
#3
ryo shirakome
takayaki
ARIFURETA:
ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU
ZERO
FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST
ZERO

#3

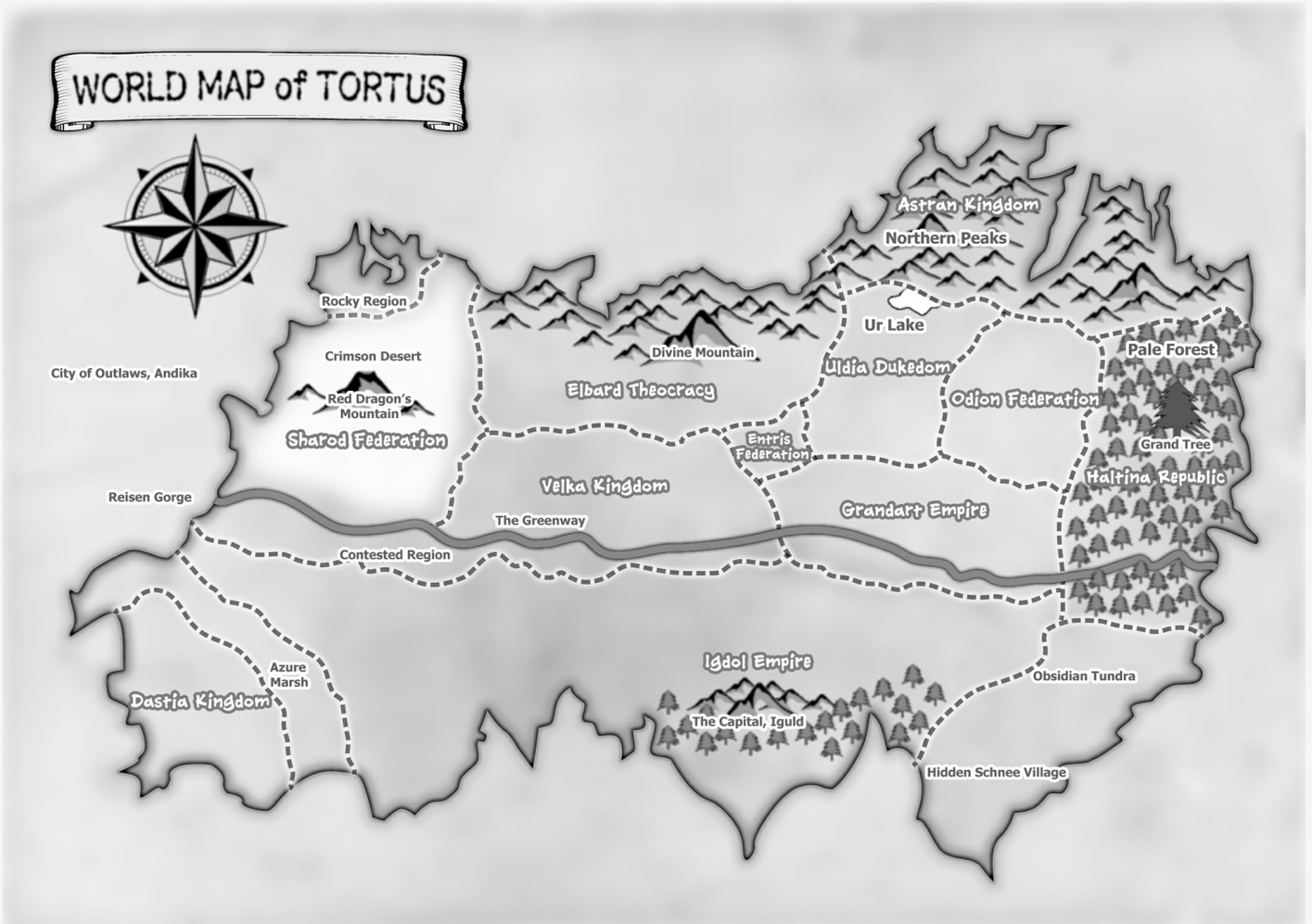


ARIFURETA ZERO: FROM COMMONPLACE TO WORLD'S STRONGEST

ryo shirakome takayaki


MEIRU MELUSINE
"OH MY, WHERE
DO YOU THINK
YOU'RE LOOKING?"


OSCAR ORCUS
MILEDI REISEN
"THANKS, O-KUN."


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

CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter I: The Merry Band of Liberators

Chapter II: A New Ancient Magic User

Chapter III: The Demon Army Vs. The Liberators

Epilogue

Prologue

The dilapidated remains of a hut could be seen in the distance. There were holes in its walls, the foundations were leaning, and wood rotting. The only indication that anyone had once lived there were the bloodstains on the floor. Proof that the family which had returned home with hope in their hearts had met with unspeakable tragedy.

How did this happen?

“Are you going to stand there forever, or what?”

Someone please tell me...

“Are your ears just decorations, huh?”

How did the hope found within despair...

“Hmph. I’ll only say this one more time, so listen well.”

Such arrogance.

“I’m saying I’ll join your little group.”

He really thinks he’s all that, huh?

“I’m like you... a user of ancient magic—”

The man folded his arms. He was wearing a muffler and had a rapier-thin sword at his belt.

“My name’s Vandre Schnee.”

You look like a little mouse. For the first time, an ancient magic user had come to them instead of the other way around. However— “Tch. Hey, four-eyes. What’s with that face? Got a problem with me, huh?”

I get the feeling we’re not going to get along at all.

Chapter I: The Merry Band of Liberators

Rustred rocks spread out as far as the eye could see. They looked like miniature mountains, tapered as they were. Because of their haphazard placement, they'd transformed the area into a labyrinth of stone.

This was the northern tip of the Crimson Desert. Though it had vast deposits of stillstone, which could dampen the flow of mana, it wasn't very populated. Stillstone itself wasn't in high demand. Especially since there were much more accessible stillstone deposits by the Red Dragon's Mountain. Furthermore, the land in the area was barren, with only a few tough desert weeds capable of surviving in the climate. It required crossing an entire desert to reach, adding another reason on the growing list of reasons why no one wanted to come here. But today there were three people in this secluded land that normally only hermits might want to visit.

One was a young man whose glasses were more famous than him, Oscar Orcus. Another was a beautiful, sadistic dagon woman, Meiru Melusine. Lastly —

"So, darling. Can you take care of things here?"

There was a tall, buff... man? His purple hair had been cropped into a mohawk. Furthermore, he was wearing clothes that were possibly even more revealing than Meiru's. His pecs were as exposed as Meiru's breasts.

"I've told you a dozen times, Snowbell... don't call me darling."

"Oh darling, you're so shy."

His face looked like it had come out of Fist of the North Star, and every time he exhaled he unleashed a mini-cyclone. This man, Snowbell, was not the monster of this wasteland, but rather a member of the Liberators. In fact, he was captain of the expeditionary squad, which looked for areas to build more secluded villages.

His special magic, Mirage, allowed him to create large-scale illusions up to

five-hundred meters wide. Those illusions could also be imprinted on mana crystals causing them to last until the mana crystal ran dry. During that time, Snowbell could leave the area and the illusion would keep going. His power was almost as impressive as his appearance. Snowbell's job was not only to find new hidden villages for the Liberators, but also to hide them from prying eyes.

Originally, he'd been part of a circus troupe, and used his magic to perform dazzling stage tricks. But as always, the church had found him. One word from a disgruntled bishop who didn't like his act, and he and his troupe been branded heretics. From there, things had gotten worse and worse. By the time the Liberators had found him, most of his comrades had been killed. The current expedition squad was made up primarily from his surviving circus buddies.

Incidentally, Snowbell had originally been a much more masculine fellow. However, the Liberator who'd saved him had inspired him to go down the path of a drag princess. What exactly had happened between them, no one knew. But Snowbell had come out of the experience a changed man. And right now, he was pinning a tearful Oscar to the wall of a nearby boulder. Meiru grinned at Oscar and said, "Oh my, am I perhaps interrupting something?"

She was quite enjoying this spectacle.

"I'm gonna fucking kill you, Meiru!" Oscar shouted desperately. However, the sadistic pirate princess wouldn't be cowed by such mundane threats.

"Fufu. In that case, I guess I should go back before you get a chance to."

"I'm sorry, I was out of line. Please don't leave me here alone."

Oscar gave in instantly. His Metamorph Chains wound themselves around Meiru's waist as if clinging to her. Meiru's smile grew wider.

Dammit, I picked the wrong person to come with me! Oscar had wanted someone to accompany him because he'd been scared of being alone with Snowbell, but Meiru hadn't been any help at all. She'd been the only one who was free, but she was also the wrong person to ask to guard his chastity.

Mentally cursing Meiru out, Oscar nevertheless knew it was better to have her around than to be alone with Snowbell. He sidled away from Snowbell, doing his best to ignore the fact that Snowbell was staring at his butt. Once he

was free, he got to work. This rocky area was like a small-scale version of the Reisen Gorge, but that was no obstacle for him at his current level. He placed his hand on a nearby boulder wall and said, “Transmute.”

He cast his favorite Synergist spell, and a large hole opened up inside the boulder. Stepping inside, he unleashed a dozen or so Metamorph Chains from his sleeves and had them attach themselves to various points inside the newly-formed cavity. Oscar then turned back and shot Snowbell a questioning glance. Snowbell nodded and started relaying orders.

“Darling, I’d like a skylight here. Considering the path of the sun in this part of the world, it’ll catch the most light. Try to make it as inconspicuous as possible. Add a staircase leading to the second story here. Ventilation shafts should go here and here, but be wary of the angle. Yes, that’s right, just like that. Put a spare bedroom here. I need a slope here as well, so we can escape through the underground waterway in times of emergency.”

Despite his outlandish appearance and demeanor, Snowbell stopped playing around when it was time to work. His expression was dead serious. That was only natural though. He was designing houses for a hidden village. In times of emergency, how well the escape routes were designed would be the deciding factor in whether a family lived or died. Every house needed to be resilient to attacks, and easy to escape from. Snowbell gave it his all because he knew lives depended on him doing a good job.

“Hey, you two. I’m getting bored, so can I go back?”

This was absolutely, one hundred percent, a vital job. Certainly not a job where it was okay for Meiru to carve graffiti into the walls using her water blades. To make matters worse, her art was so horrible it was hard to tell what she was even drawing. And on top of that, she was also using her godlike restoration magic to undo Oscar’s transmutation in places as a way of pranking him.

“Meiru-chan, people are going to be living here, so could you please not draw monsters on the walls?”

“Monsters? But this is a cat. Isn’t it cute?”

Even Snowbell shuddered at that. Oscar threw out a few more of his

Metamorph Chains and restored the graffitied wall to normal in an instant.

“Meiru, I know I’m the one who asked you to come, but could you please calm down?”

“There’s nothing I hate more than being bored.”

“Okay, but even if you went back, what would you do there?”

“Hmm... It is almost noon, so I suppose I could help cook lunch.”

Oscar adjusted his glasses and asked flatly, “Meiru, let’s assume you had a cut of meat in front of you. How would you cook it?”

“Grill it.”

Seriously, that’s all you can think of?

“Aren’t there some other things you should do with it?”

“Boil it?”

“N-No, I mean like something you should do to prepare it.”

“It will become edible if you grill it or boil it.”

There’s gotta be a limit on how savage you can be... At this rate, Oscar was worried she might even say it was okay to eat meat raw. It was obvious from her responses that Meiru had no cooking ability to speak of, meaning if she tried to serve her food to others, it would just end with them screaming in terror. Most likely because she’d managed to infuse her food with a demon god or something.

Naturally, anyone who ate her food would be seeing the river Styx as well. Had it not been for Meiru’s restoration magic, she would have killed most of her pirate crew a dozen times over. In Chris’ case, perhaps a hundred times over.

Incidentally, Meiru was just as bad at cleaning as she was at cooking. According to her, she kept things in places that made sense to her, but in truth, her room was a disorganized mess. Plus, every time she did laundry she ruined clothes, and when she tried to sew she turned slightly ripped clothes into ragged cultist robes. Though Meiru looked like a gentle, caring older sister, in truth she was a sadistic, deadbeat outlaw incapable of doing even the simplest

of household chores. Which meant—

“Even if you go back, you won’t have anything to do.”

You’ll just get in Miledi’s way back there, so the least you could do is stay out of her hair and act as my guard...

Meiru puffed out her cheeks and said, “Is it just me, or have you been looking down on me recently, Oscar-kun?”

Meiru didn’t like the way Oscar had been treating her.

“You’ll regret underestimating me.”

“That sounds like something a villain would say.”

Technically, she was a pirate. A pirate princess, in fact.

“Fine, if that’s how you want it... Torrential Bulwark!”

Suddenly, the house Oscar was transmuting became covered in a dome of water. Oscar and Snowbell watched the dome form, confused.

“You know, water barriers like these are soundproof,” Meiru said with a grin. Realizing what that meant, Oscar shuddered. Snowbell, on the other hand, eyed him hungrily.

“Wait, Meiru!”

“Have fun you two!”

Meiru turned on her heel and wreathed herself in a veil of water before walking out. Oscar desperately reached out for her, but his hand only got halfway before Snowbell grabbed it in a death grip.

“Hiii!” Oscar let out a pathetic scream.

“Darling, shall we do our best together?”

He’s talking about building houses. He’s definitely talking about building houses... Just because he’s panting and has bloodshot eyes and is licking his lips, doesn’t mean he’s thinking about anything sexual.

“Follow me, darling!”

“Wait, I already finished making that bedroom!”

A moment later— Flashes of light and loud booms spilled out from the doors and windows of the unfinished house.

“Like hell I’ll lose here! Corrin, Ruth, give me strength! Uwooooooooooooooooooooh!”

Oscar sounded as though he was about to take part in the most difficult battle of his life.

Nearly a month had passed since that fateful day where the floating city of Andika had sunk to the bottom of the sea and its residents forced to live on a platform of boats chained together. Of the people living in Andika, 600 had chosen to leave their sunken home and join the Liberators. Most of them had been charmed by Miledi’s dazzling charisma.

That was hardly a surprise, considering she had bested not only the Holy Templar Knights, but also the Leviathan that had been slumbering beneath the city for millennia. Watching her legendary battle had reforged the shattered hearts of Andika’s residents and given them the strength to rise against oppression. Others had been hit with a cold hard dose of reality and been reminded that even this distant island wasn’t safe. Everyone had their own reasons, but the fact of the matter was that 600 people who had once fled from oppression had once again been roused to fight it.

After a long journey, those 600 people had been brought here, to this rust-colored wasteland. The area had been considered as a potential site for future Liberator villages for quite some time now. It was a place people avoided and required risking the elements to reach. Furthermore, the boulders created a complex maze, providing natural camouflage for any buildings that might be dug into the rock. Which was precisely why it had been an obvious choice to place another Liberator village.

However, the land was barren. So barren that a few hardy weeds were about the only things that could grow in this lifeless place. Fortunately, it was at the northern tip of the desert, and bordering the ocean. But while maritime people of Andika would be able to make a living through fishing, it wouldn’t be enough to support the population. Meaning it failed to fulfill the most important

condition for a suitable village location—it wasn't self-sufficient.

On the other hand, though, the Liberators' other villages weren't capable of taking an influx of 600 people. If they expanded too much they wouldn't be very hidden, defeating the purpose of putting them in remote locations. Miledi and the others could have split Andika's people across all the scattered villages, but they didn't have the heart to separate friends and families. Especially since they'd only just lost their second home.

In the end, Miledi had been at a loss for what to do. So as always, she'd turned to her reliable partner, Oscar.

"Oh, enlightened man of spectacles! Please prove once more that those glasses of yours are not just for show, and grace us with your wisdom!"

Naturally, Oscar had blinded Miledi for that, and she'd stumbled around like a drunk for a few hours. However, he had given her an answer. After all, he knew that Melusine's pirates had managed to grow crops even atop ships.

"Hmm. Things are progressing smoothly," An old man rasped. Though he was well past his eighties, he looked to be surprisingly fit. He had a thick head of white hair and a wispy white beard. He appraised the land the hidden village would be built on with sharp eyes. What had once been a barren wasteland was now a fertile valley, the soil rich and damp. There were even a few plants sprouting from the earth.

"What do you think, old man Ben? Good enough to grow crops on?" Meiru asked. She'd just finished abandoning, or rather, selling out Oscar.

"What's this? Did you abandon the young lad?"

"Nope, I sold him out!"

"....."

Meiru didn't feel the least bit guilty about what she'd done. Even if she had, she wouldn't have hidden it. That was the pirate queen Meiru Melusine's creed. *First Miledi, now Meiru. The young ladies of this organization sure are a handful.* Ben shot a sympathetic glance in Oscar's direction. Ben was another member of the Liberators and an agricultural wizard. He helped manage the villages' farmlands.

“Soil from the bottom of the sea’s not half bad, lass.”

“Isn’t it? As long as you make sure to take the salt out, it’s usable.”

“A useful life lesson.”

The soil that had suddenly appeared all over the wasteland had indeed been dredged up from the bottom of the ocean. Of course, salt was lethal to most crops. So it would be impossible to grow anything here still. However, Meiru and her pirates had figured a way around that problem after spending so long living on boats. Furthermore, Meiru was an unparalleled genius when it came to water magic. She was capable of sifting out harmful minerals out of the soil with just water. Granted, it had taken her years of experimentation and effort to reach this point.

It was thanks to her abilities that even this wasteland could become habitable though. *Finally, I can be useful!* It had been weighing down on Meiru that, despite having recently joined the Liberators, she was unable to do anything helpful. Incidentally, it had only been with the help of Oscar’s Treasure Trove that Meiru had been able to transport this much soil in the first place. She’d purified the soil, then stored it all in his interdimensional Artifact. Any further fertilization of the soil Ben could do on his own, so after this, Meiru wasn’t even needed.

“I can’t believe you managed to get three harvests done in a single month though. No wonder your job is farmer, Ben.”

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere, lass.”

Why did she even come here... Ah, I suppose she must have been bored. Ben sighed inwardly. Before he could say anything else, he was interrupted by a high-pitched voice.

“Come on, Miledi! What’s the harm? I promise I’ll make myself useful! Please? Pleaaase?”

“K-Kia-chan. I uhh, really appreciate the sentiment, but...”

Miledi walked out of a nearby house, a bunny-eared girl trailing behind her. It was rare to see Miledi look troubled.

“Oh my, you two seem to be having fun.”

“You should tone the teasing down, lass.”

Ben gave Meiru a tired warning, but she gave the old man a thumbs-up and started walking over to Miledi anyway. She clearly had no intention of toning anything down.

“Look, Miledi!”

“I-I’m looking.”

Kiara—the poster girl for one of Andika’s inns—hopped away from Miledi and vanished behind a boulder. A second later, her presence started to vanish. She dashed from boulder to boulder, but so swiftly and so quietly that normal people wouldn’t even be able to see her.

Though rabbitmen couldn’t hold a candle to other beastmen when it came to physical power, their stealth and speed were a far cry above the rest. Which was why they were the best race at manipulating their presence. Kiara was only half rabbitman, since her father was human, but it seemed that hadn’t affected her racial talents in the slightest. Not only that, the lawless environment she’d lived in meant she’d had even more opportunities to hone her stealth skills than most rabbitmen. In fact, she could practically make herself invisible. However, her skills only worked against normal people.

“Kiara-chaaaaan!”

“Fugyaah!?”

Kiara had circled behind Miledi in an attempt to jump on her unawares, but she found herself wrapped in a soft embrace. At the same time, she felt her arms pinned against her back.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What!? Meiru-neesan!?”

“Yep, it’s me~”

Smiling, Meiru pressed Kiara’s head against her ample bosom. The girl’s ears perked up in indignation. But that only caused Meiru to smile in joy as more of Kiara’s fluffy fur brushed against her face.

“Jeez, stop getting in my way all the time, Meiru-neesan!”

“Oh my. What exactly was I interrupting? Were you trying to do something?”

Meiru’s genuine confusion caused Kiara’s ears to droop. Even though she’d been running with all her might, Meiru had been able to pick her out without even trying. Kiara had wanted to prove that she wouldn’t be a burden, that she had what it took to join Miledi on her journey. That she could be useful. And yet, not only had Meiru been able to follow her movements, she’d even managed to grab Kiara from behind. Looking like a deflated rabbit balloon, Kiara limply rested in Meiru’s embrace.

“Kia-chan... Um, are you okay?”

Miledi was hardly surprised that Kiara had been caught, but she tried to be sympathetic.

“Miledi... could you see me?”

“...Yeah.”

“...I see.”

Kiara laughed weakly, and Meiru finally realized what she’d been trying to do. Recently Kiara had been trying extremely hard to show she was useful—cooking for the group, serving as a messenger, taking care of Miledi’s every need, and so on. And her attempt to show off her stealth skills had been another way of trying to appeal to Miledi.

“Kiara-chan, you still haven’t given up on coming with us?”

“Ugh... I know, but...”

Kiara had been captivated by Miledi. Her friend had stood up against the injustice of the world, her sky blue mana a dazzling beacon of hope. But at the same time, Kiara knew how badly Miledi had been hurt in the battle against the church and the Leviathan. Which was why she wanted to help Miledi. She wanted to join her on her journey and ease her struggles. But, frustrating though it was to admit, Kiara knew she wasn’t strong enough to fight.

Still, at the very least, she wanted to be strong enough to protect herself, so she could take care of Miledi on her travels. Most importantly though—

“I want to spend more time with Miledi...”

In the end, all it boiled down to was that Kiara cared about her friend. A month had passed since they’d come to this rocky wasteland. Kiara knew that Miledi wouldn’t stay here much longer. Miledi sniffled.

“Kia-chan...”

Her nose was bleeding. That was just how cute Kiara was acting. Meiru quickly fixed Miledi’s nosebleed with restoration magic and said sternly, “This is a serious moment, you know?”

You really are hopeless, Miledi-chan... Even though Miledi showered others with unconditional love, she never knew how to act when others returned the favor. She’d always either try to change the topic, act annoying to disturb the mood, or escape the situation entirely. In truth though, she was just too embarrassed to return sincerity with sincerity.

They’d only been together for three months, but Meiru was already well aware of Miledi’s bad habits. *She has the guts to pick a fight with the world, but she can’t even bring herself to face her friends honestly. My, what a clumsy girl. But that pathetic side of you is just so cute! Miledi Reisenseless-chan! Still, you need to do something about that soft spot you have for your friends. You know we can’t take Kiara-chan with us so dragging things out only makes things worse. You have to be sterner, Miledi-chan.*

Meiru’s gentle smile disappeared, and she gave Miledi a stern glare. Miledi shivered and turned to look at Meiru. She knew what Meiru was going to say. For a moment, Miledi looked depressed, but then she shook her head and took a deep breath. Smiling forlornly, she looked Kiara in the eyes.

“You know, Kia-chan. I’m really happy you care so much about me.”

Sensing the seriousness in Miledi’s tone, Kiara’s expression stiffened. She didn’t want to hear what was coming next, but she knew she had to.

“But you saw what happened in Andika, didn’t you? You know what kinds of enemies we’re up against.”

“.....”

Kiara said nothing. But she understood that this decision was final.

“There’s not just one way to fight. Remember what I told you about the Liberators? There’s plenty of other ways to help.”

The Liberators were roughly split into three categories. The first of them was the Fighters. The group consisted of all members of the Liberators with sufficient fighting strength. Their primary goal was to protect the hidden villages, rescue people who’d been branded as heretics, and recruit allies. They traveled all across the world, usually in small teams.

The second category was naturally the Villagers. It consisted of those who had no fighting ability or were too injured to fight. Most of them were civilians who’d been persecuted by the church. Or children who were too young to fight.

Finally, the last category was the Support Team. They took care of the villagers, relayed information to the various bases the Liberators had, such as the one in the Reisen Gorge where Corrin and the others were staying, and helped with discovering and developing new village sites. Snowbell and Ben were both part of this group. There were also a few spies in the support team who lived in large cities across the continent and kept an eye on world events. Some posed as merchants while others pretended to be adventurers. Some had more mundane covers, like doctor, butler, or farmer.

They didn’t do any truly dangerous work, like infiltrating castles. They simply lived their day-to-day lives and gathered what information they could. As a result, they were in no danger. However, the information they gathered was quite useful. Rumors, major events within cities, the prices of goods, and the flow of people were all useful details for the Liberators to know.

Of course, not all the information they gathered was significant, and a lot of time was wasted sifting through it all. Still, they were the foundation of the vast information network the Liberators had and the unsung heroes of the organization. Which was why Miledi and the others deeply respected the support team’s help.

“Kia-chan, the best way you can help me is by joining the support team.”

“And working at an inn?”

“Yep. I want you to work at an inn.”

Even if they were apart, Miledi and Kiara would still be friends. Distance wouldn’t weaken their bond. Gazing warmly at Kiara, Miledi pulled a small box out of her pocket.

“This is for you, Kia-chan.”

Confused, Kiara accepted the box. She glanced from the box to Miledi a few times before hesitantly opening the lid.

“Wh-What is this? It looks really expensive...”

Inside the box was a beautiful necklace. Kiara had never seen something so extravagant in her life. It was made of silver and inlaid with jade gemstones. The way it shimmered was reminiscent of how sunlight reflected off the morning dew.

“I...”

“It’s an Artifact I asked O-kun to make for you.”

Miledi urged Kiara to try it on, but she was too stunned to move. Smiling gently, Meiru walked over and helped Kiara fasten the necklace. The moment it was on, Kiara’s ears and tail disappeared, and her navy-blue hair turned blonde. From all angles, she looked like a normal human girl. This was a camouflage Artifact Oscar had made so that Kiara could blend in with humans.

“Even the largest tree needs branches and leaves to support it.”

Without them, the tree would be at the mercy of the elements, unable to protect itself from torrential downpours or excessive rain. Furthermore, no birds would come to roost. And the larger the tree, the more support it needed. It was this line of thought that had led Miledi to christen the Artifact “Dew on the Branches.” She wanted to be able to see a beautiful morning together with all of the comrades who supported her, not just the ones who fought with her.

“By the way, according to O-kun, it’ll run out of mana in half a year. Well, whenever that’s about to happen, I’ll come back to personally recharge it for you. Isn’t that great?”

Miledi laughed, and tears formed in the corners of Kiara’s eyes.

“Waaah... This isn’t fair. Miledi, you big dummy!”

Though she said that, Kiara still hugged her friend. Her expression was a weird mix between pouting and joy. Their wonderful, beautiful display of friendship seemed as though it might last an eternity.

“Dieeeeeeeeeeee you monsteeeeeeeeeeeeeeer!”

“Who do you think you’re calling an unsightly, disgusting, monsteeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeer!?”

But alas, it was interrupted by a thunderclap from above. A second later, something crashed into the ground with enough force to leave a crater. It was Snowbell, his chest impaled by a lightning-clad black umbrella. Oscar descended after him, panting heavily. Needless to say, Miledi and Kiara’s beautiful moment of friendship had been ruined.

Oscar pulled his umbrella out of Snowbell’s chest and held it aloft. His clothes were in tatters, and he was covered in scratches.

“Look, Miledi! I did it! I won! I defeated the source of all evil!”

Oscar let out an elated war cry. He was trembling from the combination of relief and joy that accompanied knowing he’d successfully protected both his dignity and his anal virginity. But neither Miledi nor Kiara had the background knowledge necessary to appreciate his victory so they just stared blankly at him.

“I realize the fault for this lies with me, but... Oscar-kun. You came at the absolute worst time.”

Meiru sighed in exasperation.

At the center of this village, Oscar had carved a meeting hall inside an exceptionally large boulder. It was connected to every single house via an underground canal, so it served both as a place to make important town-wide decisions and as an emergency evacuation area. An angry voice echoed through the hall, which was easily as large as the Church’s biggest cathedrals.

“Meiru, don’t think I’ve forgotten how you sold me out.”

Oscar dragged Snowbell, who he’d tied with multiple Metamorph Chains,

behind him. The men who were busy working on the details and architecture of the building took one look at Snowbell and muttered, “Not again, boss...” They’d seen Snowbell come on to Oscar so many times that they were used to this scene by now. Fortunately for Oscar, he’d succeeded in fending Snowbell off every time.

“Come now, I apologized, didn’t I?”

Meiru gave Oscar a playful wink. It was obvious from her smile that she didn’t feel the least bit of remorse.

“I’m not sure you understand the meaning of the word, Meiru. When you apologize you’re supposed to bow your head to the other person.”

“Did you know, Oscar-kun?” Meiru’s smile grew wider, putting Oscar on guard. “I hate nothing more than bowing my head to others.”

“So you’re a failure of a human being...”

Oscar’s shoulders slumped, and Miledi came in to deal the finishing blow.

“Hey, O-kun! Mister popular-with-the-dudes! How does it feel knowing more guys hit on you than girls? Huh? You mad?”

Oscar glared at Miledi, who was hopping happily around him.

“O-Oscar-niisan, Is your... butt okay?”

“Like I said, Kiara. I defeated the source of all evil.”

Kiara fidgeted nervously. Though she’d grown up in a lawless city and was tougher than most grown men, she was also a pervert who had a habit of fantasizing about people. In fact, when Oscar and the others had been staying at Wanda’s Inn, she’d often tried to rappel down the roof to peek on Miledi. She’d also tried hiding underneath Miledi’s bed, or disguising herself as part of the wall. Her head was filled with delusions about Oscar, Miledi, and Naiz’s relationship. Of course, there wasn’t actually anything to their relationship.

“I understand! No need to elaborate! Everything is clear to me now!”

“Actually, I don’t think you understand at all.”

“But let me just say one thing!”

Kiara hopped over to Oscar. Her bunny ears stood on end as she prepared to defend her best friend.

“Make sure you satisfy Miledi too!”

“Kia-chan!?”

“At the very least, include her in a few threesomes with you and Snowbell-san! In fact, that sounds like the best solution!”

The best solution for you, maybe. Oscar thought with a sigh as he watched Kiara collapse from a nosebleed. As they were currently inside a spacious building carved entirely out of stone, Kiara’s voice had echoed quite far. All around, workers could be heard muttering things like “S-So this is what it takes to be the leader of the Liberators,” or “She’s so young... I’m worried about her future,” or “Miledi-chan! You’re free to do what you want, but just remember to keep it in moderation” or “Oi, four-eyes! How dare you lay a hand on Miledi-san! I’ll make you pay for this!” Kiara was one of Miledi’s dearest friends, but sometimes Miledi wished she could punch her. Not only was Kiara able to misunderstand just about any situation, but she was also exceptionally skilled in spreading her misinformation around at lightning speed.

“My, Kiara-chan! How could you say such cruel things?”

“Meru-nee!”

“Meiru!”

Miledi and Oscar turned to their savior, a little life returning their eyes.

“You forgot to include me in the fun!”

But their hopes were immediately dashed.

“B-But that would make it a foursome... Awawawah... Miledi, you’re ama—”

Kiara’s ears and tail swayed back and forth excitedly, but before she could finish her thought someone grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and lifted her into the air.

“Kiara! Stop causing trouble for people!”

“M-Mom!”

Kiara's mother—Vera—put her free hand on her hips and glared at her daughter. Behind her, Marcus watched Kiara with a troubled look on his face.

"There's a mountain of tasks to be done! Now get back to work!"

"Aaah! Wait, Mom! I still need to ask Miledi—"

"You're causing Miledi-chan nothing but trouble! Get your head out of the gutter you vulgar girl! I don't know where you get it from, but you need to shape up!"

Vera dragged her daughter out of the hall. Marcus bowed to Miledi and the others in apology then followed after Vera. As he left, they could hear him muttering, "I'm pretty sure she gets it from you." Miledi and Oscar cradled their heads in a corner while Meiru laughed maniacally. Just then—

"Hm? What's all the ruckus?"

Naiz appeared from a portal, bringing a wagon loaded with caged chickens behind him. He was in charge of bringing livestock from various regions to the area so they could start raising them. And it seemed he'd just returned.

"Nacchaaaaaan!"

"Naiz!"

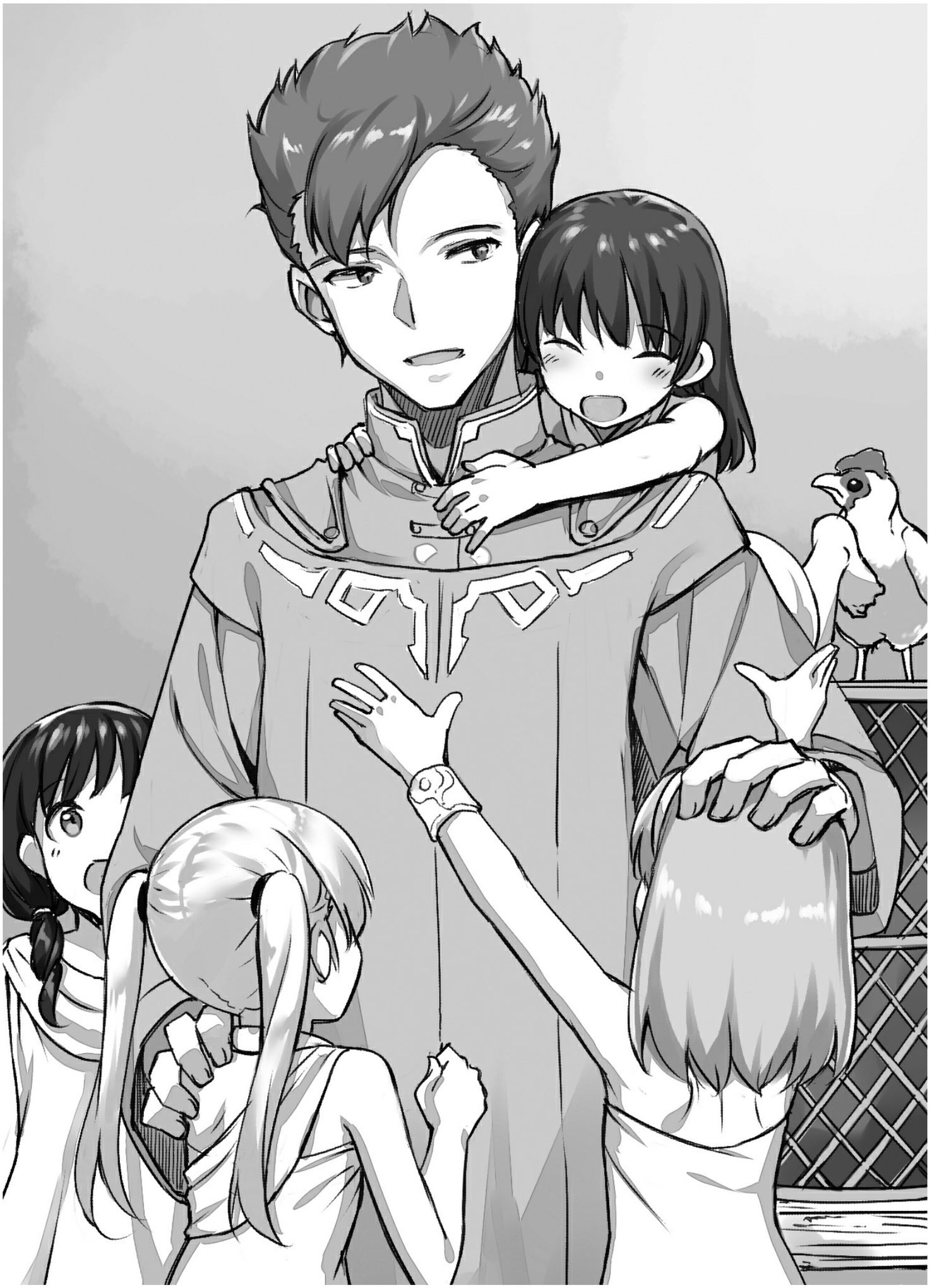
Oscar and Miledi rushed over to their reliable comrade. His return was their only hope in escaping this chaos. But before they could reach him, he was swarmed by children.

"Welcome home, Naiz-sama!"

"Naiz-niichan! What took you so long?"

"Naiz-san! Thank you for bringing all the animals!"

Most of the children crowding around him were girls. They climbed onto his shoulder, hung from his arm, and hugged his legs. Before long, Naiz was wading through a sea of little girls. Naturally, the scene was so cute that even Miledi stopped sulking.



“Meru-nee!”

“Leave it to me.”

Miledi cast gravity magic on Oscar to pin him down while Meiru stole his glasses and put them on. By the time Oscar shouted “Ah!” Meiru had already activated the ability she’d wanted. There was an audible click.

“Wait! Why did you take a picture?”

“I can’t wait to meet Susha-chan.”

“Why’re you bringing that up now!?”

