toward his airship. Oscar watched him for a few seconds, then shook his

head. He asked Chris and the others to help with Andika's evacuation, then headed to Miledi. As he neared the patch of sky where Miledi had fallen, he saw Meiru carrying her in her arms.

"Miledi!"

"Yooo, O-kun! What'd you think!? That was awesome, right!?"

Her reply was as lighthearted as usual, and Oscar's jaw dropped open in surprise.

"Oh my. Oscar-kun, were you really that worried about Miledi-chan? Don't worry, I made sure to properly heal her."

"She sure did!"

"'She sure did' my ass! Don't scare me like that!"

Sighing, Oscar adjusted his glasses.

"Ehehe, thanks for worrying about me, O-kun. And thanks for the assist. I knew I could count on you and your glasses!"

"Stop bringing my glasses up all the time, goddammit!"

As they continued their friendly bickering, Miledi rose to her feet and asked him a question.

"What happened to the knights?"

"They retreated."

"Now that's a surprise."

After a moment's hesitation, Oscar voiced his thoughts.

"He... seemed really interested in you. Also... he seemed to know Belta. When I told him you two were related, he was pretty shaken up."

"Ah! O-kun, does that mean..." Miledi gulped and looked over to the airship retreating in the distance. It was already a speck in the sky. As it vanished, she turned back to Oscar and shook her head. Now wasn't the time to worry about vague possibilities.

True, hundreds of ships had already evacuated, but there were still citizens

stuck on Andika. Miledi looked down at the huge hole in the sea with a grave expression.

“Meru-nee. How much longer can your spell hold?”

“Ten more minutes, at most.”

Miledi’s magic was all that was slowing Andika’s descent and keeping the wall of water around it from rushing in. But in ten minutes, that would be gone. Just then, Naiz teleported over to the group. Opening up so many portals had left him exhausted, and his face was pale.

“We’ve managed to evacuate about sixty percent of the residents. Now that the storm’s passed, I think the rest will go faster, but the problem is we don’t have enough ships...”

They were packing as many people on each ship as possible, but it still wouldn’t be enough. Naiz looked worried, but Miledi just grinned confidently.

“Don’t worry. With four ancient magic users here, there’s nothing we can’t do! So, O-kun! What’s the plan?”

She dumped the problem on Oscar’s lap. However, her confident smile showed that she didn’t doubt for a moment that he had a solution.

Oscar felt both annoyed and a little happy that Miledi expected so much from him. As he stroked his chin and thought how best to tackle the problem at hand, Naiz chimed in with his opinion.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m sure Oscar can think of something.”

“Meiru, head to the graveyard of ships. Use your restoration magic to fix the sunken wrecks. Naiz, you find Diene. She should be able to restore your mana. While you’re there, ask the Melusine Pirate Crew for help. They should be able to load at least a few people on the Melusine. Miledi, you float as many people as you can using gravity magic. It doesn’t matter if they’re on a ship or not, as long as we get the residents above the water. I’ll start making as many rafts as possible, so start depositing them there.”

“Nice going, O-kun! Your glasses are as sharp as always!”

“A splendid plan, Oscar-kun. Your glasses are quite formidable.”

“Thanks, Oscar. I knew we could count on your glasses.”

“I’m going to kill all of you!”

Miledi and the others smiled at Oscar, who was glaring at them, then began their hardest battle yet. Namely, saving the residents of Andika.

Epilogue

After returning to the continent, Laus gave his report to the pope, fully expecting to be reprimanded. He explained how the pirates had broken the terms of the agreement, so he'd attempted to eliminate them as per his original orders. He then went on to say that he'd been unable to overcome four ancient magic users, and had been forced to retreat. He continued by speaking about the existence of the Liberators and the fact that Andika had sunk into the sea. And to end things, he explained how the divine beast had been resurrected, then summarily defeated.

Though each item on his report beggared belief, the pope didn't seem the least bit surprised by any of the information. Furthermore, he didn't punish Laus for his failure. He simply ordered him to stand by.

Down below, the residents of the theocracy believed that since the church's airship had returned, Laus had succeeded in his mission without a single casualty. Never in their wildest dreams did they imagine that Laus had failed, and returned with barely a fifth of his force. Laus believed it was for this reason that the pope withheld punishment. If he censured Laus, word would get out that the church's strongest knight had failed, which would cause unrest with the populace. That being said, there were plenty of ways to punish him without letting the public find out. Laus considered that something far worse might be in store for him as he exited the pope's audience chamber and headed to his room.

As he walked through the cathedral's corridors, he passed by someone. Laus was too preoccupied by his own thoughts to give the passerby much thought, but a second later recognition flashed through his mind.

"Wait," he said as he turned around him. The man who'd walked past him was someone who had no right being here—Ace. However, looking behind him, it wasn't Ace standing there but a beautiful nun wearing a hooded robe.

"Yes?"

“Ah, my apologies. I mistook you for someone else.”

Feeling nervous for some reason he couldn’t quite explain, Laus shook his head and apologized. Seeing as the nun gave no reply he continued the conversation on his own.

“I haven’t seen you around the cathedral before...”

“My name is Ahat.”

“I-I see.”

Her voice was as clear as a bell, but devoid of all emotion. Laus took an involuntary step backward as he heard it.

“Do you need anything else?”

Laus once again shook his head, and the nun bowed and took her leave. He watched her go, then turned and continued the trek to his room. A few seconds later, he realized something, and a shiver ran down his spine. He whirled around, but the nun was no longer there. He was certain, without a shadow of a doubt, that the nun had no soul. He hadn’t sensed one within her.

Various thoughts flashed through Laus’ mind. *Why is it that I wasn’t punished even though I failed to carry out my sacred duty? Why is it that the divine beast was revived and Andika sank while we were there? Why is it that the pope seemed so indifferent to hearing about Andika’s loss when he himself said it was a valuable asset? Why didn’t I realize the answer to these questions sooner? It’s obviously because someone with even more authority than the pope willed it.*

The Leviathan had been revived only after Laus and his knights had attacked. He could think of no logical reason for reviving it then, nor any logical reason for why he wasn’t informed about the plan to revive it, meaning there was no logical reason. He’d received incomprehensible missions like this before. Those, and this mission too, had been Ehit’s will.

“So we’re just playthings to you, huh?”

The emotions that welled up within Laus were the complete opposite of those he’d seen in the dazzling girl he’d fought. As he thought back to that girl who was as bright as the sun, he realized something else. The reason he, the

commander of the Holy Templar Knights hadn't been informed of the Liberators' existence. Along with the reason Belta had died, and her connection to Miledi. Those disjointed facts led him to one conclusion.

None of this had a good reason. It was simply happening because Ehit willed it.

Laus gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. He wanted to scream. His emotions threatened to boil over. But in the end, Laus Barn was a man who'd chosen not to fight. He let the strength drain from his fists, heaved a weary sigh, and resumed walking.

"A world where the people can live free..." Those words resonated in his head, but he ignored them. And he was so preoccupied with his thoughts that he didn't even notice one of his subordinates monitoring him intently.

A month had passed since the fateful day Andika sank into the sea. In its place floated a new island made entirely of ships. Though quite some time had elapsed, Miledi and the others were still there.

Thanks to Oscar and the others' valiant efforts, all of Andika's residents had been evacuated before the island sank. They'd watched from Oscar's rafts as their home fell to the depths of the ocean, and Miledi's magic had run out, causing the walls of water around it to crash over everything, erasing all trace of their previous lives. No one would ever forget that wondrous and terrible sight.

Having lost everything they'd ever owned, the residents of Andika had been in shock. Even Meiru and Diene, who'd been rejoicing at their reunion, and Miledi, who'd barely spent any time on the island at all, felt a pang of sorrow at the loss of Andika. But after a few moments of silence, Miledi had once again gotten the ball rolling.

While everyone had escaped alive, plenty had been injured, and Andika's residents couldn't sit packed like sardines in tiny boats forever. If they'd tried to sail to the continent in their current condition, people would have died during the journey. So first, they'd linked the ships together, raised a few more to make them less crowded, treated the wounded, and gathered enough food to feed everyone.

The next morning, Miledi presented Andika's residents with their options. They could either continue to live on the ship island, return to the continent, or test their luck and search for a new continent where the church would never find them. If they returned to the continent they would naturally be hunted by the church, since they were heretics, so Miledi had offered to let any residents who wanted to return live in the Liberators' hidden village.

While most citizens were content to remain on the ship island under Baharl's leadership, a good chunk of them elected to return to the continent and live with the Liberators. Part of the reason so many had signed up was because they'd been inspired by Miledi. In fact, most who wanted to return had asked not only to live with the Liberators, but to join them as well. After all Miledi had done for them, they wished to be of use to her in return. After watching her pick a fight with the church, save Andika's people, and kill a giant sea serpent, they were convinced she could do anything. Miledi Reisen had left that big an impression on them.

Afterward, Miledi and the others had remained behind to help Meiru and Diene expand the island by raising up more ships and gathering enough food to ensure the residents could have a stable life. They'd also wanted to stay for a while to make sure the church didn't return to finish the job they'd started. In the meantime, they'd of course kept in touch with the Liberators back on the continent. But a month had passed now, and Miledi was ready to return. Today would be the day of their departure.

"Hey, Miledi! From here, the first thing you see when you get to the continent is a desert, right? I heard it's like a huge ocean, but full of sand instead of water. I can't even imagine what that looks like. I can't wait to see it!" Kiara hugged Miledi from behind, her bunny ears flopping up and down in excitement. She was one of the people who'd chosen to join the Liberators. In fact, she'd been the first to apply. It was because she'd yelled "I don't like any of those choices! I wanna join your organization Miledi! I wanna follow you!" that so many other people had thought to apply as well.

"Oh yeah, I forgot you were born in Andika, Kia-chan. Yep, the desert's one giant sea of sand. There's a lot of problems with it, but it's definitely pretty! By the way, Kia-chan. Are you sure you want to join the Liberators?"

Miledi had asked Kiara that a dozen times already, but she wanted to confirm one last time before they departed. Seeing the serious look on Miledi's face, Kiara stepped back and looked at her head-on.

"Yes, I do. I want to help you, Miledi. We may have lost our home, but it's only thanks to you that I, mom, dad, and everyone else are still alive. I have to repay you somehow."

"You don't have to worry about that. I just did what I wanted to. You don't owe me anything. But if you join the Liberators, you'll make the world your enemy."

"You told me that a hundred times already. I'm not really sure if I'm ready to do that or not, but..." Kiara closed her eyes, then gave Miledi a determined stare.

"But this isn't just about repaying you. The reason I... No, the reason everyone, even my mom and dad, want to join the Liberators is because we respect you! We want to be able to live our lives like you do, and we want to make the world a place where we can say the things we want to without fear of persecution!"