The girls suddenly started clamoring around Naiz while the walking disaster Miledi and the master sadist Meiru high-fived in the background. “Who’s Susha!?” “Where did you meet her!?” “Naiz-sama, won’t you choose me instead!?”

When Andika had been sinking, it was Naiz who’d gone around personally saving everyone with his spatial magic. As a result, the people of Andika adored him. Especially the girls. Women and girls of all ages threw themselves at him every chance they got. Since the children were the ones who actually had free time, Naiz was usually being swarmed by little girls. Terrified of what Susha might do if she saw that picture, Naiz shot Oscar, his only ally, a pleading look. As they were Oscar’s glasses, he was capable of deleting the evidence.

“Hmph!”

“What!? You’re awake already!?”

Snowbell had revived. He flexed his massive muscles, breaking free from Oscar’s Metamorph Chains. His biceps bulged to twice their size as he bore down on Oscar. There was a feral gleam in his eyes. Oscar no longer had the leeway to help Naiz. His battle with Snowbell resumed, and Naiz was left to fend for himself against Miledi and Meiru. However, the chaos stopped almost as quickly as it began.

“Oi, Leader! We’ve got a message from another branch!”

One of Snowbell’s subordinates ran into the meeting hall and waved a letter in the air.

“I see... So it’s time.”

The time to depart had come.

After eating lunch, Miledi and the others gathered in the meeting hall’s innermost conference room. The circular table in the center was a large slab of rock that had been carved out of the boulder. Miledi sat furthest from the door, with Oscar to her left, then Naiz, then Meiru. Directly across from her sat Snowbell and Ben, along with other important members of the Liberators. To her right sat Kiara’s family as well as representatives from each sector of Andika’s economy.

“Alright, let’s get started.”

At Miledi’s words, Kiara and the others tensed up. This was their first time sitting in on an official Liberators meeting. Even the representatives from Andika were feeling a little nervous, so it made sense that Kiara and her family —innkeepers who used to live in Andika’s poorest district and had never been in any position of power—were feeling stressed. They were here to represent the common citizens of Andika, but the only real reason they’d been chosen as representatives was because they were Miledi’s friends. Miledi flashed the three of them a quick smile, then got down to business.

“First of all, our informants are all ready to accept new people.”

All of the spies and informants living in various countries had been making various preparations to receive new comrades. Merchants had been opening new stalls, craftsmen had been expanding their workshops, and innkeepers had been buying up more land to put down new inns.

“For now, we can send about thirty people out.”

At Miledi’s words, Kipson furrowed his brows. Kipson had been captain of the guard that patrolled the outer districts of Andika and was now captain of the guard in their new village.

“That’s it?”

The biggest difference between this hidden village and all of the other ones belonging to the Liberators was that the majority of people living here weren’t

civilians. They'd left Andika, their second home, in order to fight, not hide.

"We need to be careful."

"Well, I figured as much."

"Also, we need to consider which people to send. If we send all the best fighters, the village's defenses will be weakened."

Though about 600 people had left Andika to join the Liberators, only 30 of them were strong enough to even buy time against regular templar knights. In fact, Miledi needed to reduce the number of non-combatants staying in this village, or the 30 fighters wouldn't even be able to buy enough time for everyone living here to escape. Meaning people like Kipson were needed here. Kipson nodded in understanding, and Miledi nodded her thanks back. She then turned to Snowbell.

"Give me a status report."

"Roger, ma'am."

Snowbell activated his special magic, Mirage. A three-dimensional hologram of the surrounding area appeared atop the stone table.

"As you can see, most of the residential buildings have been completed. Thanks to Oscar-kun's help, we were able to finish half of the planned dwellings in an instant."

Snowbell zoomed the hologram in and colored a section of it. That was the area that had already been carved into buildings.

"Many of our other villages are nearing capacity, so once people start leaving here, I plan to bring in residents from other villages to ease the burden on them. Fortunately, there's more than enough space for people here."

"Have all the escape routes been built?"

"Of course. We have canals running throughout the entire complex. And every house comes furnished with an escape raft. We've placed three large ships each with a capacity of two hundred people underneath the meeting hall. Lastly, we've run a canal connecting the meeting hall to the ocean, as well as laid down abundant traps to slow down pursuers."

“Is the camouflage over the village functioning?”

“But of course!”

Snowbell puffed his massive pecs out as he said that, and Miledi smiled.

“Alright, good work. You did well considering how little time we had. Thanks, Snow-nee. And thanks to all of you guys in the building team too.”

“You honor us with your praise, ma’am.”

Snowbell sat back down with a smile. His subordinates all looked pleased with themselves too.

H-Hey, Oscar-kun, Naiz-kun. What’s wrong with Miledi-chan? She’s actually acting like a charismatic, competent leader of a secret organization! Is this real!?

I-I’ve never seen Miledi like this either. In fact, I’m not sure this is Miledi at all!

Tell me about it. A Miledi who’s not annoying can’t be real... Don’t tell me she has a doppelganger!?

Meiru, Oscar, and Naiz all whispered fervently to each other. Miledi shot the three of them a dirty glare. It was only Kiara’s look of abject awe that prevented her from making a fuss.

“O-Old man Ben. How goes the agriculture side of things?”

“I’d like to observe the situation for another month or two before saying anything definitive but... the soil seems workable. In fact, it’s quite fertile. If it’s possible to transport such large quantities of soil using a Treasure Trove, I think it would be worth considering the coastal settlement proposals we abandoned before.”

“I see, that’s good to know. The church has been growing more active recently, so there’s a greater need for more villages. The coast would be good since people could flee at a moment’s notice.”

Miledi put a hand to her chin thoughtfully.

“Is anyone else capable of de-salting sea soil?”

“I may be able to, but I would need to train first.”

“In that case, once you’re done here, I’m taking you off all active missions, Ben. I want you to return to headquarters and practice your skills. Can you do that for me?”

“You really know how to run an old man ragged, Leader. But well I’ve already appointed a successor, and it is a personal request from you. I’ll do it.”

“Thanks. I’m counting on you.”

Ben sounded reluctant, but there was an eager glint in his eyes. Most of his motivation came from a desire to help Miledi.

Oh no, at this rate Miledi will stop being annoying. She’ll lose her only notable trait!

Should I cast restoration magic on her?

No, I’m pretty sure this is a fake—

“You three! Shut up!”

Unable to bear it any longer, Miledi cast gravity magic on her three comrades. Their heads slammed into the table with a surprising amount of force. They were quiet after that.

Embarrassed by the way her friends had been talking about her, Miledi blushed slightly as she struggled to maintain the facade of a leader. But when she turned back to her council, she found they were all grinning. Snowbell especially.

“Good for you, ma’am.”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

Snowbell smiled suggestively, declining to elaborate. He didn’t need to say anything, though. Everyone knew he was referring to the fact that Miledi had finally found comrades who could stand on equal footing with her. Naturally, there was no real hierarchy among the Liberators. Their driving tenet was freedom after all. But even so, Miledi had been a special existence. Her ancient magic had given her strength far greater than that of her other comrades, meaning she was always the one protecting them. Even though she was only fourteen years old.

She'd joined the Liberators at age ten, and after four years of desperate fighting, she'd become their leader. Even if everyone was equal on paper, the truth had been that Miledi was always the one protecting others. But now, she'd finally found comrades she trusts to have her back. Comrades she could fight shoulder to shoulder with. Comrades who'd protect her as often as she protected them. Comrades capable of saving her if she got herself into a sticky situation. These were the kind of truly equal comrades that she'd wanted. And no matter how badly Snowbell and the others wanted to, they'd never be able to reach that level. The most they could do was support her from the rear.

"You can be more annoying if you want, Leader."

"It looks like you're scaring your friends by being too serious. Feel free to be your usual self, lass."

"M-Miledi! I think it's really cool when you act like a leader and all, but I like the normal, annoying you more!"

"Yeah!"

"You don't have to try to show off in front of us, Leader!"

"Show us just how annoying you can be!"

"Yeah, we wanna see peak annoying!"

"Bring it, Miledi Annoyingsen!"

With surprisingly gentle looks, everyone in the meeting room started calling for Miledi to become annoying. She gripped the hem of her skirt with both hands and trembled in embarrassment.

"You're bullying me, aren't you!?"

Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes. Things got heated after that, but in the end, it was confirmed that this village would be fine even if Miledi and the others left. Kiara's family was also confirmed to be part of the group of 30 that would make up the first wave of spies infiltrating various points on the continent.

The Entris Federation was where the first wave of former Andikans, including

Kiara, would be going to. It sat in the center of the northern continent, bordered to the north by the Elbard Theocracy, to the west by the Kingdom of Velka, to the south by the Grandart Empire, and to the east by the Dukedom of Uldia. As its name suggested, the area was a federation. Its government was run by a council, and each country sent a delegation to sit on that council. Because of that, it wasn't a nation, but more a collection of cities. As a result, it had no borders. Anyone could enter and exit the area as they pleased.

The federation spanned 300 kilometers and was comprised of seven cities. Esperado, the city that sat at its center, was the federation's capital. Between the six cities sat numerous villages, large and small. It was said there were so many that it was impossible to visit them all in a year. The biggest thing that separated the federation from other areas, though, was the mana-powered trains that connected the cities. Railroads linked all of the cities, allowing both people and goods to be transported quickly. With how freely goods moved around the region, it was little wonder that it was considered the trading mecca of the world.

The federation's capital, Esperado, was filled with towering buildings the likes of which were only seen in the grandest of cities. Crowds in the city were so large that it often seemed as though the entire world had been crammed inside it. Even smaller streets were wide enough that four wagons could ride abreast. The city's parks and streetlamps were all meticulously maintained, and goods from all over the world were on display. Shops sold everything from clothes to weapons, to accessories and food.

"M-Miledi, I think I want to go back to the hidden village after all," Kiara whimpered as she took in the sights. The grandeur of the city had broken her will. "Cities are a scary place. They're like a different world. Doesn't a country bumpkin like me stand out too much?" Kiara continued complaining as she held on to Miledi's arm for dear life. Kiara feared that if she let go of Miledi's slender arm, she'd be swallowed up by the city, trapped in its belly, doomed never to return. Since she was wearing her disguise, Miledi and the others couldn't see her ears or tail, but they had no doubt they were waving back and forth frantically.

"For starters, Kia-chan, the whole point of a hidden village is to keep it

hidden, so don't talk about it in public."

Miledi had a point. Naiz had teleported the group here over a series of hops, so they'd skipped most of the desert and quite a few villages along the way. The few villages they had stopped in had been small. Meaning this was Kiara's first time seeing a large city. And judging by her reaction, it seemed not stopping by a few medium-sized cities along the way had been a mistake.

"K-Kiara! Get a grip! I didn't raise my daughter to be such a wimp!"

"You say that, but you're trembling too."

Of course, Marcus was trembling as well. The Wanda family was one giant ball of nerves. And since it would have been too conspicuous if all thirty of Andika's former residents had flooded in at once, Kiara and her parents were the only ones here. The rest of the potential spies were waiting outside the city. Naiz didn't know the exact coordinates of the Liberator branch building in this city, so he couldn't teleport directly there. He needed to go there by foot first, and only after he had an exact sense of its location would he be able to teleport everyone in. Chances were, the moment most of those guys saw the city, they'd be just as overwhelmed.

"Now now, the city seems like a fun place! My, what might that be?"

Meiru staggered over toward some flashy display window, like a child enthralled by a butterfly. Even here Meiru was unwilling to dress thickly, and so she was wearing the same revealing outfit she normally did. Like Kiara, Meiru was wearing one of Oscar's camouflage Artifacts to hide her dagon ears. However, that meant to passerby she just looked like a normal human girl wearing extremely seductive clothes.

"Ah, jeez. Meru-nee, you can't just wander off by yourself!"

Naturally, most of the nearby guys were staring at Meiru. Miledi tried to drag her back onto the path, but failed. This was Meiru's first time in a big city too, and she was too excited to stop. Her lack of nervousness set her apart from Kiara, but in a way that was causing even more problems. And whenever Miledi tried to chase after Meiru, Kiara would cling to her, begging her not to abandon her.

“O-kun!”

“Yes, yes, I’m going.”

Oscar tried to chase after Meiru in Miledi’s stead, but— “Oscar, don’t leave me.”

“.....”

Naiz grabbed onto his shoulder, holding him back. Upon closer inspection, Oscar realized Naiz was trembling too. The desert warrior had spent his childhood in a small tribe and most of his adult life in seclusion. Only recently had he seen Andika, and to him, that was a huge settlement. A massive city like this had given Naiz quite a shock.

“Naiz, I promise I’m not leaving you behind, but I need to get Meiru.”

“You mean to abandon your friend!?”

“Just how terrifying is the city to you!?”

Apparently, it was quite terrifying. While Oscar was trying to shake Naiz off, Meiru was getting even farther away.

“Huh? There’s an easy job where I can make a lot of money? Oh my! You say you’re only willing to introduce me to it because I’m beautiful? You sure know how to flatter a lady.”

She was on the cusp of being taken away by some very bad men. This was dangerous. For the men, mostly. Meiru had the look of a predator in her eyes. There was no doubt that once she found out the location of these men’s brothel she’d steal all their assets and then whip them into submission.

After a few seconds, Miledi managed to pull Kiara off her. But before she could chase after Meiru, Vera and Marcus were swept away by the crowd. Miledi shook her head in exasperation and shouted, “Jeez! Can you people please just stick close to meeeeeeeeeeee!”

Miledi then activated her gravity magic. With pinpoint precision, she dragged all the lost children back to her side. Her gravity magic was so precise that, to a passerby, it just seemed as though Meiru and company were walking back to her.

“Whoa, nice going Miledi.”

Despite Oscar’s praise, Miledi looked quite displeased.

“O-kun, you need to keep a better handle on things! You grew up in the capital so I’m counting on you to keep these kids in line!”

“Ah, okay. Sorry.”

What an unbelievable sight. Miledi, who was normally the one causing trouble, was keeping everyone in line with a straight face. Recently, Miledi had been so serious that it had left Oscar feeling a little lonely. *Wait, did I seriously just think that!? That almost makes it sound like I* want *Miledi to mess with me!* Oscar shruddered. He most definitely did not have masochistic tendencies. He hoped.

“O-kun, I’ll keep an eye on Meru-nee and Kia-chan, so you take care of Nacchan and the others!”

“G-Gotcha.”

I can’t believe I got scolded by Miledi of all people! What a disgrace! As he was thinking that, Oscar suddenly felt someone staring at him. He whirled around, but all he saw was a few older women smiling at him.

“Do you think he’s showing his friends around?”

“Fufu, look at him. His girlfriend’s scolding him for letting them out of his sight.”

“She sure has a good head on her shoulders.”

To onlookers, it seemed as though Miledi and Oscar were a young couple who were showing their friends from the countryside their home city. Furthermore, Miledi was currently giving off the impression of a levelheaded girlfriend while Oscar seemed to be the whipped boyfriend.

“Unacceptable! This is Miledi we’re talking about!”

“Wh-What’s gotten into you all of a sudden!?”

Miledi watched in confusion as Oscar flashed his glasses and grumbled to himself. She wasn’t the only confused one, either. However, Oscar ignored the

stares people gave him and pushed his glasses up a few inches.

“Listen up! From now on, I’m taking care of you lot! I won’t let a single one of you out of my sight. So long as I’m here, you won’t get lost!”

“So Miledi, rest easy. You can go back to being your old annoying self. I much prefer the usual you, who’s a walking disaster, always in high spirits, and causes nothing but trouble for people!”

“Oi, Oscar, I dare you to say that again. I’ll cut your glasses in half.”

But Oscar wasn’t cowed by Miledi’s threats. He linked everyone together with fine metallic wires and started walking confidently down the street. After a few seconds, Miledi said, “O-kun, that’s the wrong way.”

The old ladies watching the exchange giggled to each other.

Some time later, Miledi and the others found themselves on the city’s main street. The buildings around them were even more majestic than the ones they’d seen earlier. None of them were smaller than five stories. And all of them seemed to be competing with each other for height.

Most buildings at the time were built out of wood or, if you were especially rich, stone. But here, the massive skyscrapers were made out of molded steel, something so rare and expensive that other nations had perhaps only one or two buildings made out of it. The upside to using steel was that it allowed for stable buildings as tall as fifteen stories high. But despite how tall the surrounding buildings were, the street had been constructed such that sunlight poured into it at all times of the day. And so, the main street never felt dark or crowded. The grandeur of the main street seemed almost intentionally designed to overwhelm country bumpkins, and Miledi kept a tight hold on Kiara and Meiru’s hands.

“Umm, Miledi. Is this really the right place?”

They were going further and further into the heart of the capital. Since the Liberator branch office was meant to be hidden, Oscar had expected it to be tucked away in an alley somewhere. So he was surprised to see they were heading straight for the center.

“Hey, O-kun. You feeling nervous? Need the great, smart, and beautiful mage Miledi-chan to take care of you? Bahaha!”

“Is it just me or did your title get longer?” Oscar gave his usual reply. But his heart wasn’t really in the retort. If anything, he was relieved Meiru and Kiara had calmed down enough that Miledi could go back to being her usual self. Competent Miledi felt so wrong that she terrified Oscar.

“You’re thinking something really rude, aren’t you?”

Miledi glared at Oscar, and he averted his gaze.

“J-Jeez, Miledi, stop flirting with Oscar-niichan and take us where we need to go.”

Kiara fidgeted nervously. They were attracting even more looks now that they were in the main street. Kiara felt as though she looked out of place in this ostentatious city, but in truth, Miledi had helped her pick out new clothes at a famous store before they’d come to the main street. Her one piece was elegant and refined, making her fit in perfectly with the ladies walking down the street. Vera, Marcus, and Naiz were all wearing new clothes that fit the style of the city as well.

The only people who hadn’t changed their outfits were Oscar, whose suit blended in perfectly well with city life too, and Meiru, who had refused to wear anything that covered too much of her skin. However, Meiru was bold enough that she didn’t feel embarrassed, even in her revealing outfit.

“Ugh, such frilly clothes don’t suit me... I shouldn’t have bought this...”

“Oh my god, Meru-nee. Kia-chan looks so cute. I’m gonna get a nosebleed.”

“You already have one, Miledi-chan. Here, let me wipe your nose for you.”

Kiara tugged awkwardly on the hem of her skirt. She was clearly uncomfortable in this outfit. Though Kiara’s ears were invisible, Miledi could tell what they were doing. She cleared her throat as Meiru wiped the area around her nose and said, “You would have stood out in your travelers’ clothes. Besides, that store was the place we needed to go to.”

It seemed there had been more to Miledi’s visit than a simple desire to get

her friends new clothes. Oscar gave Miledi a thoughtful look.

“Come to think of it, even though I paid for the clothes, the store clerk asked Naiz and Meiru to sign the receipt. I thought that was weird at the time... Was this all part of our goal?”

“Yep, you guessed it. Well, I’m with you guys this time so it’s not necessary but... I figured they should know what you look like.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

Naiz and Meiru shot Miledi questioning glances as well.

“The owner of that shop back there is a pal of mine.”

Miledi had used the codeword “pal,” meaning that clothing store owner was actually a member of the Liberators. The woman who’d run the shop hadn’t seemed anything like a Liberator though. Nor had she given any indication that she was anything but a refined old lady.

Miledi grinned mischievously as she watched the shock spread across Oscar and the others’ faces.

“Her name’s Melissa. And she possesses the special magic Penmaster.”

Normally, Liberators coming to Esperado needed a letter of introduction before they were accepted by the city branch. Melissa’s special magic allowed her not to analyze people’s writing, but rather to see a memory of that person writing whatever she was looking at. So she knew right away whether or not those Liberators had been sent by the organization’s higher-ups or not by examining their letter of introduction. It would be impossible to forge.

Now that Oscar, Naiz, and Meiru had all signed something in front of Melissa, their letters of introduction would all be valid in case they needed to send someone here.

Oscar and the others nodded in admiration at Miledi’s explanation. The only reason Miledi hadn’t introduced her in the shop was because she’d wanted to surprise them like this. Elated that her plan had succeeded, Miledi pointed at the collars of Kiara’s, Vera’s, and Marcus’ clothes.

“Also, once she knows the letter of introduction is genuine, she’ll give you

clothes that have this special embroidering on them.”

That embroidery was what served as a secret passcode for the branch office in the area.

“My, but doesn’t this mean Oscar-kun and I need new clothes as well?”

“Heh... Don’t worry about that, I’m a VIP here. In fact, you could even say I’m in charge.”

Miledi grinned proudly and puffed out her chest. So long as she was accompanying them, they needed no further identification. As they walked, she kept shooting Oscar furtive glances, hoping he would praise her for her capable leadership. Annoyed, Oscar subtly adjusted his glasses. In his place, though, Kiara bounded up to Miledi, her eyes sparkling with admiration.

“Wooow! You’re amazing, Miledi!”

“Oh, uh, yeah. It’s not that big a deal though, you know? Hehe.”

Miledi wasn’t used to honest praise, so she didn’t know how to react when she received it. Noticing that the remainder of her comrades were grinning at her, she quickly cleared her throat and returned to acting like a capable leader.

“A-Ahem! Anyway, we’re almost at our destination! Actually, you can see it right now. Look, right over there!”

Miledi grabbed Kiara’s hand and pointed it at their destination. A massive, ostentatious building. Like everything else on the main street, it was a good 15 stories tall. The walls of the building were covered with magnificent, detailed engravings. Carved in golden lettering on the archway in front of the entrance was the building’s name: Hotel Lusheina. It was obviously a first-class hotel. Moreover, it sat in the heart of the city.

“I changed my mind. I’m going home,” Vera said flatly, her expression stiff.

Marcus turned to her and said, “C-Calm down, dear. Our home... sunk to the bottom of the sea, remember?”

Though he tried to play it cool, he was obviously shaken too. Miledi cocked her head, confused by their reactions. Kiara looked up at her, tears in her eyes.

“Miledi iiiii. I’m sorry for failing you. But this is way bigger than any inn I’ve

ever seen. I don't think I..."

"Huh? Ohhh, it's okay, don't worry! I'm not asking you to manage this place!"

Kiara and the others had thought this was the "inn" they were being given. It was natural they'd misunderstand, considering the conversation they'd had with Miledi earlier.

"This is where our pals live."

This was the headquarters of the Liberator branch office in Entris. Furthermore, the inn Kiara and the others would be managing wasn't here in Esperado, but rather one of the villages along the trade routes connecting Entris to the other nations. It was only after Miledi had explained all of that to the Wanda family did they breathe a sigh of relief. Kiara and the others had received quite a shock when they'd first laid eyes on the capital.

It was at this time that Naiz, who'd mostly been focused on not getting lost until now, opened his mouth. His expression was as stiff as the Wandas.

"Miledi, are there any businesses here whose buildings look like churches?"

"Nope. If they modeled their buildings after churches they'd be branded heretics."

Oscar instantly saw where Naiz was going with this. Right across from the hotel was a large open square that happened to be the perfect center of the city. And on the other side of that square was a towering building surrounded by four spires. In other words, a church. That was the reason Naiz looked so worried.

The church enshrined at the center of Esperado was no normal church. It was the centerpiece of the Holy Church, the Celestial Cathedral. If the cathedral that sat atop the Divine Mountain in the Elbard Theocracy was the most important building in the church, then this was the second most important. And more to the point, the second-largest.

Yet sitting right across it was the Liberators' hideout. On top of that, the hideout was a hotel, a building that attracted all sorts of people.

"You were serious about picking a fight with them, huh?"

Oscar couldn't help but be amazed at Miledi's audacity. Standing guard in front of the beautifully wrought iron gates that marked the entrance of the church was a group of Templar Knights. On the surface, they looked like a graceful, modest, and pious group of guards.

"Hey, morooooooons! It's me, your sworn enemy, the beautiful Miledi~ I just kicked the asses of your strongest knights a few weeks ago, you worthless losers! Got a problem with that!? Bleeeeeeh!"

Miledi taunted the templar knights at the top of her lungs. She was using wind magic to make sure no noise actually reached them, but Kiara, Oscar, and even Naiz were utterly shocked.

Meiru was the only one who seemed to approve, saying, "Well played, Miledi! Insulting them while they can't even hear you! These are the kind of cowardly tricks I expect from you!"

Honestly, it was hard to tell if she was actually praising Miledi or not though.

"Miledi. Come on, let's go."

"Hm? Oh, sure. We can continue from our hotel room. I always get the best room on the top floor, so we'll be able to insult them to our heart's content from there!"

"That's kinda petty, you know?"

Everyone else nodded in agreement with Oscar's comment, then followed Miledi into the hotel. They still couldn't believe she'd hidden a Liberator base right under the church's noses.

The first thing the group noticed upon entering the hotel was the luxurious spiral staircase sitting in the center of the lobby. Their eyes naturally followed the staircase upward, which brought their attention to another thing. The ceiling was exceptionally high. In fact, the entire room was an atrium of sorts, with the ceiling sitting five floors above them. Hanging from that distant ceiling was a gigantic, glimmering chandelier.

Looking back down, Oscar and the others saw numerous soft sofas lining the right wall. By the far wall, a magically-created waterfall cascaded into a pool, providing some relaxing background noise. Finally, on the left was the reception

desk. The counter was one long, glossy slab of wood. Behind it stood an army of polite receptionists dressed in wine-red uniforms.

Miledi led the group to the reception desk and a young woman met them with a smile.

“Yo! It’s me, the beautiful prodigy mage, Miledi-chan!”

“Good afternoon, beautiful prodigy mage Miledi-sama. Your reservation seems to be in order. Welcome to Hotel Lusheina.”

The young woman had grey eyes, grey hair, and a charming smile. Most surprisingly, there wasn’t even a hint of insincerity in the smile. On top of that, she hadn’t even batted an eye at Miledi’s overblown self-introduction. Her customer service skills were unbelievable.

“So this is first-class service...” Vera muttered with a shiver. Had this been Wanda’s Inn, Vera or Kiara would have just laughed Miledi off with a, “Ahaha, you’re a funny one!” or given her a curt, “The heck are you talking about? Anyway, what do you wanna order?” For a rural inn, that kind of response was expected though.

“Allow me to guide you to your rooms. Please, follow me.”

“Thanks!”

This receptionist was likely a Liberator too, but she didn’t even signal anything to Miledi with her eyes, let alone engage her in conversation. Like the old woman who’d run the clothing shop, Melissa, there wasn’t anything out of the ordinary about her. While there was a mountain of questions Oscar wanted to ask, he just quietly followed Miledi and the receptionist.

“Please step into the elevator.”

“Elevator?” Oscar asked. As a craftsman, it was only natural that his interest was piqued.

Miledi snickered and gave Oscar a meaningful look. It was obvious she’d expected that comment to catch his attention. *I wish I could punch that smug face of hers.*

“Yes. By using a magical tool to adjust the water pressure surrounding this

box, we can raise and lower it at will. We can hardly expect our esteemed guests to walk up and down a dozen floors every time they wish to leave their room."

Oscar nodded in understanding, and the doorman respectfully opened the elevator's doors, which were decorated in silver leaf. Kiara, Vera, Marcus, and Naiz stepped timidly inside, while Oscar and Meiru leaped forward with excitement.

"This is pretty wide. Considering the total weight of the box and the people inside, it must take a lot of water pressure to take this all the way to the top..."

Oscar's eyes glittered with excitement behind his glasses. He was eager to see the inner workings of the elevator's engineering. There was a soft dinging of a bell, and the elevator doors closed around them. Then, with another ding, the wall behind them slid away to reveal a passage.

"What... the..."

"Bahahahaha! You thought it was gonna go up, didn't you!? You really thought that, huh!? You looked so excited to ride in your first elevator, O-kun! Hey, how does it feel knowing it was all a trick? You mad? Mwahahaha!"

Miledi roared with laughter, and Oscar expressionlessly grabbed her head. He looked deeply into her eyes and fired off a beam of light from his glasses.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!? My eyes! I can't see! My poor eyeeeeees!"

Miledi covered her eyes with both hands and tilted her face up toward the ceiling.

"Leader... you've managed to somehow get even more annoying in the time since we last met."

The receptionist shook her head in disappointment. Then, she bowed respectfully to Oscar and the others.

"Everyone, it's an honor to meet you. My name is Shirley Nelson."

"Hey, Shirley. I can't really see, can you help me out here?"

"I've been looking forward to meeting the new users of ancient magic our leader found, as well as our new comrades."

“Shirley, that leader you’re talking about could really use some help right now.”

“All of us here at the Esperado branch are overjoyed that our leader finally found comrades who can stand shoulder to shoulder with her.”

“I’m really happy you’re thinking about me. But you know, what I need right now isn’t your feelings, but some help.”

“Now then, the manager of this branch is waiting to see you. Come, this way.”

“H-Hey, Shirley? Do you hate me or something? Is that why you’re ignoring me? Hey. Heeeeeey!”

Shirley scooped Miledi into her arms without a word and led the party down the corridor with a smile.

“I see. So this is how a pro does it.”

“She certainly seems used to dealing with Miledi-chan.”

“We could learn a few things from her.”

Shirley looked like she was barely in her twenties, but it was clear she was a veteran with how easily she dealt with Miledi. Oscar, Meiru, and Naiz all watched in amazement.

The passageway behind the elevator was made of stone, and completely straight. Shirley’s footsteps echoed on the flagstones as she led the party.

“This corridor’s really well-maintained considering it’s a secret passage... Does your guys’ pride as a first-class hotel compel you to clean even places like this?”

“Not at all, Oscar-sama. This isn’t actually a secret passage, but rather a service corridor.”

No wonder it’s so clean then. This led Oscar to another question, but before he could ask, Shirley suddenly changed direction.

“What the, she just disappeared!?”

She turned directly into a wall and passed right through it.

“I haven’t disappeared. Everyone, this way please.”

Shirley poked her head back through the wall, finally clueing everyone in on what was going on. There was a narrow passageway that was nigh unnoticeable unless someone was standing directly across it. Thanks to the unevenness of the walls, it was extremely easy to miss otherwise.

“Okay, *now* we have to be going down a hidden passage.”

“Though it’s a bit difficult to spot, this is just another service corridor.”

Shirley smiled at Miledi, who was still in her arms. *Isn’t that right, Leader?*

“Yeah, this is just another service corridor. Fufufufu,” Miledi said, returning the smile. It seemed her sight had returned. But she was too lazy to walk, so she was having Shirley carry her still. Truly, she was the laziest leader there was.

The group passed through another corridor with floors so polished they nearly slipped on them multiple times. From there, they went into a corridor filled with the sound of girls’ sobbing. They then passed through a door that looked like a boulder and went down a staircase leading to the basement. Finally, they reached their destination.

“Is this a wine cellar?”

Beyond the door was a five-meter wide room made of stone. Oscar’s question made sense, since the old wooden shelves on either wall were packed full of wine bottles. After all the secret paths they’d walked through, Oscar had been expecting to find some kind of amazing hidden room, so he was a little disappointed.

“Fufufu, this is where it gets interesting.”

Miledi grinned and floated out of Shirley’s arms.

“Everyone, please stand back. Oh, make sure you aren’t standing in that area.”

Shirley walked over to the shelf in the back, grabbed a wine bottle, and placed it into an open spot. She then shoved it against the wall with all her might. Oscar and the others watched in disbelief as Shirley continued exchanging bottles in some unreadable pattern.

Finally, after the last bottle was placed, there was a metallic clang. Shirley

grabbed the shelf and pulled, causing the entire wall to swing outwards.

“Hehehe. Look, Shirley! Look at everyone’s expressions!”

“Thank you all for the wonderful reaction.”

Miledi and Shirley gave each other a high-five.

“This certainly is elaborate. I suppose I should have expected nothing less from the Liberators.”

“This really gives it that secret society feel.”

Oscar nodded in agreement.

“I can’t believe I’ve actually joined a secret society...”

“It certainly didn’t feel real until now.”

“I just hope we can actually help...”

Flustered, Kiara and her family peeked timidly through the door. Before they could go inside though, Naiz scrunched up his face and sniffed the air.

“I smell something weird. Is it just because we’re underground?”

Naiz didn’t want to insult whatever hidden room they were about to enter so he kept his words vague. But to his surprise, Shirley and Miledi grinned.

“No, you’re definitely smelling that. After all, this isn’t a hidden room, but rather—”

“A path leading to the sewers.”

“Where the hell’s the hidden room, then!?”

All these puzzles, just to hide a path to the sewers!? You’ve gotta be kidding me! Oscar wasn’t the only one getting fed up. Even Naiz looked a little annoyed. But just then, there was another clang from underneath the floor. It came from the same spot Shirley had said not to stand on. A second later, the floor rose up.

“It’s been a while, Miss Miledi.”

A fashionably-dressed old man with swept-back gray hair and a curly gray mustache popped out of the floor.

“And it’s a pleasure to finally meet the rest of you. I am the manager of this hotel and the leader of the Esperado branch of Liberators, Rigan Nelson.”

The first thing everyone thought was, *What was the point of the wine bottle switching, then?* Shirley sensed the confusion in everyone’s expressions and grinned.

“This way we have a decoy we can show the church if they ever come calling.”

“Why is there a hidden passage behind the elevator?”

“For convenient access to the service corridor.”

“Why do you have a hidden door camouflaged as a boulder?”

“For aesthetic reasons.”

“Why did you make such an elaborate contraption in the wine cellar?”

“For fun.”

“And after they come all this way, they’ll find that the only thing this secret wine cellar is protecting is a boring old path to the sewers.”

Naturally, no one would want to check the sewers for any more hidden paths. Of course, they might wonder why the wine cellar was directly adjacent to the sewers, but Shirley’s answer to that would just be that there was another, proper, wine cellar and the architect had simply added all these rooms for fun.

“Hmph...”

“Damn...”

“Oh my...”

Naiz, Oscar, and Meiru all shook their heads. Half in amazement and half in disgust. Incidentally, there was some meaning behind the bottle switching. Inputting the correct sequence sent a signal to the real hidden room in the hotel. If anyone tried to put in the incorrect code, those in hiding would know it wasn’t one of their comrades. That being said, it was unlikely any investigator from the church would really be fooled by tricks like this.

Shirley and Miledi exchanged smiles and said simultaneously, “All of this is just to exasperate any investigators.”

They both gave Oscar and the others a thumbs-up.

“After all that effort and hard work, all they’ll get is a path to the sewers!”

Then, they dragged their thumbs across their necks in a cutting motion.

“Meanwhile, we’ll be laughing our heads off!”

Then, they reversed their wrists to make their thumbs-ups thumbs-downs.

“Take that, you church bastards!”

Shirley and Miledi high-fived each other again. They were in perfect sync. Though their words didn’t match their gestures at all. Taking their gestures literally, it implied that Miledi and Shirley’s plan was to lure church investigators into this room and then murder them.

“Wait, don’t tell me you put this next to the sewers so you’d have somewhere to dump bodies...”

“The sewers are the perfect place to get rid of shit, after all.”

“Shit, huh...? Come to think of it, all of the wine in this cellar is red wine.”

Naiz’s expression stiffened as he said that. Upon closer inspection, he realized the stone walls were heavily stained. He just hoped those stains were wine and not blood. At the very least, they smelled like wine. Though, perhaps a little too strongly. Almost as if someone had been trying to mask some other scent with the scent of wine...

“Now then, everyone. Please follow me.”

Rigan smiled to everyone. Though his smile was gentle, the party’s newfound context made it seem as though there was something sadistic behind it.

“What’s with the weird looks, guys? Oh, are you getting scared? Hey, are you really getting scared? Bahaha.”

Miledi managed to be so annoying that she snapped Kiara, Vera, and Marcus out of their delusions and back to the present. They followed Rigan down another set of stairs, silently seething at Miledi.

Meiru, on the other hand, took a more direct approach to vent her anger and started pinching Miledi’s cheeks. Oscar turned to Naiz and said, “I guess we

should expect this from the Liberators, huh?”

“Any organization led by Miledi was bound to be full of oddballs.”

The two men smiled ruefully to each other.

The party was ushered into a large underground space whose walls were covered with bookshelves. From the layout of the tables, it seemed like an underground cafeteria. All of the bookshelves were packed to the brim with documents and folders. To one side of the room was a bar counter piled high with food and drink.

There were around thirty or so tables, each large enough to seat four people. Staff members of all ages ran around the room, storing and retrieving documents. All the way in the back was a partition, behind which was a large wooden table. The moment Miledi entered the room all of the staff members got to their feet and turned to her with a smile.

“Welcome. For real this time.”

Rigan and Shirley both bowed to Miledi, as did all the other staff members. It was almost as if this was an organization that actually respected their leader.

“You know, you really don’t have to do the whole bowing thing! I’ve told you guys a dozen times already!”

Miledi crossed her arms in an X and puffed her cheeks out unhappily. Rigan smiled wryly and turned to Oscar and the others.

“Our leader doesn’t like being shown respect. She’s quite the handful.”

He reluctantly got to his feet and Miledi waved for everyone else to do the same.

“Alright, alright, that’s enough! Long time no see, everyone! I brought us some new comrades!”

The moment Miledi said that, everyone rushed up to the party. They mobbed Miledi, giving her status reports and asking her what she’d been up to.

“Whoa... How do I put this... Miledi’s kinda amazing.”

“Indeed. Even though Miledi-chan is supposed to be mine and mine alone, I’m getting jealous.”

Kiara watched in amazement as Miledi was jostled around by her fans while Meiru looked legitimately jealous. Oscar and Naiz just watched on quietly. Despite this being their welcoming party, Oscar and the others were being completely ignored. However, they had no desire to interrupt Miledi’s reunion. Especially considering how happy she looked to see everyone.

“My apologies. It has been close to a year since everyone last saw our leader, so they’re rather overexcited.”

Rigan walked over to Oscar, his brow furrowed slightly. He knew the Liberators wouldn’t let go of Miledi anytime soon, so he guided the group over to the round, wooden table in the back. Once they were seated, he brought out cups of tea from seemingly nowhere.

Meiru cocked her head and asked Rigan, “They’re like this even though Miledi-chan’s their leader?”

“It’s precisely because she’s our leader.”

Rigan’s expression grew pained and somewhat lonely.

“She’s too strong for us.”

Because Miledi’s abilities far outstripped her regular comrades’, she’d ended up acting alone most of the time. The other Liberators would have just slowed her down. Even the organization’s strongest fighters had been no match for her.

“But no matter how strong she is, there’s only one of her.”

Most of the Liberators’ work was information gathering. But Miledi didn’t have the time to travel across the world and personally visit all of the Liberator headquarters whenever she needed info. Nodding in understanding, Meiru asked a followup question.

“So why is it they adore her so if they barely ever meet her?”

“Because she glows as brightly as the sun. Surely you understand what I mean?”

Meiru and the others thought back to the feats Miledi had achieved. Creating

an abyss within the Greenway, supporting an entire island by herself, parting the seas, and even destroying a legendary monster. Her blazing spirit and overwhelming might certainly did make it seem like Miledi Reisen was a burning sun. Especially since she always seemed to descend from the heavens clad in sky blue mana. Even Oscar and the others were amazed by her abilities, and they were fellow ancient magic users. To normal people, she seemed practically godlike.

"Those who have been saved by her personally worship her."

It made sense.

"Does that include you?"

Rigan's smiled in response to Oscar's question.

"I've been with the Liberators long before she joined. In fact, I've been with the group since its inception."

He turned to look at Shirley, who was hugging Miledi with a smile.

"Our leader can't bring herself to abandon anyone, even when she should. But I have her to thank for saving my daughter's life."

Rigan thought back to the day when the branch where Shirley and her mother were staying at had been raided by the church. They'd been captured, and the fate that awaited them was worse than death. They'd be tortured endlessly for the church's enjoyment. But the members who'd been captured knew not to expect any help. They'd been taken to one of the church's most heavily guarded cathedrals. And they knew that there was no saving them now. Those who could fight couldn't afford to risk their lives for those who couldn't, or the Liberators would never grow strong enough to take on the gods.

It wasn't for some grandiose reason like duty, but simply to protect his remaining comrades that Rigan had been unable to go to save his family.

I'm sorry. I couldn't make it in time. Please forgive me. An eleven-year-old girl cried in front of Rigan. She was hugging Shirley and apologizing over and over for failing to save Shirley's mother. She looked so sad that it was as if it was her own mother who'd been killed.

Later, Rigan had learned that she'd ignored the warnings of her comrades and charged into the church alone to save the captured Liberators. Though she'd still been inexperienced with her powers, and utterly outnumbered, she hadn't hesitated at all.

Rigan hadn't been the only one moved by her actions. Her unbending, unbreakable desire to help others no matter the situation had shone so brightly that everyone who'd seen what she'd accomplished had been captivated.

"It was inevitable that she'd end up our leader."

After that incident, everyone had pushed for Miledi to become their leader.

"Miledi... That girl bears the burdens that are too heavy for—"

Rigan trailed off, thinking about how she was far too young to be carrying such a heavy load.

"I see... That's great..." Oscar muttered, sounding strangely relieved. He looked up, his expression gentle. Everyone turned to look at Oscar. Naiz tilted his head in confusion.

"What do you mean?"

"Huh? Oh, uhh..."

It seemed Oscar hadn't meant to say that out loud. Noticing that everyone's gazes were centered on him, he hesitated. But after a few seconds, he adjusted his glasses, took a deep breath, and said what was on his mind.

"It's just, I was a little worried."

"Worried? What for?"

"Because Miledi's a Reisen."

She was from the Reisen family, a family of famous executioners from the Grandort Empire. For the longest time, her job had been to execute criminals. Criminals like the Liberators.

"And Belle... the former leader of the Liberators, was executed by the Reisens."

"Oh... I see."

Naiz didn't know what else to say. Kiara and the others gulped. Hesitantly, they all turned to Rigan. Meiru did as well, trying to see through Rigan's true feelings. However, Rigan kept looking at Oscar, a gentle smile on his face.

"I know just how much Miledi cared about Belle. But I cannot say for certain that everyone among us understands that. Nor are they all aware of what Belle entrusted to Miledi."

Thinking about it normally, it would make sense for many of the Liberators to think Miledi was a mole. After all, until recently she'd been the Liberators' sworn enemy. Even if she had destroyed the Reisen family with her own two hands, it was natural for people to doubt her.

"I've met a few of the Liberators already. And seeing how they treated Miledi, I figured everything was fine, but..."

Anyone Miledi trusted, Oscar would trust. It was because Miledi had trusted her comrades that Oscar had felt safe leaving his family with them. However—

"I was still a little worried that you guys had propped Miledi up as a figurehead. That a lot of you still didn't really believe in her."

Because of her strength, Miledi would have made for perfect advertising. Oscar had been worried that the higher-ups in the Liberators had made Miledi their leader just to get more followers and that they hadn't actually liked her at all. That they'd all secretly hated her guts. Of course, he hadn't really believed that theory, but it still had been a niggling worm of doubt in the back of his mind.

"And if that really was the case, I knew that Miledi would still accept all the hate without complaint."

Not because she was particularly tolerant or broad-minded. But because she was the one who'd inherited Belta's will and she was the one who grieved Belta's death more than anyone.

"I made it in time. This time, I wasn't too late."

Meiru thought back to when Miledi had rushed back to save her. The fact that she'd said "this time" was proof that even now, the pain of losing Belta was still fresh in Miledi's mind.

“That’s why I’m glad. Because it looks like I was just overthinking things.”

Oscar smiled gently as he watched Miledi get paraded around by her comrades. Kiara’s eyes glittered when she saw that smile, her mind filling with R-rated delusions.

“Oh, Oscar-kun...” Meiru muttered to herself quietly. Though she already knew the answer to her question, she smiled playfully and asked, “If the other Liberators truly did hate her, what would you have done?”

“Nothing, really. I’d just keep following Miledi like I have been. We’re here because we believe in her, right?”

Meiru chuckled and nodded, while Naiz just shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly.

“Then, what if we attempted to harm her?”

It was clear from Rigan’s tone that he’d never actually do that.

“In that case, we’d run,” Oscar replied casually. Rigan seemed surprised by his response.

“No matter what happened, Miledi wouldn’t ever want to hurt you guys, so we’d just take Miledi and run.”

Oscar turned back to Naiz and Meiru.

“That’s right. Running away is a specialty of mine. It’d be a piece of cake.”

“I’m sure Miledi-chan would want to come back and talk to you guys even if you were trying to kill her, so I suppose my job would be to keep you tied up until you could work your differences out through words.”

“Meiru’s wording could use some refining, but yeah. I’d come back.”

Oscar looked Rigan in the eyes and said resolutely, “I’d convince everyone to trust her. No matter how long it took.”

“I see,” Rigan replied, nodding slowly. Then, he said, “Fake Gentleman with Evil Glasses.”

“...What?”

“Gang boss. Fake intellectual. A loser who always gets scolded by Corrin-

chan.”

“Okay, you’re clearly picking a fight, right? Fine, you’re on.”

You’re about to see just how evil my glasses really are! Oscar brought a hand up to the frame, but before he could fire a beam off, Rigan interrupted him.

“A kind man who cares very much about his family.”

“Huh?”

“A hard-working, strong, dependable person. That was how she described the comrade she finally found.”

“You mean...”

Oscar suddenly blushed. He realized whose words Rigan was relaying to him. Rigan then turned to Naiz and said, “Pedophile.”

“Let go of me, Oscar! This is all Miledi’s doing! I’m going to cut her in half!”

“C-Calm down, Naiz!”

Still blushing, Oscar pinned Naiz’s arms behind his back to keep him from running at Miledi. Rigan ignored the scuffle and continued his descriptions.

“Has a strong sense of responsibility and doesn’t hesitate to sacrifice himself for his friends.”

“Wha—”

“Though he gets hurt the most, he’s also the most scared of hurting others. A truly gentle man.”

“Mrrrgh.”

Naiz blushed so deeply it was visible on his dark skin. He looked away, too embarrassed to meet Rigan’s eyes. Finally, Rigan turned to Meiru.

“A sadistic pirate with a sister complex. Unless she does something about her personality, she’ll never find a husband.”

“Fufufufu. My, what a naughty girl. She must really want me to play with her.”

Meiru pulled a whip out of seemingly nowhere and smiled dangerously. There was a darkness in her pupils that shouldn’t have existed, considering how well-

lit the room was.

“She reminds me of Belle.”

“.....”

“Even though she likes bullying people, she’s kind at heart. And though she’s always causing problems, I feel like I can count on her. She’s like a big sister.”

“U-Umm, Meiru-neesan. Would you like this handkerchief? Your nose is bleeding.”

“My, thank you, Kiara-chan.”

Meiru took the handkerchief and dabbed at her nose. Oscar and Naiz watched her with smiles on their faces while Rigan continued.

“Even through just a letter, we could tell just how happy Miledi-sama was to have met you, Oscar-sama.”

“Oh, well...”

Oscar scratched his cheek awkwardly.

“In fact, all of the letters she sent recently have been filled with joy. To be honest, most of us here are actually a little jealous of you three.”

Naiz and Meiru also blushed in embarrassment. Rigan bowed deeply to the three of them.

“Finally, at long last, Miledi-sama has comrades who can protect her. I cannot thank you enough for joining her.”

“Rigan-san...”

“Oscar-sama, please just call me Rigan. There is no need for honorifics with us. After all, we are your support.”

Rigan’s smile was a mixture of relief and joy. When he lifted his head back up, Oscar could see tears in the corners of his eyes.

“Oscar-sama. Please don’t leave her side.”

“Of course. I’ll follow her to the depths of hell if I have to.”

Oscar straightened his back and looked Rigan in the eyes as he said that.

“Naiz-sama. Please protect her.”

“I have no qualms about risking my life for her.”

Naiz nodded, fierce determination etched onto his face.

“Meiru-sama. Please take care of her.”

“I was planning to regardless. She’s like a sister to me.”

Meiru’s gentle smile belied the resolute glimmer in her eyes. Finally, Rigan turned to the Wanda family. In particular, to Kiara.

“These are the people you’ll be supporting.”

“O-Okay.”

“Know that even their strength won’t be enough to protect us all. That’s what it means to wage war against the entire world.”

“.....”

Rigan’s words were heavy. They carried with them the weight of a veteran who’d been fighting this fight long before Miledi had joined.

“Are you resolved to stay the course?”

Rigan had lost his wife, and his daughter had been prepared to die. It was entirely possible something similar could happen to the Wandas. Rigan needed to be sure they were still willing to join the Liberators even after knowing the risks. Vera and Marcus hesitated, unsure of what to say. But Kiara answered immediately.

“I won’t know if I have the resolve to fight against the whole world until I have to make that choice.”

Her voice was surprisingly firm. It was hard to believe she was the same girl who’d been cowering at the sight of skyscrapers minutes earlier.

“But Miledi is my friend. And if it’s for my friends, I’m willing to do anything.”

Kiara glanced back at her parents.

“I’ll stay the course. But Mom, Dad, if you—” Kiara trailed off, her gaze making it clear that she’d honestly prefer it if they turned back here.

I'm sorry, but I want you guys to be safe.

Vera and Marcus gulped nervously. But then, their expressions cleared up and they said, "Don't be stupid. Did you forget? I used to be part of the Devault Family. I can take care of myself."

"Remember what we said when we left Andika? We'll be together forever, no matter what."

The two turned to Rigan and smiled fearlessly. Though there was still a hint of nervousness in their smiles.

"Very well. Welcome to the support branch, Kiara, Vera, and Marcus."

The three of them bowed to Rigan. Just then, Shirley walked over to the group, carrying an exhausted Miledi in her arms. It seemed the other Liberators had finished fawning over Miledi.

"Oof, everyone's way too energetic."

"They're just excited to see their leader again."

Shirley turned to Rigan, and he nodded slightly. It seemed it wasn't a coincidence that everyone had let Miledi go just now. They'd been told to keep her busy until Rigan finished speaking with Oscar and the others. And Shirley had been the one who'd coordinated the timing perfectly with Rigan.

Meiru got to her feet and took Miledi from Shirley's arms. She then buried Miledi inside her ample bosom.

"Mmmpf!? Wh-What's going on? What're you doing, Meru-nee?"

"I'm showing you something that's impossible for you to do, Miledi-chan."

"Okay, you're clearly picking a fight, right? Fine, you're on. I'll flatten you like a pancake."

Get those useless lumps of flesh out of my face! Miledi pulled her head back and glared at Meiru. But before she could do anything, she felt something soft on her head.

"Huh? O-O-kun?"

It was Oscar's hand. Confused, Miledi was hit with another surprise attack

before she could react.

“N-Nacchan, you too?”

Naiz had also started patting Miledi’s head.

“Wh-What’s with you guys? Hold on a second. Oho, now I get it. You guys were getting lonely because the support branch guys took me away from you, weren’t you? Hehehe. It’s fine, it’s fine, I understand. I’ll have to write a letter to Corrin-chan and Susha-chan and Diene-chan that you’re all a bunch of clingy babies, though. Ufufufufufu.”

Miledi covered her confusion by acting like her normal annoying self, but it didn’t work for once.

“That’s fine, Miledi.”

“Yeah, it’s fine, Miledi.”

“Indeed. It’s fine, Miledi-chan.”

All three of Miledi’s comrades seemed completely unfazed.

“H-Hang on, what the heck’s gotten into you!? Come back to your senses! You’re scaring me!”

Despite Miledi’s protests though, Oscar, Naiz, and Meiru simply continued to smile at her. Their reaction ended up terrifying Miledi even further.



Afterward, Oscar and the others were treated to the same greeting Miledi had been. Theirs was even rougher since everyone was continually apologizing for not introducing themselves initially. They also kneeled to Oscar and the others like they had to Miledi, which caused them to beg everyone to treat them like regular comrades too. Their efforts backfired however, and the Liberators all extolled how humble Oscar and the others were, despite being masters of ancient magic. Their praise for Miledi's comrades turned to near-worship.

In truth, neither Oscar nor anyone else knew how to handle their newfound fame. After all, Oscar had been raised in an orphanage, Naiz had been a shut-in for decades, and Meiru was a pirate raised in the slums. It was hardly surprising none of them could handle being treated like heroes. Of the three, it was Meiru who got accustomed to all the attention the fastest. However, her eyes started getting that same glint she had when she was torturing prisoners, so Oscar was forced to calm her down with a light flash from his glasses.

And thus, Oscar and the others' first real meeting with a large group of Liberators came to an end. Naiz went back and teleported all the other people who'd asked to join the support team into the hotel, and they were put through an orientation of sorts. All of them would spend some time at Hotel Lusheina, learning about the locations they'd be posted to, how to get in touch with their comrades, what to do in cases of emergencies, and anything else they might need to know as newly minted members of the Liberators.

Meanwhile, Miledi was still confused by her comrades' sudden transformations. She was so unused to being treated with genuine kindness that she kept shooting Oscar and the others furtive glances all throughout their meeting. Rigan started the meeting off by reporting the current situation in all the countries the Liberators had informants posted in, as well as any dangers Miledi and the others should watch out for. He also mentioned any requests and issues other branches had.

Despite continuing to give the oddly docile Meiru suspicious looks, Miledi nevertheless fulfilled her role as leader spectacularly. Just like she had during their meeting back in the desert, she swapped over to capable, charismatic, leader mode and gave precise instructions to Rigan while asking for Oscar and

the others' opinions where appropriate.

"There's one other small matter that needs to be resolved. It's about our vice-leader."

"Oh yeah, Badd! I told him to get over here since I wanted to introduce O-kun and everyone to him, but... is he not gonna make it in time?"

Badd Virtus was the vice-leader of the Liberators and the man who'd managed the organization in the time between Belta's death and Miledi's promotion to leader. In a way, he could be considered the second leader of the Liberators after Belta, with Miledi being the third. He was also the first person who'd recommended Miledi take over his position. Oscar and Naiz turned to each other.

"Miledi told us about him didn't she?"

"Isn't he the person everyone calls the knight hunter?"

During their travels, Miledi had often told Oscar and Naiz tales about the other Liberators, and Badd was a name that had popped up often. Miledi nodded and said, "Yep, that's him."

Oscar and the others had already come all this way to one of the Liberators' branch headquarters. They definitely wanted to meet the organization's vice-leader. Curious, Oscar and Naiz turned to Rigan, waiting for his next words.

"Virtus-dono has... gone missing."

That wasn't the response anyone had been expecting.

"What do you mean?"

Miledi's voice quavered. *It can't be...*

"No one has heard from him for over a month. He was last seen at the Angriff branch office."

The Principality of Angriff was the leader of the Odion Federation, an alliance of nations that was far to the east, near the border of the Pale Forest. Naturally, such an important location had a Liberator headquarters.

"Do you have any clues about where he went? He's killed so many Templar

Knights that there are wanted posters out for him all over the world. If the church had captured him, you'd think they'd be talking about it."

"It's as you say. However, we doubt the situation is quite that serious."

Rigan passed Miledi a piece of paper. Written on it was: "I've turned 45 this year, but I still haven't found a wife or even a mistress. And yet, that annoying brat Miledi managed to score a partner already? Who the fuck is this O-kun anyway? Not only that she's got herself another guy too? Nacchan? What is this, some kinda reverse harem? Why do popular people have all the goddamn luck? That brat's always— [redacted] —Anyway, I'm going on a journey of love, so don't look for me."

"....." Miledi smiled and balled her fingers into a fist, crushing the letter in her hands.

"That is the original letter we received from Angriff's headquarters. Lady Melissa confirmed that the handwriting is indeed Virtus-dono's... When she used her special magic to check, she said that she saw Virtus-dono muttering 'I want a wife' over and over while crying tears of blood as he wrote this. Apparently, copies of this letter were sent to every branch. Along with this."

Rigan brought out another letter. Everyone leaned over to read it.

"If anyone sees that good-for-nothing excuse of a vice-leader, report to me immediately. Also, give him a good beating for me. If you can't manage that, make sure you report his location to the leader as soon as possible. And tell her I want her to beat the shit out of him for me."

The supplementary letter had been written by the head of the Angriff branch.

"Alright, let's just forget about Badd."

Miledi's tone was utterly dismissive. But then, it appeared the vice-leader of the Liberators was a pathetic man who was jealous of a teenager.

"Indeed, he's the kind of man who's impossible to kill anyway. If he doesn't want us looking for him, we can probably let him roam free for a while without worrying. Now then, there's one last worrying report."

"What is it?"

“Before I tell you, there’s one thing I need to confirm. When was the last time you were in contact with Tim, Miss Miledi?”

Tim Rocket was a bright young man, with brown eyes and hair. He always wore a distinctive newsboy cap and carried around his signature leather bag. His special magic, Animal Harmony, allowed him to strengthen animals, and his animals were the primary means of communication between the various Liberator bases.

Originally he’d been an orphan living in one of the theocracy’s rural towns, but then Belta had found him communicating with animals and granting them power. That had been around ten years ago. Meaning despite his youth, Tim was one of the organization’s senior members. His stalwart partner, the cream-colored isoniol eagle Creme, was Miledi and the others’ primary means of communicating with the Reisen branch.

“Umm, about a month ago? Right around the time we reached the boulders in the desert. We had Creme-chan deliver a letter for us.”

Normally, a reply would have arrived before they left the desert. But the rocky area they were terraforming was a new location for the Liberators. The safest travel routes to and from the area still hadn’t been discovered, so it wasn’t too surprising that a reply was taking more time than usual.

“Did something happen to him?”

“The thing is, recently we’ve stopped receiving any letters from Tim.”

According to Rigan, no one had seen any of Tim’s messenger eagles for the past two weeks. Miledi’s expression clouded over in worry. She was quite fond of Creme, who’d always perch on her shoulder whenever he came with a new letter.

“Is this the first time his letters have stopped?” Oscar asked. Rigan smiled faintly and shook his head.

“No, it’s happened a few times before. Tim’s eagles aren’t just messengers, they’re his family. He gets lonely if they’re away from him for too long, and they need to spend time with him periodically anyway, or they’ll lose the enchantments he casts on them.”

In other words, the eagles stationed at the various Liberator headquarters needed to be regularly cycled out so that Tim could take care of them. Occasionally the timings would match up so that Tim needed to recall all his eagles, causing communications to be delayed.

“But he’s the captain of the messenger corps right now. And for the past few years or so, he’s scheduled his eagles well enough that there’s always been some on active duty at all times.”

To make matters worse, Miledi hadn’t seen hide nor hair of Creme, the eagle assigned exclusively to carry correspondence to and from her.

“Hmm, yeah that’s definitely concerning.”

“Susha and the others sometimes ask Tim to help them move stuff around in their village, so maybe he’s just busy with something...”

“Or maybe he just got sick...”

Miledi and the others looked down worriedly, and a little guiltily. They had crossed the desert and even gone all the way out into the ocean. And while they were in Andika, they’d frequently exchanged letters with Susha and the others back in Reisen. Crossing that distance so many times had undoubtedly placed a large burden on Creme, and by extension, Tim. Their overuse of Creme might have caused both Creme and Tim to fall ill. Sensing their thoughts, Rigan smiled gently and shook his head.

“Don’t look so worried. After all, you’ve finally found comrades capable of using ancient magic. Even Tim was happy when he learned more ancient magic users were joining the Liberators. It’s quite possible he and his animals simple got so excited that they slipped up somewhere.”

The meeting came to an end with everyone deciding to wait a little longer before drawing any conclusions. Then, Rigan relaxed a little and turned to Miledi.

“By the way, Miledi-sama. What do you plan on doing now?”

“Well, for now, I’m going to take a bit of a break. We’ve already had a lot of success finding ancient magic users through rumors. Besides—”

Miledi turned to Oscar.

“I’ve kept you waiting long enough.”

Oscar shook his head and said gently, “I told you before, you don’t need to worry about that.”

“I know, but...”

It was obvious from Miledi’s expression that the plight of Oscar’s family had been weighing down on her all this time. Especially since even after finding Meiru, they’d put off healing Dylan and Katy.

“You really worry too much...”

“Wh-What? It’s only because I kept—”

“Miledi, I’m a Liberator too.”

Oscar’s brothers and sisters were more important to him than his life. But that didn’t mean he was going to just abandon the people who’d lost Andika, their second home. Especially not when they’d pledged to give their lives to help Oscar and Miledi’s cause. Besides, the moment Oscar had sworn to follow Miledi, everyone important to her had also become his family. Not once had Oscar resented Miledi for asking him to help Andika’s residents before going back.

“You better not underestimate me.”

Oscar Orcus met Miledi’s gaze, his eyes resolute.

“Ehehe, sorry.”

Miledi blushed and scratched her head awkwardly. Oscar looked confused, wondering why anything he’d said had caused her to blush. Rigan, on the other hand, realized exactly what was going on and smiled.

“In that case, Miss Miledi, you should probably get going as soon as possible. For Dylan-kun’s sake. Incidentally, the head office was asking us to send you to them, but...”

“Why? Did something happen?”

“No, they’re just jealous only the people from the Esperado branch got to

speak with you.”

“Ahahaha... Well, I do want to show O-kun and the others the main headquarters sometime, so we’ll head over there after curing Dylan-kun and Katy-chan.”

“That would be much appreciated. Especially since the headquarters chief is starting to get lonely without you. In fact, it’s gotten so bad that people have overheard him saying things like ‘Maybe I should just abandon this mortal coil if my cute Miledi won’t come back.’”

“O-Oh... Sal’s the same as always, I see.”

Sal was a grizzled old man who took care of managing the Liberators while Miledi was out in the field. His abilities as a commander were outstanding.

Incidentally, Sal was a nickname. His full name was Salus Gaistrih. Though he was pushing 88, he was as sharp as ever. Furthermore, he was one of the founding members of the Liberators and the one who first set up the support branch. He doted on Miledi as if she was his real granddaughter, and whenever she was gone for more than a few months at a time he started pining for her. Despite his constant claims that he’d die unless Miledi came back more often, everyone in the support branch was certain he’d outlive all of them.

“Well, thanks to Nacchan we won’t keep him waiting long.”

Miledi turned to Naiz, and he nodded.

“Yeah, leave it to me. We’ve got Meiru now too, so we can go even faster.”

Thanks to Meiru’s restoration magic, Naiz could teleport more times than he could before. On top of that, he could also hold some mana in reserve in case of emergencies. Distances that would take a month to cross on horseback could be covered in three or so days now.

“Your powers truly are splendid.”

Rigan nodded, amazed by their powers. Oscar turned to him and asked, “That being said, we did come all this way to the trade capital of the world. This is a good opportunity to stock up on equipment. Rigan, could you get us a place to stay for a few days and help us find the stuff we need?”

Oscar had burned through a lot of his stockpiled materials during his numerous clashes with the Holy Templar Knights. And neither Andika nor the few hidden villages they'd stopped at along the way had sold many supplies. Though he didn't want to keep his family waiting, Oscar did want to make sure he was at full strength in case anything happened.

"Of course. Ask and you shall receive. I've already prepared our best single rooms for all of you."

"Nyufufufu, what a shame, O-kun. Were you hoping you'd get to share a room with me? Too bad. I'll have you know, I'm not such an easy—"

"That sounds great, Rigan. Mind showing us to them?"

"It would be my pleasure. Come, follow me. We've prepared meals for all of you as well."

"Great. Can I get something light though?"

"But of course."

Oscar headed toward the exit with Rigan following behind him. They looked like a young nobleman and his trusted butler.

"I-Is it just me... or does he look more like a leader than I do?"

"That's your own fault," Naiz shot back mercilessly. Miledi sighed and brought a hand to her chest as she watched Naiz get up and follow after Oscar and Rigan. Meiru suddenly showed up behind her and started pulling on her cheeks.

"Come on, Miledi-chan. We should get going too. You'll be sharing a room with your dear old sister, won't you?"

"Whoa, Meru-nee!?"

Meiru had been so quiet the past few minutes that Miledi had forgotten she was still there.

"We're finally in a big city, so we should go clothes shopping!"

"What's the point, Meru-nee? The only thing you ever wear is that swimsuit."

"I know, but I want to dress *you* up, Miledi-chan."

"Ugh..."

Grimacing, Miledi let Meiru pull her toward the exit. The rest of the Liberators saw her off with heartfelt smiles.

Oscar and the others spent two days in Esperado. On the first day, the Liberators threw them a welcoming party, and on the next day, they threw them a farewell party. During both parties, Miledi fulfilled her role as the Liberators' idol, singing and dancing for everyone. On the second day, Kiara and Miledi got dead drunk as well.

"Miledi!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I love youuu!"

"I love you more, Kia-chaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!"

As the two of them had hugged, Shirley had walked up to them.

"Leadeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeer, was I just a casual fling to youuuuuu!?"

Unsurprisingly, she'd gotten wasted as well. A bunch of other Liberators had come to Miledi as well, lamenting that she hadn't chosen them.

"Sorry guys. But Miledi-chan belongs to me!"

Meiru would never turn down free alcohol, so naturally, she'd gotten hammered too. She waded her way into the crowd and kidnapped Miledi away from them. Afterward, a coalition led by Kiara and Shirley had led an effort to rescue Miledi from Meiru's clutches, creating a huge commotion within the hotel.

Meanwhile, many of the male members of the Liberators had surrounded Oscar and started asking him questions like "Hey, tell me the truth. What do you plan on doing to our idol, hmm, *O-kun*?"

For some reason, no one had bothered asking Naiz similar questions. When Oscar had asked them why, they said things like "Hm? I mean, Naiz-sama already has those two girls he's in love with, right?" "You know, it's kinda weird he's into girls that young when he's almost thirty..." Needless to say, Naiz had spent most of the party drinking alone in the corner to drown his sorrows.

After two very hectic days in Esperado though, Miledi and the others left the city behind. Naiz was able to teleport dozens of kilometers in a single hop, and

thanks to Meiru's restoration magic, he could make a lot of hops in a day.

Technically, Naiz was able to traverse over a hundred kilometers with just one hop, but that drained all of his mana. So long as their destination wasn't 100% safe, Naiz wanted to leave some mana in reserve just in case. Likewise, Meiru didn't want to drain all of her mana using restoration magic either, so the party didn't travel as far as they theoretically could each day. But even then, they were able to travel a few hundred kilometers and cross Entris' border by mid-afternoon without breaking a sweat.

"I guess we're in Velka now."

Oscar looked wistfully at the Velka Mountain Range in the distance.

"Seriously, O-kun? It hasn't even been a year since you left and you're already homesick? Or what, do you just miss Corrin-chan? Kukuku..."

Oscar blinded Miledi with a light beam from his glasses.

"That riverbank over there looks like a good place to take a break. Let's have lunch here."

Oscar dragged Miledi, who was doing the usual "My eyes! My eyeees!" routine over to the riverbank and sat down. He put his hand to the ground and quickly transmuted a simple dining table and four chairs. Then, he pulled out cooking utensils and ingredients from his Treasure Trove and started preparing lunch. He looked like a housewife with the way he deftly handled a knife.

"It never ceases to amaze me just how girly Oscar-kun is."

"Meanwhile, you're not girly at all, Meru-nee!"

Miledi's eyes had started growing accustomed to Oscar's light beams, and she was able to recover much faster than before. As a result, she was able to start being annoying again much faster than before too. Meiru pinned Miledi's arms behind her back and started playing with Miledi's cheeks.

Naiz, who was helping Oscar by taking out the bread and cheese for him, smiled ruefully and said, "Well, in your case, you should at least learn how to cook food that won't make people pass out, Meiru."

"I don't make food for weak people."

Only those who can withstand my cooking deserve to eat it. Such was the pirate queen's logic. But despite how unflappable Meiru was, even she was a little hurt when the rest of her party gave her pointed glares.

"O-Oh yes, Miledi-chan. How many Liberators are there?" Meiru tried to change the subject, but that just caused Miledi's glare to grow stronger. It went from passive exasperation to active scorn. Meiru's position as a dependable older sister was beginning to crumble.

"During the meeting, Rigan told us the total number when he was giving us an overview of the Liberators' current situation."

"Meiru. I thought you were paying attention during his report? You looked really focused."

"Yeah, you didn't even say a word."

Oscar and Naiz had expected the leader of a large-scale pirate organization to be used to meetings regarding logistics and the like, and they'd actually been somewhat impressed with how seriously Meiru seemed to have taken the meeting back in Esperado. And yet here she was now, asking an extremely basic question.

"You know, there's a saying about water magic."

Meiru suddenly started talking about something completely unrelated, and Miledi and the others stared at her suspiciously. She skillfully avoided meeting any of their gazes and continued, "Since it lets you control water, you can effectively do anything in the world with it. For example, you can make sure your eyes don't dry out even if you're not blinking."

"M-Meru-nee. Be honest with me. During the meeting, were you actually—"

"I was sleeping!"

Meiru had been sound asleep with her eyes wide open.

"Why!? Why did you fall asleep!?"

"The things you were talking about were too complicated."

Within one minute of the meeting starting, Rigan had started talking about things like the world economy and the relative political machinations in each

country. Meiru hadn't been able to understand any of it, so she'd given up on paying attention. And because of that, she'd been asleep even when the discussion had moved to simpler matters like the total number of active Liberators.

"But Meru-nee. You were awake at the end, weren't you?"

"I'm both capable of falling asleep whenever I want and waking up the moment I sense whatever's boring me is over."

"What a worthless skill..."

Miledi looked over at Meiru in disappointment.

"And this is the woman who was planning on taking over Andika. Can you believe it, Naiz?"

"The world is full of terrifying things."

Meiru pursed her lips, pouting. As a way of venting her frustration, she buried Miledi's face in her breasts.

"What do you expect from me? I was raised in the slums of a lawless city, then became a pirate."

It was certainly unlikely that Meiru had received any official schooling, and she seemed to be using that as her defense.

"Yeah, but Chris and the others were smart."

"Kyaty and the others were always asking us questions about what they didn't understand too."

"Oh yeah, she'd always come to me and ask about economics on the continent or how trade worked and stuff. Unlike a certain someone, she actually cared about learning."

Though it was possible that the only reason the rest of the pirates had been so inquisitive was that their leader was so clueless.

"I hate it when other people make sense."

Miledi and the others gave Meiru disapproving looks.

Oscar dropped a few sausages on a self-heating frypan that he'd invented and

started cooking. He'd christened the invention "The Hot-Blooded Fry Master." Miledi sighed at Meiru as the pleasant noise of sizzling sausages reached her ears. She raised her index finger and said, "Right now, there's a total of about 3000 Liberators."

"My, that's quite a bit."

Miledi smiled sadly. That number was nowhere near enough to wage war against the whole world. The Liberators were horribly undermanned. Worse—

"Of those 3000, about a third are non-combatants living in hiding within our villages."

"There's a bit less than 2000 Liberators on active duty," Oscar added, looking over his shoulder. He'd brought out a few vegetables and was chopping them with a super-sharp knife enchanted with the Light Blade spell. He named this invention "You are Already Cut."

Miledi nodded in agreement.

"Yep. And of those, 80% are on the support team. It's only 20% of them who can actually fight."

"Meaning when we end up in an all-out war with the church, there'll only be..."

Meiru brought a finger to her lips and started doing some mental math.

"400 people who can fight."

"Naiz-kun... For a shut-in, you sure are good at math."

"I made my living selling iraks, after all."

Naiz had effectively been running a one-man business. And he'd been very skilled at managing his finances. Meiru shot Naiz a spiteful glare, but Miledi cupped Meiru's cheeks and forced her gaze back onto Miledi.

"Well, even if there aren't too many of them, all of our fighters are elites. Most of them could take on 4-5 Templar Knights on their own."

"What about Holy Templar Knights?"

"They might be able to beat them in one-on-one duels, but they probably

can’t take on anyone captain-class or stronger...”

“Well, they might be able to manage now, since I’ve been sending them all artifacts.”

Oscar started serving everyone cheese hotdogs and vegetable soup. No one had any idea how he’d managed to finish cooking all of that while Miledi had been talking.

“My, this looks delicious. You’d make for a good wife one day, Oscar-kun,” Miledi said with an annoyed smile. But despite her sarcastic comments, she still dug in. “But you know. In a way, Oscar-kun’s the scariest one among us.”

“I know what you mean. There’s plenty of other strong people out there, so we’re not all that unique, but...”

“As long as he has the materials, he can strengthen his comrades too. Plus, he’s quite intelligent. In some ways, he’s an even more dangerous person to make an enemy out of than the Liberators or the church.”

“Wh-What’s with you guys all of a sudden? You’re just buttering me up cause you want more food, aren’t you? Fine, I’ll give you all an extra sausage.”

Everyone thrust their plates toward Oscar, eager for more food. Smiling, Oscar started grilling more sausages.

Meanwhile, Meiru started thinking about the relative numbers of all the Liberators. As she absently spooned some soup into her mouth, she realized she’d accidentally dripped some onto Miledi’s head. It was hard to eat while keeping Miledi in her lap, but her sister complex was so strong that she refused to let go of her. Instead, Meiru did her best to ignore the soup stain spreading across Miledi’s hair.

“Are there a lot of hidden villages and support branches?”

In an attempt to hide her mistake, Meiru went back to asking questions.

“You really didn’t listen to anything, did you?”

Despite her joking attitude, there was an air of refinement to the way Miledi ate her food. On the other hand, despite looking elegant and refined, Meiru was spilling sauce everywhere as she ate her hot dog.