The other people who'd asked to join the Liberators all turned to Miledi. They were all ready to depart, and it was clear they wouldn't be dissuaded. After all, they all had the glint of rebellion in their eyes.

"Alright."

That was all Miledi said in response. They'd chosen to follow her of their own free will. And in truth, that made Miledi incredibly happy. She tried to keep a straight face, but after a few seconds she was smiling. That pure smile of hers captivated the hearts of every man who'd petitioned to join. They blushed and looked away, too embarrassed to make eye contact. Even Kiara blushed slightly.

"Besides... I'm, you know, your friend. It's normal for friends to help each other out. I'm not that strong, and I might not be able to do much, but..." Kiara fidgeted, her bunny ears twitching nervously.

"You're too freaking cute!" Miledi squealed, blood dripping from her nose.

"Miledi, are you okay!? Is the battle from the other day still hurting you!?"

Kiara shouted, panicking.

“I-I’m fine. This is friendship flowing from my nose, don’t worry about it.”

“Uh, you sure you didn’t hit your head somewhere?” Kiara was a perfectly normal girl, and her reaction to Miledi’s strange behavior was also perfectly normal.

Before Miledi could respond, Baharl walked up to her, followed by Diene and Meiru.

“Yo, Miledi. We’ve—”

“Excuse me, Baharl? How many times must I tell you to add honorifics after Miledi-chan’s name? Do you wish to die? If so, I can grant you that wish.”

It appeared saying Miledi’s name was a capital offense for Baharl. A bead of sweat poured down his forehead as he looked at the razor-sharp saber pointed at his neck.

“N-Nee-sama! Father didn’t mean to be rude! He’s just a bit slow, that’s all!”

“Oi, Diene. What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” Baharl raised his hands in surrender, his expression stiff as he questioned his daughter.

“Oh my, it appears you get to live another day. You should be thanking Diene for her kindness. In fact, prostrate yourself before her right now. I’ll step on you until you’ve reflected on your actions.”

“You know what, I take it all back. You’re nothing like Reej.”

Meiru smiled gently and slapped Baharl’s cheek with the flat of her blade, urging him to get to his knees. Sighing, he made to do as he was told. Before he could though, Diene grabbed Meiru’s arm and stopped her. Reluctantly, Meiru pulled her saber away.

Their relationship was a little complicated, but it appeared Meiru and Baharl had made up to some degree. So long as Diene was there to mediate between them, they wouldn’t be trying to kill each other any time soon. For her part, Diene had begun to open up more to Baharl after he’d started acting more like a proper father to her.

Miledi smiled at the trio and Baharl awkwardly scratched his head.

“Uh, so where was I? Oh yeah, thanks for all your help.”

“Help? But I skipped out on my casino debt and then raided it afterward.”

“You saved Andika’s people. Compared to that, your debt’s chump change. You even provided this island with the supplies it needs. If anything, we owe you now. Big time...” Baharl shrugged. Over this past month, he’d mellowed out. Having lost the city he’d ruled through force had caused a profound change within him.

“You owe me, huh? In that case, you better take good care of Diene-chan. Promise me!”

“How the hell’s that going to repay you— Stop, stop, I get it already. I promise I’ll protect not just Diene, but everyone who’s too weak to protect themselves!” Baharl started to argue, but stopped when Meiru began poking him in the back with her saber. He threw his hands into the air as a gesture of resignation.

“Well said, Father!” Diene exclaimed, and pulled her nails away from his stomach. When all was said and done, Baharl couldn’t hold a candle to his daughter. He cleared his throat awkwardly, then said in a grave tone.

“If you ever meet Ace... Err, actually, you said he was an apostle, right? Anyway, if you meet him again, give him my regards. And if you can manage it, get a good punch in for me.”

After hearing Naiz’s explanation, Miledi and Oscar had agreed that Ace had likely been killed by one of God’s Apostles who had then masqueraded as him. No one but an apostle possessed silver-colored mana. The group had also surmised that the reason the God’s Apostle had unsealed the Leviathan was because god had likely thought it’d be fun. The apostles existed to properly set the game board for Ehit, and make sure the pieces were moving in an amusing manner.

“Yeah, leave it to us. The beautiful, genius mage Miledi and her merry band’ll make sure to beat the shit out of the apostles, the church, and even god!”

“I’ll be counting on ya. I doubt those guys’ll come after us again. We can’t pay ’em bribes anymore, but they still need a place to throw all their heretics.”

“Yeah, there’s no reason for them to go out of their way to destroy this place

when it's in the middle of nowhere."

Now that the ship island was only useful for containing heretics, the church had no reason to bother with it at all. Which was why the Melusine Pirates intended to leave the island as well, along with Diene. Meiru planned to return to the island regularly so that Diene could meet her father and the pirates could stock up on supplies, but otherwise they planned to wander the seas. They wanted to keep their position hard to track, so that the church wouldn't be able to find them. That was the only way they'd be able to live in peace. Furthermore, they'd be putting the island in danger if they remained there permanently.

"Thanks. Anyway, I'll uhh, do my best to keep things running out here. If you ever get your asses handed to you and have nowhere else to go, you can always come back. I'll try to make it a bigger island by then."

"Huh, you sure?"

"Our island might be gone, but this is still the city of freedom. We don't turn away anyone, no matter who they are. And we don't stop anyone from leaving either. Well, I guess we'd turn the church away, but that's it."

"Ahaha. Thanks. I'll keep your offer in mind!"

Baharl blushed at Miledi's sincere expression of gratitude, and he scratched his head to hide his embarrassment. A few seconds later he shrugged and said, "Well, see ya. Try not to kick the bucket too easily," before walking off.

"Miledi-san. Thank you so much for everything you've done," Diene added. She gave Miledi a brief hug, then tottered after Baharl. Meiru watched her go with a smile. She could tell Diene had left to give the two of them some time alone. But before either of them could say anything, Oscar, who was saying his farewells to Chris and the other pirates, shouted at Miledi to let her know their ship was ready to go. They'd been given one by Baharl as a token of gratitude. Starting with Kiara, the newly minted Liberators started boarding. Eventually, it was just Miledi left. She smiled at Meiru and said, "Guess it's time for me to go, Meru-nee."

"So it is, Miledi-chan."

Meiru was wearing the same gentle smile as always.

“There were some rough spots, but I had a lot of fun hanging out with you.”

“I see. I had an enjoyable time myself. Also...thank you. I’m more grateful to you than words could ever express.”

“Nyufufu. What’s this? You’re being surprisingly honest today, Meru-nee.”

Miledi provoked Meiru with a vexatious grin. But for once, Meiru didn’t rise to the taunt. Instead, she hugged Miledi tight.

“M-Meru-nee?”

“.....”

Meiru said nothing. She just kept hugging Miledi, tight enough to choke her. After a while, Miledi closed her eyes and hugged Meiru back. Finally, they broke apart.

“If Oscar-kun’s Artifacts aren’t able to cure his siblings, come find me. I promise I’ll do everything I can to help.”

“Okay, I will.”

The two exchanged a brief glance, then Miledi smiled and turned on her heel.

“Ah!”

Meiru reached her hand out to Miledi, but then pulled it back. She straightened her posture and quietly watched the back of the small girl who’d sworn to fight the world—the girl who was like a sister to her—recede into the distance. Once Miledi was on board, the ship cast off. The remaining residents of Andika cheered and waved as the ship sailed away. Meiru went to the deck of her own ship, the Melusine, and saw Miledi off with her crew. The Melusine Pirates were cheering and waving with the rest, but also throwing in occasional shouts of “Visit us again sometime!”

Their ship grew smaller and smaller as it receded into the distance. Miledi continued jumping and waving to everyone until Meiru and the others were out of sight. As Miledi vanished beyond the horizon, Meiru gripped the ship’s rudder with such force that her knuckles turned white. Her smile vanished, replaced by a stiff grimace.

This is for the best. I can finally live together with Diene. It's too dangerous to join Miledi-chan. If I became a Liberator, Diene and my family would be in even greater danger than they are now. So this is for the best. Running for the rest of our lives is much safer than fighting. This is...for the best.

Meiru kept repeating "This is for the best" under her breath over and over. But no matter how many times she told herself that, she couldn't get the image of a beaten and battered Miledi out of her mind. Meiru knew that Miledi would continue recklessly putting herself in danger for the sake of others. For the sake of freedom. For the sake of fighting against this unreasonable world.

What if this is the last time I'll ever see her alive... The thought left Meiru terrified. Her heart felt like it was being squeezed by a vice. Meiru had no idea when it had happened, but somehow, she'd started to consider Miledi just as important to her as Diene. Even though they'd only known each other for a few months, Meiru loved Miledi like a real sister.

"Nee-sama."

"Ah...what is it, Diene?"

Meiru plastered on a smile and turned to her beloved sister. Diene was looking up at her with an expression of unbelievable kindness. It was this smile that had caused others to call Diene a saint.

"Go with them, Nee-sama."

"Huh? What are you..."

"You want to join them, don't you? You want to help them, I can tell."

Diene gently took hold of Meiru's hand.

"It's because you worked so hard that I have such a wonderful family now."

Meiru turned around, and saw her crew gazing at her. Each and every one of them was smiling.

"I know Father loves me now too. This is more than enough. I don't need anything else."

"Diene..."

Diene pointed toward the sea with her free hand. She was pointing in the direction Miledi had gone.

“I’ll be fine, because I have everyone to protect me. But Miledi-san needs you to protect her, nee-sama.”

Diene’s smile turned from a gentle one to a fearless one. As odd as it seemed, that cocky grin suited her just as well as a benevolent smile.

“Besides, I hate the church. They stole my home from me. Or well, I suppose unleashed the thing that stole my home. But I’ll never forgive them.”

“D-Diene?”

“So, nee-sama. You have to get revenge on them for me!”

I suppose she is the princess of outlaws. Meiru thought to herself. Unsurprisingly, Diene had quite a backbone herself. Meiru looked up at the sky to hide her tears. The little sister who’d begged to be saved all those years ago had grown up into a woman strong enough to send her older sister off.

“Go, Meiru.”

This time, it was Chris who told her to go.

“It’s too late to change course.”

“What do you mean, too late? Running is still a better option than fighting the church head—”

“That’s not what I mean. You know as well as I do that those guys have already become a part of our family. It’s too late to pretend they’re not. And the number one rule of the Melusine Pirate Crew is that we never abandon our family, isn’t that right?”

The other pirates nodded in unison.

“If you really wanted to stay here, that would have been fine with us too. But you obviously don’t. And we don’t want to see you looking like that. Isn’t that right, boys!?”

“Yeah! It’s not like you to be this hesitant, you moron! You’re that tomboy’s older sister, aren’t you!? So hurry up and go after her, Meiru!”