“Whoops.”

Meiru accidentally dropped a bit of brown sauce on Miledi’s ponytail. This time, even Oscar and Naiz noticed. Both of them exclaimed, “Ah.”

“In order to explain how many there are and where, you need to first understand the layout of the world. Meru-nee do you know your geography?”

“Huh!? O-Oh, I suppose I don’t. But I do know all of the currents of the western seas better than anyone.”

For a moment, Meiru looked flustered, but then she recovered and gently smiled again. Oscar and Naiz exchanged glances.

Meiru silently glared at them, commanding them not to say anything about the sauce on Miledi’s hair. The glare of a pirate queen was quite convincing.

“Sheesh, you’re hopeless. Fine, take a look at this. You can keep eating, but pay attention.”

Actually, you really should make her stop eating... Oscar and Naiz both tried to silently signal to Miledi to stop Meiru, but she didn’t notice. Instead, her Treasure Trove glowed as she pulled something out. While they’d been in Andika, Oscar had built Treasure Troves for everyone. The one Miledi was using was shaped like a necklace instead of a ring. Once the glow faded, a large map appeared in Miledi’s hands. She spread it out in front of her.

“This is a world map. Now listen up, because I’m only giving this lecture once, Meru-nee. You better not fall asleep on me.”

“I know, I know. I’ll pay attention, Miledi-chan.”

Now’s not the time for a lecture, Miledi-chan! Oh no, now the sauce is staining your hair... Maybe I can mask my mana well enough to cast restoration magic without her noticing...

“Eyes on the map, Meru-nee! Sheesh, we haven’t even gotten started yet!”

“Ngh, she has no openings.”

Miledi scolded Meiru as though she were an unruly schoolchild. Reluctantly, Meiru shifted her gaze toward the map. Miledi nodded in satisfaction and began her explanation.

“First of all, we have the northern continent. I’m sure you know this, but humans control all of it.”

More specifically, the church controlled all of it. Miledi pointed to a spot in the central-north part of the northern continent.

“See that big mountain? That’s the Divine Mountain. It’s the church’s headquarters. From here to the Sharod Federation in the west, the Uldia Dukedom in the east, the Velka Kingdom in the south, is the Theocracy of Elbard.”

“Sharod is where the Crimson Desert and the Red Dragon Mountain are, right? And the Velka Kingdom is where the Greenway is. This is my first time hearing about the Uldia Dukedom, though.”

Meiru, pay more attention to your food! You’re dripping sauce again! Oscar implored Meiru with his eyes, but she didn’t notice. Sauce was dripping from her hotdog onto her fingers.

“The Uldia Dukedom used to be an independent monarchy.”

Its territories hugged the northern mountain range, encompassing Ur Lake and the surrounding fertile wetlands.

“But that was a hundred years ago. The people of Uldia used to worship the spirits said to dwell within Ur Lake, but then...”

“The church colonized them, right?”

Drip... Drip... Drip... Oscar and Naiz were both screaming internally. Miledi’s beautiful blonde hair was covered in sticky brown sauce.

“By the way, that’s where our main headquarters is.”

In practice, Uldia was basically a neglected Elbardian colony, so it made for a convenient hiding place.

“Anyway, east of Uldia is the Odion Federation.”

“That’s where the vice-leader was, right?”

“Yep. All the countries in the federation have a pretty strong military. There are nine of them in total, but they have a centralized government where all the

power lies in the hands of the leader of the alliance. The other countries function more like satellite colonies for the federation leader.”

Every five years, all nine countries held a grand tournament to decide who the federation leader would be, so each country had a chance to seize power.

“I never knew there were such bloodthirsty countries out there...” Meiru muttered absently, ignoring the fact that she was a pirate queen hailing from the most lawless city in the world.

Thanks to Miledi’s serious attitude, Meiru was actually paying attention to her lecture. Unfortunately, that also meant she wasn’t paying any attention to her half-eaten hotdog.

“Oh no!”

“Watch out!”

Oscar and Naiz both shouted out warnings, but it was too late. A few sauce-drenched vegetables slipped out of the bun and fell onto Miledi’s hair with a wet splat.

“O-kun? Nacchan? What’s wrong?”

To say, or not to say. That was the question. They wanted to tell Miledi what was happening to her hair, but they also didn’t want to incur Meiru’s wrath. Besides, this was the first time that the haphazard pirate queen was actually paying attention to a lecture. Such a rare occurrence might never happen again, so Oscar and Naiz decided to remain quiet for now.

Miledi wasn’t fully convinced by their half-assed deflections to her question, but since Meiru was paying attention, she decided to continue her lecture.

“Anyway, south of the Uldia Dukedom and the Odion Federation is...”

“Your birthplace, right? The Grandort Empire, home to the world’s strongest mages.”

“Yep, the only country on the northern continent to hold territory in the southern continent, past the Reisen Gorge.”

That was a full list of all the human nations. Each of them had a Holy Church cathedral somewhere in their capital, and each nation was controlled either

directly or indirectly by the church. The Uldia Dukedom wasn't the only vassal state Elbard possessed. Effectively every human nation was a vassal state in some capacity.

"I see. Now that I think about it, our opponent is quite formidable. Incidentally, you said our goal is to slay the gods, but do you even know where they are?"

Tears welled up in Miledi's eyes and she looked reproachfully over her shoulder at Meiru.

"You weren't even paying attention when I told you that? It was back when we were on the Melusine..."

Do you not care about me at all? Is that it? Seeing the hurt in Miledi's eyes, Meiru started to panic. Unfortunately, that panic caused more of her hot dog to fall into Miledi's hair. However, neither of them noticed.

"I-I was paying attention! But your story about Belle was so moving that I forgot everything that came after. Besides... when you told me all that, I still had no intention of joining the Liberators."

"So you forgot all about it?"

The tears disappeared from Miledi's eyes, and her glare turned cold.

"I'm the kind of person who doesn't sweat the small details..."

Meiru whistled innocently, refusing to meet Miledi's eyes. Sighing loudly, Miledi turned back around and folded her arms. She looked pissed.

"Do you remember how I told you I went to the church's main cathedral?"

"I do. You said you wanted to see for yourself whether or not Belle's claims were true, right? After you snuck into the cathedral, you were discovered by one of God's Apostles and needed to run away."

Wondering why Meiru only seemed to remember details regarding Miledi's mistakes, she started talking about the Liberators' primary goal. Namely, the destruction of the marble pillar that stood at the center of the cathedral at the top of the Divine Mountain.

"When I was in there, I saw one of God's Disciples talking to Ehit in that room.

The room where Belle nearly died once.”

The marble pillar had been emitting a radiance and sentience unlike anything Miledi had seen before. It was there, where the priestesses received oracles from Ehit, that God was connected to the mortal realm.

“Honestly, I have no clue where Ehit is. But it’s obvious he’s using that pillar as a medium to connect to this world. So we’re going to invade the theocracy, blow up the main cathedral, and cut him off from this world. That is our immediate goal.”

Of course, the Liberators didn’t have nearly enough strength to attempt an assault like that yet. On top of that, even Miledi had been no match for a God’s Apostle on her own, so she’d relied on rumors and legends to try and seek out people who could use ancient magic like her.

“And that’s how we’ll defeat a god?”

“Nah, that’s not enough to actually kill him. It’s just at the moment we have no idea where or what kind of existence he is, so this is the most realistic solution we have.”

Miledi grinned and added, “But you know, the main cathedral is the symbol of the church, and everyone calls it ‘The House of Ehit.’ Hey, Meru-nee. Do you think a god who sees people as nothing more than playthings will just stay quiet if we barge into his house and blow the whole thing up?”

“Oh my, Miledi-chan! That’s a wonderfully wicked smile you have there!”

At the very least, Meiru knew that she wouldn’t stand for something like that. If someone destroyed her house, she’d personally make them pay.

Miledi nodded in satisfaction, glad that her hopeless comrade finally understood the Liberators’ primary objective. She then said, “While I’m at it, do you want an overview of the world’s current political situation?”

“Yes please, I— Ah!?”

Glad that she’d succeeded in repairing Miledi’s mood, Meiru plopped the last of the hot dog into her mouth. And as she did so, she finally realized just how much she’d dripped on to Miledi while listening to her lecture. Miledi’s hair was

an absolute mess. Shocked, she looked over at Oscar and Naiz. They both looked like they were nursing headaches.

“First, let’s talk about the Pale Forest in the east. This is where the beastmen live. Their country is closed off from the rest of the world, and even most of our Liberators can’t get access to it. We know they have some kind of centralized government, but we have no idea what kind, so... Hey, Meru-nee, are you listening?”

“I’m listening, don’t worry. In fact, I’m paying *very* close attention to everything. Your explanations are so easy to understand, Miledi-sensei.”

“R-Really? Hehehehe, alright I’ll keep going, then.”

Oscar and Naiz could both tell she wasn’t listening at all. She was just pretending to pay attention while she tried to figure out a way to use restoration magic without Miledi noticing. As cautiously and surreptitiously as she could, Meiru began gathering mana. But the moment she did, Miledi looked over her shoulder and gave her a confused look.

“What’s wrong, Miledi-sensei?”

Meiru smiled her most innocent smile as if to say “I’m not doing anything suspicious at all.” Miledi blushed upon being called Sensei again and turned back to the map.

“The forest is perpetually covered in a thick fog that’s impossible to traverse without the beastman king’s blessing. Just once, the church managed to brainwash one of the beastmen they captured into leading them through the forest, but...”

In the end, they’d gotten lost as well. Thanks to the fog, the Pale Forest was the only place on the northern continent free of the church’s influence.

“Though there are a few other places where the church’s influence doesn’t reach...”

“Such as?”

Pretending to stroke Miledi’s hair, Meiru frantically searched for the vegetable chunks that had fallen into it. *I have to get them out of there without*

Miledi-chan noticing!

“The mountain range in the north. Far past that range lies the land of dragons. But the deeper into the mountains you go, the stronger the monsters you find. The range serves as a natural fortress, preventing anyone from marching across it. The only feasible way past the mountains is to fly.”

But attempting to fly over the mountains meant certain death. After all, dragonmen were masters of the sky.

“Their country is closed off from everyone else as well. I’ve heard that dragonmen are intelligent, wise, and noble, so I’d wanted to enlist their help if I could, but...”

“Wait, does that mean you actually went to visit their land, Miledi? Actually, hold on, aren’t dragonmen a myth?”

Oscar interrupted Miledi’s explanation. Dragonmen were a legendary race said to be capable of transforming into dragons. They often showed up in children’s books and the like as evil tyrants.

Supposedly they loved treasures, demanded virgins be sacrificed to them, and burned everything in their path. In stories, they were always defeated by valiant heroes. Most children grew up hearing at least one or two stories about dragonmen.

“That’s just propaganda spread by the church. They’re the exact opposite of what everyone says they are.”

“I-I see...”

“Yep. That’s precisely why they don’t show themselves in public.”

Miledi looked off into the distance, reminiscing. However, Meiru rifling through her hair interrupted her trip down memory lane, and Miledi reached out to stop her.

“You can’t, Miledi-chan!”

“Huh!? I-I can’t what?”

Meiru grabbed Miledi, surprising her.

“Don’t stop me, I’m fixing up your hair. It’s fine, I know what I’m doing. More importantly, please continue with your lecture. Oh, yes... you still haven’t told me about the southern continent.”

“U-Uh, okay, but... sheesh, Meru-nee, you really are obsessed with me. Diene-chan’s gonna get jealous.”

Fortunately, Miledi didn’t get the real meaning behind “fixing up your hair,” so Meiru urged her to continue explaining things.

“Now turn back around and keep talking! I really want to hear more!”

“A-Alright.”

Meiru realized she wouldn’t be able to use restoration magic. Miledi was too sensitive to the flow of mana. Her only choice was to wipe the sauce off with a napkin.

“Ummm, so you wanted to hear about the southern continent, right? Well, 60% of it is controlled by demons. Their empire, Igdol, is ruled by what we call the Demon Lord.”

Miledi went on to explain that after the last large-scale war ten years ago, Igdol had started focusing its efforts on domestic affairs. In that time, there had only been a few small skirmishes between Igdol and the human kingdoms.

“Oh my, does this mean the demons have become pacifists?”

“Hmm, I dunno about that. Both sides suffered heavy casualties during the war ten years ago. The demons managed to raise an army of monsters, which was completely unheard of, but then that army got eradicated. Rumors say they’re focusing on building another huge monster army.”

The year after the war, Igdol got a new demon lord. And it was this new demon lord who seemed more focused on domestic affairs than international ones.

“Humans and demons have been fighting with each other since time immemorial. But I suppose it would be nice if this new demon lord was a pacifist.”

Miledi smiled and nodded in agreement with Meiru’s statement.

“In the eastern edge of the southern continent sits the Obsidian Tundra, and on the west lies the Azure Marsh.”

The Obsidian Tundra got its name from the ominous black clouds that covered the region almost year-round. On the other hand, the Azure Marsh was shrouded in a perpetual faint blue mist. Bottomless swamps dotted the marsh, and it was considered very hazardous terrain. Furthermore—

“Deep inside the Azure Marsh lies the vampire kingdom... Dastia.”

“I see... The vampire kingdom, huh?”

Meiru stopped combing through Miledi’s hair for a second. Vampires were also a very reclusive race. They were the least populous of all the races, but also the strongest. Like the dragonmen, the church had gone to great lengths to paint them as wicked and cruel.

They also happened to be the race Meiru’s real father belonged to. Meiru’s crimson eyes were proof that she’d inherited vampire blood. She still didn’t know what to think of the father whose face she didn’t even know. Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz all gave her inquisitive looks.

“Miledi-chan, turn back around.”

“Oh, yeah. Okay.”

Meiru had gotten even more sauce in Miledi’s hair while trying to fish the vegetable chunks out of it, and right now she was more focused on fixing her mistakes than anything else.

I can’t let her see the sauce-stained handkerchief! And where did those vegetable chunks even end up? Oscar-kun, you cut them too fine! Of course, cutting them fine had helped improve the taste, so Meiru was just irrationally angry at him because she didn’t want to accept responsibility for her mistakes. Meiru glared at Oscar, who glared stonily back. He knew her anger was misplaced, and that he had nothing to apologize for.

“Ummm, all that’s left is to explain the situation near the frontlines. So everything near the Reisen Gorge, from the western tip of the continent to the land controlled by the Grandort Empire, is known as the frontlines.”

“Is that where most wars take place?”

“Well, it feels more like the whole area’s been designated a battlefield for the sake of waging war.”

Either way, the Reisen Gorge was what separated the human and demon sides. Neither army wanted to be the first to make the trek across a ravine that dispersed mana and was inhabited by all manner of dangerous monsters. Especially demons, who relied primarily on magic. Attempting to cross the gorge during a battle was paramount to suicide. It made much more sense for demons to let humans be the ones to cross, then blast them with magic once they did. If they were lucky, they’d be able to push their opponents into the gorge, saving them the trouble of disposing of the corpses.

“That’s why the demons erected a heavily guarded wall a short distance from the outpost. It’s pretty impressive, too. No one has any idea how long the thing is, and people call it the Impenetrable Demon Barrier.”

Miledi sounded pretty impressed by the demons’ handiwork. Oscar and Naiz both grew excited. Anything impressive enough to awe Miledi had to be amazing. Meanwhile, Meiru was excited because she’d finally found the elusive vegetable chunks.

“Anyway, that’s the basic overview of the world. Now, as for the locations of all the hidden villages and headquarters...”

“Got you!”

Meiru grabbed the pesky vegetable strip out of Miledi’s hair, ripping a few hairs in the process.

“Owww!?” Miledi screamed. Meiru held the vegetable chunk and attached hairs up to the sky, like a pirate admiring her treasure. Oscar and Naiz shook their heads and looked up at the sky in exasperation.

“Hey, Meru-nee! Don’t just pull on my hair like! Wait, what the heck!? Why is my hair all sticky!? And why does it smell so sweet!?”

At long last, Miledi realized what had happened to her hair. Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

“Miledi-chan, calm down. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes. I think it’s important for a leader to be merciful and forgiving.”

Upon hearing that, Miledi grinned. Meiru’s expression stiffened in response.

“Alright then. Let me ask you this, Meru-nee. Did you at least pay attention to what I was saying?”

“Of course?”

“Then explain everything I just said. Go on.”

“.....”

After a long pause, Meiru smiled gently and said, “All beastmen are shut-ins. Humans have a lot of countries. And demons are really cool!”

“Heavensfall.”

Meiru hadn’t scored nearly enough points to pass Miledi-sensei’s test.

Afterward, Meiru used restoration magic to bring Miledi’s hair back to normal. Once Miledi was done chewing Meiru out for her negligence, she went on to explain where all the Liberators’ bases were.

Wanting to be respected by the girl she saw as a younger sister, Meiru paid attention and memorized everything perfectly this time. She wanted to prove she wasn’t a deadbeat. Unfortunately, she basically was one.

The party then resumed teleport-hopping across the continent. The sun was starting to set around the time Naiz said wearily, “Miledi, can we stay the night in the next town over?”

“Yep. We’ve got a branch office there too.”

It appeared Miledi was planning on using her connections to get everyone a free room.

“Phew, traveling across land sure is inconvenient. On the sea, you can move without having to do anything.”

“Only lazy bums like you would think of something like that, Meru-nee.”

“Is it just me, Miledi, or do you suddenly get more competent whenever

you're around Meiru?"

"Hey, O-kun. What's that supposed to mean? I'll have you know I'm always competent, serious, and beautiful."

"Yeah, that's more what I normally expect."

While Oscar and Miledi were chatting, Naiz activated the final teleport of the day. He took the party to the coordinates Miledi specified, and they teleported in at the base of a small hill. Their destination was at the hill's summit. It was Prantz, a small village in northeastern Velka.

The party entered the village and headed straight for a wheat merchant's office, which was the location of this town's Liberator headquarters. The three-story building they stopped in front of had a sign hanging from the door that said "Lumond Trading Firm." Behind the main building was a warehouse several times its size.

"Good afternoon! It's your favorite regular, Miledi-chan!"

"Lea— Ledi-sama!"

The young receptionist stood up so fast her chair fell down behind her. She'd almost accidentally said "Leader." At the last second, she'd managed to turn it into a nickname for Miledi, but considering she was a veteran receptionist, she never should have made such an amateur mistake to begin with. Most of the trading firm's business was done in private rooms, so there were few people in the lobby, but those few were now curious about these newcomers.

Realizing she'd messed up big time, the receptionist froze up. But a second later she plastered on a professional smile and said, "We've been expecting you, world-famous wheat gourmet, Miledi-sama. Is your Wheat Superiority Society doing well?"

Everyone present looked befuddled, Miledi included.

"O-Of course it is! I'll be needing another large order of wheat to continue my research! Naturally, once I'm done with it, my staff will be able to enjoy the fruits of my labors!"

Despite her surprise, Miledi masterfully played along with the ad libbed

scenario.

The nearby customers' jaws dropped open. *Is there seriously a society like that, with a girl like this at its head?*

A few of the other receptionists went around and started whispering something furiously to the spectating customers. After a few seconds, the customers all gave her pitying looks, then walked out of the office. Whatever story they'd been told, it was clear it hadn't reflected Miledi in a positive light. Regardless, she'd safely managed to keep her identity secret.

"Please wait a moment. I'll bring the president immediately."

"Okay..."

There was something off about this receptionist. Not only had she made such an elementary mistake, but her attitude was also oddly formal. Realizing something wasn't right, Miledi quietly waited for her to come back with the president. The receptionist scurried into the back, vanishing in seconds.

"Do you think something happened?"

Oscar had sensed that something was off too. He wasn't the only one. Naiz and Meiru looked puzzled as well. Before they could speculate any further, a well-built man in his fifties emerged from the back. His black hair was beginning to thin out, and his jowls and stomach were plumper than average, but that much was expected for a successful businessman. The president of this wheat company, Brad Lumond, was also the manager of Prantz's Liberator headquarters. He gave Miledi his best business smile. Not a natural, affectionate one a subordinate might have for their beloved leader, but a stiff, obviously fake, business one. Even though normally, he'd welcome Miledi with as much warmth as the people from Esperado had.

"It's been a while, Brad. Were you busy?"

"It's been far too long indeed, Miledi-sama. And I suppose you could say that."

Brad then added, "But I am overjoyed you decided to stop by my humble establishment. I sent you a letter, but it seems it must have missed you. However, I suppose it's a stroke of good fortune that you came here so quickly."

“Did you need me for something?”

“Yes. There’s something that requires your immediate attention. Please follow me to the warehouse.”

Miledi didn’t bother asking anything else. Behind his smile, Brad’s eyes were serious. There was something he needed to tell Miledi so badly he’d sent an express messenger. Miledi glanced back at her companions. They looked relaxed on the surface, but it was obvious from the look in their eyes that they were tense as well.

“Follow me.”

Brad led them into the back. He passed a few rooms, then took them into the large warehouse they’d seen from the outside. Passing by countless rows of stacked wheat, he took them to the very back of the warehouse. Here, bags of wheat of all sizes were strewn about haphazardly. It seemed as though these held no saleable value. Brad started moving them around in a set pattern. They still looked scattered about, but it was obvious their placement wasn’t random this time.

“My apologies for the late introduction, gentlemen. I am the manager of this Liberator branch, Brad Lumond. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Oscar-sama, Naiz-sama, and Meiru-sama. I sincerely thank you for agreeing to aid Miledi-sama in her quest.”

It was obvious from his words that Brad was being sincere, which made Oscar and the others even more confused about his earlier attitude.

“Normally, all of the branch staff would be here to welcome you but... unfortunately, that won’t be possible now.”

Brad finished rearranging the bags, and, with a loud creak, a section of the floor sunk in a few inches. Another section of the floor slid over it, revealing a staircase leading downward. It seemed this secret passage operated on a weight scale.

“I have heard that you are a master of ancient magic that specializes in healing magic, Meiru-sama. Is that true?”

Brad looked over his shoulder at Meiru as he led the way down.

“Yes. So long as someone is alive, I guarantee I can heal them.”

“Thank goodness. You’ve just barely made it in time, then.”

“Brad, what the heck—”

Unable to hold her curiosity back any longer, Miledi turned to Brad. But her question was answered before she could finish asking. There were a few Liberators in the underground room Brad had taken them to, but they all looked grim. However, hope sparkled in their eyes the moment they laid eyes on Miledi.

“Leader!”

“You came!”

They started to huddle around Miledi, but Brad shouted, “Out of the way! We don’t have much time!”

The Liberators quickly backed away, and Brad led them to the room furthest in the back. As they approached, the party noticed something strange. The door was surrounded by a flock of Isoniol Eagles. They all stared at the door, chirping mournfully.

“They all gathered here a few days ago. No one could convince any of them to carry letters anywhere. I can’t really blame them, though.”

Miledi suddenly realized why the Liberators’ mail had suddenly stopped coming. The eagles that carried it had all come to roost here. And there was only one reason they’d neglect their duties.

Feeling a mounting sense of dread, Miledi opened the door. Inside—

“Ah!? Tim!”

She spotted the captain of the Liberators’ messenger corps, Tim Rocket. He was covered in wounds, barely clinging to life. Miledi rushed over to his side, the blood draining from her face. Oscar and Naiz, who’d both met him before, also looked worried. His wounds were terrible. His whole body had been wrapped in bandages and casts. He wasn’t the only one in such an awful state, either. Creme lay sleeping beside his pillow, its wings torn off.

It was a miracle either of them was still alive. A massive pile of empty potion

bottles sat on the table beside Tim's bed. Everyone in this branch office had done everything they could to keep Tim and Creme alive.

"Meru-nee!"

"Leave it to me."

Meiru got to work instantly. Sunset-orange mana swirled around her and quickly expanded to fill the entire room. For a moment, it looked as though this room was bathed in sunlight, even though it was underground. That light filled everyone watching with hope.

"I won't forgive anything that makes Miledi-chan cry— Tetragrammaton!"

Meiru rejected the very existence of this tragic phenomenon. Her power wasn't healing, but restoration. So long as someone wasn't dead, Meiru could restore them, no matter how severe the damage. Ancient magic had the power to deny even the reaper. Naturally, Tim's wounds were a trifling matter. His wounds vanished as if they'd never existed, and Creme's wings grew back as good as new.

"U-Unbelievable..." Brad muttered in awe. The other Liberators in the room looked just as stunned. Everyone was speechless, their eyes wide.

After a few seconds, the glow of Meiru's mana faded, and the divine spectacle came to an end.

Tim slowly opened his eyes and muttered, "Wh-Wha?"

"Tim! Can you hear me!? It's me, Miledi!"

"L-Leader?"

Tim's eyes, which were the only part of his face visible through his bandages, looked bewildered. Next to him, Creme chirped in confusion. The watching Liberators all sighed in relief.

"Yeah, it's me, Tim. Look, O-kun and Nacchan are here too. This is your first time seeing Meru-nee, but she's here too. She's the one who saved you and Creme, actually."

Miledi turned to Meiru and squeezed her hand. There were tears in her eyes.

“Thank you! Thank you so much, Meru-nee! You made it in time!”

“Fufu, you’re welcome.”

Meiru smiled and patted Miledi’s head with her free hand. Tim watched the two of them blankly for a few seconds until Oscar and Naiz called out to him.

“Tim, it’s good to see you safe and sound. Creme too.”

“What happened to you two?”

He returned to his senses upon being spoken to, and his eyes suddenly widened in panic.

“Leader, we’re in big trouble. This isn’t the time to be celebrating!”

Tim ripped off the bandages wound around him and struggled into a sitting position. Miledi and the others were surprised by his sudden actions, but he ignored their shock.

“How long have I been asleep? Shit!”

“Hey! Calm down, Tim! You’re okay! It’s safe here—”

“*Nothing* is okay!”

His voice tinged with desperation and despair, Tim shouted, “The Reisen village was attacked! The whole place was destroyed!”

Tim’s voice echoed through the underground chamber. Miledi’s eyes widened in shock, Oscar and Naiz turned pale, and Meiru closed her eyes. A cold draft wafted through the room, chilling everyone’s already frozen hearts even further.

Chapter II: A New Ancient Magic User

A single beast stalked the darkness, not bothering to hide its bloodlust. The beast was a wolf, but one so massive it stood as tall as a man. It sniffed the walls and floor as if searching for a specific scent. After a few seconds, it picked up on something.

“Grrrr...”

With a low growl, one filled with mad glee, it looked up at the wall directly in front of it. Dark crimson eyes glimmering with malice, it pounced.

Just as its forelegs were about to close in on its foolish prey— “Holy light of judgment, bless my sword— Divine Slash!”

The wolf had no way of dodging. It was at its most defenseless when it was going in for the kill, and the blade heading for its stomach had suddenly popped out of the ground. Not only was it coming from a very inopportune angle, but it had also been enhanced with powerful support magic.

The blade sliced cleanly through the wolf’s torso, cutting it in two. Both halves of the monster spun through the air, landing on the ground with a sickening plop. Blood spilled out of the wolf’s bisected corpse and the light faded from its eyes.

The earth started to writhe, and an arm popped out after the sword. It looked like a zombie was rising out of its grave.

“Alright. Surprise attack successful.”

The voice echoing in the darkness was full of confidence. It belonged to a tall, muscular, and stern-looking man in his mid-forties. The same man who’d just risen from the earth.

He spat out a mouthful of dirt and looked around. Though he had the air of a hardened warrior about him, he also seemed affable and easygoing. He patted his graying hair, knocking clumps of dirt out of it, and turned to the wall the wolf had attacked. Like the wolf, he knew there was something there.

“Hey, you lot. You can come out now.”

The section of the wall he was staring at crumbled away, like the outer shell of an egg. Within stood a young boy.

“Bleh...”

He tumbled out of his hiding place, looking exhausted.

“Uh, hey Ruth? Are you okay?”

Ruth didn’t respond. He was on all fours and looked anything but okay.

A girl came out of the wall after him and sympathetically patted his back. She had chocolate-colored skin, blonde hair, and jade-green eyes—Susha.

“He’s been using magic within the Reisen Gorge. It’s no surprise he’s worn out.”

“Yeah, good point.”

The older man, Combat Commander Marshal Diamond, smiled in response to Susha and looked down at Ruth.

“You’re one hell of a kid, you know that? Your camouflage was perfect.”

“It’s hard to believe he’s just eleven. Compared to him, I’m pretty much useless... Alas.”

Sections of the wall next to and directly across from Ruth’s hiding place crumbled away in quick succession and two more men stepped out. One was a young, brown-haired man in his mid-twenties, while the other was a slender beastman with a long monkey’s tail and a penchant for pessimism. The former’s name was Tony Owen while the latter was called Abe Morgan. They were Marshal’s subordinates and part of the Reisen village’s defense squad.

Ruth gave the two men a tired thumbs-up to show he appreciated their praise. In doing so he could no longer rely on his arms to hold him up so he fell to the ground, his butt sticking out.

There was, of course, a good reason the five of them were doing this. Put simply, they were in the middle of exterminating monsters who’d found their way inside the village. This particular hidden village was the one Miledi had

used as a base of operations before meeting Oscar. It sat deep within the Reisen Gorge, close to where Velka and Grandort's borders met.

Because the Reisen Gorge dispersed mana the moment it left anything's body, it would have been impossible for Snowbell and the other builders to construct anything inside it. In fact, originally the Liberators hadn't even planned on building a base here. However, the gorge was familiar territory for Miledi. She was a Reisen after all.

She'd personally constructed this base and set it as her headquarters. After all, any potential attacker would be unable to use magic, while Miledi could still cast her spells. Within the gorge, she was invincible. So she'd used gravity magic to carve a cavern out of the sheer cliff face.

Of course, now that Oscar had joined the Liberators, he'd sent everyone living in the gorge, including Ruth, Artifacts that allowed them to use a limited amount of magic down here. Thanks to its remote location, the village had never been attacked by people, and even monsters rarely ventured inside it.

"Marshal-san, thank you for letting us join you."

Susha bowed to Marshal, her blonde hair falling around her head.

"Don't sweat it. Your plan was pretty good, so if anything I should be thanking you."

Marshal smiled ruefully as he said that. His subordinates mirrored his expression. Susha had been the one who came up with their earlier battle plan. Her willingness to act as bait had astounded Marshal and the others.

Of course, everyone living in the village knew that Susha and Ruth had been tagging along with Marshal when he went out to eliminate monsters and that they'd learned a lot in a great deal, but their courage and the speed of their growth had amazed the adults.

"Now then, I don't sense any other monsters around. Alright, Ruth, get on my back."

Marshal turned his back to Ruth and squatted down. However, Ruth didn't respond. He wasn't unconscious, that much was obvious from the glimmer in his eyes.

“Captain... Look at that.”

“Hm?”

Ruth was looking at the cavern exit. Hesitantly, Marshal followed his gaze.

“Was that a rat?”

Marshal caught a fleeting glimpse of something small with white fur before it darted behind a boulder. Though he wasn’t able to get a good look at it, it definitely seemed like a rat.

“I wonder how it got all the way here? We don’t normally see rats in the village, but it’s still just...”

Susha tilted her head quizzically. With how many dangerous monsters prowled the Reisen Gorge, few natural animals lived at the bottom. They wouldn’t be able to survive down here. Of course, the gorge wasn’t utterly devoid of fauna that wasn’t monsters. Rats, bats, and lizards had carved out a niche for themselves in the ravine’s harsh environment. They tended to hide in the cracks of the walls or within caves though.

The village had a larger proportion of animals than anywhere else in the gorge too, since it was much safer. All of this was to say, it was understandable that Susha didn’t see what was so special about the rat Ruth had pointed out.

“Well... maybe it’s just my imagination, but...”

Hesitating slightly, Ruth explained what he found strange about the rat.

“I feel like I’ve seen it before.”

“By ‘it’ you mean that rat?”

“Ruth-kun, you can differentiate them by their appearance?”

Tony and Abe gave Ruth incredulous looks.

“No, that’s not what I mean. It’s just...”

“Stop beating around the bush and just spit it out already.”

“A-Alright, but don’t laugh at me, Captain. The rest of you better not laugh either.”

“Don’t worry. We were able to keep a straight face this whole time while you’ve been lying down with your ass in the air. I doubt you’d be able to break our poker faces now.”

“So you’ve been laughing at me this whole time, you’ve just been hiding it!?”

Frowning, Ruth nevertheless cleared his throat. Ever since he’d parted from his beloved older brother, Ruth had slowly been learning how to keep his cool in all circumstances.

“When I was looking at that rat, it felt like our eyes met. It felt like that last time, too.”

“Oh, how do I put this...”

Marshal wanted to tell Ruth it was just a coincidence, but the young boy’s serious gaze caused him to swallow his words.

“That rat has a will. I can tell.”

The first time Ruth had seen it was when he’d gone out shopping. He’d seen it just before he’d gone down the secret staircase that connects the top of the gorge to the village.

It had been watching him intently from the shadow of a nearby boulder. When it had noticed Ruth’s gaze it had turned around and scampered off, so he’d just marked it off as a coincidence. But now...

“Alright, I get it. I’ll report this to the others. Who knows, it’s definitely possible that there are other people out there like Tim, who can talk to and strengthen animals.”

“Captain... but what if I really am just imagining things?”

Marshal affectionately ruffled Ruth’s hair.

“You’ve got the sharpest eyes out of all of us here. It’s worth reporting at least.”

Ruth grinned at Marshal’s praise.

“Alright, let’s get outta here.”

Marshal squatted back down, urging Ruth to get on his back. Just as Ruth

reached out to grab Marshal's shoulder— "Please wait."

Susha held out a hand to stop him.

"We still can't be sure we're safe."

Not only was Ruth claiming there was more to the rat they'd seen than meets the eye, it was entirely possible monsters capable of hiding their presence, like giant ravine worms, were hiding nearby.

"Marshal-san, you need to be ready to fight at any time. I'll carry Ruth-kun."

Ruth twitched and turned to Susha in disbelief. But she used the body strengthening magic she'd just recently learned and rolled up her sleeves. It seemed she was serious about this. Ruth tried to run away. Unfortunately, he was still too weak to stand, and all he could do was crawl across the ground.

"Well, I guess you've got a point, but..."

Marshal, Tony, and Abe all exchanged glances. They were all thinking the same thing. But when they saw how determined Susha was to make herself useful, they couldn't bring themselves to tell her to stop. As a result, Ruth was caught. Susha lifted him in her arms and carried him princess-style.

"S-Stop!"

"This isn't the time to be complaining, Ruth-kun."

"A-At least carry me on your back!"

"Marshal-san, I believe I've improved my body strengthening magic by a great deal, but what do you think?"

"Oh, uhh... Yeah, you're doing good."

Marshal's expression was stiff. Meanwhile, Tony and Abe gave Ruth pitying looks. The party walked in silence for a few minutes, until they reached the residential part of the village.

"Aaaaaaaaaah! Ruth's being carried princess-style!"

Upon arriving, they were greeted by an excited Yunfa. Her eyes, the same jade-green as her older sister, sparkled as she jumped up and down in glee. Her twin braids bounced with her. In her hands was the violin she'd carried with her

constantly ever since learning her Job was Bard. Seeing as it was out of its case, she'd likely been in the middle of practicing.

"Huh? Ru-oniichan?"

Corrin, who'd been listening to Yunfa practice, looked surprised when she saw Ruth in Susha's arms. Ruth, on the other hand, looked like his soul had left his body.

"Oh my, Ruth. Did you injure yourself?"

Moorin ran over to the party, looking worried. Marshal scratched his head awkwardly and said, "Oh no, he's fine. The only thing that's hurt is his dignity."

"Umm, are you sure he's okay?"

Moorin still looked a little worried as she examined Ruth. Because of her kind nature and her penchant for looking after children, she was like the village godmother. Finding no external injuries, she sighed in relief. Moorin then clapped her hands together and turned to Corrin.

"Corrin, Yunfa. Now that Marshal-san and the others are back, how about we have dinner? Could you call all the others over for me?"

"Sure, Mommy!"

"Yep, we'll get everyone!"

Yunfa packed her violin away while Corrin saluted to Moorin. The two of them then trotted off to round up the other villagers.

"Moor— I mean Mother. Is there anything I can do to help?" Susha asked hesitantly, fidgeting.

"My, thank you for offering, Susha. Could you help me serve the soup?"

"O-Okay!"

Though Susha was normally cool and unflappable, she acted more like the little girl she was around Moorin. When Moorin patted her head, she beamed.

Susha's parents had died at a young age, and since then she'd worked at a family friend's bar to earn her keep and protected her younger sister. Her environment had forced her to mature quickly, but Moorin's motherly nature

allowed Susha to return to acting like a child around her. Susha still felt a little embarrassed about calling Moorin “Mother,” though. She was a little jealous of how easily Yunfa was able to just call her “Mommy.”