“That’s right, Cap’n. Besides, it’s not like you to just keep running away. If the church hates us either way, then ya might as well take the fight to them!”

“I shall allow your departure, if it means you will send me blessed pictures of Miledi-kun in a maid outfit.”

Everyone was telling Meiru to join the Liberators.

“It won’t hurt to have a place to run to on the sea if you need to. So we’ll hold the fort down here, and make sure the Melusine Pirate Crew’s ready any time you need us. So, Meiru. You’ve gotta go in our place and make sure those cocky brats don’t kick the bucket!”

Meiru covered her eyes, hiding her tears. After a few seconds she took a huge breath, and made her decision. She gathered her resolve and gave her beloved family a fearless smile.

“You’re all fools, the lot of you!”

The pirates cheered. The Melusine Famile had found a new goal—bring down the unreasonable system that governed this world. Meiru dropped to one knee and hugged Diene tight.

“I suppose I’ll be going then, Diene. Will you look after this foolish family of mine for me?”

“Of course, nee-sama. Good luck! I’ll be waiting for you to come visit me again!”

The sisters nodded to each other, and Meiru rose to her feet. She climbed up onto the ship’s railing and prepared to jump.

“Hey, Meiru.”

Chris called out to her. Meiru turned around to see Chris walking up to give her the Melusine Pirates’ farewell gift. Considering how rehearsed his act was, Meiru guessed he’d prepared this beforehand.

“You’ll be leaving us and the ship behind for a while. Which is why you’ve gotta at least take our name with you.”

“Fufu. I suppose so. In that case, I shall take you up on that offer.”

Meiru smiled happily at her family and shouted, “As our representative, I, Meiru Melusine, shall show the world our power!”

With that, Meiru leapt backward into the sea. The Melusine Pirate Crew saw her off with final, resounding cheer.

“Haah...”

Miledi stopped waving her arms and sighed. She turned her back to the ship’s stern, her expression glum.

“Feeling lonely, Miledi?”

“Not really.”

Miledi’s denial lacked vigor. After exchanging a troubled glance with Oscar, Naiz walked over and tried to cheer Miledi up.

“It’s not like this is goodbye forever. As long as you’re both alive, you’ll be able to see each other again.”

“I know.”

Miledi said with a pout. She’d kept up a smile as they’d been leaving so as to not alarm Andika’s residents, but she no longer had the energy to maintain the act. That was how much she missed Meiru. Oscar followed up with a joke, trying to distract Miledi from thinking about Meiru.

“Sheesh, I never knew you were such a siscon. Looks like you can’t do anything without you’re big sister around.”

“Wha— That’s not true! And I’m not a siscon!”

“I can’t believe you miss her already. You should grow up a little, really.”

“Not you too, Nacchan! I don’t miss her! Even if Meru-nee’s gone...even if she’s gone...”

Miledi’s face fell again. *Oh no, this is serious.* Oscar thought. Miledi lost all will to argue, and she staggered away.

“Oh my, and where do you think you’re going?”

“To my room. Sorry O-kun, Nacchan, but I want to be alone for a bit.”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that.”

“God, stop bugging me! I’ve got times I want to be alone too, you know!”

“I know that very well. But that doesn’t mean I’ll let you be alone.”

“Look, if you don’t cut it out I’m gonna get mad for...”

Miledi glared at Oscar and Naiz, but then realized the voice wasn’t coming from their direction. On top of that, both of them were looking at something behind her. A second later, a pair of hands grabbed Miledi’s cheeks and pulled.

“Owwwwwie! Wha!? Whash going on!? Wait, ish that you, Meru-nee!?”

“Yeeeeeeeeees. It’s me. Here to see my lonely little sister.”

Meiru let go of Miledi’s cheeks and she hurriedly turned around.

“B-But why?”

Why’re you here? Meiru smiled gently and said, “I think I’ll join your little group after all. It’s a pleasure to be working with you, Oscar-kun, Naiz-kun. And of course, my soft-cheeked little Miledi-chan.”

“R-Really? You’ll join us? B-But what made you change your mind?”

“Well, you see...”

After a very long pause, Meiru said, “I haven’t teased you enough!”

“You know what, go back! Go disappear in the ocean somewhere! Stupid Meru-nee!”

“My, how mean. I’m afraid mean girls like you need to be punished.”

“No not aga—Stooooooooooop!”

Meiru hugged Miledi and once again began playing with her cheeks. The other passengers came to see what all the ruckus was about, then smiled when they saw Meiru was there. Though Miledi looked like she was annoyed, it was obvious she was happy Meiru was joining them. On the other hand, Meiru was leaning into her sadistic side to hide her own embarrassment. As always, the two of them resembled a pair of actual siblings.

“Heeey! O-kun, Nacchan, stop staring and lend me a hand!”

Oscar and Naiz looked at each other and smiled. Then the two of them ran over to their beloved leader and their newest comrade to join in on the fun.



Afterword

Thank you so much for picking up this book. Everyone's favorite chuuni lover, Ryo Shirakome, here. This book is about the owner of the Sunken Ruins of Melusine, the underwater Labyrinth Hajime and the others conquered in the main series. I hope you guys enjoyed all of the references I added. Like with volume one, everything in this volume's new content that hasn't been published before on Narou. And I've gotta say, that made thinking up what to write a lot harder. Still, it was also a lot of fun. I'm happy as long as you readers enjoyed the work.

The truth is, I had so much fun writing that I ended up at 520 pages and my editor forced me to cut it down. Sorry I always write such long volumes!

Oh, and for those of you who're curious, the war Hajime and Kaori see in the Sunken Ruins of Melusine is actually one that occurred long before even Miledi's time. It was that war that created the graveyard of ships that Meiru and the Melusine Pirates built their island on.

On an unrelated topic, I've been continuing the trend of trying to make characters who look nothing like what their personality would suggest. Like with the first volume, I hope most of you did a double-take when you discovered what Meiru was really like.

Now then, I know it's presumptuous of me, but I'd like to advertise some of my other works here. The first volume of Zero's manga just came out, and I've gotta say, Ataru Kamichi's Miledi looks *really* cute! (The mini-Miledi he drew for the flashback scene is adorable too.) Plus, Oscar looks super cool in the manga, too! I highly recommend checking it out!

Last, but certainly not least, I'd like to do the acknowledgments. As always, a huge thank you to Takayaki-sensei for his godlike illustrations. I'd also like to thank Ataru Kamichi-sensei for drawing Zero's manga, RoGa-sensei for drawing the main series' manga, and Misaki Mori-sensei for drawing the everyday Arifureta spinoff. Furthermore, I'd also like to thank my editors, proofreaders,

and everyone else at the publishing department that made this book a reality. Finally, I'd like to thank my fans on Narou, and all of you wonderful readers. I hope to see you again in a future volume!

Ryo Shirakome

Bonus Short Stories

Aesthetics Beget Sacrifice

“Oh yeah, Naiz. Have you ever thought about getting a weapon?”

The party was taking a short break at a desert oasis when Oscar suddenly asked Naiz that.

“I don’t need one. Well, not for now, anyway.”

“But you used to be a warrior, right? I’m pretty sure desert warriors don’t fight bare-handed...”

“True, they don’t. Most of us used swords. The standard weapon was a curved greatsword. Some use spears, but I always preferred the sword. It’s what my father taught me how to use.”

“So then, why not use one? I can make one for you if you want.”

“Thank you, but I’m fine. The dagger I’m carrying will do for now,” Naiz smiled slightly and shook his head as he responded to Oscar’s words. Then, he went on to explain that he was trying to master his magic as fast as he could, which was why he was purposely avoiding using a sword. Furthermore, he’d also been taught hand-to-hand combat by his father, so he was confident in his fighting skills even when bare-handed.

“I see now. That makes sense. But if you ever feel like you want to use a sword again, just ask. I’ll make you the most powerful magic sword you’ve ever seen.”

“When that time comes, I’ll be counting on you.”

It’s amazing how casually he says he’ll make me an artifact-class weapon... Touched by Oscar’s generosity, Naiz’s smile grew bigger. Miledi chose that moment to butt into the conversation.

“Oh, I want a weapon!”

For a few minutes now, Miledi had been standing off to the side, hopping up and down in excitement, her eyes sparkling in anticipation. She'd clearly wanted Oscar to ask her if she wanted a weapon too. *It's amazing how obvious she is about her desires,* Oscar thought ruefully to himself.

"You're a pure mage, aren't you? I'm pretty sure you don't even know how to fight at close quarters."

Most of the time, Miledi crushed her enemies flat or sent them flying before they even had a chance to close in on her. On the off chance someone did manage to get near her, Miledi could reorient her gravity, flying through the air faster than the eye could follow. Her predominant battle strategy consisted of maintaining her distance and flattening enemies with gravity magic.

"Who cares if it's not practical, O-kun! I just want a weapon like your black umbrella! It looks really cool!"

"Hehe, you've got a good eye, Miledi."

Blushing slightly, Oscar adjusted his glasses. He was weak to people praising his fashion sense.

"Very well, Miledi. I'll give you a weapon so awesome it'll blow your mind. Naiz, you're getting one too. Even if you don't use it, you should have a cool weapon to show off."

"Yaaaaaay! You're the best, O-kun! I knew you wouldn't let me down!"

"I don't believe weapons need to be flashy to be functional..."

Though Miledi looked excited, Naiz couldn't help but be a little worried. He rubbed his eyes wearily and prepared himself for the worst. Oscar fished through his Treasure Trove and presented his two comrades with their new weapons.

"Is that a circle with a hole in it?" Miledi tilted her head quizzically as she looked down at the weapon Oscar handed her.

"It's called a chakram. It's used by the tribes who live on the snowy tundra on the southern continent. They use these to hunt. If you throw it, it'll loop back around to you. Also—"

“Whoa! That sounds cool! Hiyah!” Miledi exclaimed as she threw the chakram before Oscar could finish his explanation. She was one of those people who’d rather learn from experience than read a manual. The chakram traced a neat arc through the air and turned to return to Miledi. As she reached out to catch it—

“Whoa, it multiplies!?”

The chakram split into ten. One of the new chakrams slammed into Miledi’s forehead, cutting it open.

“Miledi!!!!!!” Naiz shouted. On the other hand, Oscar just adjusted his glasses and continued.

“Also, I’ve modified it so that it splits into multiple weapons mid-flight. However, it only multiplies on the way back, so you need to be careful when catching it. If you’d listened, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“This isn’t the time to be explaining things, Oscar! Look, she’s bleeding even worse than when we fought an apostle. Oh no, she’s collapsed! And she’s lost consciousness! Hang on, Miledi, I’ll heal you!” Naiz screamed as he pulled out the chakram stuck in Miledi’s forehead and hurriedly cast healing magic on her. Thanks to his speedy first-aid, Miledi was back in action in no time.