Once the villagers were gathered, dinner began. It was a lively affair, with everyone present except the people on watch or nursing the sick.

“So, Ruth, how’d it feel to be carried by Susha?”

“Oh, shut up.”

Ruth glared at the woman who was teasing him, a young woman with wild gray hair. She wore a tank top, low-rise pants, and a simple pair of sandals. She sat with her legs crossed underneath her on her chair, and rested her elbows on the table. From the way she pointed her fork at Ruth, it was obvious she didn’t have any table manners. Her fluffy wolf ears and tail bobbed back and forth as she chuckled.

Her name was Shushu Corthea, and she was half-wolfman, half-human. More importantly, though, she was the second strongest fighter in the Reisen base.

“Susha’s got pretty big tits for her age, you know? Did you enjoy being pressed against them?”

The way she teased people was reminiscent of the Liberators’ leader.

“I didn’t let them touch him. I would never allow that.”

Susha smiled at Shushu, but her eyes were stone cold.

“Su-nee and I are—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I know. You guys belong to ‘Naiz-sama,’ right? I’ve heard that line a thousand times now.”

Marshal and the other guys realized this conversation was headed in a dangerous direction, and they all stiffened nervously. At the same time, Corrin blushed and looked pointedly down at her food. She pretended to be extremely interested in the vegetables dotting her plate.

“Shushu. *Munch, munch*... You’re being... *chew, chew*... a bad influence on Corrin, so... *swallow*... just stop talking.”

Mikaela Eifield gave Shushu advice in between bites of food. Though she was blind, her special magic Soul Sight gave her a wide field of vision and she was able to keep an eye on the entire village even while eating.

“Decide whether you’re gonna talk or eat, you glutton.”

Mikaela had food in both hands, and her mouth was so full that her cheeks were puffed out like a squirrel. A particularly gluttonous squirrel.

“I am not... *swallow...* a glutton!”

Her words weren’t all that persuasive when they were coming from a mouth full of food. Though she looked like a beautiful priestess, Mikaela’s eating habits ruined her good looks. Shushu waved her hand dismissively at Mikaela, then turned back to Ruth. She bit a chunk of meat off the chicken thigh in her hands and started teasing him again.

She was quite fond of this serious, determined, and indomitable boy. There was, however, one part of Ruth’s personality that Shushu didn’t like.

“Give it a rest already, Shushu! You’re a girl so you shouldn’t be telling jokes like that! Besides, I don’t even care about getting a girlfriend! I need to hurry up and become an accomplished Synergist like my brother!”

“Oh god, not your brother again. Every time you open your mouth it’s always ‘My brother this, my brother that!’ You got a brother complex or something, you weirdo?”

“What’d you say!? What’s wrong with me being proud of my brother!?”

“My brother’d say this. My brother’d do that. I wanna be like my brother. I wanna help my brother... God, I’m sick of hearing it. Did he fucking brainwash you or something?”

“He’d never do something like that! He’s an amazing guy! I just—”

For a myriad of reasons, Shushu got irrationally angry whenever Ruth started praising Oscar. Largest among them was the fact that Shushu wasn’t too fond of Oscar.

Tch... What’s so special about that guy? Both Miledi and Ruth are always fucking going on about him.

The reason Shushu didn't like Oscar had to do with Miledi. Not only did Shushu love teasing Miledi, who was surprisingly innocent, she also owed her life to the Liberators' leader.

The church was still trying to penetrate the Pale Forest, and they were still using brainwashed beastmen soldiers as their scouts. And Shushu had been one of those scouts.

Her family had been killed by the church, and her will trampled all over. Because she'd been brainwashed, her old comrades had been forced to bare their fangs at her. While it had been an unfortunate necessity, being attacked by her old friends had destroyed what little remained of Shushu's heart.

It was at that moment that she'd awoken to her special magic, Repulse. It was magic that emitted shockwaves in all directions, preventing anything from getting close to the caster. Shushu had been unable to turn her own magic off, and had been on the brink of dying from overusing mana when Miledi had shown up.

Miledi had used her overwhelming mana pool to push her way past Shushu's Repulse magic and forcibly shut down the girl's rampaging magic. Afterward, she'd taken Shushu back with her to the Liberators.

By nature, wolfmen were attracted to those who were strong, so it was inevitable that Shushu would become infatuated with Miledi. Recently though, the only letters she'd received from Miledi had been ones talking about "O-kun."

"Yeah, well, I don't like him."

"Wh-What!? What's your problem!?"

Ruth couldn't stand how Shushu always acted so dismissive whenever he started talking about Oscar. The dinner table grew tense as Ruth and Shushu glared at each other.

"Ruth, Shushu. No fighting at the dinner table."

Moorin's calm voice carried surprisingly far. Ruth withered before Moorin's reproachful gaze and meekly apologized.

“I-I didn’t do nothing wr—”

“Shushu?”

“Ugh, f-fiiine...”

Not even Shushu could stand up to Moorin. Her tail drooped and she settled back down in her seat.

Scenes like this had become commonplace recently, and all of the other villagers just smiled. The silence that followed was broken a few seconds later by Mikaela.

“Hm? *Chew chew...* Tim’s back.”

She scarfed down an entire loaf of bread as she said that. As Tim was head of the messenger corps, he wasn’t able to make any one base his permanent home. But because of how often he relayed correspondence to and from Miledi, he practically lived in the Reisen Gorge village for all intents and purposes. People had gone from saying, “Tim’s come to visit” to “Tim’s back.”

Susha and Yunfa’s faces lit up, while Corrin and Ruth smiled to each other. Usually, it took Tim around fifteen minutes from Mikaela announcing Tim’s arrival to him reaching the residential part of the village. Ruth and the others started bolting down their food, eager to hear what news Oscar, Naiz, and Miledi had for them.

Exactly fifteen minutes after Mikaela’s announcement, Tim came into view.

“Wow, that smells delicious.”

Looking a little tired, he walked over to the dining table. Perched on his shoulder was Creme. Tim’s other messenger birds, as well as his beloved horse Tart, were resting in a special stable built specifically for Tim’s animals.

“Tim! Creme! Welcome home!”

“Tim-oniichan, Creme-chan, welcome back.”

Tim smiled as Ruth and Corrin rushed over to him. Creme cooed happily as well.

“Welcome back, Tim-san. Thank you for always relaying our messages. Do you

have any letters for us?”

“Welcome home, Tim-oniisan. Did you bring any souvenirs?”

Though Susha and Yunfa smiled as they greeted Tim, there was a forcefulness in their voice that scared him. Even Creme was scared enough to stop cooing. Their obsession with Naiz’s letters was borderline insane. Tim hurriedly pulled a letter out of his satchel and said “Y-Yes, I do. Here you go.”

“Thank you very much, Tim-san!”

Susha’s smile was simultaneously dazzling and terrifying. Tim thought back to how Naiz always asked whether or not Susha had suddenly awoken to some special magic that let her see what he was doing at all times whenever they met.

I’m sorry, Naiz-san. I don’t want to do this, but I don’t have a choice... Tim handed Susha and Yunfa a second letter, then moved on to give Ruth and Corrin Oscar’s letter. Lastly, he handed Marshal and the others Miledi’s letter.

“Oooh, look at this! Corrin, Mom! Brother’s coming home!”

Ruth’s elated voice echoed through the cavern. Oscar’s letter detailed how they’d left Andika and were finding a new home for all the Andikans who’d chosen to join the Liberators. He also mentioned how once they’d gotten the Andikans set up at their new posts that they’d return to Reisen for a time.

His previous letter had mentioned how they’d met Meiru and how she could heal Katy and Dylan, so Ruth and Corrin were looking forward to meeting her. Tim’s letters this time had come bearing wonderful news.

“He said they’ll be back within two months... Hic... Thank goodness... Dy-oniichan, Katy. You’ll be back to normal soon...”

Overcome by emotion, Corrin burst into tears. No one poked fun at her. Everyone knew how she’d spent all of her free time looking after Dylan and Katy, as well as the other unfortunate souls who’d been left in a coma after being transformed into mindless soldiers by the church.

“Hehe, I should have known our brother of all people would find a way to bring Dylan and Katy back.”

“I always believed that oniichan would do it.”

“Stupid, I did too!”

The other Liberators smiled, warmed by Ruth and Corrin’s happiness.

“Oh Naiz-sama, you’re such a... naughty boy.”

Suddenly, the warm atmosphere froze over. Though Susha’s voice was gentle, it seemed to freeze the souls of everyone who heard it.

“Not again. Goddammit Naiz, not again...”

Though he was berating Naiz, Marshal’s voice was full of pity.

Timidly, Mikaela asked, “Wh-What happened this time, Susha?”

Yunfa, who was reading the letter together with her sister, responded in her place.

“Naiz-sama’s *very* popular. Meiru-oneesan told us everything.”

Everyone looked at the two letters in the siblings’ hands. They then turned to Tim. He looked away, trying his best to seem unconcerned. Of course, he couldn’t tell everyone he’d just handed over Meiru’s secret report on Naiz to the two of them.

Though none of them had met her, the Liberators all thought they could imagine Meiru’s laughter echoing through the cavern. They did not doubt that this new comrade of Miledi’s was... interesting, to say the least.

Susha finally recovered enough to talk, sending a wave of relief through the veteran Liberators who had fought things far scarier than a twelve-year-old girl without flinching.

“It’s fine.”

The haughty way in which she said that made it seem as though she’d personally eliminate the rabble that dared to crowd around Naiz. But then—

“We’ll be able to see him soon, Yunfa.”

“Yep.”

Susha blushed and stared at the letter in her hands with sparkling eyes. She

looked like a wife awaiting the return of her beloved husband. Which was a problem in its own way. Everyone thought there was something wrong with this scene, but no one had the guts to say anything.

Susha's obsessions aside though, the members of the Reisen branch were filled with hope. They'd soon be reunited with their friends and family. Furthermore, they'd be able to meet Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz's new comrade. There was a sense that things were going to get better from here on out.

However, it was a sad truth of the world that fate tended to kick people down right when they were most hopeful. Suddenly—

"Run."

A semi-transparent image of a young man appeared in the middle of the room. His name was Forest. And he was the one in charge of keeping watch up above tonight. Right now he was at a lookout tower camouflaged as a boulder near the surface. His special magic allowed him to detach his soul from his body, which was how he was contacting everyone right now. He opened his mouth to expand on his warning, but—

"Gah!"

Before he could, his spirit vanished.

"Mikaela!"

"Ah... No way!"

Her pained scream cut through the room.

"We're under attack! I don't know how many there are, or who's attacking! They have some way to mask their presence! James and Forest... have been killed."

Both of them had been strong enough to take on a few Holy Templar Knights on their own, and yet they'd been defeated in an instant.

The shock left everyone stunned until Mikaela shouted, "Ngh, everyone, prepare to fight! Non-combatants head to the clinic! Get the wounded and prepare to evacuate!"

The first to return to her senses was Shushu. She slapped her cheeks and

dashed off. Her ears and tail were bristling, and her mouth twisted in an angry snarl. A second later, Tony, Abe, and the other fighters followed after her.

As they left, Marshal shouted, “I doubt they’ll be able to hide themselves down here, but be careful! Stay calm and focus on buying time!”

If Shushu and the others got too aggressive, it was possible some of the enemies would slip past them, and reach the undefended civilians within the settlement. That was the one thing that had to be prevented at all costs.

“Captain, I’ll help too!”

Ruth shook off Moorin, who was trying to hold him back and ran toward Marshal.

“No, you’ll just get in the way!”

“Ah...”

Marshal’s words were harsh, but Ruth’s life was on the line here.

“Besides, you’ve got a more important job, don’t you? Did you forget what your brother told you when he left?”

“Goddammit! Fine, I’ll go!”

Once again, Ruth was unable to fight together with the others. Once again, he was forced to run away, leaving those he cared about behind. It was so frustrating he wanted to cry. But Ruth shed no tears. There was no time to lament his helplessness. He turned on his heel and grabbed his precious sister, Corrin’s, hand.

“Let’s go. We’ve gotta get Dylan and Katy.”

“Okay.”

Oscar had tasked him and Corrin with protecting their bedridden siblings. Though Corrin was trembling in fear, she was determined to see her task through.

“Ruth-kun. I understand how you feel. It’s frustrating for me too.”

“But soon we won’t have to run.”

They were still children now. But as long as they survived, there’d be a next

time. And if they weren't strong enough next time, then they'd keep getting stronger for the time after that. That was what Susha and Yunfa were trying to tell Ruth as they ran with him.

"Yeah, this is the last time."

Ruth picked up the pace, doing his best to ignore the sounds of fighting coming from behind him. Each clash was a like spear wedging into his back, reproaching him for fleeing while others fought.

While the kids ran, the other Liberators fought near the entrance.

"Dammit, these guys are crazy strong!"

Tony barely managed to fend off his opponents' flurry of attacks. There were six enemies in total. They were gray robes with matching gray masks, so it was impossible to tell who they were. However, their physical prowess was leagues above anything the Liberators had seen.

Furthermore, they were more agile and dexterous than the best acrobats, using even the walls and ceiling as footholds. Despite their limber movements, even their lightest jabs struck with the weight of a warhammer.

Even Tony was hard-pressed to parry them, despite his amazing swordplay. Though he possessed no job or special magic, he'd practiced swordplay under Marshal for years. His simple defensive style was so well polished that it was considered impenetrable by the other Liberators. But for the first time, it seemed even his defenses were about to be breached. Overwhelmed by his opponents' coordinated attacks, Tony was blown away.

He crashed into the wall behind him, grunting in pain. Before he could recover, another enemy dropped from the ceiling toward him.

"Not on my watch!"

Abe kicked off from the ceiling himself, getting behind the enemy. His job was Acrobat, and he was just as used to using the walls and ceiling to fight as these mysterious assailants seemed to be. He stabbed his opponent's back just before their dagger reached Tony. The impact caused the assailant's attack to miss its mark, only grazing Tony's cheek instead of driving into his skull. Abe then

jumped back, while Tony kicked his defenseless opponent. He recovered his stance just as Abe landed. Unfazed by the loss of one of their comrades, the other enemies rushed toward Tony and Abe. But before they could reach them —

"Fuck off!"

A shockwave rippled across the ground. Shushu had activated her special magic, Repulse. Waves of gray mana shook the cavern, sending the enemies flying. They crashed into the nearby walls and ceiling, pinned there by Shushu's magic. Tony and Abe were far enough away that they weren't affected, but some of the other Liberators closer to her were also sent flying.

After Marshal, Shushu, Tony, and Abe were the strongest fighters the Reisen branch had, and even they were having trouble with these enemies. The rest of the Liberators didn't stand a chance against the mystery attackers, so Shushu had actually saved them by blasting them away. Coughing, they muttered their thanks to her.

However, she didn't respond. Rather, she couldn't. Because while the enemies had been knocked back by her Repulse, they looked completely unhurt. She couldn't take her eyes off them for even a second.

"Haaah, haaah... What the hell's with these guys!? They're so creepy!"

Shushu yelled in frustration. Though she was rough-spoken and enjoyed picking fights, she cared deeply about her comrades. She wanted to slaughter all of these assailants for killing Forest and James.

Unfortunately, they were so strong that she couldn't. There were five other fighters present aside from Shushu, Tony, and Abe. They had the numbers advantage, and most of the Liberators' fighters could hold their own against even a Holy Templar Knight. And yet, they were being pushed back.

Marshal had told them to focus on buying time, but he needn't have worried. Buying time was the most they were even capable of. Shushu didn't have time to even curse before the enemy struck again.

A burly robed figure wearing steel gauntlets shot forward with such force that they shook the ground. Shushu crossed her arms in front of her to guard.

Though she was thin, she'd inherited the blood of the wolfman clan. Her physical strength far surpassed that of humans and demons. But even so—

"Goddammit!"

She was sent flying by her enemy's punch. The impact rattled her guard, and the bones in her arms creaked.

Shushu crashed into the wall behind her with a deafening boom. Cracks spread out from the point of impact, and her body was half-buried in the rock. She wasn't the only one being pushed back, either.

"Gaaah!"

A short distance away, Tony clutched his flank as he shakily held his sword in one hand. Even as he was cut, he unleashed a counter that sliced through the stomach of his opponent. But his opponent continued pressing onward despite the blood spilling from their guts. It was as if they felt no pain. Tony tried to twist out of the way, but his opponent's sword still stabbed his shoulder.

Seeing what a precarious position his comrade was in, Abe disengaged from his foe and dashed toward Tony. As he left, his opponent's blade scratched his cheek.

"These guys heal way too fast! Are they beastmen or something!?"

Abe hit Tony's opponent with a roundhouse kick and landed next to his companion. The man who'd stabbed Tony was the same one Abe had stabbed in the back just seconds ago. Even now, the gash Tony had opened up in his stomach was healing.

Shushu shouted, "You mean they're all beastmen with special magic that lets them heal!? You've gotta be kidding me!"

Their physical abilities were on par with beastmen. However, beastmen were supposed to be unable to use magic. There were rare exceptions who could use special magic, but that was it. It was impossible that the six people Shushu and the others were fighting all possessed the same special magic. *This has to be some kinda sick joke.*

Unfortunately for Shushu and the others, the joke was about to get much

worse.

“Huh?”

Shushu pulverized the wall around her to get herself unstuck and examined her surroundings. For some reason, the gray-robed figures attacking them had stopped moving.

“They brought reinforcements?”

Deeper within the passage, black shadows drew closer. As their outlines became more distinct, Shushu realized they were all dressed in black, instead of gray. Their gauntleted hands lay limply by their sides, and their heads were drooping. They looked like puppets without a puppeteer. Furthermore, unlike the gray-robed figures, their masks were open at the mouths, and their jaws looked like those of beasts.

They looked unbelievably eerie. Shushu’s instincts screamed at her to run. The beastman blood flowing in her veins was telling her those creatures were dangerous.

“Hmph. Bring it on.”

She wiped off the cold sweat pouring down her forehead with the back of her hand. Shushu screamed at her instincts to shut up. So long as there were comrades left to protect, Shushu would never run. Leaving friends behind was a fate even worse than death.

“Hey, Tony? Can you still fight?”

“Of course I can. I still got those ampoules Oscar-san gave us.”

Grinning, Tony took two syringes out of his pocket and injected himself in the shoulder and side. The syringes were filled with enchanted liquid that healed far faster than regular potions. They were just one of the many tools Oscar had invented and delivered to all branches of the Liberators.

“You guys are good to go too, right?”

Though all of Tony’s comrades were heavily wounded, they nodded emphatically.

Shushu glared at the two black-robed newcomers and shouted to her

companions, “As long as Marshal’s with the others, they’ll be fine. Are you ready to die, you bastards!?”

She knew they’d all die here, but they needed to buy enough time for the children and the sick to escape.

“Hell yeah!” all of the other Liberators shouted in unison.

A second later, Shushu heard a small voice whisper, “Limit Break.”

“Huh?”

Shushu cocked her head in confusion. Somehow, the enemy was already right in front of her. And there was a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Oh. I just got hit, didn’t I? Surprised by her own calmness, Shushu suddenly felt a pain in the back of her neck.

“Shushu!”

“Get away from her, you monster!”

At the edge of her vision, she saw Abe throw a barrage of knives at the enemy. But they were all struck down with ease.

“Don’t... underestimate me, you fuck...”

Shushu activated her Repulse, sending shockwaves of gray mana radiating outward. The enemy jumped back immediately. Then, clutching her stomach and the back of her neck, she stumbled backward.

“What the hell did you...?”

The black-robed figure stood silently in the cavern, unaffected by Shushu’s shockwaves. Its lips were dyed red with Shushu’s blood.

“Don’t tell me you’re...”

Before Shushu could reveal the figure’s true identity, it started emanating an invisible pressure. Because of the Reisen Gorge’s special characteristics, she couldn’t actually see it, but she was certain the figure was unleashing vast amounts of mana. Were it not being dispersed the moment it left the figure’s body, it would likely have formed a spiral reaching up to heaven.

A second later, the figure vanished. Its speed surpassed even Shushu’s

enhanced kinetic vision.

“Gah!”

Shushu was hit so hard it took everything she had just to remain conscious after the blow. She didn’t even know if she’d slammed into the wall, the floor, or the ceiling. Dirt and gravel filled her mouth, and all her muscles went limp. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t move.

Goddammit... Shushu watched helplessly as her comrades were blown away one after another, blood spilling from their injuries as they flew.

Tony’s solid swordsmanship allowed him to block a few attacks, but eventually, a gauntleted hand knocked his sword away and another one chopped at him from above. A second later, that hand blurred, and Abe’s arm was flying through the air.

Move! Move, goddammit! Shushu desperately clawed at the ground, but she could do nothing more than that. Her body refused to listen to her orders. Soon enough, Tony fell as well. Abe was pinned to the wall by his own sword, his arm stump bleeding profusely.

Run! All of you, run! You’ve gotta tell Miledi! Darkness rimmed the corners of her vision. All Shushu could do was pray, the one thing she hated more than anything. As her consciousness faded, she heard the crunch of boots on gravel next to her. It seemed the reaper had finally come for her.

Isn’t that...? The last thing she saw before blacking out... was a small white silhouette.

Let us turn back time to a few minutes before Shushu and the others encountered the black-robed enemies.

“Mikaela, how’s it look?”

“Shushu and the others are putting up a good fight. But... there’s something strange about these enemies.”

“Did the church come up with some new abomination?”

It was obvious from Mikaela’s expression that if things went on for too long,

Shushu and the others would be in danger. Marshal's expression grew grim, and he looked over at the non-combatants who were rushing to the evacuation tunnel. Unlike other branches, this one housed a lot of comatose patients, so the going was slow.

Marshal wanted to go help his men, but he couldn't afford to leave the civilians unprotected until they'd evacuated.

"Alright, well, we better hurry. Tim, you're up."

"You got it."

As long as the group could make it to the chamber in the very back, they'd be able to reach the surface in seconds. By cutting the wires at the edge of the room, a pair of weights would drop, catapulting the entire space to the top of the gorge. That room also happened to be where Tim's favorite horse and his messenger eagles were resting. And it was also stocked with carriages and other horses, so it'd be easy to transport people who couldn't move. Including Tart, all of Tim's horses had been strengthened so they could gallop faster than monsters.

"Sensei... Will we be safe on the surface?"

Susha looked up at Mikaela, carrying one of the comatose children on her back. Her face was scrunched up in worry.

"For now, the surface is safe. But our enemy has a way of masking their presence, so we can't lower our guard."

"Are they using that advanced light magic, Prismatic Haze?"

"Possibly. They could also be using an artifact of some sort. Either way, these aren't your normal enemies."

Even if they were relying on an artifact, it didn't change the fact that they were a threat. But if they *weren't* using an artifact, then that meant they could use advanced magic even in the bottom of the Reisen Gorge. Meaning they possessed massive quantities of mana, and were highly skilled mages.

At the same time though, the enemies' physical abilities were far above normal. They weren't just highly proficient mages, they were also highly

proficient warriors.

Though Mikaela tried to sound calm, her voice shook. Ruth, who was carrying Dylan on his back, ground his teeth.

“Why’d they come here!?”

“Ruth. Our highest priority is to escape and meet up with our other allies. That’s all you should be thinking about right now.”

At Marshal’s words, Ruth nodded. Behind him, Moorin was carrying Katy while Corrin ran next to him. Both of them were pale-faced, but they looked determined.

The other non-combatant members of the Liberators were also carrying sick or comatose patients. Within ten seconds, everyone had reached the evacuation room. But just as they did—

“Marshal-san!”

Fortunately, Mikaela noticed just in time. It seemed even these mystery assailants weren’t completely immune to the effects of the Reisen Gorge. For just a second, their mana supply cut off and they lost control of the spell that was concealing them.

“You won’t get past me!”

At Mikaela’s warning, Marshal turned around immediately. He unslung the giant broadsword strapped to his back and held it in front of him like a shield. A second later, something hard impacted it.

“Gwoooooh!?”

Marshal, who was easily over 100 kilograms heavy, was pushed backward, his feet leaving furrows in the ground. The air in front of his sword shimmered. The magic concealing Marshal’s enemy dissipated, revealing a black-robed, masked figure with a bestial jaw. There was a short blade jutting out of its sleeve; an assassin’s dagger.

“Raaaaaaaaah!”

Marshal howled a battle cry, and his muscles bulged. His inhuman strength, the product of years of constant training, allowed him to swing his massive

broadsword free. Unable to beat Marshal in a contest of strength, the black-robed figure leaped backward.

“Run, now!” Marshal yelled, adjusting his stance. He was using himself as a literal meat shield to protect the others.

“Let’s go, everyone!”

Tim hurried Ruth and the others forward. However, it was too late.

“Limit Break,” the figure muttered softly.

“Ngh! Diamond Skin!”

Sensing danger, Marshal quickly activated his special magic, Diamond Skin. Even with the help of Oscar’s artifact, casting that spell down here drained a prodigious amount of mana. Still, Marshal sensed that he had to use it or he’d die. His instincts proved to be correct.

“Gah!?”

Marshal’s massive frame was blown away like a leaf in the wind. He crashed into Mikaela and Tim, and the three of them rolled across the ground. They ran into Ruth, who fell down as well. Meanwhile, the girls all screamed.

At the same time, “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Mikaela howled in pain. Looking over, Marshal saw that the black-robed figure was biting down on Mikaela’s neck. She struggled to break free, but it seemed the figure had broken her legs when it swooped onto her. She didn’t have enough strength left to resist.

“Mikaela!”

Marshal ignored the burning pain in his ribs and swung his broadsword at the figure. He swung with such ferocity that it seemed as though he was intent in cutting both the black-robed figure and Mikaela in two. But the black-robed figure kicked Mikaela in the stomach to bounce off her and jump out of the way. Mikaela crashed into the wall behind her, coughing up blood.

“Sensei!”

Susha dashed over to her. She took out one of Oscar’s recovery ampoules and

poured it down Mikaela's throat. But even as fast as Oscar's medicine was, it wasn't enough to heal Mikaela in time. Just as Susha finished pouring the last few drops down Mikaela's throat, a wave of pressure hit her. Her breath caught in her throat, and her skin tingled. She involuntarily stiffened up.

"Get doooooooooooooown!"

Just as Marshal shouted, a blinding burst of light illuminated the dark cavern room. It was followed by a deafening boom.

The overload of stimuli left Susha's senses disoriented. All she could tell was that she'd been flung against something and that she was rapidly losing consciousness. A sudden impact to her shoulder snapped her hazy consciousness back into focus though.

"Ah..."

Susha discovered she couldn't move. And it wasn't just her shoulder that hurt, but her whole body. Her ears were still ringing, but she could faintly make out the sounds of people screaming in pain.

I have to get up. I can't stop. If we stop we're dead. Move! Open your eyes! After a few seconds, her body complied and Susha's eyelids flew open.

The situation was disastrous. All of the Liberators were lying on the ground, and while a few were still able to move, none were able to stand. Most were either unconscious or groaning in pain.

Tim, who'd been flung against the wall, Yunfa, Corrin, Dylan, and Katy were faring better than the others, but not by much. The only reason Dylan and Yunfa were fine was because Ruth had transmuted a wall in front of them and used his own body as a shield. As for Katy and Corrin, Moorin had protected the two of them.

As a result, though, Ruth and Moorin were even more heavily injured than the others. Their legs and backs were covered with burns.

Considering the spell the figure had cast had been comparatively weakened by the properties of the Reisen Gorge, it was likely one of the strongest lightning spells in existence. Had this spell hit anyone directly, they would likely have been killed instantly. Anyone that wasn't Marshal, that was.

“Marshal-san.”

If he focused all of his mana on defending with Diamond Skin, he was sturdy enough that he’d earned himself the nickname “The Unbreakable Shield.” He stood at the center of the blast radius, white smoke rising from his body. He’d absorbed most of the impact of that spell. Of course, it had come at a cost.

“Gah...”

Marshal fell to his knees, using his sword as a crutch to keep him from keeling over. Deep burns covered every inch of his body.

“Wh-What the hell are you?”

He asked that question in a hoarse voice. His goal was to buy time until he was capable of moving again. However, the black-robed figure didn’t even spare Marshal a second glance. Because of its mask, it was hard to tell what exactly the figure was looking at, but it was staring at the dazed and unconscious civilians.

Wait, who’s he looking at? Marshal knew it was a cardinal sin to take his eyes off the enemy while in a battle, but he was curious what the black-robed figure was after.

This isn’t just some ordinary raid, is it? Who’re they after? Marshal was frustrated. If slaughtering everyone wasn’t the enemy’s goal, then that meant the figure had known Marshal would block most of its attack. And it had utilized Marshal’s desire to protect his comrades to leave everyone mostly incapacitated.

After scanning the room, the black-robed figure walked over to Marshal. It drew its arm back, the assassin’s blade glinting dully in the light.

“So you... don’t need me, huh? Well then... at least tell me... what you’re after... I’d like to take a souvenir with me to the afterlife.”

Marshal still couldn’t move. His opponent didn’t answer. There was nothing more Marshal could do. But just as he’d resigned himself to his fate—

“Transmute!”

“Ah!”

He gasped as he heard a young voice echo through the room. A flash of green light filled the room, expanding as fast as that lightning spell had earlier. Marshal had his back turned to the light so he didn't see the blinding flash directly, but the figure did. It covered its eyes with a sleeve and leapt backward. Marshal smiled, realizing that Ruth must have triggered the glowstone grenades he always carried with him.

I can't believe I said he'd just get in the way. I gotta apologize to him later. Ruth wasn't the only resourceful one either.

"Grace those warriors who fear not death with thine divine radiance— Hero's Ballad!"

Marshal could feel strength welling up within him. Support magic had bolstered his physical prowess. At the same time, a soothing melody played across the battlefield. The Bard job was skilled not only at playing instruments, but it also excelled at support magic. Furthermore, its support magic was bolstered when accompanied by music.

This was the strength of Yunfa's class. Though she was heavily wounded and barely even ten years old, she continued to play her violin to support Marshal.



“Sheesh. I can’t even hold a candle to these kids.”

Marshal mustered his strength and swung his broadsword. The black-robed figure hadn’t been expecting that sudden surge of strength from Marshal and had already lunged forward to attack. Marshal’s broadsword bit deep into the figure, and it flew backward in a spray of blood. He rushed forward to deal the finishing blow, but—

“Are you kidding me?”

He came to a halt when he saw the figure’s wounds close up in a second. Marshal was still covered in wounds. Yunfa’s magic had buffed him, but she wasn’t a healer. The situation was getting worse and worse.

In the distance, Marshal could sense a huge amount of pressure building. It seemed there was more than one of this strangely powerful enemy. Internally, Marshal despaired.

“Tim.”

“Wh-What is it?”

Tim, who was pouring potions down Mikaela’s throat, turned around. Even that simple movement took effort, with how injured he was.

“Escape by yourself.”

“What...? You’re kidding, right?”

“You think I’d joke around in a situation like this?”

This was no joke. Marshal needed at least one person to escape. Miledi and the others needed to be told of what was going on. The fastest one among them all was Tim. And the only way he’d be able to escape was if he escaped alone.

Tim opened his mouth to argue. But before he could say anything, the black-robed figure finished healing. It shot forward so fast its outline blurred. Marshal’s years of combat experience kicked in and he dove sideways on instinct. Not to dodge, though. But rather to prevent the enemy from passing by him. As he expected, the figure tackled into him.

Marshal dropped his sword and started grappling with the figure. He managed to grab both of its arms and pin it to the ground, but was then struck by a bolt of powerful lightning. Coughing up blood, Marshal nevertheless maintained his hold on the figure. He poured all of his mana into Diamond Skin, determined to delay the figure for as long as possible. His mana drained at a prodigious rate as he weathered spell after spell. And the only way he'd be able to escape was if he escaped alone. Gritting his teeth, he shouted, "Go! You have to tell Miledi! She needs to know!"

"Ngh!"

"You're a man, aren't you, Tim Rocket!? Then prove it and gooo!"

Tim struggled to his feet. He shot Ruth and Yunfa a pained, guilty look.

"We're counting on you, Tim!"

"Bring Naiz-sama back with you!"

Despite how young they were, the two of them weren't despairing, even in this hopeless situation. "Struggle until the very end." That was the Liberators' motto, and the two of them embodied it perfectly. Creme chirped forlornly at the two children, then flew onto Tim's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, guys."

Tim's voice shook. Leaving everyone felt like cutting off a part of his own body. But even so, he grit his teeth and ran, not once turning back. The only thing in his mind now was completing his mission.

Once he'd left, Ruth crawled toward Corrin and held out his hand. After detonating those grenades, he didn't even have enough strength to stand. However, his younger sister's wounds were a lot less serious. If he could just wake her up, she might be able to escape too.

Yunfa was nearing the limits of her mana as well, but she continued supporting Marshal, her face pale. Susha, on the other hand, ran over to Mikaela, ignoring the searing pain in her shoulder. Everyone who could move went to the aid of someone who couldn't. No one was giving up. Unfortunately, no matter how hard they struggled, they were still out of time.

“Gah!”

At long last, Marshal was thrown off the figure. Standing next to him was another black-robed silhouette. Its hand dripped with blood, and there was a huge gash in Marshal’s torso, going from his shoulder to his stomach. His Diamond Skin had saved him from being killed instantly, but the wound was still serious.

Not yet! I can still fight! Marshal roused himself, burning through every last drop of strength in his body. Even as blood spurted from his wound, Marshal got to his feet and raised his sword. More so than his skills, it was his grit that had earned him the nickname Unbreakable Shield.

However, at this point, he barely had the strength left to stand. Worse, more enemies were coming out of the tunnel. Meaning that Shushu and the others had been defeated. The Liberators had been checkmated. But something seemed off.

“What?” Marshal muttered in confusion. The black-robed figures seemed oddly impatient, even though none of the Liberators could put up any meaningful resistance. They stared intently at Ruth, Corrin, Susha, and Yunfa. A second later, they ran over to the kids, not even bothering to finish Marshal off.

Are they here to kidnap them? Marshal once again moved so that he was between the children and the black-robed figures. He could barely stand though, and he knew this was just a futile struggle.

“Gwah!?”

So it was hardly surprising when one of them casually stabbed him in the chest without even slowing down. Marshal barely managed to move enough to avoid getting pierced through the heart, but the wound was nevertheless fatal. The black-robed figure flung Marshal against the wall, and this time he didn’t get back up. Though he knew it served no purpose, Marshal glared at the figures even as his lifeblood spilled onto the floor.

Ruth stood protectively in front of Moorin and Corrin as the black-clad figures approached. Marshal couldn’t help but smile when he saw Ruth’s mettle. Just as one of the figures raised its hand to strike Ruth down—

Roaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar! A pack of white wolves suddenly appeared. Their glowing crimson eyes made it clear they were monsters. However, it seemed they weren't any ordinary monsters. They completely ignored Ruth and Marshal, their malice focused only on the assailants.

As expected, the black-clad figures tried to strike them all down, but they were outnumbered. Furthermore, packs of other monsters started flooding out of the corridor, creating a living wave that swept the assailants backward. It was like a flash flood of monsters.

Even the monsters the figures managed to kill created a wall of dead flesh, preventing them from moving forward. The monsters inflicted no damage on the figures, leaving them unable to get past them and head toward Marshal and the others.

What the hell's going on? Vision blurring, Marshal watched in disbelief as a four-armed gorilla monster scooped up Ruth, Corrin, Dylan, and Katy. At the same time, a black panther with tentacles growing out of its back grabbed Moorin, Susha, and Yunfa.

It wasn't just the children and Moorin that the monsters were grabbing either. While the white wolves kept the black-robed figures at bay, the other monsters grabbed all of the Liberators and carried them into the room behind them. Most surprising of all was the monsters' eyes. Beneath the dark crimson gleam was a burning resolve. The wolves, and even the monsters, grabbing the Liberators seemed ready to throw down their lives for whatever mission they were carrying out.

As Marshal's consciousness began to fade, he realized a monster had lifted him as well. He looked into the eyes of the monster carrying him and thought,

I don't care even if you're monsters... just please, save those kids... That was his last thought before unconsciousness took him.

The sound of bones grinding together echoed through the cavern.

"O-kun, you're bleeding."

Oscar was clenching his fists so tight that blood dripped from his hands onto

the ground.

“You are too, Miledi-chan.”

Meiru gently brought a finger up to Miledi’s lips and wiped away the blood spilling from them. A brief flash of orange light healed the damage she’d done to them by biting down too hard. Meiru then healed Oscar’s fists and turned to Naiz. While Naiz wasn’t engaging in any acts of self-harm, he was crossing his arms tight enough to strangle a bear. The party’s final companion silently examined the deserted cavern, his eyes glazed over.

“Tim-kun? Are you okay?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I’m fine. But what was with that giant crowd of monsters that fled the cavern after I left?”

“That’s what we’re here to find out. And we’re going to need your help, so keep it together.”

While Meiru scolded Tim, Miledi and the others exchanged glances and sucked in a deep breath. After healing Tim in Prantz, Miledi and the others had rushed to the Reisen Gorge. The first thing they’d noticed was that a section of the gorge had crumbled away as if there’d been a landslide. Naturally, the Liberator headquarters was also in a horrible state.

They’d discovered James and Forest’s corpses in the lookout outpost near the surface. Meiru had used restoration magic to repair their bodies, and the party had held a short wake for their departed comrades. When Miledi heard from Tim that they’d spent their last moments warning their comrades rather than trying to escape, she muttered, “Your sacrifice won’t be forgotten.”

Though she’d shed no tears, it had been obvious that Miledi was grieving. Afterward, they’d had the Prantz branch members who’d come with them take the bodies back to Prantz for a proper burial while Miledi and the others had descended into the gorge. With the help of Oscar’s artifacts, Meiru had been able to use restoration magic on a large enough scale to repair the headquarters to the way it had originally been. Now Meiru was downing mana potions so that she could recreate the past and figure out what had happened here.

“Is everyone ready? I’m going to continue.”

“Yep. Go ahead, Meru-nee.”

Miledi steeled herself for the worst. But as Meiru’s magic played out, things headed in an unexpected direction. At the very end, monsters took the Liberators away, meaning there could still be hope of their survival. It was that knowledge which helped Miledi and the others remain calm, despite all that had happened.

After Meiru had downed another gallon of mana potions, she continued her magic where she’d left off. The black-robed figures finally broke through the pack of white wolves and started chasing after the monsters carrying Ruth and the others. However, other monsters would then take up the rearguard, keeping the figures at bay for just long enough that the monsters carrying the Liberators could stay ahead of their pursuers.

Though each monster bought only a few extra seconds, those seconds were invaluable.

Finally, Ruth and the others reached the innermost room, and the monsters carrying them cut the hidden wire without hesitation. It was as if they knew how this room worked already. There was a loud thud, and the room shot up toward the surface.

“So they knew about the location of this headquarters, and even how the secret escape route worked.”

“Their eyes were intelligent too... What on earth were those monsters?”

The pack of monsters had been comprised of all sorts of different types, but they’d all been coordinated. On top of that, they’d all been sentient. And they’d even known the layout of the village inside and out. Once they’d seen everything, Miledi and the others took the restored escape route back to the surface themselves.

“Miledi, do you have any comrades who can control monsters?” Naiz asked.

“If I did, I would have told you about them ages ago.”

Miledi gave him the expected reply. When the party reached the surface,

Meiru's past recreation magic revealed an astonishing sight.

"Hey, uh, that's a wyvern flock, right?"

Like Oscar had said, there was a flock of wyverns roosting above the gorge. That in itself wasn't too surprising. What *was* surprising was that they all had saddles and riders, and were carrying gondolas. People were riding inside the gondolas as well, and all of them were wearing bulky clothes to hide their appearance. They even wore masks. As the pack of monsters reached the gondolas, white-robed figures rushed out to heal the injured Liberators.

To Miledi and the others' surprise, another gondola held Shushu and the other fighters. They were all gravely injured, but the slow rise and fall of their chests told the observers that they were still alive.

Just as the wyverns prepared to take flight, Ruth shouted, "Wait! Please let me down!"

Face contorted in pain, he tried to crawl out of the gondola. Thinking he was trying to escape, the white-robed figures ignored him. However, his next words caused them to pause.

"We need to blow up the headquarters! Please, help me do it!"

All headquarters had a self-destruct mechanism in place in case the worst happened. Ruth naturally knew about that as well.

The white-robed figures exchanged glances, then nodded. One of them carried Ruth out of the gondola. He quickly pointed out the various switches that needed to be triggered within the escape room to activate the self-destruct. Since the adults were all incapacitated, Ruth knew that taking care of all the loose ends fell to him. Oscar watched with admiration and pride as his little brother took charge.

"Nice going, Ruth-kun."

"My, what a nice kid."

"Heh, I expected no less from Oscar's younger brother."

"Yeah..."

Oscar adjusted his glasses to hide his eyes.

Smiling, Tim said, “All Ruth ever talks about is how he wants to be like his big brother. It drives Shushu up the wall.”

While Miledi and the others talked, Ruth finished setting up the self-destruct countdown. The white-robed figure then hurried back to the gondola, and this time the wyverns did take flight. Their heading was south. Once they crossed the gorge there was a thunderous boom and part of the Reisen Gorge crumbled.

“I see... Everyone managed to escape... I’m so glad. So, so glad.”

Tim fell to his knees, weeping with relief. Considering how bad Marshal and the others’ wounds had been it was too early to relax, but now the party knew there was at least hope. Miledi’s shoulders slumped, the tension draining out of her.

Meiru’s magic moved on to the next scene and Naiz muttered, “I don’t believe it.”

Naiz and the others had heard Tim’s description of what had attacked them. So they recognized the black-robed figures that jumped out of the ruined rubble of the headquarters, blasting aside any rocks in their path. None of the figures looked injured at all.

“I used the single-person escape chute to reach the surface and rode Tart toward Prantz.”

Of course, Creme and the other messenger eagles had flown with him. He’d barely gotten moving when he’d heard the explosion signaling the self-destruction of the headquarters. Overcome with grief, Tim had nevertheless focused on completing his mission. As a precaution, he attached warning messages to each of his eagles and sent them off in all directions.

But even they weren’t fast enough to escape the black-clad figures. Though it took only a few seconds until they were mere specks in the sky, the black-robed figures shot them all down with lightning magic. Even Creme, who’d been given a more detailed letter meant to be delivered directly to Miledi was shot down seconds after taking flight.

Worst of all though, was that the figures could keep up with Tart, who was

faster than most monsters. Though Creme had managed to avoid being killed by the lightning by twisting out of the way, it had lost one of its wings and tumbled back into Tim's outstretched hands. Tim had spurred his beloved horse as fast as it could go, but it wasn't a match for these strange assailants, especially now that they were unhindered by the effects of the Reisen Gorge.

"So that's what happened to your eagles..."

The few that survived used their bodies as shields to protect Tim. They flew at the black-robed figures and died, one after the other. No matter how much Tim screamed at them to run, they didn't listen. Watching his family die like that had been the most painful thing Tim had ever experienced. And even then—

"It wasn't enough for me to escape."

Tart had given its all. Even after it had been pierced by ice magic, burned by lightning, and cut up by wind, it hadn't stopped galloping toward Prantz, where Tim's comrades were. But once all of Tim's eagles were dead, nothing was protecting it from a direct hit, and one fatal blast of magic was enough to put an end to the poor horse's life. Tim was struck as well, and he fell off of Tart even as the horse died. Though he tried to fight back, he wasn't a trained warrior and in less than a second he was cornered.

"The only reason they didn't finish me off was... probably because they wanted to know where everyone else had gone," Tim muttered as the scene came to an end, still on his knees. Creme cooed softly on his shoulder and pecked at him with its beak.

"Tim..."

"Leader..."

Miledi knelt down in front of Tim. She gave him a sad smile and said, "Thank you for surviving."

"Ah... Yeah... Leader..."

Tim sobbed quietly, and Miledi and the others had a moment of silence for Tart and the other animals. A gust of wind whipped its way past the party, drowning out Tim's weeping. After a few minutes, Tim wiped his tears and looked up with newfound resolve.

“Sorry. I’m alright now. Anyway, there’s one thing that’s bothering me about all this.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, why did they just leave me there?”

Indeed, that was unnatural.

“When I was on the verge of death, one of them picked me up. It looked like they were going to ask where everyone had gone.”

But in the end, they didn’t. It wasn’t because Prantz’s Liberators had come to Tim’s aid or anything either. In fact, he’d been found by a passing merchant who’d brought him to a nearby village, not his comrades.

One of Prantz’s Liberators had happened to overhear that a boy on the verge of death had been brought to a nearby village along with his pet eagle. Thinking it could be Tim, the Liberators had gone to see what was up and taken Tim with them from there.

“If it was adventurers or something that were coming, I could see them being cautious, but they had nothing to fear from merchants. And yet, they still left. Oh, but they did all look up at the sky right before they did.”

According to Tim, it had felt like they were listening for something.

“Anyway, after that, they left in a pretty big hurry.”

“Were they receiving orders remotely?”

“Maybe part of their orders were to be as inconspicuous as possible?”

“That would explain why they were wearing those robes.”

Miledi, Meiru, Naiz, and Oscar nodded to each other.

“Let’s go check the headquarters again.”

The party wanted to analyze the raid more closely to see if they could glean any other hints.

“Yeah. Alright Meru-nee, take it away.”

“Leave it to—”

Meiru trailed off and staggered.

“Meru-nee!?”

“Oh my, it seems I used up too much mana.”

Though her tone was light, Meiru had been using restoration magic this whole time to recreate events a whole two weeks in the past. Even with all the mana potions she’d been drinking, she couldn’t stop the exhaustion that came with prolonged magic use. Oscar mentally kicked himself for not realizing what a huge burden this was placing on Meiru earlier.

“Let’s take a break for a bit,” he said.

“I’m fine. I know I may look like a dainty noblewoman, but I’m quite tough.”

I wouldn’t really describe you as a “dainty noblewoman...” everyone thought simultaneously. Meiru pulled a mana potion out of her cleavage, and her boobs bounced. Oscar, Naiz, and Tim all pointedly looked away. Miledi, on the other hand, looked at Meiru with dead eyes.

“Why do you keep your potions there, Meru-nee? You have a Treasure Trove, don’t you?”

“To tease you, of course, Miledi-chan.”

Miledi’s face reddened in rage, and for a moment everyone forgot how guilty they felt about forcing Meiru to push herself this hard. If Meiru had purposely put a potion between her breasts earlier because she knew Miledi would eventually feel bad about asking Meiru to exert herself, but would also want to search for clues as fast as possible, then her ability to manipulate her comrade’s mood was on a level that could only be called godlike.

“She really is something else, huh?”

“Yeah, what a reliable comrade.”

Oscar and Naiz smiled to each other, impressed by Meiru’s tactfulness. Normally she was just a lazy bum, but she had her moments like this one. The party returned to the bottom of the ravine and started combing through past events, looking for clues.

“I had an inkling this might be the case when I saw what happened to Shushu

and Mikaela, but...”

Miledi trailed off, watching the scene where the black-robed figures blasted their way out of the ruined headquarters, but this time from below. While they were trapped in the rubble, the black-robed figures leaped at their gray-robed allies, or perhaps subordinates, and bit their necks. A second later, their power grew exponentially, and they cast both offensive and defensive magic simultaneously to clear the rubble. Such a feat would be difficult normally, but within the Reisen Gorge, it was nigh-impossible.

“Vampires... It seems like they really do get stronger by sucking blood.”

Meiru’s tone was casual. Though her father was a vampire, she didn’t really have a problem discussing the topic and she didn’t want her comrades trying to act considerate or anything. Smiling ruefully, Miledi nodded to Meiru and turned to the ever-reliable Oscar.

“What do you make of this, O-kun?”

“Well...”

There were five things Oscar knew for sure. The assailants had scouted out the Reisen Gorge headquarters beforehand and understood its composition. And the same held true for the Liberators’ mysterious rescuers. The attacking side had exhibited a lot of traits commonly associated with vampires. While the rescuing side could control monsters. The assailants’ primary goal seemed to have been capturing Ruth and the other children.

Oscar laid those five points out to Miledi, then said, “The question here is, why would vampires be attacking us? Also, that physical strength of theirs was abnormal... I haven’t seen any vampires myself, but from what I’ve read...”

Oscar turned to Miledi, going over all the knowledge he had on vampires in his head. She nodded in agreement.

“Yeah. Vampires, like demons, are supposed to be skilled mages, but I’ve heard they’re not much stronger than humans physically. Though apparently, they can grow stronger by sucking blood.”

“But Shushu and the others were being pushed back even before their blood was sucked.”

Furthermore, even if they had sucked Shushu's blood, it still didn't make sense that they could shoot off such powerful magic at the bottom of the gorge. They had the magical capacity of demons, the physical strength of beastmen, and the special traits of vampires. It was like they were some kind of supersoldiers.

"Their recovery speed was unnatural too. Can all vampires heal that quickly?" Naiz asked.

Pensively, Oscar said, "The books I read said they can heal by drinking blood. But those gray-robed figures..."

"Never drank any blood."

"Were they a different race, then? But they could heal unbelievably fast too."

Oscar's expression grew grim and he muttered, "Limit Break, huh?"

"Yeah... I was thinking about that too. You think they're from the church?"

Miledi thought back to her fight with the captain of the Holy Templar Knights, Laus Barn. He'd possessed ancient magic that let him interfere with the souls of others, and had possessed a skill that strengthened people past their limits. But to Miledi's surprise, Oscar shook his head.

"Nah, probably not."

"Huh? Why?"

"Of course I can't say anything for certain, but... I feel like the church has stronger trump cards they could have used."

Of course, it was possible the church had been experimenting on creating some new breed of soldier and had wanted to pit their test subjects against the Liberators. But if their primary goal was to capture the children, they would have picked a more surefire method.

"Ah... that apostle."

Miledi was referring to Hearst, the one they'd fought in the past. But seeing as they'd already fought her once, the church had no reason to hide her existence from them or worry about being inconspicuous.

“Those white-robed guys flew south. On top of that, vampires are supposed to be isolationist, but those gray-robed people with them didn’t seem to be vampires. If we consider all that, the attackers were most likely—”

Oscar raised his eyes and paused dramatically. But just as he opened his mouth to state his deduction—

“Demons, ya.”

“Huh!?”

Miledi and the others whirled around in surprise, instantly prepared to fight. They glared at the corridor the voice had come from, but saw nothing.

“Where do ya think you’re looking?”

The voice seemed to be coming from below them. Confused, Miledi and the others looked down. Staring up at them was a rat. However, it was standing on its hind legs, its forelimbs crossed over its chest. It was wearing a muffler and carried a sword the size of a toothpick.

“Uh, what kind of bizarre creature is this?”

“No clue,” Oscar muttered in response to Miledi’s question. Dumbstruck, Miledi and the others stared at the haughty rat. The rat ignored their shock and continued talking.

“I’m Vandre Schnee. Rejoice, ya bastards. I’m offering to pledge my ancient magic to your cause.”

Miledi and the others didn’t register anything he just said. They were still trying to comprehend that a rat was talking to them. Even in the world of Tortus, that wasn’t normal. The fact that it seemed to say “ya” a lot despite having a normal accent otherwise bothered them too.

The rat kept talking for a few more minutes before it finally realized Miledi and the others were so shocked they weren’t listening. He glared at the Liberators and said, “Are you going to stand there forever, or what? Are your ears just decorations, huh?”

Picking their jaws up off the floor, Miledi and the others exchanged glances.

Now that they were finally listening, the rat sighed and said, “Hmph. I’ll only

say this one more time, so listen well. I'm saying I'll join ya little group. I'm like ya... a user of ancient magic. My name's Vandre Schnee."

This time, Miledi and the others comprehended his words. It seemed a rat was one of the ancient magic users Miledi had scoured the world for. This was in and of itself a shocking revelation.

"Tch. Oi, four-eyes. What's with that face? Got a problem with me, huh?"

"Well, I've got a problem with you using 'ya' all the time."

You're just gonna come out and say it!? Miledi turned to Oscar in surprise.

"Hm? Oh... I can't help it, ya. Whenever I use Batyam's power to camouflage myself, I end up getting some weird verbal tic, ya."

It appeared Vandre didn't think too highly of his speech style either, and he looked away awkwardly. At any rate, it seemed nothing could be done to fix his tic.

"Batyam?"

Oscar cocked his head in confusion.

"Not Batyam, Batyam!"

"That's what I just said, isn't it? Batyam."

"No! Bat-ya-m!"

"Huh?"

"Tch, damn four-eyes. I'm gonna smash those glasses of yours."

"Why!?"

Miledi's gaze swapped back and forth between Oscar and Vandre as they argued. This sight was so surreal she could hardly believe it was happening. Oscar and Vandre's argument went in circles for a while until Vandre realized he'd get nowhere like this. He clicked his tongue.

"Tch... This form takes up a lot less energy, but ya won't understand a thing unless I go back to normal."

As he muttered that, Vandre started to melt.

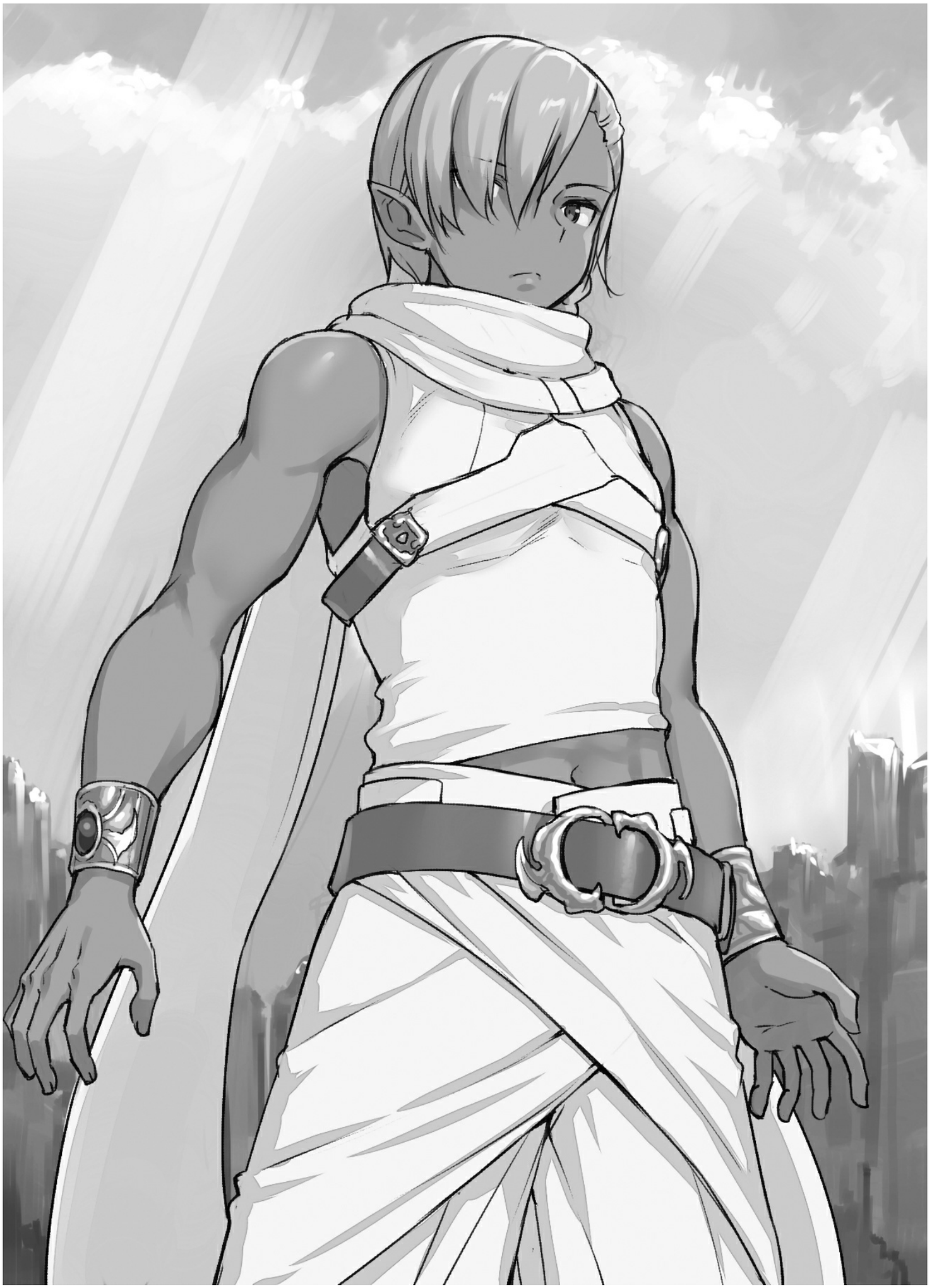
“What!? Are you a slime!?”

But the surprises didn’t end there. More viscous liquid, in other words slime, started pouring out of the cracks of a nearby boulder and gathered around the slime that had been Vandre. They piled on top of each other until they were human height, then their form started to solidify. The transformation took only a few seconds.

“Mmm... Good work as always, Batlam.”

Standing in front of Miledi and the others was a young man who looked like a demon. He had swarthy skin, pointed ears, and red eyes. All physical features shared by demons. But his hair wasn’t deep red like most demons’, but rather a pale sky-blue.

Going off of appearances he appeared to be in his early twenties. He was around 180cm tall and his hair was braided back on one side, but on the other it fell free and his bangs covered his right eye. His gaze was sharp, and his expression sour. Judging based on first impressions alone, he seemed like the kind of guy to be fussy about everything.



He had on a high-neck sleeveless white shirt as well as white pants and boots. He also wore a muffler which, like the rest of his ensemble, was white. The muffler was embroidered with artistic flower and vine patterns. The white motif of his clothing gave Miledi and the others a sense of deja vu.

“H-Hey, umm, are you the one who saved our comrades?” Miledi asked, her eyes sparkling.

“Got it in one, Lady Reisen.”

Vandre’s way of addressing Miledi was rather strange. It was almost as if he saw her more as the noble daughter of Earl Reisen than the leader of a group of rebels. Growing even more confused, Miledi and the others exchanged glances again.

“Now then, let me reintroduce myself. My name’s Vandre Schnee.”

Still looking displeased, Vandre furrowed his brow and said, “Your friends are with my clan. If you want them back, you better come save me.”

While everyone else was still reeling in confusion, Oscar thought, *Yeah, I don’t think I can get along with this guy.*

After that, the party left the Reisen Gorge. Miledi begged Vandre to let them meet with their comrades, but he refused.

“My clan’s healers are skilled, and they have my familiars’ special magic. Your friends’ lives are in no danger. Stop wasting time and follow me.”

Miledi and the others followed Vandre to a spot a short distance from the gorge, where he called even more slimes and transformed them into a wyvern. He then forced everyone onto his back and took to the skies. Before they left though, Miledi and the others left Tim behind to tell those back at the Prantz branch what had happened.

“And right now, you’re using one of your familiars’ Batyam-chan’s power to __”

“Batlam.”

Vandre corrected Miledi. It seemed getting the name right was important to

him.

Incidentally, it seemed Vandre had come up with the name Batlam by smashing the words butler and slime together and fudging the pronunciation until it sounded less ridiculous. As Miledi and the others had expected, Vandre's ancient magic allowed him to control, create, and strengthen monsters. It was known as metamorphosis magic. The monsters that had come to the Liberators' aid back in the Reisen Gorge had all been his familiars.

Of the monsters under Vandre's control, Batlam was the one he'd known the longest. It had been with him since childhood, and years of being strengthened by Vandre had made it far superior to other slimes. Normal slimes possessed the special magic mimicry as well, but at best they could change colors or imitate the vague shape of something else. Batlam, on the other hand, could copy even the traits and abilities of something it mimicked. By transforming into a person it could talk, and thanks to its high intelligence it could even impersonate personalities. Of course, the stronger the person or monster it was copying the weaker Batlam's version of its skills would be, and it couldn't copy particularly rare special magic or ancient magic.

Still, it was extraordinarily useful. Considering its versatility, Miledi and the others could see why Vandre had named it after a butler. Of course, Batlam's ability had its flaws. Because of how perfectly it could mimic its target, it often inherited weird traits from what it was mimicking at the time. Just like how when it had looked like rat-Vandre, it had some weird verbal tic. Which was why he'd ended up pronouncing his proud butler's name as Batyam instead of Batlam. And of course, now Miledi had taken to the name Batyam so much that she refused to use its real name.

"So Batyam-chan, right now you're mimicking your master, and allowing Van-chan to remotely control your body, is that right?"

"It's Batlam. And who're you calling Van-chan?"

"And right now, the real Van-chan is trapped in the demon lord's dungeon, right? There's a bunch of other people being held there too, and Van-chan wants us to save them all."

"Don't ignore me. And stop calling me Van-chan."

“What about the people from your clan, the Schnee clan? Aren’t you their chief, Van-chan? Shouldn’t they come save you?”

“Don’t be stupid. My clan is my greatest asset, but also my biggest weakness. It’s thanks to them that I can talk to you guys like this through Batlam, and it’s thanks to them that I’m able to still affect things across the continent. If they came to save me and got captured too... we’d be done for. Also, the next time you call me Van-chan, I’m throwing you off.”

Vandre, or rather Batlam mimicking Vandre, sat cross-legged at the head of the wyvern which was also Batlam. He kept his back turned to Miledi and the others as he gave his explanation. It seemed the real Vandre was held captive somewhere in the demon lord’s castle. He wasn’t the only one either. Members from various races were all being held captive there. The one thing they all shared in common was that they could use special magic. And the reason they were there was to serve as test subjects for the demon lord’s experiments.

The demon lord was trying to fuse multiple race’s special magics together to create supersoldiers that could fight against the human church. The black-robed creatures that had attacked the Reisen Gorge were one such variant. Miledi and the others now understood why those vampires had been uncharacteristically strong.

The demon lord had taken vampires and fused the abilities of demons and beastmen into them. Naturally, such a feat should have been impossible. He hadn’t cross-bred vampires with other races, he’d taken vampire bodies and literally injected the traits and magic of other races into them.

Oscar didn’t even want to think about how many lives must have been sacrificed to create those abominations. Vandre’s voice remained level the whole time he talked about the demon lord’s atrocities, but everyone could tell he was trapped in a truly hellish place. It seemed since he’d been captured, Vandre had been using his metamorphosis magic as a bargaining chip to protect the other captives, but even then, it was only a matter of time. Miledi could see why he was in such a hurry.

“Van-chan, are you doing okay?” Miledi asked in a worried voice.

“What do you mean?”

Vandre brought his muffler up to his nose to hide his expression. True to appearances, he was the kind of guy who tried not to show any weakness.

“The demon lord’s currently away inspecting his western territories. This is our best chance.”

Vandre brought the discussion back on topic. According to him, the black-robed quasi-vampires were part of his personal guard.

“Are you sure we should just leave them alone?” Naiz asked, his expression troubled. Those black-robed creatures had hurt his comrades. But at the same time, they were victims of the demon lord’s cruelty. It was possible Vandre would want to save them too.

“For now, saving the powerless takes priority. Once that’s done, I’ll—”

I’ll free them. Even if I have to do it alone... Though he kept that last thought to himself, his intentions were clear to Naiz. Vandre knew he couldn’t ask the Liberators, who were victims of the supersoldier assault, to go save them. Miledi opened her mouth to say something, but before she could, Vandre cut her off.

“Besides, the demon lord’s using an artifact to bind them to his will. Unless we do something about that artifact, there’s no point in saving them... and destroying that artifact won’t be easy.”

“You sound pretty scared of this demon lord. Is he that strong?”

Vandre frowned and nodded in response to Miledi’s question.

“Of course he is. He’s the king of the strongest anti-church faction in the world.”

He possessed an insane quantity of mana and had a deeper knowledge of magic than anyone. On top of that, he possessed rare and powerful artifacts. But most of all—

“He’s unfathomable.”

Vandre spoke of him as though he were some deep abyss that sucked everything in. A cold wind blew past the party.

In an attempt to lighten the mood, Vandre said haughtily, “Anyway, I didn’t

save your comrades out of compassion. I saved them so you'd save me. If you help me with my plans, not only will you get your comrades back, but you'll be able to get me into your ranks too. Not a bad deal, right?"

It was in fact a wonderful deal. Almost too good to be true, in fact. Miledi and the others exchanged glances. They still had a boatload of questions. But Oscar and the others knew from the look in Miledi's eyes that she'd already made up her mind. Still, it'd be nice if they could clear up some of their doubts first.

Normally, Oscar was the one to ask the questions, but he seemed oddly unwilling this time around. He was adjusting his glasses far more frequently than usual. It wasn't that he was impatient to meet with Ruth and the others, more just that Vandre's personality irked him.

As they flew, the party suddenly saw a break in the clouds below. They hadn't noticed because of the cloud cover, but they'd covered a good deal of distance while they talked. The ground beneath them was dotted with little towns and villages. It seemed they were already within Igdol territory. Seeing that Oscar was unwilling to be the interrogator, Naiz decided to pick up the slack.

"Do you know why the demon lord targeted Susha and the other children?"

"I'm curious how he discovered the location of our headquarters as well. The rat Ruth-kun was worried about was you, right Van-kun?"

Meiru added on a supplementary question.

"Gah, now it's Van-kun? Why do you lot all act so friendly with people you just met?"

Bringing his muffler up over his mouth, Vandre coughed and said, "The demon lord's always been chasing after 'Lady Reisen.'"

"Wait, the demon lord's my stalker!? Oh no, how scary! Being popular is such a terrifying thing! I'm sorry I'm so beautiful I make everyone fall for me regardless of their race!"

"I won't deny you looked pretty stunning when you were younger. I had a chance to see you once too, using farsight magic."

It seemed Vandre had seen Miledi in her younger days.

“Oh my!” Meiru exclaimed while Oscar and Naiz looked dubiously at Vandre.

Meanwhile, Miledi, who was quite weak to praise, blushed profusely and said, “Fuhehehehehe. Y-Yep! I knew you had a good eye, Van-chan! That’s right, I’m the beautiful genius mage Miledi-chan! O-kun, Nacchan, Meru-nee, did you hear him!? I’m a *lady!* A beautiful lady people all over the world fall for! Repeat after me! Miledi is a *lady!*”

Vandre turned back to Miledi with a pitying look and said, “The passage of time... truly is a cruel thing.”

“Oi, what the heck’s that supposed to mean, huh?” Miledi went from embarrassed to angry in a split second. It was amazing how her expression turned from blushing maiden to mafia boss so quickly.

“Ah, so you do get it,” Oscar and Naiz said to Vandre, nodding in agreement. Miledi rounded on them, and they quickly averted their gazes.

“A-Anyway, why did he go after Susha and the kids?”

“You’ve gotta have figured it out by now, right? He wanted to use them as hostages against you.”

When he put it that plainly, Naiz did feel a little dumb for not realizing it sooner.

From the very start, the Reisen family had been a thorn in the demon lord’s side. After all, they were the only human nobles who possessed land on the southern side of the gorge. Meaning not only were they encroaching on demon lands, but they were also the ones responsible for pushing the battle lines back. Though it had only been Reisen the first who’d managed to actually capture land in the south, his descendants had managed to stubbornly hold onto it for generations. To add insult to injury, every member of the Reisen family, without fail, had been born with more magic than most demons. Since the Reisens were the strongest human mages alive, it was difficult for even the demon armies to defeat them.

However, that same Reisen family had been destroyed in a single night. It was unbelievable. The demons, naturally, had been unable to ignore such news. But because of how dangerous the Reisens were in their mind, they’d overthought

the situation. Believing that it was some elaborate trap laid by the Reisen family, they'd done nothing.

"After all, we're talking about the Reisens here."

The same family that was known for being cruel and inhumane. They were seen less as people and more as an unfeeling machine designed to reap the lives of demons.

From the demons' point of view, it was impossible that such an insurmountable wall had been destroyed so easily. Fueling their suspicions had been the fact that they'd been unable to locate the corpse of the family's eldest daughter. The same genius mage who'd been said to possess talent equal to Reisen the first.

"Ahhh, yeah, I can see that. I'd probably think it's a trap too."

Oscar nodded in understanding, as did Naiz and the others. As a result, the demon kingdom had begun investigating the Reisen heir. Consequently, they'd discovered a few things.

One: She'd been involved in the creation of a great chasm within The Greenway, as well as the death of one of Velka's bishops.

Two: She'd been involved with the creation of a massive crater within the Crimson Desert, and the death of one of its bishops.

Three: She'd been present when Andika had sunk to the bottom of the ocean and fought with the Holy Templar Knights.

During his investigation, the demon lord had also discovered the existence of the Liberators, as well as the Reisen heir's current goal—to recruit fellow users of ancient magic.

"For some time, the demon lord had known there was a secret anti-church organization. But until recently, he hadn't paid it any attention. After all, it was an organization trying to oppose the church."

The demon lord figured there was no way it would last very long. However, once he learned the Reisen heir was leading it, his opinion changed. Especially when he discovered that she already had three other comrades capable of

using ancient magic. The Liberators suddenly became an organization the demon lord couldn't ignore. But at the same time, he'd suffer huge losses if he sent his armies after them. While the demon lord was happy to see another force fighting the church, he knew that if the Liberators didn't believe humans should rule everything, there was little chance they'd agree with his view that demons should rule everything. Which was why he wanted to mount a raid both to show his power and to obtain hostages as a means of deterring Miledi and the others.

"It took him a while, but his spies finally managed to track down one of your bases. They're pretty good, but your biggest mistake was sending too many letters," Vandre said with a shrug.

No matter how well-camouflaged a base was, repetitive actions would leave traces that a skilled tracker could pick up on.

"Haha... So that was his way of getting back at the Reisens? I guess I've gotten lax since meeting O-kun."

Miledi smiled weakly. There were dark shadows under her eyes. Her clear, sky-blue eyes clouded over. Seeing how down she looked, Meiru softly hugged Miledi from behind, trying to cheer her up.

"Miledi-chan, there's no such thing as a perfect person, and you don't have to try and be one."

"Meru-nee..."

"You saw how happy the Liberators were to see you. I'm sure they felt the same way when they got a letter from you, too. Your words have supported everyone until now."

Miledi's letters had contained details about the new comrades she'd made, the places she'd visited, what she wanted to do with everyone when she saw them again, and so on. No matter what the reason, none of her comrades would have wanted her to speak to them less. Because the organization Miledi had built up was neither mechanical nor inhumane like her family's had been.

"Everyone had been prepared for something like this. And it would have happened eventually. But because of how well we've trained everyone, our

comrades were able to pull through without losing anyone.”

And so long as no one was dead, Meiru Melusine could heal them all with her restoration magic.

“So pull yourself together, Miledi-chan. And you two, stop looking so depressed.”

Scolded by Meiru, Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz looked up at her. Then, they exchanged glances and smiled wryly at each other.

“I must have been looking really pathetic if even you scolded me, Meru-nee.”

“I know you said no one needs to be perfect, Meiru, but coming from someone as flawed as you it just sounds like an excuse.”

“And it’s not like you’ve helped with any of the training.”

“Is it just me, or are you three not as down as you look?”

Meiru shot the three of them a withering glare and they all looked awkwardly away. Sighing, she turned to Vandre, who was looking back at the group over his shoulder, and asked, “So? Who exactly are you? No normal prisoner would be this well-informed.”

“Like I said. I’m just the chief of a remote demon clan who happens to be able to use ancient magic.”

“That doesn’t explain how you were able to locate the Reisen headquarters yourself, contact your clan, and send an army of monsters to hold off the demon lord’s experiments.”

“Batlam’s just that versatile.”

“In that case, why was a mere clan chief like you allowed to see Miledi-chan in her younger days?”

On top of that, Vandre seemed awfully knowledgeable about the demon lord’s thoughts and plans.

“...Batlam’s just that versatile.”

“Oh my, what was that pause for just now? And why did you turn around? It’s only proper manners to look someone in the eyes when you’re speaking to

them, isn't it, Van-kun?"

Meiru narrowed her gaze, looking more like the pirate queen she was than a harmless young lady. Her sadistic streak had come out in full force, and she would torture the answers out of Vandre if she had to. She licked her lips in anticipation, and though Vandre wasn't looking at her, he shivered. Meiru crawled past Miledi and stalked her way toward Vandre like a panther. She arched her exposed back and—

"Alright, alright, that's enough, Meru-nee. You sit back for a bit. If you get your hands on Van-chan, this'll become an 18+ novel."

"Aren't those your favorite, Miledi-chan?"

"No, they're not!"

Denying it that vehemently just makes you more suspicious... Though Oscar and Naiz both thought the same thing, they were wise enough not to say it aloud. They simply exchanged glances and nodded to each other. Miledi shot the two of them a reproachful glare, then floated over to where Vandre was sitting. She circled around until she was in front of him, then used gravity magic to match her speed to his wyvern's flight.

"We'll help you, Van-chan. We'll save you and all the other captives in the demon lord's castle."

Miledi's tone was different from usual. It was calm and completely serious.

"We're Liberators, after all."