“H-Huh? Belle? I just saw Belle standing on the other side of a river. She kept shouting, ‘Don’t follow me, Miledi-chan!’ What was all that about...”

“I think that shaved a few years off my life...” Naiz sighed in relief. *I bet Bell was just as panicked when she saw Miledi on the other side of that river.*

“As I suspected, these chakrams are too dangerous for you Miledi. Here, try this instead.”

“Hey, O-kun, did you just say ‘as I expected’? You did, didn’t you? Hey, answer me!” Miledi tugged on Oscar’s sleeve as she begged for a reply, but he was too busy choosing Miledi’s next weapon to answer. And so, she turned to Naiz, and the two of them exchanged a worried glance.

“Here, put this on instead, Miledi.”

“What’s this?”

Oscar had pulled out an assassin's katar. The handle was meant to be strapped to the wielder's wrist, and they had to flick their wrist and use mana to push the blade out.

"Isn't it cool to flick a dagger out of your wrist!? Go on, try it! No need to be shy!" Oscar's eyes shone with excitement as he said that.

Oh shit, we've flipped his switch, haven't we? Miledi and Naiz thought simultaneously. Too late, they realized they were being used as guinea pigs to test out Oscar's new weapons.

"Y-Yeah, it is cool! B-But, I don't think a weapon like this is for me. Actually, on second thought, I don't need a weapon after all."

"No, Miledi, you do. You absolutely do."

"Uh, okay."

Oscar had no intention of letting this precious chance to test his weapons slip past him. Seeing the determined look in his eyes, Miledi reluctantly took the dagger and then turned and pushed it into Naiz's arms.

"M-Miledi!?"

"Man, you're right, this really is cool! But I think it suits Nacchan more than me!"

"This is what I get for saving your life!?"

Miledi looked away and whistled innocently.

"She's right. Naiz, this is the perfect weapon for you. Go on, equip it. Weapons are meaningless unless they're equipped, after all."

Desperate, Naiz turned to plead with Oscar. However, when he saw the look in Oscar's eyes, he turned back to Miledi. Unfortunately, Miledi pointedly refused to meet Naiz's gaze and just said, "Ahh, the weather's great today."

To think I call these people my friends... Sweating, Naiz reluctantly strapped the handle onto his forearm. And then, as instructed, he poured mana into the apparatus and flicked his wrist. *Boom!* There was a thunderous explosion, and Naiz flew through the air.

“Nacchaaaaaaaaaaan!”

“Hmmm, did the self-destruct function misfire? I’ll need to investigate this.”

Miledi used gravity magic to bring Naiz back to earth, then shot Oscar a terrified look. He cocked his head and said, “What? There’s no point in a weapon that doesn’t have a self-destruct feature.”

“O-kun’s a mad synergist!”

As Miledi cast healing magic on the smoking Naiz, she thought back to her previous battles with Oscar. *Come to think of it, when we fought that three-headed dragon in the Greenway, his black umbrella blew itself up...*

“Hah!? Where am I!? I could have sworn I saw my father yelling something from the other side of a river...”

It appeared Naiz had seen a vision of his family as well. Like Belle, Naiz’s father had likely been yelling at him to turn back.

“Now then, I have a few more weapons I think you guys would love...” Oscar said as he pulled out cool-looking weapons one after another. Naturally, they were all prototypes, and they obviously all came with a self-destruct function.

“I’m so glad you guys are willing to help me test these weapons. Only ancient magic users are sturdy enough to handle these.”

Miledi and Naiz paled and took a few steps back. They knew what was coming was going to be bad if Oscar was emphasizing their sturdiness.

“What’s wrong guys? Here’s the next weapon I want you to test,” Oscar said as he brought out something that resembled a scythe. But unlike a normal scythe, it seemed to have a pulse, as if it were alive. Miledi didn’t like the look of that one bit.

“Go on, it won’t bite!”

There was something terrifying about his smile. Naturally, both Miledi and Naiz wanted nothing to do with that scythe.

“Nacchan, you take it!”

“Miledi, it’s all yours!”

They both tried to use each other as a scapegoat and ran as fast as their legs would carry them. Such wonderful friendship. Afterward, multiple explosions rocked the peaceful desert oasis, and both Miledi and Naiz were sent flying multiple times. No one could escape from Oscar the mad Synergist.

Girl Power!

This happened around two weeks after Miledi and the others started living on the Melusine Pirate Crew's ship island. By that point in time, the three Liberators had become good friends with the pirates.

Oscar stood within one of the ships' kitchens, an apron tied around his waist. He'd been feeling a little peckish, so he'd gone down to make himself a small snack. As he was about to start cooking, Meiru and Miledi walked in with pale-faced Chris and Naiz behind them.

"What're you guys all doing here?"

"O-kun, I'll be borrowing this side of the kitchen. This is a fight I can't afford to lose."

"Huh?"

"Oh my, Miledi-chan. Do you truly believe yourself capable of besting your older sister?"

"What's going on here?"

Miledi and Meiru exchanged glances, sparks flying from their eyes. Miledi was grinning fiercely, while Meiru wore her usual gentle smile. Chris walked over to Oscar and quickly whispered what was going on.

Apparently, Miledi and Meiru had been chatting and the topic of girl power had come up. One thing had led to another, and the two had started arguing about who had more girl power.

"I-I get it now. Though, I can't tell if they get along or not... By the way, Chris. I get that you guys got dragged along as judges, but why do you all look so scared?"

"You'll see soon enough..."

Oscar cocked his head in confusion, but he quickly realized why Chris and his men looked so grave.

“Let us begin with a cookie-baking contest!” Meiru proclaimed as she pulled a sack of flour out of the cupboard... and dumped its contents onto the countertop. She then threw a brick of butter into the flour, added some eggs, and poured handfuls of sugar over the entire mess. And after all that, she started stirring the concoction.

“Meru-nee, I’m pretty sure that’s not how you cook...”

“Whatever do you mean? I admit this is a bit difficult to mix, but I see nothing wrong with my cooking.”

Rather, she wasn’t really mixing it at all.

“It’s this accursed butter’s fault!” Meiru muttered under her breath as she tried to force the ingredients together. In an attempt to melt the butter, she shot a fireball at her ingredients. And after a while, she realized she didn’t have enough water, and so summoned an entire waterfall to dump into the smoldering flour-butter-sugar mixture. Next, she added raw fish to her cookie batter.

Why the hell is she putting FISH into her cookies!? The guys all thought simultaneously. Apparently, this was Meiru’s “secret ingredient” for her cookies. Since she was chopping up the fish herself instead of using preserved meat, the batter was getting drenched in blood on top of everything else. The ship’s kitchen was beginning to look like the ninth circle of hell.

“Th-This is so wrong...” Oscar muttered, terrified. It appeared Meiru’s cooking methods aligned more with her real personality than the facade she normally kept up.

So this is why Chris and the others were so scared... It seemed Meiru’s opponent was just as horrified by her blasphemous baking as everyone else. Miledi watched with a stiff expression as Meiru created her abomination. Meiru’s cookie batter resembled a dying slime as she continued adding a plethora of absolutely unnecessary ingredients, giving it an even more ghastly appearance.

Is she trying to summon a devil or something? Oscar thought to himself.

On the other hand, Miledi had made a perfectly normal batch of cookie dough, which made Meiru's attempt at cooking look even more pitiful. Before long, Meiru's cookies, if they could even be called that, were ready. The dark red biscuits looked like they'd crawled out of the depths of hell.

"Enjoy, my dear judges!" Meiru smiled gently as she said that. Normally, any man would have been overjoyed to receive handmade cookies from such a beautiful woman. However, in this case, everyone was trying to push each other forward. No one wanted to be the one to test those poisonous cookies.

"Hmph, cowards, the lot of you. Fine, I'll eat them."

"First mate!"

Chris stepped forward, cold sweat pouring down his forehead. At that moment, he looked positively heroic. First, he sampled one of Miledi's cookies. While her cookies had come out a little misshapen, they seemed normal otherwise.

"Mmm. Yeah, these are good. A bit too sweet, but I'm sure the kids would love 'em."

Normally, this would be around when Miledi would start gloating. But she just gave Chris a quiet "Thank you." She was too sad over what was about to happen to him to boast. Grinning confidently, Chris picked up one of Meiru's cookies. Everyone held their breath as they watched him bring it to his mouth.

"Heh... Take care of everyone for me, guys," Chris said as he slumped to the ground.

"First maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaate!" the other pirates screamed.

"Oh Chris, you sure love to exaggerate. Surely they couldn't have been *that* delicious!"

"Like hell they were delicious! Look at him, Meru-nee! He's foaming at the mouth! Don't worry Chris, I'll heal you! Hang on...! Wait, my healing magic's not working!?"

In the end, Meiru was forced to use restoration magic to save Chris' life. She

seemed utterly confused as to why Chris had needed healing, and why her men were all cheering for his safe return. As the commotion died down, Oscar walked over and spoke to them.

“I baked some cookies too. Would you guys like to try them?”

“Oh, you too, O-kun? Let’s see how well yours turned out...” Miledi trailed off as she saw what Oscar’s cookies looked like. The other pirates also fell silent as they turned around and beheld his creation. Oscar had cut his cookies in animal shapes. There were cat cookies, bunny cookies, dog cookies, and even mouse cookies. Each and every one of them looked unbelievably cute.

“Oh, I made some fruit sauce to go with them, too. They’ll taste even better if you dip them in it.”

Everyone was stunned. Not only had Oscar made cute-looking cookies, but he’d even made a dipping sauce to vary up the taste a little. In fact, he’d also brewed some black tea that paired perfectly with the cookies. Miledi sucked in a huge breath and held it. A few seconds later she shouted, “So this is what girl power looks like!?”

The onlooking pirates and Naiz nodded simultaneously. Miledi and Meiru’s contest to see who had more girl power continued, but no matter which event they picked, the results didn’t change. For example, during the embroidery contest, Miledi was able to embroider a respectable design. While she was no expert, she’d been taught the basics during her nobility days, and she was no slouch with a needle. On the other hand, Meiru somehow managed to tangle the threads together into one super-thick cord and got the needle stuck into her cloth, eventually creating some Frankenstein monster pattern that didn’t look appealing by any stretch of the imagination. Clearly, Meiru had no skill with needle and thread. Incidentally, the strange monster was supposed to be a kitten, but no one could tell. Probably because it looked like it had tentacles. Right as their match was wrapping up, however, Oscar happened to pass by. He was carrying one of Miledi’s dresses. It was one that had been ripped up pretty bad during one of their previous fights, and Miledi had honestly been debating just tossing it. However, she hadn’t been able to bring herself to do so and had thrown it into Oscar’s Treasure Trove instead. As a favor, he’d repaired it for her and had come by to return it.