It was Miledi and the others' duty to liberate those who were trapped by injustice. Her sky-blue eyes glinted with a fierce determination. There wasn't a hint of falsehood in her words.

"But there's one thing I need to be sure of."

Feeling uncomfortably pressured by Miledi's steady gaze, Vandre looked down and shot back, "What?"

"You promise you'll become a Liberator?"

"Yeah. Once this is over, I'll—"

Vandre trailed off. No, he was forced to cut his words short by the intensity of Miledi's gaze. Vandre gulped, knowing frivolous promises weren't what Miledi was looking for. Even though she said nothing, he knew what she was really asking.

"Are our comrades really safe? Are you certain they don't need Meiru's magic to survive?"

If she'd just been asking if he was prepared to fight against the church, he would have said yes without hesitation. That was the question he'd expected her to ask. But instead he'd been asked something far heavier: "Are you certain you didn't abandon any lives that could have been saved?"

I see... So this is the true nature of the woman who leads the Liberators. Becoming a Liberator was about more than just fighting the church.

"I..."

Though he opened his mouth to answer, Vandre's shame prevented him from doing so. He brought his muffler up to hide his expression, but then felt even more ashamed about doing that. Vandre was conflicted. *I want to tell her the truth but... I need to keep something as insurance.*

Sneaking into the demon lord's castle to rescue his test subjects was tantamount to declaring war on one of the two biggest powers in this world. As they were already embroiled in a conflict with the church, Vandre wasn't certain they'd be willing to hurl themselves at the demon army as well, at least not without leverage. It was possible they'd abandon him at a critical moment. *Even if what I'm doing is scummy, even if people say I'm no better than the demon lord, I still...*

"Don't you dare underestimate us."

Vandre looked up in surprise. It hadn't been Miledi who'd said those words, but Oscar. He turned around and saw Oscar scowling at him. Though his eyes were hidden by his glasses, he was obviously unhappy about something.

"We owe you our lives."

"....."

“It doesn’t matter what kind of guy you are, you saved our family.”

“So what?”

“So if you wish it, we’ll gladly lay our lives down for your cause.”

Vandre gasped, clearly at a loss for words. Oscar had guessed everything he was thinking. Not only that, even though Vandre was effectively holding Oscar’s family hostage, Oscar said he was willing to give up his life for him.

“Stop overthinking things. It’s only natural that we’d want to repay you.”

Naiz offered a few follow-up words.

“You should just give in. These children are the world’s biggest idiots. You can’t win against them.”

It didn’t even matter that this was Vandre’s request. Now that they knew there were people in trouble, Miledi and the others had to go save them. That was what it meant to be a Liberator. Regardless of what kind of person Vandre was, they’d go save him. But at the same time, Vandre was no fool. Not everyone in the world was trustworthy, and his situation was dire enough that he couldn’t just take them at their word.

“Ridiculous... I’m a demon. Not only that, I’m asking you to pick a fight with an empire that controls half of the world. You expect me to believe that without any insurance, you’ll keep your word?”

Quietly, he whispered to himself, “How can I trust you when even the person I trusted most in this world turned on me?”

Vandre furrowed his brows and met Miledi’s gaze.

Miledi smiled fearlessly and replied, “An empire? Half of the world? Because you’re a demon? Van-chan, it seems you’ve misunderstood what the Liberators are.”

“I have?”

Vandre had believed they were just an anti-church organization. Wondering what other objectives they could possibly have, Vandre gave Miledi a questioning look. She struck an intimidating pose and pointed up at the sky.

“We may be fighting the church, but our true enemy isn’t the church. It’s who’s behind it.”

Behind the... church? You mean those deities who look down upon us from up above? You’re kidding, right? Vandre’s confusion turned to disbelief.

Under the vast open sky, Miledi boldly declared, “The gods are our enemy! Who cares about some measly demon lord and his empire!?”

Just then, Batlam shifted its heading a little to keep the party on course, and the sun illuminated Miledi from behind. Looking like the very avatar of the sun, Miledi glowed with a radiant light.

“The Liberators’ goal is to create a world where people can live freely. A world where everyone can cooperate without the gods’ meddling!”

“A world where everyone can cooperate...”

Those words struck Vandre to the core, melting the ice around his heart.

“You’ve had this really troubled look this whole time, Van-chan.”

“Huh?”

“It’s like there are all these things you want to talk about, but can’t. And that just talking about them would be too painful. I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Don’t talk like you know me.”

Not again. What’s with those eyes of hers? How can they be so overwhelming? How is it that she can see right through me? Vandre wanted to tell her to shut up, but he couldn’t get the words out. Meanwhile, Miledi continued talking.

“For example, let’s take your familiars, Van-chan. The truth is, you treasured them all dearly, didn’t you?”

“Th-That’s not true. I just grabbed a few monsters and powered them up to __”

“When I saw their eyes, I could tell. They were all filled with determination. Those monsters gave their lives for you, Van-chan. They died not just to save my comrades, but to answer your expectations. Isn’t that right?”

That much had been obvious from the visions of the past Meiru had conjured up. At least, it had been obvious to Miledi.

“There’s no way monsters with eyes like that were ordinary.”

“What’re you trying to say?”

If all Vandre had been after was to put Miledi and the others in his debt by saving the Liberators, he wouldn’t have asked his precious familiars to sacrifice themselves for Marshal and the others. He could have just had them save Ruth and a few other important people while Marshal and the rest fought. After all, if Vandre had said saving the children was the most he could manage, Miledi and the others would have had no way of knowing he was lying. Meaning the reason Vandre had saved everyone was that he couldn’t bear to see anyone die.

“Van-chan. I think you’re trustworthy.”

Even though all he had to do was nod and say, “I see,” Vandre instead spat, “That’s not true at all. There’s more to it.”

He wasn’t arguing just for the sake of it, though. He really hadn’t saved everyone just because his conscience had told him to. There was a much more shameful, unacceptable reason that he’d done that.

“I know there’s more to it, but I think you’re still trustworthy.”

“You... How...?”

Vandre trailed off, amazed at how easily this girl saw through him.

Miledi grinned and replied, “Fufufu, you can’t hide anything from me.”

Seeing how taken aback he was, Miledi’s expression softened and she said, “Van-chan. I’m really happy you want to join us. Really, I am... Which is why I need you to tell me.”

Eyes filled with a mixture of sorrow and quiet resolve, Miledi asked, “After you join us, no one will have to be sad, right?”

Miledi’s words echoed through Vandre’s mind. The rational side of his brain was shouting at him to just say whatever Miledi wanted to hear. For the sake of his comrades, for the sake of their salvation, he knew that was what he needed to do. He couldn’t afford to lose his one trump card he had over these people

he'd just met. Anyone who tried to cross rapids without a lifeline was a fool. This was something Vandre understood well. And yet, before he knew it, he was talking.

"There's a spot near the capital where I've hidden a wyvern of mine. Meiru Melusine, if you ride that wyvern, it will take you to my clan's hidden village."

Why did I say that?

"Van-chan..."

"It's true that all of your comrades are still alive. But many of them won't survive for much longer. There may be casualties if we wait until after the rescue operation."

Looking down to avoid meeting Oscar and the others' gazes, Vandre said quickly, "This is as much of a compromise as I can make. You have to rescue everyone before the demon lord returns. If you insist on all going to the hidden village, I'll have to—"

"Thank you, Van-chan."

Miledi's tone was gentle and accepting. Looking up, Vandre saw that she was smiling. Miledi floated through the wind back toward the wyvern. Vandre watched her, entranced. She circled around behind him and did a little twirl. Facing Batlam, she held out her hand. Both as a gesture of thanks, and of friendship.

Embarrassed, Vandre drew his muffler up to his face and brusquely thrust out his hand. But just as he did, a sudden gale buffeted him.

"Waaah!?"

He barreled into Miledi, and she let out a squeal of surprise. His muffler slapped her in the face, blocking her vision. Miledi flailed around, unable to breathe. At the same time, Batlam banked heavily to avoid the worst of the turbulence. Oscar and the others hung on to Batlam for dear life, but Miledi was too disoriented to realize what was going on and lost her footing.

"Nwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?"

She rolled down Batlam's back, headed straight for Oscar.

“Hey, wai— Bwah!?”

Panicking, Oscar tried to get out of the way but failed. The two of them tumbled even further backward, and Meiru deftly sidestepped out of the way. They nearly fell off of Batlam, but Naiz opened a portal to save them. They rolled into the gate and fell neatly back onto Batlam’s back.

“Owww, sorry, O-kun. Are you— Kyaaa!?”

Miledi struggled into a sitting position, then let out a cute scream.

“Gah.”

“Hey, O-kun!? Where do you think you’re touching, you pervert!?”

“Gah!?”

Oscar’s face was directly under Miledi’s ass. In other words, Miledi was sitting on his face. She hurriedly leaned forward when she felt his breath on her butt, but that only caused her to suffocate him more. A deep blush spread up Miledi’s face. She was one step away from blasting Oscar with gravity magic.

“Alright, things are about to delve back into 18+ territory so let’s stop there shall we?”

Reliable as always, or perhaps not always, Meiru scooped Miledi up into her arms. Miledi buried her head in Meiru’s breasts and bawled like a child.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Meru-nee! O-kun’s sexually harassing me!”

“I object.”

Oscar gingerly got up and fixed his glasses.

“Oscar. In times like these, you need to be the gentleman and apologize.”

Naiz gave Oscar a piercing look. Even if it was a complete accident, it was the man’s duty to take the fall here. This was something Naiz had learned well over the years. “I object,” Oscar muttered again, but more quietly. He then adjusted his glasses and said, “M-Miledi. Uhh, I’m sorry...”

He tried to be considerate, but was then attacked from another direction.

“Four-eyes, you pervert... How could you be so shameless on top of *my* Batlam?”

Vandre glared contemptuously at Oscar. Oscar's contrition quickly transformed into anger.

"Anyone with eyes could tell that was an accident! Besides, this all happened because of your stupidly long muffler!"

"You got a problem with my muffler, four-eyes!?"

"You got a problem with my glasses, muffler boy!?"

Now it was Vandre who was pissed. In the same way that Oscar hated it when people insulted his glasses, Vandre hated it when people insulted his muffler.

"Tch. I should have known a fake intellectual like you wouldn't understand the true worth of mufflers. Do you think I haven't noticed? I know those glasses of yours are fake. Did you think you'd look smarter or something if you wore glasses? Moron."

"That's rich, coming from you. You think I haven't figured out you act all tough and haughty because you don't have any self-confidence? That's why you always hide behind that muffler of yours when you feel pressured, isn't it?"

"Poor fool, you don't even realize the aesthetic value of a muffler. I guess I shouldn't have expected any better from a second-rate moron."

"What aesthetic value could a muffler possibly have?"

"Don't you see this embroidery? It took three months to craft."

"You knitted it yourself!?"

Of course, this Vandre was just Batlam taking his form, but the real muffler Vandre had knitted himself. He'd picked flowers that expressed his feelings in the language of flowers, and had tied them all together with long stretches of ivy that symbolized the joys and suffering of life. He explained all of this to Oscar with a smug smile.

"Get it now? My muffler's on a completely different level than your shitty glasses."

"Hah. My glasses aren't any ordinary glasses. Besides, your muffler totally clashes with your getup. A sleeveless shirt? It's like you can't decide if you're dressing for hot weather or cold. Don't compare your pointless muffler with my

glasses.”

“Excuse me!? Mufflers are cool! Not tasteless, like your shitty fake glasses!”

“You’ve got it backward, idiot! Glasses are cool and mufflers are tasteless!”

Oscar and Vandre glared daggers at each other. Miledi and the others watched, speechless, as the two hurled insults back and forth.

“Tch. Whatever. No point in talking to a pervert.”

“How many times do I have to tell you that was an accident? Are you deaf?”

“Hmph, accident or not, I bet you enjoyed it didn’t you?”

Wait, really, O-kun? Miledi turned to Oscar, blushing.

Oscar adjusted his glasses and said, “You’ve gotta be kidding me. I was too worried Miledi was either going to suffocate me to death or kill me with her magic to pay attention to how it felt.”

I... don’t know how to feel about that. Miledi lapsed into thought, but Oscar and Vandre were still going strong.

“Besides, just think about it for a second. Once her embarrassment’s gone, Miledi’s gonna tease me about this for months. She’s gonna keep asking how it felt and start making up stories of how I liked it!”

U-Uhh, O-kun?

“That’s not... Is she really that annoying?”

Van-chan!?

“Oh, she is. That’s just who the person known as Miledi Reisen is. So naturally, there’s no way I got aroused. QED.”

“Ngh... You make a good point, you fake intellectual.”

“Hey, Meru-nee, can I squish them flat with gravity magic?”

“Not now, Miledi-chan. We’re in the sky, and there’s nothing but demons down below.”

Oscar and Vandre were so wrapped up in their argument that they didn’t even hear Miledi and Meiru’s exchange. Oscar smiled threateningly while

Vandre frowned unhappily. Naiz tried to jump in and mediate between the two of them, but neither of them paid him any attention.

“H-Hey, Nacchan, Meru-nee. What’s with those two? Why do they look like they hate each other? They just met, didn’t they?”

“Van-kun likes to act tough, so I’m not surprised he’s so aggressive. But I didn’t think Oscar-kun was this emotional. Especially since he did just say he owes Van-kun his life.”

Miledi and Meiru whispered quietly to each other. After a few seconds of deliberation, Naiz gave his opinion.

“Maybe they get along so badly because they’re so similar?”

“They are!?”

Miledi and Meiru cocked their heads simultaneously and Naiz said hesitantly, “I don’t know Vandre too well yet, but it seems he’s pretty proud of his position as clan chief, and he has the smarts to go with it. But even though he’s intelligent, he’s got a belligerent side to him.”

“Yeah, I can see that... Wait, hang on?”

“That’s just like Oscar-kun, right?”

“Yeah. Oscar has that refined gentleman persona, and he’s got the smarts to keep the facade up when he wants to, but he’s more vulgar than he lets on.”

Oscar had grown up in an orphanage in the slums, after all.

“Maybe I’m thinking too much into it but... it feels like they’re looking into a mirror and they don’t like what they see.”

Naiz glanced over at Oscar and Vandre.

“Wipe that smug grin off your face. It’s disgusting.”

“Well, sorry, but I don’t like looking like I swallowed a lemon all the time.”

I see... Naiz, Meiru, and Miledi thought simultaneously. Oscar and Vandre were quite similar, but it was precisely because they were similar that they instinctively hated seeing the sides of themselves they didn’t like reflected in each other.

“Wh-What should we do, Meru-nee? This is the first time two ancient magic users have been so incompatible in personality...”

“I’m sure it’ll end up fine. There’s no need to worry about their fighting.”

“I-I feel like you’re being too lax about this...”

Naiz sighed as he watched the two girls whisper to each other. He had a sinking feeling that his life was about to get much harder.

From there, Naiz used his spatial magic to help speed the party along, and they reached their destination within a day and a half. They camped outdoors without bothering to find a suitable place to stop and, as a result of their rushing, were able to complete a journey that would have taken a month on horseback in record time.

The demon kingdom’s capital, Igurd, sat inside a forest covering the base of a towering mountain. As the party landed, the part of Batlam that was mimicking a wyvern reverted to its slime form.

“From here, we’re heading into the mountain. There’s a small cavern partway up the slope. That’s where I’ve hidden the wyvern.”

Vandre led the party into the trees. The forest was quiet and filled with a strange scent. Though it wasn’t unpleasant, the smell was new to Miledi and the others, who were unused to southern forests. There was no one else around, and it was almost as if they were on a hike.

“Haaah... Haaah... This cavern’s pretty far, huh?”

“Huh? You’re tired already?”

Vandre shot Miledi a look of disbelief. There was no trail, and the path Vandre was taking them through was rugged and uneven. But even so, only a sheltered girl who never exercised would get tired this fast.

“Nah, no way! I’m used to traveling, so there’s no way this’d tire me out!”

Miledi vehemently denied Vandre’s claim, but—

“Miledi, you look pale. And you’re sweating a lot.”

Oscar furrowed his brows in worry.

“Huh? Really? You sure you’re not just imagining it?”

Naiz gave Miledi a dubious look.

“You had the stamina needed to cross the desert. This shouldn’t be enough to tire you out, and yet...”

“Yeah! You’re making a big deal out of nothing, O-kun!”

“Still, it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Meiru cast restoration magic on Miledi. Color returned to her face and her breathing steadied.

“Thanks, Meru-nee. See, I’m perfectly fine now. I was fine before too. You were just imagining things, O-kun.”

“I sure hope so.”

“Fufu. You’re so overprotective, Oscar-kun.”

Embarrassed, Oscar adjusted his glasses and walked on ahead.

“Don’t walk ahead of me when you don’t even know where we’re going,” Vandre complained. Feeling even more embarrassed, Oscar argued back, and the two started fighting again.

The party continued like that for some time, until they finally reached the base of the mountain. Trees covered the slopes, a green mantle that ran halfway up the mountain.

“I-Is this where your real wyvern is, Van-chan?”

For some reason, Miledi was out of breath again even though the slope was gentle.

“Yeah. You’ll be able to see the cavern soon.”

Worried, Meiru asked, “How soon... is soon?”

“Soon means soon,” Vandre shot back with an annoyed click of his tongue.

“I’m a woman of the sea. Mountain hikes are not for me.”

Meiru turned back to Miledi. She was complaining more for Miledi’s sake than

her own. *Can't Naiz-kun teleport us there?*

Though, of course, she wasn't too keen on walking either. Vandre shot Miledi a look, as if to say "Is Meiru really someone you guys can trust to have your back?"

"I-It's fine. She's got a lot of problems, but she's a reliable comrade... I think," Miledi vouched for her friend, but she didn't sound too confident herself. She couldn't even look Meiru in the eyes as she said that. With how useless Meiru was usually, Miledi couldn't say with confidence that she was reliable.

Naiz gave Meiru a troubled smile and said, "In a densely packed place like this, it's dangerous for me to try and teleport somewhere I've never been."

"Besides, we're in enemy territory. We shouldn't use flashy magic that'll draw attention."

Oscar cocked his head at Vandre.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Tch..."

"Can you stop 'tch'ing' every time you look at my face?"

Oscar glared at Vandre, and he clicked his tongue again. The two didn't get along at all.

"Alright you two, no fighting! Sheesh. Anyway, Van-chan, why can't we use magic?"

Miledi pushed Oscar and Vandre apart and brought the conversation back on topic. Vandre scowled as usual, but still explained himself.

"The capital's defenses are tight. And I don't mean that they've got a lot of guards stationed on the walls or anything. The city has ways of detecting whenever enemies are near."

According to Vandre, the capital and the surrounding area around it were covered by a barrier that could detect magic. Human mana had a slightly different fingerprint than demon mana, so if Miledi or the others cast anything, the capital would instantly be on alert. Just as no two people had the same exact hue of mana, everyone's mana left different traces that a skilled analyst

could identify.

Anyone who lived in or visited the capital needed to register their mana footprint with one of the city's inspection stations. If the barrier detected any magic that wasn't registered, the city sent out soldiers to investigate immediately. Of course, spells like body strengthening, which kept all mana circulating within the body, could be used just fine. Since the capital sat inside the mountain, its barrier covered most of it.

"So avoid using magic as much as possible."

Seeing as they were already almost there, Oscar saw no reason to use magic anyway.

"Anyway, once that woman—"

"I have a name, you know. Meiru-oneesan."

"Once Meiru's—"

"That's Meiru-oneesan to you."

"Who gives a shit about the honorific?"

Meiru looked like she was ready to attack Vandre, but Miledi pulled her back and signaled Vandre to continue.

"Ahem... Once Meiru's gotten on the wyvern, we'll head straight for the mountain's halfway point."

"Huh? Van-chan, does that mean...?"

"Yeah. We're going straight in to the rescue operation."

"And we can't use any magic, right?"

"Yep."

"Umm, even if the capital's protected by the mountain, they still patrol the area and stuff, right?"

"Obviously. There's a special group of guards that watch over everything from a fortress at the summit of the mountain. They're masters of mountaineering and magic, and their patrols are completely random."

“C-Can’t I just act as a diversion while you and Nacchan go save the prisoners?”

Since Vandre had enlisted the help of ancient magic users, Miledi had thought this rescue operation would be carried out through force. But to her surprise, Vandre had a different plan.

“Absolutely not.”

He shot down her suggestion. According to Vandre, the existence of the test subjects was highly classified information. If the demons knew they were under attack, the first thing they’d do was try to hide the evidence. If all they did was move the test subjects to a new location, then that wouldn’t be too bad. However, if they decided to kill the ones they no longer had any use for, Vandre’s plan would be all for naught. In other words, they couldn’t resort to violence until after the prisoners were safe.

“It’s fortunate that you managed to find a comrade who can use teleportation magic. My original plan was to hold off the soldiers together with Lady Reisen while her comrades rescued the prisoners.”

In that case, Miledi and Vandre would have had to fight their way through thousands of demons. But thanks to Naiz, they’d be able to infiltrate the castle and teleport everyone out. However, many test subjects were too injured or sick to move. Getting everyone out would still take a little bit of time, even with teleportation. It was for that reason he’d wanted Meiru present as well. But if she was going to be healing the Liberators, then Vandre just needed Miledi and the rest to work that much harder.

After hearing all that, Miledi tried to offer an alternative plan. Fighting without magic was one thing she really didn’t want to do.

“I-In that case, instead of trying to go through a mountain crawling with patrols, shouldn’t we try to infiltrate the city instead? You know, disguise ourselves as merchants or something?”

“It won’t work. We don’t have the time. We have to force our way through the mountains without letting the guards raise the alarm or using magic.”

In other words, the Liberators had to sneak or fight their way through

numerous patrols of mountaineering experts without using their trump card, ancient magic.

“Either way, it’s a race against time. We need to finish everything before the demon lord returns. If we end up getting spotted by a patrol, take them all out without using magic.”

You make it sound so easy... Miledi’s eye twitched. Her expression was stiff as a board. She was completely out of her depth. In fact, she looked like a lamb being sent off to slaughter. But Vandre ignored her and continued talking.

“Don’t worry. We don’t have to scale the entire mountain. Plus, sneaking into the castle itself will be easy. I know all of the hidden passages inside it.”

Adjusting his glasses, Oscar asked, “You do? Aren’t those things only royalty are supposed to know about?”

“...Batlam’s just that versatile.”

“You realize you can’t use that as an excuse for everything, right?”

Vandre pulled his muffler over his face to hide his expression. It seemed he’d really thought that explanation would fly every time.

“We’re here. This way.”

Vandre sped up in an attempt to avoid Oscar’s piercing glare. He weaved his way through the trees, circumventing a slope overgrown with weeds. Once they were past the slope, the party found themselves in front of the entrance to a natural cavern. The entrance was partially caved-in though, and a person would have to crawl to get in.

It was hard to imagine Vandre had managed to sneak a wyvern into there. But Oscar and the others had an even more pressing question to ask.

“Vandre... Did you leave anyone but your wyvern here?” Naiz asked quietly. Naiz’s magic allowed him to detect distortions in space, and right now he could tell there were multiple other living things inside the cavern aside from Vandre’s wyvern.

“No, there shouldn’t be anyone else here. But if they were able to get in, it means they’re...”

Vandre didn’t seem worried, but the way he wrinkled his brow suggested that while whatever was inside wasn’t dangerous, it wasn’t meant to be there either.

“Batlam, go ahead.”

Vandre’s slime butler put a tentacled hand over its chest and bowed. A second later, the rocks covering the cavern’s entrance turned blue and started to melt.

“Batlam’s fragments can transform into other things even when it’s separated from its main body?”

Oscar turned to Vandre in surprise while readying his Black Umbrella just in case.

“They can’t mimic living things, but his detached parts can still camouflage themselves as inanimate objects.”

Vandre smiled smugly, enjoying the surprised look on everyone’s faces. Feeling like bragging about Batlam even more, he said, “That’s not all. He knows how to make over a hundred dishes, and he’s as good as the chefs in the royal palace. On top of that, he can do household chores like cleaning and laundry. Plus, he gets them all done in a tenth of the time. Naturally, he’s a master spy as well. And if need be, he can transform into a sword and shield to protect his master. As long as he doesn’t run out of slime, he’s basically immortal, and he doesn’t need any sleep. Most importantly, though—”

“M-Most importantly? There’s more, Van-chan!?”

Miledi gulped. Vandre savored her reaction. Then, after a dramatic pause, he said with a grin, “He brews the best tea you’ll ever taste.”

“Un...believable... He’s perfect!”

Elated, Vandre concluded by saying, “See what I mean? My Batlam really is that versatile!”

The part of Batlam that had camouflaged itself as rocks bowed, as if to show its appreciation for Vandre’s praise.

Now I see... Oscar thought to himself.

“He’s just that versatile...”

“Indeed. I want a butler like this.”

If Meiru actually got a butler as versatile as Batlam, her slow decline into becoming a complete slob would accelerate. While Vandre and the others were talking, a few figures timidly walked out of the cavern.

“Van-sama...”

“Margaretta, I should have known it was you.”

Miledi and the others’ eyes widened in surprise. The newcomer was wearing white robes. The same white robes Ruth and the others’ rescuers had worn. It looked as though she’d been waiting for Vandre for some time now, but was also unsure how to act around him now that he was here. She wasn’t wearing her mask this time, so her expression was visible.

Like Vandre, she had dark skin and pointed ears, but her long hair was red and black. Judging by her build and the sharp glint in her eyes, she was a warrior.

Behind her stood five other white-robed figures. They all looked like demons at a glance, but they had beastmen traits and oddly colored hair. Oscar guessed these were the members of the Schnee tribe. In other words, Vandre’s family.

Miledi opened her mouth to thank them for saving her comrades, but before she could, Vandre shouted, “Go back to the village! I’m ordering you as clan chief!”

“Ngh, but now that you’ve been taken prisoner and our brethren are being tortured, we can’t just sit back and watch!”

“That’s why I brought the Liberators here! If you guys get caught too... I won’t...”

“Van-sama. We came here prepared to die. We left more than enough soldiers to guard the village! We have no regrets! Please, take us with you!”

Margaretta dropped to one knee and pleaded with Vandre. It seemed his clansmen treated Vandre more like a king than a mere chieftain. The men and women behind Margaretta knelt as well, parroting her request. However, Vandre’s answer remained the same.

“No. I can’t afford to lose you guys.”

“Van-sama...”

“This is an order. Take Meiru Melusine to the village! Your mission is to make sure the Liberators we rescued all survive. She must heal them so that there’s no ill will between us and the Liberators. Now go!”

“Ngh... Van-sama...”

Margaretta and the others seemed to want to argue further, but Vandre’s stubborn expression dissuaded them. Margaretta then turned to Miledi, thinking back on the Liberators she helped rescue in the Reisen Gorge. She bowed her head, expressing in one action all the emotions she couldn’t with words. Then, without a word, she grit her teeth and headed back into the cavern. The people behind her followed. They were likely going to get their wyverns.

An awkward silence followed Margaretta’s departure.

“Coo?”

But it was broken almost immediately as a wyvern poked its head out of the cavern and cooed.

“Mmm, sorry for making you wait, Uruluk.”

The wyvern that walked out was identical to the one Batlam had been imitating earlier. However, its eyes were rounder and gentler than Batlam’s.

“Listen up, you need to take her to the village. Don’t worry, I’ll be there soon. But first, you have to take her.”

Vandre pressed his forehead against the wyvern’s. His usual sour look was gone. He closed his eyes and leaned against Uruluk, looking completely at ease. It seemed Uruluk was as precious to Vandre as Batlam and the other familiars he’d sent into the gorge were.

After a few seconds, Vandre opened his eyes and turned to Meiru.

“Uruluk’s a gentle soul. And you’ll have my clansmen with you. Just sit on his back and he’ll take you where you need to go.”

Meiru nodded and glanced over to Margaretta and the others, who'd come back out with their wyverns. She then turned back to Miledi.

"Alright, Miledi-chan, Oscar-kun, Naiz-kun. I'll go meet with our friends."

"Yeah. Take care of everyone, Meru-nee."

"Make sure you tell them what we're up to."

"We'll meet up with you soon."

"Of course. Take care of yourselves, everyone."

Meiru hugged Miledi and patted her head. She then hugged Oscar and Naiz as well, patting them on the back. The two men blushed as her voluptuous breasts pressed against them. But when she whispered, "Keep Miledi-chan safe," to both of them, they forgot their embarrassment and nodded resolutely. Finally, Meiru turned to Vandre.

"Stop, I don't—"

But he couldn't escape Meiru's warm embrace.

"Don't worry. You've got Miledi-chan with you."

Vandre's protests died in his throat as Meiru whispered that in his ear. The strength drained from his limbs and he relaxed. Margaretta and the other members of the Schnee clan glared enviously at Meiru. But once Meiru let go of Vandre, he slapped his cheeks and changed gears.

However, Miledi didn't miss the slight blush on his face. Grinning she said, "Did Meru-nee's boobs feel good? Huh, Van-chan? Did they feel so good you lost yourself in them? Bahahaha!"

"Batlam."

At Vandre's command, Batlam lashed out with a tentacle, smacking Miledi on the face. She hit the ground like a sack of potatoes. Ignoring the chaos her actions had caused, Meiru leaped up onto Uruluk. Margaretta and the others urged their wyverns into the sky, and Uruluk followed. They flew low, close to the treeline, and Miledi and the others lost sight of them in an instant.

Once they were gone Vandre said, "Let's get out of here, just in case."

Miledi nodded and the party headed deeper into the mountains. The foliage grew thicker as they went.

“Miledi?”

“I’m fine. I think I just prefer the sea to the mountains too.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not the problem here.”

Oscar and Naiz turned worriedly back to Miledi, who was lagging behind. But she brushed them off with a smile and continued trudging onward. After they’d been walking for a few more minutes, Oscar suddenly held out a hand to stop everyone. The lenses of his glasses glowed dimly.

“I’m picking something up on my heat sensors. There are four enemies ahead. If we keep following this path, we’ll run into them. Going by how small they are, I think they’re monsters.”

“Oi, I told you no magic—”

“I’m not emitting any mana.”

“Tch... What’s with those glasses of yours?”

Vandre eyed Oscar’s glasses suspiciously and reached a hand out to Batlam. He’d thought they were just for show, but it seemed that wasn’t the case. Batlam squirmed, then transformed into a shamshir. The shamshir’s blade was engraved with intricate flower and vine patterns, while the spiral-shaped hilt also had fancy embroidery on it. Naturally, the crossguard did as well.

It was obvious the shamshir Batlam was mimicking was one Vandre had designed himself. Fortunately, Batlam’s transformations didn’t emit any mana outside of his body, so he could transform all he wanted without alerting anyone. Vandre handed the shamshir off to Naiz.

“Th-This is so ostentatious...”

Naiz preferred his weapons to be simple and functional, so this wasn’t really to his tastes.

“I think what you mean is that it’s a work of art.”

Vandre had Batlam make him a shamshir as well, then crept forward. He hid

in the shadow of a large tree and brought a finger to his lips, signaling for quiet. After a few seconds, there was a rustling noise and four ugly, green-skinned figures walked out of the brush.

Goblins. They were equipped with rusty daggers and crude wooden cudgels. One had a broken spear. They passed to the left of the tree Vandre was hiding behind and he circled around to the right. Once he was behind them, he leaped.

He sliced twice in quick succession, his first slice taking the head off a goblin, while the return slice slit another one's throat. Vandre twirled, throwing the dagger he'd stolen from the goblin he'd just killed. It slammed into the throat of the goblin furthest away, killing it instantly. Lastly, Vandre kicked another dagger the second goblin had dropped into the chin of the last goblin, killing it as well. There were four soft thuds as the goblin corpses hit the grass. Barely two seconds had passed since he'd engaged them.

"I forgot to mention this earlier, but the mountain's crawling with monsters. The demon lord lets them roam free on purpose, since they're a good deterrent against intruders."

Vandre returned to the party as if nothing had happened. Miledi and the others all thought simultaneously, *This guy's strooooooong.*

The way Vandre had fought made it obvious he was a seasoned warrior.

"Umm, Van-chan. I know you can use metamorphosis magic, but is your job one of the combat jobs?"

Vandre nodded.

"Yep, my job is Artist."

"Liar," Oscar responded immediately.

Artist has nothing to do with fighting!

"I'm not lying. Look at the exquisite embroidery on my muffler? How can you think I'm not an Artist?"

"Fine, I'll admit your artistic talents are great, but..."

Indeed, even the shamshir he'd had Batlam transform into looked more like a ceremonial weapon used for rituals than a tool of war.

“Is my information outdated? Is Artist actually a combat job?”

Naiz rubbed his temples, looking confused. Not understanding why everyone found this so strange, Vandre said, “Martial arts are art.”

“That’s not how it works.”

Oscar shook his head. At any rate, it seemed Vandre was fond of the arts. And as far as he was concerned, anything that had art in the name was indeed an art, including martial arts. So it seemed natural to him that the job Artist would make him skilled in that area as well. Of course, everyone else thought that was a bit too liberal an interpretation of Artist, but they didn’t argue the point.

“Hm? Above us?”

Vandre spotted a group of monsters that looked like monkeys swinging on the trees above them and shot his hand out toward Batlam again. In seconds, the versatile butler-slime transformed into a bow. Vandre grabbed the bow and unleashed a flurry of arrows faster than the eye could follow. He drew his bow back three times and fired three arrows per release.

Naturally, all nine shots were fired with perfect aim. Just before they hit their targets though, Batlam transformed again, each arrow morphing into a sickle. The sickles cut through the monkeys, eliminating them all.

“They were probably lured here by the smell of blood. You three, stop spacing out. We need to keep moving.”

“Oh, okay.”

The party moved swiftly, Vandre eliminating any monsters they encountered with whatever weapon was most fitting. He cycled between swords, spears, knives, warhammers, scythes, and even chakrams. Some powerful demon warriors he even incapacitated bare-handed. He was like a god of war. Though he was barely over 20 years old, he’d mastered every martial art there was.

“Tch... It’s hard to move smoothly when it’s not my body. I can barely use a third of my strength.”

Vandre seemed annoyed by his performance. Even though he was able to send enemies flying with a flick of his finger, crush their innards with a simple

palm strike, and bury demon soldiers before they even had a chance to raise the alarm, he was unsatisfied. He was so strong already it was easy to forget this wasn't his real body or his full strength.

Oscar and Naiz, who'd started helping Vandre after a few battles, exchanged rueful smiles. As they neared the secret passage that would take them to the castle, Naiz muttered, "Your battle prowess is amazing."

"Flattery won't get you anywhere... But well, you're pretty good too... Though it seems you haven't fought in a while?"

Vandre's discerning eye saw through everything. Indeed, Naiz had originally been a warrior. His swordplay was polished, and he was clearly a veteran fighter.

"Yeah, controlling spatial magic is pretty hard, so I've put my sword practice on hold while I try to get the hang of it."

"At the end of the day, your muscles are the only thing you can rely on, not magic."

Oscar chuckled and said, "Never thought I'd hear that from a demon."

"Hmph! By the way, four-eyes... I mean, Oscar, you're not half-bad yourself. I thought you were just a weakling who relied on artifacts."

"Thanks for the praise. I'd like it if you'd stop insulting me every time you compliment me, though."

However, Oscar was really more of a craftsman than a warrior. His primary role should have been to support the main fighters from the rear. As it was, he was just barely keeping up with Naiz and Vandre by using his glasses' perception enhancing abilities along with his umbrella's body strengthening enchantments. That being said, his various magical enhancements, along with his metal wires, were enough that he could hold his own against even the best of the demon elites.

A bond formed between the three men as they fought together and learned more about how each of them had trained themselves up.

As they fought, Vandre looked over his shoulder and said, "But you know..."

“Ah!”

Miledi twitched as his gaze landed on her. This whole time she’d been following behind the three guys, doing her best to hide her presence completely. Vandre looked disdainfully down at her.

“I never knew you were so worthless without your magic, Lady Reisen.”

“What!?”

Miledi clutched her chest and dropped to her knees. Vandre had just landed a critical hit on her fragile heart.

Smiling sadly, Oscar said, “Now that I think about it, this is the first time Miledi hasn’t been able to use magic. I didn’t realize it until now, but she really relies on it for everything.”

The unsaid implication was, of course, that Miledi was useless. She toppled over, taking another direct hit to the heart.

“You should at least learn some basic self-defense, Miledi.”

The last thing Naiz wanted to see was his leader running around like a headless chicken trying to escape from enemies just because she couldn’t use magic. That was the final blow for Miledi and she curled up on the ground and cradled her head.

“I’m sorry I’m such a pathetic leader,” she muttered.