“Umm... O-kun, is it just me or did you make it look even cuter than it was originally?”

Oscar had added flower patterns to the dress to hide the stitches his repairs had made. In order to keep the overall appearance from becoming unbalanced, he’d also added ribbons to the dress to make the flowers fit. And though the color of the dress was supposed to have faded a little, he’d somehow managed to make it vibrant again.

“Really? I just fixed it up since I was repairing my coat anyway. To be honest, it’s not very high-quality work. If you’d wanted to buy a new one after seeing this, I wouldn’t have minded, but I’m glad you like it.”

Oscar had been raised in an orphanage, so he was used to repairing torn clothing. Plus, he was dexterous by nature, so he’d had no problem learning how to mend clothes in a way that looked cute, or clean even the most stubborn of stains.

“Are you secretly a mother or something!?” Miledi took the dress from Oscar and sucked in a huge breath before screaming those words. Everyone around her nodded.

Next up was a contest to see whose room was cleaner. Meiru had just shoved all of her things into a corner of her room, so while it was technically clean, it didn’t look very nice. Miledi, on the other hand, had kept her room tidy since she was mooching off of Meiru’s kindness. However, after two weeks of habitation, there were small patches of uncleanliness here and there, like stains or dust piles. Upon seeing Miledi’s room, he’d cleaned it until it was spotless with all the speed of a consummate professional. His orphan upbringing had equipped him with all the skills necessary to manage a household. On top of that, he was naturally skilled with his hands and serious in everything he did, so it made sense that his standards for cooking, cleaning, and sewing were so high.

In the end, the rankings for girl power were as follows:

Meiru: Too crude, no girl power to speak of.

Miledi: average in all fields, and thus average girl power.

Oscar: Possesses so much girl power he may as well be a mom.

“And so, Oscar wins the girl power contest! Out of all of us, he’s the most mom-like!”

The Melusine Pirates cheered Chris’ proclamation.

“I don’t understand,” Oscar, Miledi, and Meiru muttered simultaneously.

Secrets, Buried Pasts, and so much More

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

A young girl’s crying voice rang out. Wondering what was wrong, the Liberators Marshal and Mikaela rushed over to her.

“Oh my, this is terrible!”

“H-Huh? What’s going on?”

Few things surprised Marshal, but what he saw managed to stun him. Ruth was standing in the hallway, seemingly at a loss for words, while Susha desperately tried to console her younger sister, Yunfa, who was bawling her eyes out. A short distance away, Corrin was on the ground. Upon seeing the puddle of liquid further down the hallway and the dampness around Yunfa’s legs, Marshal could more or less guess the cause of Yunfa’s distress.

Despite how precocious she was, Yunfa was still a little girl. It was hardly surprising that she’d start crying after accidentally wetting herself in public. The question was, how had something like this happened? Mikaela rushed over to comfort Yunfa, while Marshal turned to Ruth.

“Hey, Ruth, what happened here!?”

“Um, I wanted to help strengthen the village’s defenses... so I tried making some of the booby traps Oscar told me about...” Ruth took a few steps forward, angled his body, and stomped his foot on the ground as he said that. The flagstone he’d stepped on sunk a few inches, and a sawblade whizzed past his neck. A second later, countless spears shot out of the walls, floor, and ceiling. For a booby trap, this was overkill.

“Are you crazy!? I’m a former soldier and even I’m scared of traps like that!”

“But Oscar told me ‘there’s no value in a trap that doesn’t kill its victim. Make sure you layer multiple traps onto each other so that there’s no way for them to escape.’”

“Your big brother’s insane, you know that?”

For some reason, that made Ruth blush with pride.

“Haaah... Let me guess, Yunfa accidentally triggered one of your needlessly dangerous traps?”

“I’ve dulled all the weapons just in case. Also, as long as you don’t move, none of the attacks will hit you, so it’s not dangerous. But I know stuff like this is still dangerous, which is why I was working on it all on my own.”

Susha, Yunfa, and Corrin had spotted him while he was in the middle of working on his traps. He’d warned them not to come any closer, but that had only spurred Yunfa’s curiosity. Thinking Ruth was hiding something naughty, she’d ignored his warning and rushed forward. And in doing so, she’d triggered his trap and been grazed by a plethora of deadly weapons.

“You apologized, right?”

“Of course I did. Even if it’s not my fault, a guy can’t ever let a girl cry. Besides, it’s partially my fault Yunfa had to go through something so embarrassing, so I’ll keep apologizing until she forgives me.”

“I-I see... Damn, you’re even manlier than I am.”

That’s probably one of his older brother’s teachings too, huh? Marshal wondered what kind of person Oscar was while he watched Ruth dismantle his traps. Most of the village’s residents, Marshal included, hadn’t actually met him yet. Meanwhile, Mikaela managed to get Yunfa cleaned up and calmed down, so the whole group moved to the dining hall to continue their conversation.

“Ruth... If you ever tell Naiz-sama what happened here, I’ll kill you.”

“G-Gotcha. I promise not to tell.”

Blushing slightly, Yunfa glared at Ruth. She knew she was at fault for ignoring Ruth’s warning, so she’d already accepted his apology and forgiven him. But even so, she needed to make sure Naiz never found out about that incident.

Besides, half the reason she'd accepted his apology was that he'd gotten down on one knee and begged her to forgive him while all the adults were watching. She'd been so embarrassed she'd said yes just to get him to stop.

Ruth's esteemed older brother, Oscar, had taught him that when he apologized to a girl, he had to get on his knees, look her in the eyes, and apologize with all the sincerity he could muster. However, to most of the girls watching, it had looked more like Ruth was proposing than apologizing. At that moment, the older women had all realized that Ruth would be a natural ladykiller when he grew up. They quickly began thinking of ways to seal Ruth's powers before they blossomed, while also speculating on whether or not his mentor, Oscar, was also a natural much the same.

Unfortunately, while Yunfa had forgiven Ruth, she was still embarrassed. Currently, she was hiding in Susha's arms, her tiny body curled up into a ball. Susha patted Yunfa's back comfortingly.

"Cheer up, Yunfa," Mikaela said and held out one of the snacks she always kept handy. However, Yunfa just groaned and retreated further into Susha's embrace. At a loss for what to do, Mikaela eventually decided to sell out her leader in order to improve Yunfa's mood.

"Don't worry, Yunfa. When Miledi first joined the Liberators, she had an embarrassing episode too!"

"Huh?"

Everyone's eyes widened in surprise.

"Hold on, you're not supposed to—" Marshal stuttered, but Mikaela was a friend to children first and foremost. Her loyalty to Miledi came second.

"I'll spare you the details for the sake of her honor, but it was one hell of an incident, let me tell you."

"I-I see. So even Miledi-oneesan wet herself... But that doesn't make it any less embarrassing that I did it too!"

"No see, Miledi's secret was way more embarrassing than yours ever could be. You see, for a time there were rumors that a ghost haunted the village streets at night. People heard mysterious panting late at night, and attributed it

to a ghost.”

“A-A ghost?”

Yunfa and Corrin paled. Even Susha covered her mouth in shock.

“Seriously, stop it! If you say any more, you’ll be betraying Miledi!” Marshal shouted. But Mikaela couldn’t be stopped. She really enjoyed talking about Miledi’s youth.

“But in truth, the panting belonged to Miledi! You see, that girl would sneak out every night and do exercises that were supposed to make your boobs grow bigger! Only, she never realized people could hear her panting.”

Yunfa and Ruth burst out laughing. Susha snickered as well, while Corrin pulled a face. Kind as she was, she couldn’t help but sympathize with Miledi.

“Anyway, you know what else—”

The children avidly listened as Mikaela regaled them with tales of Miledi’s dark past. Eventually, Yunfa muttered, “If Miledi-oneesan did all that, then maybe what I did isn’t that bad after all...”

It seemed Mikaela’s stories had done the trick, as Yunfa was feeling a lot better. Mikaela’s stories grew more and more damning, and after a while, Marshal cut her off before she spilled something that would really make Miledi cry if she knew the kids knew.

“B-By the way, do you have any stories of Oscar’s childhood mishaps?”

In a way, Marshal was just as cruel as Mikaela since he was using Oscar as a scapegoat for Miledi.

“Hm? Well, if I had to say, he got called a loser because he was hiding his powers. He’s so cool, that’s the only thing I can think of!”

“Yeah, he never did those kinds of embarrassing things.”

In Corrin’s mind, Miledi was already a failure who’d embarrassed herself far too often.

“Come on, there’s gotta be something, right?”

Ruth and Corrin exchanged glances. As they struggled to think of something,

Marshal added, “Surely he’s done *something* embarrassing.”

As far as Marshal was concerned, there was no such thing as a boy with an innocent childhood. Eventually, Ruth did come up with something, but it wasn’t the dark past Marshal was expecting.

“Come to think of it, there is one weird thing.”

“Oh, do tell.”

“We lived in the slums, so bad guys would always try to pick fights with us. But every time they did, he would take them to a back alley, and after a while, the bad guys would come back out and apologize and everything. He’d like, made them into good guys.”

The two adults fell silent.

“Yeah, that was really surprising. There was this one guy who called me a shitty brat, but after he had a talk with him, the guy started calling me Lady Corrin. It was actually kinda scary.”

He totally threatened them, didn’t he?

“Oh, and every time I visited his house, there would be different girls there.”

“Oh yeah! Usually, whenever he was out, there’d be girls waiting around outside his house. And whenever I mentioned he was my brother, they’d start giving me snacks and pocket money and stuff.”

“They changed every month or so, too. Whenever it looked like it was a rich girl, we’d all take turns going to his house so we could get free money.”

Ruth and Corrin grinned at each other. *You do realize those rich women were trying to get with your brother, and you just sold him out, right?* Marshal lamented. The group continued to pass the time by swapping stories about Oscar and Miledi.

Ten days later.

“Hm? O-kun, Nacchan, we got a letter from the Liberators back home...” Miledi said as she pointed up to the bird soaring toward them. It was Cream, carrying a letter in its beak as usual. The bird alighted near them and Miledi took the letter out of its pouch. Oscar and Naiz gathered around her and the

three of them read the letter together. Normally, they loved reading letters from the kids, but this time the contents were anything but enjoyable.

“Miledi-oneesan, I heard from Mikaela-sensei that you used to do exercises to make your boobs grow. Are you still doing them? Do they work?”

“Oscar-oniisan. I heard from Ruth that you’re good at breaking people. Especially men. Is that true?”

“Miledi-san, is it true you like erotic novels? Do you have a huge collection?”

“Oscar, my teacher said the girls who used to hang out at your place were all your lovers. Is that true? Marshal said it was amazing you could make so many different women fall for you.”

It was obvious from what the kids had written that they’d spilled Miledi and Oscar’s secrets to each other. Both of them ignored Naiz, who was backing away slowly

and put the letter back into its envelope with trembling hands.

“Mikaelaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Ruuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuth!”

They simultaneously shouted the names of the ones who’d betrayed them.

She’s a Siscon

“Stooooooooooooop! Meru-nee, you suck!”

A few weeks had passed since Andika had sunk, and the residents were getting used to living on an island of ships. The past few days, Miledi’s screams had become a staple on this replacement island.

“Oh my, such naughty words. A naughty girl like you deserves to be punished, don’t you think, Miledi-chan?” Meiru said as she pinned Miledi’s arms behind her back, and played with her cheeks. A flush spread across Meiru’s cheeks as she watched Miledi struggle to break free. There was a sadistic undercurrent to her gentle smile as she basked in Miledi’s cries. At this point, everyone had gotten so used to Meiru bullying Miledi that no one butt in even when Miledi

begged for help.

There was, however, one girl who always came to watch the spectacle. Though she didn't seem to be enjoying it necessarily. In fact, she seemed positively annoyed. Sulking, the girl in question trotted up to Meiru.

"Nee-sama."

"My, Diene. What is it?"

"Diene-chan, help me!"

Diene ignored Miledi's cries and said, "If you want to play with someone's cheeks, please play with mine!"

She squeezed her eyes shut and spread her arms wide. Her pose was an odd mixture of determination and resignation.

"U-Um, Diene? It's not what you think. I'm not really bullying Miledi-chan..." Meiru hurriedly made excuses for herself. She didn't want her beloved sister to think she was a bully. Even if it was the truth.

"Take that, you bully! How does it feel, Meru-nee? Knowing that your only sister thinks you bully people? You mad? Are you, Meru—"

"Please shut up, Miledi-san!"

"Oh, uh, okay. Sorry... Wait, what?" Miledi had thought Diene had come to save her, but it seemed that wasn't the case. In fact, Miledi had never heard the kindhearted Diene say "shut up" before. Something was strange.

"Nee-sama!"

"Y-Yes?"

Even Meiru was a little taken aback by Diene's aggressive attitude. A hint of desperation entered Diene's voice and she shouted, "My cheeks are soft too! I'm sure they'll be able to satisfy you, nee-sama!"

"I'm sorry, I'm not quite sure I follow."

"Bully me, nee-sama!"

"I think you need to calm down, Diene."

Diene was shouting so loudly that they were starting to attract attention. For once, Meiru looked nonplussed. She cast Miledi aside and worriedly knelt down in front of Diene. Miledi slumped to the ground, looking like a woman who'd just been abandoned by her abusive boyfriend.

"How can she treat me like this," Miledi whimpered to herself. However, no one paid her any mind.

"Umm, Diene? You can't tell people you want them to bully you. Why would you even think that?"

If there was some dark trauma bothering Diene, Meiru knew it was her job to fix it. Diene bit her lip, and after a brief moment of silence, replied.

"Because you're bullying Miledi-san every day. She might call you Meru-nee, but I'm your real sister, and you don't even bully me."

"Of course not, I could never do anything to you that you wouldn't like, Diene."

"But you're fine with doing things *I* don't like, huh!?" Miledi screamed. Once again, everyone ignored her.

"I wouldn't hate it at all! I want you to hug me from behind and squeeze my cheeks like you do to Miledi-san! It's not fair that she gets to hog you all the time!"

Meiru nodded in understanding. *I see now, she wants me to pay attention to her too, and not just Miledi-chan...* Her lips curled up into a dopey grin. Her sister's jealousy was so cute that she couldn't maintain her facade.

"Oh Diene, you're just so cute!"

As requested, Meiru circled around Diene, hugged her, and started playing with her cheeks. Her siscon tendencies had come to the fore. However, Diene and Miledi possessed fundamentally different personalities. While it was possible to treat Miledi as a joke character, the same couldn't be said of Diene. Which was why, in time, Meiru's rough treatment of Diene's face devolved into loving caresses before long. She stopped pinning Diene's arms as well, and just hugged her normally. As expected, Diene wasn't satisfied with this.

“Nee-sama, you have to be rougher!”

“Oh my,” Meiru muttered, completely at a loss for what to do.

“Gufufufu. Diene-chan, I never knew you had such weird fetishes. If you like pain so much I can—Owww. Meru-nee, that hurts! I’m sorry, I’m sorry, just stop!”

Meiru pulled Miledi’s cheeks as far as they would go as punishment for insulting her precious sister. Crying, Miledi desperately apologized. Seeing how easily Meiru hurt Miledi, Diene once again felt left out. She disentangled herself from Meiru and started shivering.

“O-Oh my. Diene, what’s wrong?” Meiru didn’t stop torturing Miledi even as she asked that question.

“Waaah... Even though *I’m* your real sister, you’re only ever paying attention to Miledi-san! Nee-sama, you cheater!” Diene whined as she dashed into the ship’s cabin.

“D-Diene! You’re mistaken! It’s not what you think!” Meiru responded in a rather cliche manner. Then, she chased after Diene, looking like a husband who’d just been caught cheating. As expected, she didn’t even spare a second thought for Miledi, who she’d abandoned.

That evening, Diene came to visit Miledi.

“Miledi-san, I know this is presumptuous of me to ask, but how do I become a little sister like you?”

The fact that she was asking her rival for advice instead of getting jealous showed just how forgiving Diene was at heart. Smiling at her forthright honesty, Miledi scratched her head and tried to think of some useful tips. After a few seconds, a lightbulb went off in her head. Had Oscar or Naiz been present, they would have warned Diene not to listen to Miledi when she looked like that.

“Well, you see, there isn’t just one way to be a good little sister.”

“Wh-What does that mean?”

“There are types of sisters. Both you and I belong to different types, so learning my techniques won’t help you at all. It’s like a swordsman trying to

learn magic!”

“I see now!”

The truth struck Diene like a bolt of lightning.

“Please teach me what kind of little sister I should aspire to be, Miledi-san. I want Nee-sama to notice me.”

“Fufufu, very well, your passion has moved me. I shall impart to you the grand wisdom of little sisters.”

There was no stopping Miledi now.

The next morning, Diene went to see Meiru. The pirate captain had been up all night, worried that Diene might hate her now.”

“Good morning, Nee-sama.”

“Diene! Good morning. About what you said yesterday...” Meiru wanted to resolve the misunderstanding as soon as possible, but Diene held out a hand to stop her. She concentrated for a few seconds, then gave Meiru the most charming smile the world had ever seen.

“Nee-sama, I looooooooooooooooooooooove you!” Diene exclaimed as she jumped into Meiru’s arms and planted a kiss onto her cheek. Then, she pulled back and observed Meiru’s reaction. For some reason, Meiru’s smile had gone stiff.

“Thank you, Diene. I love—”

Before she could get out the “you too,” Meiru collapsed, blood gushing from her nostrils.

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa, Nee-sama!?”

“There’s no better way to die,” Meiru muttered as she lost consciousness, a dopey smile still plastered to her face. Other pirates burst in upon hearing the commotion, and when they saw Meiru drowning in a pool of her own blood, they also screamed.

“Cap’nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!”

Miledi watched from a distance, snickering to herself. Naturally, when Meiru

found out she was behind all this, Miledi's laughter soon turned into screaming. A few hours later, Meiru held both Diene and Miledi in her arms, though Miledi had lost consciousness from the incessant teasing. Needless to say, Meiru treasured both of her little sisters equally, just in different ways.

Searching for my Beloved Synergist

Three people stood in front of a small village inn that stood at the edge of the Crimson Desert. Two guys and one girl. The guys looked like hardened adventurers and were both creeping up on thirty. One had his hair cropped short, while another had an unruly mop of it. Standing between them was the girl, who at first glance looked like a simple villager. She was dressed in traveler's garb and had striking indigo hair, which she'd bound in a short ponytail. Her eyes were small and cute.

"Good afternoon."

The girl flashed the innkeeper a charming smile as she walked into the building. She looked so cute that she'd make for a perfect poster girl for any establishment.

"Welcome, travelers. Looking for a place to stay?"

The innkeeper, Kantas, stroked his voluminous mustache and smiled amicably at his guests.

"Actually, we're looking for someone, sir. Have you seen anyone who looks like this?"

"Oh, on a search, are ya? Must be tough, having to look for people at your age, young lady. Let's see who yer looking for."

Kantas figured the two adventurers flanking her were probably guards she'd hired. He leaned forward and looked at the poster the girl held out. The picture on it was surprisingly detailed, and there was even a field of roses filling the background. The man on the poster looked on the young side. He had a refined air about him and wore a pair of black spectacles over his sparkling eyes.

"W-Wow, you sure can draw, young lady."

“No, I’m nowhere near good enough! This picture doesn’t even bring out a tenth of Oscar-san’s overwhelming eminence! In fact, I’m ashamed to have ever drawn something so unflattering!”

“I-I see. My apologies.”

Kantas was so shocked by her outburst that he started using more polite speech.

“Don’t you think you’re exaggerating a little there?”

“Well, Aisha-chan does think awfully highly of Oscar.”

The girl was none other than Aisha, the waitress of the restaurant in Velnika that Oscar used to frequent. And the two adventurers with her his friends from the capital. The man with the cropped hair was Losere, while the man with the mop head was Scardy. The two of them sighed and exchanged glances. According to Aisha, Oscar had given her a tearful farewell on the eve of his departure, but she knew he wouldn’t be able to bear the loneliness, and so she’d set out to search for him and support him in his solitary quest. Of course, all of this was part of Aisha’s delusions and hadn’t actually happened.

She’d been hunting for him for a few months now, and Losere and Scardy had gotten used to her frequent rants about how amazing Oscar was. She’d roped them into helping her in her quest by begging them in tears, and at this point, both of them were completely disillusioned by her.

Incidentally, Aisha’s job was Artist, which was why she could draw so well. Apparently, she hadn’t been aware of her talents until her love for Oscar had awoken them. Or at least, that was what she said. And finally, after countless dead ends, she’d managed to catch Oscar’s trail.

“Hmm, can’t say I’ve seen anyone around with such sparkly eyes, but...I think I remember those glasses. Actually, I think that guy stayed here.”

“You’ve gotta tell me more!” Aisha leaned closer to Kantas as he shouted those words. Most guys would have loved to have a cute young girl come onto them, but Kantas just backed away. Not because he didn’t find Aisha pretty, but because her attitude was scaring him. Her eyes were bloodshot, and she was panting in excitement.

“S-Sure. I’m pretty sure he stopped by around two months ago.”

“Two months ago. Did he say where he was headed?”

“Yeah, he said he was going to the desert. He was traveling with this pretty lady companion and—”

“Was that girl Miledi-san!?”

“Oh, yeah, probably. I don’t remember her name, but that sounds about right.”

Overwhelmed, Kantas straightened his back and responded as best he could.

“I knew it, the two of them are together! I can’t believe thy eloped... No, wait, they can’t have! I’m sure there’s another reason why they’re traveling together!”

Sweating profusely, Kantas timidly asked, “Um, young lady. May I ask what your relation is to that bespectacled man?”

“I’m his wife.”

“Like hell you are.”

“Stop spreading lies about Oscar. You’ll ruin his good name.”

Losere and Scardy stopped Aisha before she could slander Oscar further. The longer this search dragged on, the scarier her obsession was becoming. However, Aisha was a maiden in love. She wouldn’t be deterred.

“Innkeeper, Oscar-san and Miledi-san didn’t share a room did they?” Aisha’s eyes glimmered with a fierce light as she asked that question. On the other hand, Losere and Scardy were curious if Oscar had finally ascended the stairway to adulthood, so they stared at Kantas with unbridled anticipation. Unable to withstand the pressure, Kantas confessed the truth.

“Th-They... did.”

Aisha slammed her fist onto the countertop with such force that the wood creaked. If she’d hit it any harder, it might have splintered.

“Give me the same room they stayed in!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” Kantas obediently yelped as he handed over the room key.

Naturally, Losere and Scardy rented out a separate room.

“Sorry about that, innkeeper. Girls in love are like crazed beasts.”

“You two must have it rough...”

The two adventurers and the innkeeper shared a tired smile.

The next morning, Aisha and her escorts plunged into the desert. After numerous close shaves with death, they finally arrived in the city of Chaldea. There, they learned from an apprentice irak merchant where Oscar had gone.

“Oscar-san? Yeah, I know him. See this irak? She’s called Suzanne. Her old owner, Naiz-san sold her to us because he was joining Oscar-san on their journey.”

“This Naiz-san is a man, correct?”

“Huh? Of course he is, I just called him ‘he,’ didn’t I? He’s as manly as they come, too. I think he’s a soldier. That’s probably why Oscar tried so passionately to persuade him to join them on their journey. Oscar-san seemed really happy that Naiz-san was finally joining them.”

“What... did you say?” Aisha looked as though she’d been struck by lightning as he asked the man to repeat himself.

“I know Oscar didn’t go out with too many girls, but I didn’t think he was actually gay!” Losere muttered as he exchanged a glance with Scardy. Had Oscar been present, he probably would have asked the young merchant apprentice to pick his words more carefully.

“Um, was there this really pretty blonde girl with them?”

“Oh, you mean Miledi-san? Yeah, she was there. She was saying something about how the three of them would have so much fun now.”

If the apprentice had added ‘on their journey’ after that, there wouldn’t be any misunderstandings. However, Aisha nearly fainted as she thought the merchant boy was implying the three of them were having heated threesomes every day.

“First the slender Oscar-san, now this muscular Naiz-san... How far will you fall, Miledi-san? And Oscar-san, you already have me, so why are you turning to

men now!?”

As expected, his words caused a very unfortunate misunderstanding. Naturally, imaging such acts was too stimulating for a pure young maiden, so Aisha eventually collapsed from a massive nosebleed, causing the merchant boy to back away and her two adventurer guards to drag her to an inn to rest.

A few days later, Aisha and her party arrived in the town of Liv. They were once again able to find information on Oscar, this time from a certain restaurant. However, this time, things went differently. When Aisha unveiled her glowing bronze statue of Oscar to the shop owner, he screamed.

“Th-Those glasses!? I-I have no idea who you’re asking about!”

The man tried to feel his shop. However, Aisha blocked him off and used her intimidation skills to force the owner into talking. He explained how during their stay, Oscar and Miledi had attracted a lot of attention. They were both good-looking and foreign, and it seemed to everyone that they made for a harmonious couple. When he’d mentioned that last part, Aisha had slammed her fist into the innocent restaurant owner’s wall. The cracks that formed represented the cracks in her own heart. Afterward, the owner went on to explain how the two of them had started getting close to a pair of local sisters. At that, Aisha stamped her foot so hard the stone floor cracked. Finally, the owner went on to explain how Miledi had kicked a bishop to death, and Oscar had slaughtered a bunch of templar knights. At that, Aisha finally fell silent.

“Huh, what do you mean?”

The owner tried to escape while she was still confused, but Aisha once again trapped him. This time, even Losere and Scardy wanted to know the details.

“Holy shit... Oscar, you’re insane. What’re you thinking, turning into a heretic?”

“H-Hey Aisha. I think it’d be better for you if you returned to the capital,” Loser suggested. His argument was a logical one. However, Aisha spent the rest of the day mulling over what she’d heard and eventually came to the conclusion that...

“It’s the church who’s at fault! We need to hurry up and find him so that we

can help him!”

“Why did it come to this...”

Losere and Scardy attempted to escape their charge’s clutches, but Aisha wasn’t about to let them run. She had plenty of blackmail material on them that, if she made public, would ruin their careers forever. They were now faced with the choice of abandoning their jobs, or continuing to search for Oscar and hope that the excuse of “We’re looking for the heretic so we can punish him,” would fly with the clergy.

The choice was clear. The group obtained information that Oscar had traveled west to the ocean and headed to the port city of Epona. There, they learned plenty of other things that caused more misunderstandings with Aisha, such as the fact that Miledi had stripped, Oscar

had grabbed her by her kneesocks, and that Miledi had then been eaten.

“Come, Losere, Scardy! It’s time to depart!”

“Someone please save us...”

“I wish I had the courage to just tell her no...”

Aisha continued her quest to find Oscar, unaware that she’d just sailed by the ship he was on. It would be much later that Aisha learned Oscar had long since left Andika, and hurriedly returned to the mainland. No one, not even god, knew if she would ever catch up to her beloved Synergist.

They Exist in Every Age

“Haaah... Haaah... That was close.”

A young girl, probably only ten years old, ran through a forest. Her breathing was labored and her face pale. She was clearly exhausted. Her dirty brown pants were ripped in places, and her hair had leaves and twigs stuck in it. Her white blouse was stained with dirt and dust, and the robe she’d worn over it was shredded to the point where it no longer retained its original shape. Were it not for the velvet ribbon tying her blonde hair, anyone would think she was a street rat.

“We’ve spotted the target! She’s a hundred and twenty meters out!”

“They found me!?”

A barrage of fireballs shot through the trees, heading straight for the girl.

“Spatial Severance!”

A black sphere appeared in front of the girl, distorting the fireballs’ trajectory toward it and absorbing them all.

“Release!”

The fifty or so fireballs it absorbed were compressed, and then shot back out toward their casters. They obliterated any trees in their path and hit the ground around the mages, sending up explosions of dirt and rock. The shockwaves sent the girl’s pursuers flying backward.

“Ah...”

Stumbling and barely conscious, the girl bit her lip and kept running. However, her legs were at their limits. Her pace flagged, and her pursuers began to catch up to her. In the distance, she heard the sound of running water.

“Guess it’s all or nothing!”

Despite the levity in her voice, the girl was desperate. She ran with all her might, and finally cleared the endless expanse of trees. In front of her was a deep gorge. The girl turned her back to the gorge and looked into the forest. Her pursuers were close enough that she could see them through the trees. They had dark skin and pointed ears, signaling that they were demons. Furthermore, they were all wearing matching uniforms and were extremely coordinated. One of them spotted the girl and shouted, “You damn brat! I’ll catch you if it’s the last thing I do!”

“What was thaaat? I can’t hear youuuuuu!” Miledi cupped her hands to her ears and taunted the demon. She could obviously hear him, but the way she said that was just so annoying that the demon couldn’t help but get riled up.

“You’re fucking dead!”

His goal had changed from capturing her to killing her.

“Commander, I understand how you feel, but we can’t do that! Our orders were to capture her alive! I want to kill her too, but we really can’t!” one of his subordinates shouted. Meanwhile, the girl had finished preparing her final spell, and she grinned at the demons.

“Hellblaze!”

A wave of fire shot out from the girl’s hands. The demons skidded to a halt, stunned. However, they quickly got over their shock and deployed their barriers. And while their barriers managed to deflect the flames, they only served to keep them safe. The forest, on the other hand, was burning quite nicely.

“Good luck putting out those fires, demons! You’ve gotta take care of nature, right?”

The arsonist winked at the demons and fell backward down the ravine. As these demons were soldiers, they couldn’t afford to ignore a fire threatening to burn down a huge swathe of their land. As much as it irked them to give up the chase, they had no choice but to focus on the problem at hand. It pissed them off even more that the girl had created a fire *just* big enough that all of them were needed to put it out before it spread, but no bigger. Trembling with rage, the demon pursuers shouted, “Damn you, you braaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!”

They then quickly got to work on putting the fire out. Meanwhile, the girl who’d leaped off landed into the river flowing below and sputtered to the surface. She’d just barely survived that encounter. Consciousness hazy, she left the current carry her away from her foes. And after a few minutes of floating, she squeezed out the last of her strength and swam to the riverbank and crawled onto shore, too exhausted to even stand. Drained beyond belief, the girl fainted the moment she escaped the water.

“Belle...” she muttered in her sleep.

Ten minutes later, someone came across the unconscious girl.

“Oh my, this is terrible! Miss! Are you alright!?” the girl who found her yelled.

Huh, where am I? Am I alive? It’s so warm, and it feels like I’m floating...

Eyes still closed, the girl tried to make sense of her surroundings. She

possessed far greater mental fortitude than anyone her age should. After collecting as much information as she could from sound and touch alone, she slowly opened her eyes.

A monster stared down at her. It had a terrifying, horribly lacerated face, no eyebrows, angry eyes, and thick lips. The girl's eyes widened and she screamed.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

She'd never screamed this loudly before. For some reason, the monster staring down at her screamed back at her and leaped backward. The monster's well-toned biceps flexed as it hugged itself. It seemed the monster had been just as surprised by the girl as she was by it. The strangely effeminate monster had dark skin and pointed ears and was wearing a very cute dress. Upon taking in its full appearance, Miledi once again screamed, "Aaaaaaaaaaah, it's a monster!"

"Who're you calling a hideous, unspeakable, horrifying, disgusting monster, huh!?"

The monster's reply was so loud the walls shook, terrifying the girl so much that she fainted again.

Ten minutes later, she opened her eyes once more. This time she had the presence of mind not to scream at the monster—or rather, demon. According to the demon, they were neither male nor female, but a new gender entirely. Incidentally, their name was Jingbelle. Jingbelle explained how they'd happened to find the girl collapsed on the ground, and the girl bowed in thanks.

"Thank you so much for saving me, Jingbelle-oneesan. My name's Miledi. I'm just your normal everyday genius mage."

"My! What a splendid introduction!"

This was the first time anyone had been impressed with Miledi's introduction. *This Jingbelle person gets it. Even though they're almost bald, they've braided what hair they have left into a ribbon, so I guess I should have known they had good taste.*

"Hey Jingbelle-san, why'd you save me?"

Jingbelle was a demon. They should have had no reason to help a human like Miledi. In response, Jingbelle told Miledi their story. Apparently, even though they were a demon, Jingbelle had no aptitude for magic, and because of that, they'd been ostracized from demon society. Even if Jingbelle didn't go into the details of the persecution they'd suffered, Miledi could tell just from their expression that they'd had a hard life. But as a result of their upbringing, Jingbelle had come to realize that judging people by their race was a foolish thing, and had begun training to get back at the society that had discarded them. Eventually, they grew so strong that they could compete with mages using physical strength alone. And at that point, they'd grown even more disillusioned with their people and left. It was because they didn't judge people based on race that they'd decided to save Miledi. After all, human or demon, a girl in trouble deserved help.

"I see... Thank you so much, Jingbelle-san. I wish I could repay you, but I really need to go."

Miledi then explained her situation to Jingbelle. She'd lost to a certain nun in a fight and had come to the demon country seeking strength. Demons were known for being the strongest mages on the continent, and she'd been hoping that one of them would be willing to tutor her. But when she got to the demon country, she'd been attacked before she'd even had a chance to explain herself to the demons. Irritated, she'd started taunting them, saying things like, "Hahaha, you guys can't even catch a single human girl? Pathetiiic!" or "Hey, how does it feel, getting the tables turned on you by a child? You mad? Huh?" or "I'm just a normal genius mage, nothing suspicious about me!"

She kept defeating the demons the kingdom sent after her, so eventually, the demon lord mobilized the army, putting Miledi in a tight spot.

"You can't be so reckless, Miledi-chan. You're still so young!" Jingbelle leaned in close as they said that, and Miledi awkwardly apologized.

"As long as you understand. Regardless, you're not leaving the house until you're fully healed. Don't worry, despite how I may look, I'm quite strong."

"Huh? But Jingbelle-san, I thought you couldn't use magic?"

Jingbelle replied with a straight face, "If I can't rely on magic, I just have to

rely on my muscles."

In truth, Jingbelle's pecs of steel and fists of fury were powerful enough to repel intermediate level magic on their own. Jingbelle could easily defeat an entire battalion of mages. *You know what, maybe Jingbelle-san's a monster after all. Belle, the world's a strange place.*

Years later, Miledi finished telling her comrades about that very tale. She pointed to the dress she was wearing and said, "Back then, I used to wear really boring clothes. Jingbelle-san said it was heresy for a cute girl like me to not wear clothes just as cute and made this dress for me. Apparently, sewing dresses was their hobby. They even wrote down instructions on how to replicate this pattern, so I can just show them to any tailor and get copies made if I need them."

Miledi did a little twirl, showing off her admittedly cute skirt. Upon hearing the origin story of Miledi's favorite dress, Oscar and Naiz both thought to themselves: *Who cares about the dress!? I wanna hear more about Jingbelle-san!*

It seemed a being who defied common sense lived in a tiny corner of one of the demon's forests.

The Mascot Killer

"*Sniffle... Sob...* The ocean's scary... *Sniffle...*" Miledi sobbed quietly in a restaurant situated in a quiet corner of the port city of Epona. Oscar and Naiz both gave her looks of pity.

"Cheer up, Miledi. Today just wasn't your day. I'm sure the next time you go for a swim, it'll go much better."

"Do you really think that, Oscar?"

Before Oscar could reply, Naiz interjected.

"How many times have you tried to swim only to be swallowed up by sea monsters and spit back out? There's no way this is a coincidence, Miledi."

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Miledi's sobs grew louder and she

flopped down onto the table and thought back to all the horrific experiences she'd had at sea. Like Naiz had said, every single time she'd gone into the water, monsters had flocked to her. They'd stripped her swimsuit off, swallowed her whole, and covered her entire body with sticky saliva. For Miledi, who'd been looking forward to playing in the ocean more than anything, this had been a huge blow.

"I mean, you've got a point Naiz, but still..." Oscar muttered. While he didn't disagree with Naiz, he still wanted to cheer Miledi up somehow. Incidentally, the reason he was so desperate was because Miledi's whining had prevented them from being able to order, and he was extremely hungry. He didn't care how it happened, he just wanted Miledi to stop crying.

"Don't worry, Miledi. Next time Naiz and I will keep an eye out for monsters. We'll kill them before they get close, so you can swim all you want."

"*Sniffle...* Will it really go that well?"

"Of course it will. Trust us."

"You sure?" Miledi asked, acting uncharacteristically pessimistic. Her eyes were red from crying, and she lacked her usual baseless confidence. She kept shooting Oscar worried glances, still not convinced it would be fine. Normally, any guy would feel an overwhelming urge to protect her when they saw a girl acting so frail, but Oscar was not just any guy.

"Oh, give it a rest already, Miledi!"

Miledi's eyes widened in surprise and her unspilt tears went back up her tear ducts. Oscar adjusted his glasses and added, "Stop trying to act all cute! What happened to your normal annoying as hell self!? All that happened is you nearly died a few times, so what's there to get this depressed over!? Pathetic! Don't you realize your annoyingness is the core of your identity!? Without it, you're not Miledi anymore!"

"O-kun?" Miledi said as her eyes narrowed in anger, and a vein pulsed in her forehead. The other guys in the restaurant all glared at Oscar.

How dare he call her annoying right after she narrowly escaped the jaws of death!?

“Now Miledi, annoy me. If you’re not being annoying, you’re not you. In fact, your name is synonymous with annoying.”

“Hey, Oscar if you—” Miledi started using Oscar’s name, so she was obviously fuming. However, Oscar was unfazed. He fearlessly raised a fist and gave a rousing conclusion to his speech.

“Go back to be being our annoying mood maker. I want to see that stupid, arrogant grin of yours again. Without it, you’re not Miledi. Acting all meek and depressed like a normal girl just doesn’t suit you—”

Heavensfall!”

Oscar squealed as a wall of gravity crushed him. He fell off his chair and was flat on the ground, unable to resist the pressure. Miledi ignored Oscar and turned to Naiz with a sweet smile.

“I’m hungry! Nacchan, let’s order something!”

“S-Sure. By the way, Miledi, Oscar’s starting to lose consciousness. He’s foaming at the mouth and everything...” Naiz tried to suggest Miledi calm down, but she was having none of it. Oscar’s life was only saved because one of the waitresses started screaming when she saw his prone body on the floor. But though Miledi released her Heavensfall, Oscar remained unconscious.

“A-Are you okay!?” the young waitress screamed as she ran over to Oscar.

“Leave him alone, he’s fine,” Miledi muttered.

“H-He doesn’t look fine at all! He’s foaming at the mouth! Ah, he twitched! Get a hold of yourself, sir!”

The waitress lifted Oscar’s head up and rested it in her lap. What a kind girl. Her dark brown hair was tied up with a scrunchie, and she looked like the epitome of a nurturing young woman. Plus, she had quite a sizable bust. When she knelt down to nurse Oscar, her two melons quivered, attracting the gaze of every man in the room.

“Ugh, where am I...”

“Ah, thank goodness you’re awake! Should I call for a healer?”

Oscar stiffened up for a second when he saw an unfamiliar face, half-hidden

by boobs, looking worriedly down at him. But a second later, he grasped the situation and relaxed.

“Oh, sorry for worrying you. I’m fine, though. Thank you so much for looking after me...” Oscar said as he got to his feet, brushed himself off, and bowed to the waitress. His impeccable manners left the young waitress flustered.

“O-Oh, I didn’t do much...”

“No need to be humble. Your kindness is much appreciated. Allow me to give you my thanks. Someone as beautiful as you must surely be this establishment’s mascot?”

“I-I’m not...really...”

Oscar flashed the waitress a dazzling smile. Still sitting, she covered her cheeks with her hands as a blush spread across her face. Oscar held out a hand to help her up. Feeling like a noble lady being escorted to a ball, the young waitress took Oscar’s hand and gracefully got to her feet. Oscar then tried to pull his hand back, but the waitress wouldn’t let go. It was then that Oscar realized everyone in the restaurant was staring at him. His two comrades appeared to be glaring at him as well.

Huh? After a brief moment of confusion, Oscar realized what this scene reminded him of. Back in Velnika, the atmosphere had often been like this whenever he’d helped his favorite restaurant’s mascot, Aisha, out with something. Feeling a little awkward, Oscar yanked his hand back. Naturally, the waitress refused to let go, and as a result, he pulled her closer to her, causing her to grow even more flustered.

“Um... Is something wrong?”

“A-Ah, no! My name is Meenu. I’m nineteen years old and don’t have a boyfriend! Also, my shift ends in an hour!”

No one asked you any of that! Oscar thought. And all of the other patrons, including Miledi and Naiz, were thinking the same thing.

Meenu looked up at Oscar, her eyes twinkling with anticipation. She clearly wanted Oscar to invite her out on a date. However, Oscar fell silent, and he heard a number of people clicking their tongues within the crowd.

“Hey, Nacchan, how come O-kun manages to be popular even after passing out in a restaurant?”

“I guess his looks plus his attitude?”

Oscar’s outfit made him look like a young nobleman, and the fact that he was courteous to everyone, even insignificant waitresses, made him seem approachable and kind. On top of that, he looked both intelligent and handsome.

“Actually, whenever we stay at an inn that has a young girl working there, she always asks me to pass on notes to Oscar.”

“What, I never heard that before!”

“Well, they’re always trying to be secretive about it. I’m thinking before I joined your group, they just went up to his room to give him those notes directly. Everyone’s pretty wary of you, you know that Miledi? They all think you’ve claimed Oscar, so they only make moves whenever you’re not paying attention. A lot of them have asked me about your relationship along with more info on both of you.”

“Wow, I never even noticed! Also, how come all these restaurant and inn mascots know all these high-level strategies anyway!? O-kun’s too popular for his own good!”

Meenu seemed to have overheard Miledi, as she turned to the leader of the Liberators with tears in her eyes. Apparently, while Naiz and Miledi had been having their hushed discussion, Oscar had firmly turned Meenu down. Seeing as she didn’t stand a chance, Meenu focused the brunt of her jealousy and disappointment on Miledi, who she believed was responsible for her defeat.

“Waaah, I can’t believe you’re so close that you call him by nicknames like O-kun... I should have known I never stood a chance! Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Chef, they want three daily specialllllllllls!”

“Oh god, I’m getting deja vu!”

Incidentally, Oscar had placed the order, and he’d been as nonchalant about it as back in Velnika. Seeing the same scene play out again, Miledi quietly muttered, “From now on, I’m calling you the mascot killer.”

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by Ryo Shirakome

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