“Lady Reisen... I mean, Miledi. As you are now, you’re nothing but an annoying little girl.”

Vandre was so disappointed in Miledi that he dropped the Lady Reisen title. It would have been one thing if he’d done it as a sign of how close they were, but the cold look in his eyes made it obvious that wasn’t the case. At that, the dam burst and Miledi started sobbing.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! I’m sorry I suck so much! Meru-nee, where are you!? Please hold meeeeee!” Miledi started wandering around aimlessly. This was the first time in her life she was not only useless, but actively holding her comrades back.

“If Meiru spoiled her now, Miledi’d be even worse off.”

“She really doesn’t know how to hold back, yeah.”

“Are you guys sure you want her as your leader?”

The three guys watched Miledi wander around sadly, their thoughts in sync.

Five minutes later, the party arrived at the entrance to the secret passage without tripping any alarms. Naturally, the entrance was camouflaged, so it looked no different than the rest of the mountainside. Just another patch of the forested slope.

Vandre turned to Oscar expectantly. He’d realized Oscar’s glasses were an exceptionally useful scouting tool. Oscar touched the bridge of his glasses and looked around.

“All clear.”

“Perfect, let’s go. It’s only a matter of time before someone realizes some of the patrols are missing.”

Vandre had Batlam change one of his fingers into the shape of an old key. With his other hand, he caressed the bark of a nearby tree, and the bark slid away to reveal a small keyhole. Vandre put his key-finger in and turned. Miledi, who’d finally recovered from the shock of being called useless, tugged at Vandre’s sleeve.

“How do you know what key it needs?”

Vandre’s answer was the same as always.

“Batlam’s just that versatile.”

“Batyam-chan’s so amazing that it’s scary.”

The part of Batlam that still looked like a slime bowed to Miledi. What had looked to be a tree turned out to actually be a metal tube camouflaged to look like a tree. Upon opening the door, the party found themselves looking at a staircase heading underground. At the bottom of the stairs was a wide pathway made of bricks. The moss growing within the corridor was bioluminescent, giving the party just enough light to see.

“The pathway’s built like a labyrinth to deter intruders. There are traps too, so

make sure you don’t go ahead of me.”

“And you know all this because Batyam-chan’s—”

“Versatile, yes! Stop asking every time!”

Vandre was learning for the first time just how annoying Miledi could be.

“Hold on, Vandre. It’s hard to see down here. I’ll make us some light.”

“Without magic, right?”

“Of course.”

Oscar flipped a switch on his glasses and twin beams of light shot out from the lenses, cutting through the darkness. Oscar swept his gaze from side to side, investigating the path.

“Hmph.”

Vandre slapped Oscar’s glasses off of his face. The beams of light shut off as they flew through the air.

“What the fuck are you doing, Vandre!?”

Oscar dropped his fake gentleman persona and rounded on Vandre.

“That light’s annoying.”

“You little—”

“Sorry, O-kun. But... I don’t think I can handle those beams of light either.”

“Yeah, we’d get blinded if you looked at us. Sorry, but I’m with Vandre here.”

“What...? No...”

Oscar’s shoulders slumped as his friends spoke out against his eye-beams. He staggered over to the wall and picked up his precious partner.

“Batlam can make light for us.”

Batlam used illumination magic inside of its body, and his translucent slime started glowing.

“Batyam-chan really is versatile!”

“Yeah, he can do anything.”

“Sure... Not that I’m jealous or anything.”

Batlam once again bowed to Miledi and the others, and the party began walking down the corridor. Vandre safely navigated them past all the typical booby traps expected of a secret passage: pitfalls, spear traps, poison gas chambers, rocks falling from the roof, and so on.

“Does this passageway lead straight to the prison where the test subjects are being held?” Miledi asked.

“No. This passageway connects to one part of the dungeons. It was created in case there was ever a coup d’etat. The demon lord could pretend to obediently let himself get captured, then escape from prison.”

The laboratory where everyone was being held was three floors below the dungeons.

“Is that where your real body is, Van-chan?”

“No, I’m being held somewhere else. But the other prisoners take priority. If you get the others out, I can probably escape on my own if I have to.”

“Gotcha. Don’t worry! I’m no longer useless! I’ll show you exactly what I can do!”

“I sure hope so.”

Miledi hopped up and down, eager to show off how amazing she was. Surprisingly, Vandre didn’t seem annoyed. In fact, he seemed quite tense, probably because the exit was so close.

In an attempt to reassure him, Miledi said confidently, “We’ll definitely save everyone.”

“Yeah, you can count on us.”

“You still annoy the shit out of me but... well, I promise I’ll save them.”

“Hmph... You’d better.”

Vandre harrumphed and looked away, the textbook tsundere reaction. A few seconds later, Miledi and the others arrived at their destination.

Vandre stopped in the center of what appeared to be a perfectly ordinary

corridor. He dropped to one knee and pushed down on one of the flagstones. A few bricks slid away from the nearby wall, revealing a doorknob.

Vandre twisted it, and a section of the wall pulled back, revealing a hole large enough for an adult to crawl through. Batlam sent his tentacles through the aperture, making sure there was no one on the other side. Once he was sure the coast was clear, he beckoned the party forward.

From this point on, everyone would need to be silent. Miledi and the others nodded to each other, then crawled into the dungeon. There was no one in the three jail cells they found themselves standing in front of. Though Vandre had made sure the coast was clear already, Miledi and the others still sighed in relief when they found the place deserted.

They looked around, examining the cold and unwelcoming dungeon. The first thing they noticed was that Batlam was nowhere to be seen. A second later, though, he popped out from behind a nearby wall. He waved his tentacles at the party and they followed him out of the cell. A bit further down the corridor, they found two unconscious guards. It seemed he'd gone on ahead to incapacitate them.

Vandre took the lead and used hand signals to guide the party in the right direction. They followed after him, ignoring the unconscious guards. Outside the dungeon, they found a staircase leading downward. They hurried down it, passing multiple landings. Finally, they arrived at the deepest part of the castle. As they headed down the corridor, they noticed it turned up ahead. A lantern hung from the wall at the turn, so that anyone approaching would cast a shadow easily visible to those deeper in.

"....."

Miledi scrunched up her face. A second later, Oscar and Naiz did the same. The stench of blood filled their nostrils. It was so thick it was cloying. It was clear much blood had been spilled here, and over a very long time too. Oscar could easily imagine the people trapped here screaming in anguish and cursing their fate.

"Let's go," Miledi said resolutely.

A second later, a piercing alarm rang out through the corridor. It seemed

someone had found the incapacitated mountain patrols. However, Miledi didn't panic. Instead, she smiled fearlessly. There was no need to be worried. After all —

"The beautiful genius mage Miledi-chan is here to save the day!" That meant she could freely use her magic. She shot forward like a cannonball. The two soldiers guarding the laboratory looked up in shock as they saw a human girl suddenly hurtle toward them. They'd been trained rigorously to contact their commander if they noticed anything odd, but all they could do was stare. You couldn't blame them, really. Not only had a human girl suddenly shown up, but she was also ignoring gravity and running across the ceiling.

Miledi jumped off the ceiling and shifted her gravitational orientation downward and forward. Her feet landed squarely on the faces of the two guards who'd only just started returning to their senses. Caught up in Miledi's gravitational field, the two soldiers flew backward and slammed against the iron door they were guarding. The force of Miledi's kick caused the door to fly open and the guards tumbled into the room behind them.

Their armor clattered as they skidded across the ground. They came to a stop a short distance away, their noses broken and bleeding. Miledi landed triumphantly inside the laboratory and—

"Ah!"

...Covered her mouth in horror. Oscar and Naiz, who'd been running behind her, came to a halt as well when they saw what was inside.

The laboratory was a gruesome place. Jail cells similar to the one Miledi had seen in the dungeons lined the walls. But unlike the cells in the dungeons, people were crammed into these.

They'd been stripped naked and packed together like sardines. All of the prisoners were emaciated and covered in wounds. Some stared emptily off into the distance, while others moaned in pain, as fevers wracked their weakened bodies. Some had gone insane and clawed endlessly at the ground. Shelves lined with jars full of blood and organs covered whatever space wasn't taken up by cells, and dissected monster corpses littered the floor.

Standing in the center of that hell was a group of demons wearing white lab

coats and their guards. They turned to Miledi in surprise.

“Die.”

Miledi’s voice was cold and unfeeling. She sounded like the emotionless executioner she’d once been. She gathered her mana and mercilessly assaulted the demon researchers and their guards.

A second later, her gravity magic crushed them flat. Their bones shattered with a sickening crunch and they died before they even had a chance to scream. Those who treated people like toys had no right to be treated like people themselves.

“O-kun!”

“I’m on it.”

Oscar thrust his arms out and his Metamorph Chains flew out of his sleeves. They split off from each other and coiled themselves around the bars of the jail cells. Even bars made of sealstone were no match for a master Synergist like Oscar. He transmuted them as easily as he transmuted regular iron.

“Don’t worry. We’ll take you all somewhere safe.”

Miledi smiled gently at the prisoners. They stared blankly at her while Naiz quickly prepared to create a portal. But just before he could—

“Impossible, why is he already back!?”

Vandre shouted in surprise. He looked up in a panic, then over at Miledi.

“Hurry, it’s a tra—”

Before Vandre could finish his warning, Batlam melted back into a slime.

“Van-chan!?”

But Vandre was no longer controlling the translucent slime’s body. Batlam fused with the other slime part of himself, but he was incapable of conveying Vandre’s words without Vandre. Something had happened to the real Vandre. But Miledi and the others didn’t have time to think about the implications of that.

A deep rumbling suddenly reverberated throughout the laboratory. A second

later, a section of the wall slid away and two black shadows leaped into the room. The same vampire hybrids that had attacked the Reisen headquarters. The amount of mana swirling around them wasn't natural. It seemed they'd activated Limit Break already. Behind them were ten of the gray-robed creatures.

Miledi instantly turned her gravity magic on the newcomers. But while the gray-robed creatures were forced to their knees—

"Huh?"

The black-robed ones seemed unaffected. One of them shot toward Miledi, thrusting its gauntleted fist at her stomach.

"Miledi!"

Oscar quickly brought out one of his enchanted swords and commanded it to fly between Miledi and her attacker. The sword served its purpose as a shield, protecting Miledi from the creature's fist. Miledi and the creature both leapt backward, and a second later, the blade exploded.

While Oscar had successfully protected Miledi, he'd neglected the other creature, which was bearing down on him. It had chosen the exact moment his focus had shifted to Miledi to strike, and now it's assassin's dagger was inches from Oscar's throat. Naiz quickly tried to blow the other creature away with a spatial blast, but—

"What!? It got dispersed!?"

He failed. Oscar used the sleeve of his coat to block the dagger, but the creature followed up with a knee to his stomach. The force of the blow sent Oscar flying and he slammed into a shelf of blood jars behind him. He groaned in pain as shards of glass rained down on him. As he was struggling to recover, the gray-robed creatures, which had freed themselves from Miledi's gravity magic, attacked him. Half fired blades of wind at him as the other half sprinted toward him.

"O-kun!"

"Oscar!"

Miledi and Naiz turned to go to Oscar's aid, but they were blocked by the two black-robed creatures. The one with the dagger faced off against Miledi, while the gauntleted one took Naiz. Both of them attempted to cast their respective ancient magic, but for some reason, they couldn't. They looked down in disbelief. How could their own magic have betrayed them?

Meanwhile, Oscar watched as blades of wind strong enough to cut apart boulders hurtled toward him. Just before they reached him, though—

"Wow, you really are versatile!"

Batlam slipped in front of Oscar and protected him with his sturdy slime body. He expanded his liquid gel to cover all of Oscar and absorbed the impact of the wind blades. Once the storm of wind passed, Oscar jumped in front of Batlam and deployed his Black Umbrella. He activated Wall Blast and the gray-robed figures were blown away like ping pong balls.

Though he'd managed to escape the jaws of death, there was no time to relax. A barrage of fireballs bore down on Batlam. It transformed into a wall of steel to protect itself, but then Naiz was sent flying as well. The black-robed creature had managed to get a hit in. He hit another shelf a short distance from Oscar and a stray shard cut his temple open.

Though he'd avoided taking too much damage from the creature's punch, it had successfully snapped the shamshir Batlam was mimicking in two.

"Those creatures can block spatial magic."

Naiz was now certain they were dispersing his magic.

Half-panicking, Oscar shouted, "Are you kidding me!?"

Before Naiz could respond, the creature came at Naiz with a flying kick. He hurriedly jumped to the side, and the creature's kick pulverized the wall behind where he'd been. It used the rebound from the kick to turn in midair and throw itself at Naiz again.

Judging by the fact that it was focusing on close-quarters combat and not using magic, the creature likely needed to be within a certain distance of Naiz to nullify his spatial magic. Oscar quickly pulled a sword out of his Treasure Trove and threw it at Naiz. Naiz caught it and, using a combination of body

strengthening and the skills he'd learned as a warrior, barely fended the creature off. Then, in an attempt to save Batlam from the rain of fire he was under, Oscar threw a barrage of enchanted daggers at the gray-robed figures.

They noticed the threat immediately and scattered. And after evading the assault, they surrounded Oscar from all sides. Half of them fired a barrage of lightning and fire spells as the other half dashed forward in waves. While Oscar was busy parrying their attacks, he heard a scream.

"Kyaaa!"

It was Miledi. She was lying on the ground, the other black-robed figure standing over her. The fact that its presence prevented her from activating gravity magic had left her too shaken to properly resist. But even taking that into account, it felt as though Miledi's fighting skills weren't as sharp as usual. Still, she managed to deploy a barrier in time to prevent the creature's dagger from slitting her throat.

The dagger clanged against Miledi's barrier, cracking it. It was likely some kind of artifact. Its superhuman strength alone wouldn't have been enough to damage Miledi's barriers.

Oscar wanted to go to Miledi's aid, but he couldn't shake himself free from the gray-robed squad. They used guerilla hit and run tactics, focusing more on keeping him occupied than doing any real damage.

Meanwhile, Oscar couldn't take them all out with a large-scale attack because the captives would get caught up in it as well. And though he knew this wasn't the time to be worried about others, Oscar couldn't help but think about how these assailants were also victims of the demon lord's experiments. He took them down one by one using his metal wires, but he couldn't go fast enough to reach Miledi in time.

"Dammit! Batlam, help Miledi!"

With no other choice, Oscar turned to the ever-versatile butler-slime.

"You little—"

Meanwhile, Miledi used earth magic to blow up the ground at her assailant's feet. It staggered, momentarily defenseless. Miledi quickly trapped its feet with

a Binding Chains of Light, then fired a blast of wind at it. It took the attack right in the stomach and was blown backward.

My magic still works. It's just gravity magic that I can't use... Miledi wasn't sure if she should be relieved or terrified. What kind of creature was susceptible to regular magic, but not ancient magic? Gravity magic was the reliable partner that had bailed Miledi out of every sticky situation so far. Unwilling to believe it was useless, Miledi once again tried to cast it on the black-robed creature. However—

"It really doesn't work..."

It ignored Miledi's magic and leaped at her again. Miledi thrust her hand out to push it back with regular elemental magic, but luck wasn't with her today. The moment she did, her consciousness grew hazy and she staggered.

Until that point, she'd convinced herself it was just her imagination and that she wasn't actually feeling unwell, but now her denial had come back to bite her. Unable to concentrate, the magic Miledi was trying to cast fizzled out.

Shit... There was a flash of silver, and Miledi braced herself to be stabbed in the chest. But then there was a strange creaking noise, and Miledi rolled backward. Looking up, she saw what it was that had saved her. Numerous tentacles were wrapped around the black-clad figure's dagger.

"You're the best, Batyam-chan!"

Miledi put a hand on the ground. A second later, sparks started running through it. Surprisingly, her two comrades were also casting the same spell.

"Ability nine, minimum power—"

"Get lost already!"

"Spark Plasma!"

Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz's voices overlapped, and three flashes of lightning shot out. They kept their spells centered around them, making sure they didn't hit any of the prisoners near the wall. The three of them walked over to each other and formed a circle facing outward. Their spells combined to form a barrier of electricity.

After a few seconds, the glow of their magic faded. While they'd defeated the gray-robed figures, the black-robed ones were still unhurt.

"Miledi, you okay?"

"Haaah... Haaah... I thought I was gonna die there. Batyam-chan saved me."

Batlam was currently resting by Miledi's feet. Even though something had happened to his master, he was continuing to help Oscar and the others because that was what Vandre had ordered him to do.

"You look pale. I knew it. You're not feeling well, are you?"

"Haha... Looks like it. I guess I overestimated myself."

Miledi spoke cheerfully in an attempt to dispel Naiz's worries, but she looked so pale it wasn't really working. She looked haggard, her breathing came in pained gasps, and she was burning up. There was so much sweat on her forehead that even Oscar and Naiz could tell she had a fever. Especially since she was shivering despite also sweating. Miledi grit her teeth and tried to ignore the pain in her body. *Why now of all times!?* she thought angrily.

The prisoners stared at Miledi and the others, their gazes full of despair. Miledi wanted to get them somewhere safe at least, but the black-robed creatures were preventing Naiz from using spatial magic. They needed a plan, but unfortunately, they were out of time to formulate one. A clear, malicious voice echoed throughout the room.

"I see, I see. It looks like my experiments are working as intended."

A hole opened up inside the ceiling. A man dressed in fine clothes, who was wreathed in an aura of deep crimson mana, jumped down it. He looked young, in his late twenties at most. He had long, glossy red hair and dark skin. His slit-like eyes were as red as his hair, and his face and figure were beautiful. He'd braided the hair near his left ear, giving him a strange, boyish charm.

"Normally, I'm the one who asks others to name themselves, but... I'll make an exception today."

Though his tone was light, the pressure this man gave off was immense. His vast mana was on par with Miledi and the others.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, ancient magic users. My name is Rasul. Rasul Alva Igdol. I am the lord of this country... In other words, the demon lord.”

It seemed this beautiful man was the demon lord. The ruler of one of the world’s two great powers.

“So you’re an artifact user, huh?” Oscar muttered quietly, cold sweat beading on his forehead. He could tell all of the ornaments adorning the demon lord’s clothes were dangerous artifacts. The circlet Rasul wore in place of a crown, the sword at his belt, the rings on his fingers, the bracelets on his wrists, his earrings, his necklace, and even his boots were all artifacts.

“Mmm, and you’re the artifact maker, aren’t you? It’s an honor to meet this generation’s creation magic user.”

“What do you mean by this generation?”

Rasul ignored Oscar’s question and snapped his fingers. Another hole opened up in the ceiling. Batlam wriggled uncomfortably as Miledi and the others tensed up. Like they’d feared, two of the demon lord’s generals, one a grizzled old man, the other a beautiful woman, walked in, carrying Vandre between them. He was in chains. Numerous magic seals had been placed all over his body, and he was covered in wounds. Some were fresh enough to still be bleeding, and it was obvious they’d been torturing him until just now. Vandre didn’t even have the strength to stand, and he slumped when they let go of him.

“Van, how could you be so cold? If you have all these wonderful friends, isn’t it only proper manners to introduce them to me?”

It was obvious Rasul was trying to say “Why’d you try to sneak behind my back and do this?” Vandre looked up and glared at the demon lord.

“Like you’re one to talk. You lied to me about going to the western regions!”

“You’re in His Majesty’s presence. Watch your tongue, mongrel.”

The female general dug her nails into Vandre’s cheek. He groaned in pain as she cut through the soft skin around his mouth.

“Van-chan!”

Miledi tried to dash toward him, but the older general brought his sword to Vandre’s neck. As extra insurance, the gauntleted black-robed creature stood behind him as well. With this, Miledi couldn’t use gravity magic on the two generals.

“Lie is such a hateful word. I did indeed go to the western regions. But then, I changed my mind and came back. That’s all.”

Rasul had first realized something was off when his attack on the Reisen headquarters had failed, and the hostages mysteriously disappeared. He’d had a good idea who was responsible, as well. While the world was vast, there was only one person who could control monsters of that caliber. And so, he’d decided to purposely show an opening, knowing that Vandre would try and take advantage of it.

“You’re a nice kid. I knew you wouldn’t be able to abandon the test subjects. And I also knew the only people you could rely on were the Liberators.”

“Tch, so you saw through everything, huh?”

“But of course. I know everything about you. But you knew that, didn’t you? After all, you’re... my cute little brother.”

Miledi and the others had half-suspected this was the case. Vandre had known far more about the layout of the castle and the demon lord than was normal. Even so, they couldn’t help but be surprised.

“I didn’t think you’d actually be royalty,” Oscar muttered, adjusting his glasses.

“If he’s your cute little brother, why are you doing this to him!?” Miledi’s voice trembled as she turned to Rasul, questioning him.

“You misunderstood my emphasis.”

Rasul didn’t find Vandre cute because he was his brother. He found Vandre cute because he was the perfect little guinea pig. When he said as much, a fire appeared in Miledi’s eyes. She would save Vandre from Rasul no matter what it took.

“Heh. It looks like Lady Reisen’s quite fond of you.”

“That’s right. Van-chan’s our friend, so you better prepare yourself.”

“Members of the Reisen family sure are scary,” Rasul quipped, looking completely unfazed. He shrugged his shoulders and added, “And because you’re so scary, I’ll have to use this.”

Before anyone could stop him, Rasul raised his right hand. The ring on his middle finger glowed. A second later, Miledi’s eyes grew unfocused.

“Ah...”

“Miledi!”

Oscar grabbed her before she fell to the ground. His eyes widened as he realized just how badly she was burning up.

“What did you do to her!?” Naiz shouted, standing protectively in front of Oscar and Miledi.

“This is just one of my anti-Reisen measures.”

Apparently, Reisen the first had caused the demon lord of that era quite a bit of grief. Naturally, subsequent demon lords had come up with a good number of anti-Reisen measures.

Oscar had no idea what exactly Rasul had done, but it was obvious he was the reason Miledi had suddenly fallen ill. Miledi’s fever was so high that she didn’t even have the strength to stand on her own anymore.

“Now then, I’m sure you’ve realized this already, but gravity magic and spatial magic won’t work here.”

Rasul cocked his head.

“Actually, I suppose it’d be more accurate to say they won’t work in the presence of my masterpieces.”

The black-robed figure with the dagger walked over to Rasul and stood behind him.

“I told Van I was trying to make supersoldiers to defeat the church, but that’s not quite true.”

The reason the church was so terrifying was that they owned the majority of people capable of using special magic. And until now, they'd been the ones who'd owned most of the users of ancient magic. Of course, they still had the Commander of the Holy Templar Knights, but until Miledi had come along, the Reisen family had fought for the church as well. And the Reisen family had a history of producing heirs capable of using ancient magic.

Rasul had pored over history books, thoroughly investigating when and where users of ancient magic appeared. He'd captured anyone whose family line had a history of producing people with ancient magic, or special magic that resembled ancient magic, and started his research. All for the sake of creating countermeasures against ancient magic users.

The black-robed creatures' vast mana reserves, superhuman strength, and insane recovery abilities were just byproducts. Rasul's true goal had been finding ways of nullifying gravity magic, spatial magic, restoration magic, and spirit magic. And by poring over records of the past, his research had finally borne fruit.

The gray-robed creatures that had been supporting the black-robed ones were failures. Only vampires had been compatible with ancient magic. The other races had proved insufficient. However, few vampires traveled outside of their isolated nation, and Rasul had been lacking in test subjects. And so, he'd decided to use demons as a base instead. But even though he'd mixed in the blood of his successful test subjects as well as the blood of beastmen into regular demons, they'd only managed to inherit the vampires' superhuman regeneration as well as the beastmen's strength. As he spoke proudly about his experiments, Rasul's expression twisted into one of sick joy.

"Thanks to Van's help, I was finally able to complete the research my ancestors started. Do you see what I'm getting at here?"

Rasul sneered. He found Miledi's resolve to save Vandre laughable.

"Everyone in the anti-ancient magic unit, Chimera, was made by Van."

Normally, something like nullifying ancient magic would be impossible. However, it was the nature of ancient magic to make the impossible possible. Which was exactly what Vandre had done using metamorphosis magic.

“It was the creatures Van made that attacked your precious comrades.”

Rasul’s smile was tainted with malice and derision.

“Thanks, Van. You brought all these defenseless ancient magic users straight to me. You really are such a foolish kid.”

Rasul’s words made it clear that Vandre had no idea he’d been helping create anti-ancient magic hybrids. Chances were Rasul had known Vandre was using Batlam as a spy and fed the slime false information to make Vandre believe he was helping make simple anti-church supersoldiers.

In truth, though, Rasul had predicted Vandre would turn to other ancient magic users for help and had already prepared countermeasures for them so he could capture even more test subjects. Despair clouded Vandre’s eyes as he realized just how dire their situation was.

“I...”

Vandre had already been afraid of telling Miledi and the others he was related to the demon lord, so naturally, there was no way he could have told them he’d created the robed figures. He was afraid Miledi and the rest would abandon him if they knew the truth. He was afraid of trusting them. And that was why he’d purposely tried to act antagonistic.

Once the rescue operation was done, he’d *wanted* them to treat him like a slave. That would be both his punishment and his means of repenting. But as a result, he’d unwittingly lured his rescuers into a deathtrap. This was all his fault. Despairing, weighed down by guilt, Vandre lowered his gaze to the ground. He was disgusted with himself. Not only had he been utterly shameless, he’d been a fool, too.

“I already knew that,” Miledi said quietly, her voice weakened by the fever. But the unwavering look in her eyes made it clear that her resolve was undaunted.

Surprised, Vandre looked up to see Miledi grinning at him. Though she needed Oscar’s help to stand, she still wasn’t backing down.

“What, did you think we’d abandon Van-chan because you said all that? Did you think you’d crush our resolve? Too bad! I knew all of that from the start, so

it doesn't matter! For a demon lord, you sure are crappy at manipulating people!"

Miledi brought a hand to her mouth and snickered. She was in full annoying mode now. Rasul's two generals glared at her, but Rasul himself just narrowed his eyes curiously.

Staggering, Miledi turned to Vandre. Her eyes welling up with emotion, she said, "Van-chan... No, Vandre Schnee. Hold your head up high! Be proud of yourself!"

"What...?"

Confused, Vandre thought to himself, *Her smile really is like the sun...*

Miledi pointed at Vandre and said with conviction, "You have no reason to feel ashamed! You fought your hardest against the unfairness of this world!"

"Ah..."

Vandre had no words to describe how he was feeling. All he knew was that Miledi's gentle but powerful heat had warmed his heart.

"Can you please stop seducing my brother? He belongs to me."

"I thought I told you to prepare yourself."

Miledi's words served as the signal to begin fighting.

"Take this, Super Onyx Blast!"

"I see the time for talk is over... Come to me, Ignis!"

Miledi unleashed a sphere of gravity magic five meters in diameter. It hurtled forward like a battering ram, obliterating anything in its path. But despite its overwhelming destructive might, the demon lord cut it in half with an enchanted blade.

A huge shockwave rippled outward as his crimson blade bisected Miledi's sphere. At the same time, the demon lord's allies headed toward Oscar and Naiz. The old general hefted a battleax and charged at Oscar, while the gauntleted Chimera dashed toward Naiz. Though Oscar and Naiz defended against their respective attacks, they were blown a few meters backward.

The moment Miledi was isolated, Rasul said, “Let’s see how well you can handle the combined might of all the artifacts the demon race has gathered since the founding of this nation!”

Rasul took a step toward Miledi. But a second later, a compressed blast of wind circled around Rasul and headed toward the Chimera standing behind him. The real reason Miledi had fired off that localized Onyx Blast was to keep Rasul busy while she targeted his bodyguard. The Chimera tried to dodge out of the way, but just before the blast of wind hit it, it burst into a miniature storm. Trapped in the whirlwind, the Chimera was blown into the air. But despite having lost his protection against gravity magic, Rasul didn’t stop charging forward.

“You’re mine— Heavensfall!”

“Didn’t you hear me before? I have more than one way of dealing with a Reisen.”

Right when the sphere of super-dense gravity reached Rasul, his necklace glowed. That particular artifact allowed him to manipulate gravity in a one-meter radius around him. It was his anti-Reisen trump card. He’d spent a vast amount of time and money tracking this particular artifact down. But all that effort had been well worth it. His trump card completely neutralized Miledi’s Heavensfall.

“What!?”

Surprised, Miledi nevertheless attempted to reorient her gravity backward to dodge Rasul’s attack. But just as she did, her consciousness grew hazy again and her fever sapped her concentration.

“Fear not. I’ll leave you on the brink of death.”

Rasul swung his sword down, intending to cut through Miledi’s torso. But just before his blade reached her, one of Oscar’s Metamorph Chains coiled around her waist and dragged her back to safety. She flew backward, into Oscar’s waiting arms.

“Ngh.”

“O-O-kun?”

Oscar grunted in pain a second after he'd secured Miledi. In order to save her, he'd had to divert his attention from his opponent, and he'd paid for that by getting struck in the side. A dark stain spread through his dark shirt. The old general pressed his advantage, striking with his ax again.

"Nuwoh!? I suppose I should have expected as much from the creation magic user."

But his ax was stymied by a massive tower shield. Oscar had brought out one of his Shadow Knights to protect him. He manipulated the fully armed and armored puppet with his black glove, which was currently on the hand holding Miledi. Superfine threads stretched out of the finger joints on the glove, connecting to various points on the puppet. He pulled one finger back, and his Shadow Knight swung its sword horizontally at the old general. The general brought his ax back and blocked the swing. However, Oscar's golem had more power than the general had anticipated. The old man was lifted into the air and sent flying. Oscar sent the Shadow Knight after the general while deploying his Black Umbrella with his free hand.

"Ability ten, Hallowed Ground - focused activation!"

He deployed a barrier and turned toward Rasul, who was bringing his crimson sword down on Oscar. However, even Oscar's focused Hallowed Ground wasn't enough to stop the demonic Ignis' momentum.

The sword cut through the barrier, and a moment later, the umbrella's glow vanished. But even without the barrier, Oscar's umbrella was woven from a superhard Azantium alloy. Though Rasul's sword possessed the special ability to cut through magic, even it couldn't cut through Oscar's hardest alloy. In fact, it barely even scratched the surface of the umbrella.

Oscar and Rasul locked eyes, their faces inches apart. Rasul's eyes glimmered with admiration and he muttered, "Oho." Then, he touched the surface of the umbrella with his right hand.

"But can it handle shockwaves?"

"Wha—"

The ring on his index finger glowed, and a blast of crimson mana shot out of

his hand. But it wasn't just a plain burst of mana. *Is this the same magic Shushu has!?*

Indeed, Rasul's ring allowed him to do the same thing as Shushu's Repulse. Namely, convert mana into a vibrating shockwave. However, the quantity of mana Rasul possessed was magnitudes greater than Shushu. The shockwave he unleashed was powerful enough to rupture organs.

Oscar hugged Miledi closer to him, covering her from the shockwave. Ignoring the searing pain in his side, he bore the full brunt of the shockwave. Impressively, he didn't let go of his umbrella even as it blasted him away, and he even managed to activate another Hallowed Ground as he flew through the air to cushion his landing.

Unfortunately, he didn't have any time to catch his breath. A barrage of black tentacles, or rather, flexible black spears, bore down on him.

He can control shadows too!? Thanks to his glasses' analytical abilities and his own focused analysis, Oscar was able to discern the true nature of the shifting black spears. The demon lord had turned his own shadow into an army of black spears. Judging by the fact that the ring on the middle finger of his left hand was glowing, Oscar deduced that this was the power of an artifact as well.

In response, Oscar summoned his own army of enchanted swords from his Treasure Trove. Following his will, the swords rushed toward the spears. The barrage of disposable artifacts cut through the shadow spears like they were butter. However, rather than dissipating, the spears just reformed. Of them, one managed to find its mark. With the trajectory it was following, it would end up piercing Oscar's chest and Miledi's shoulder. While neither would be fatal wounds, they'd certainly be grave. By manipulating the sleeve of his coat, Oscar managed to redirect the spear enough that it wouldn't hit Miledi. And while it no longer pierced straight through Oscar, it still grazed past his chest, cutting open a new wound. Blood spilled from the cut, staining his shirt.

"Gaaah!"

The barrage didn't end there, either. Oscar was forced to activate Hallowed Ground again to defend against the rain of spears. In seconds, the spears surrounded the spherical barrier and Rasul directed them to twine around the

barrier and start constricting it rather than try to pierce through. The spears were more like snakes with pointed heads than anything. Seeing how badly pressed Oscar was, Naiz tried to go help.

“Ngh, you’re so persistent!”

But he was blocked once again by the Chimeras. They’d both decided that Miledi was no longer a threat, and were now focusing on Naiz. They’d replenished their mana and healed their wounds by sucking the blood of the gray-robed Chimeras and were back to full strength. They focused all of their efforts not on defeating Naiz, but sticking close to him so that he couldn’t use spatial magic to help Miledi and Oscar. There was one other person, or rather, lifeform that was in the fight, but—

“Get out of my sight, you disgusting creature.”

The remaining general watching over Vandre unleashed a blast of fire at Batlam, the last remaining combatant. He had been trying to remove Vandre’s shackles while everyone fought, but the female general had seen through him. Batlam instantly transformed into a wall of steel, but the general’s flames were on a completely different level than the weaker Chimeras’.

The general’s flames turned from red to blue, becoming so hot they could melt even steel. The heat forced Batlam to cancel his transformation, and he writhed in pain.

“Batlam!”

“Shut up, you half-breed!”

The general shoved Vandre to the ground and stepped on his head. He could only watch helplessly as Batlam burned in front of his eyes. Vandre screamed in despair as Batlam’s slime was reduced to ash. He was burned so thoroughly that not even his mana crystal remained.

“Dammit!”

Oscar cursed as he watched Batlam get destroyed out of the corner of his eye. Seeing Vandre’s distraught look caused Oscar to boil over with rage. But even if he wanted to help Vandre, it was taking all he had to keep his Hallowed Ground up against the army of shadow spears. Worse, the demon lord was still growing

stronger. If Oscar wasn't careful, he'd be annihilated in an instant.

Is this the demon lord's power? He has even more mana than Miledi... The only other person Oscar had encountered that was stronger than Miledi had been an apostle. As Oscar glared at the steadily approaching demon lord, he suddenly noticed something.

Is he drawing power from his circlet? Oscar knew Rasul's circlet was an artifact, but he still wasn't sure exactly what it was doing. It seemed to be giving strength to the demon lord, but Oscar wasn't sure how. And if a highly accomplished Synergist like him couldn't analyze that artifact, it definitely warranted attention. Unfortunately, Oscar didn't have time to think about it too much.

"Very impressive, Oscar Orcus."

Rasul smiled, his praise coming from the heart. Even though Oscar was occupied with the demon lord's shadow spears, he was still able to control his Shadow Knight well enough to keep the old general at bay. As an artifact user himself, Rasul was quite impressed by the variety and utility of Oscar's artifacts.

"Why, thank you. Can't say I really enjoy being praised by you, though."

Oscar glanced down at Miledi. The sudden movements he'd had to make to dodge Rasul's attacks had placed quite a bit of strain on her fever-stricken body. Her body was emitting so much heat now that Oscar felt like he'd burn if he held onto her for too long.

Burning with impatience and worry, Oscar wanted to feed her an antidote, but he doubted she even had the strength left to swallow. Her breathing was shallow, her eyes were unfocused, and her consciousness was fading.

Rasul casually walked closer and said, "Really? Personally, I'd love to have you two on my side. What do you say to joining hands with me?"

"What did you say?"

Oscar cast Benison Aura from his umbrella while simultaneously maintaining his barrier. He needed to heal his injuries, of course, but he was also hoping it would help alleviate Miledi's symptoms. Benison Aura was healing magic that only cured physical wounds, so he wasn't expecting much, but it was better

than nothing.

“You want to overthrow the church, don’t you? Coincidentally, that’s what we want as well.”

“We want to destroy the idea that humanity is superior, not support the idea that demons are superior!”

Rasul smiled ruefully.

“Well, I expected as much. This is why I wanted hostages.”

His smile turned mischievous.

“Well, if you won’t support our ideology, I’ll just have to grind you into part of its foundations.”

Rasul poured more mana into his spears, and cracks started to form along Oscar’s barrier. It appeared Rasul’s artifact grew stronger the more mana he gave it.

Oscar looked down to check up on Miledi and the state of his wounds. Since he was using most of his mana to maintain his Hallowed Ground, his Benison Aura was far from healing him fully. Especially with how deep his wounds were. Miledi’s breathing had steadied a little, but she wasn’t doing much better.

Dammit, what do I do!? How do I get us out of this while also saving Vandre and the prisoners!? Think, Oscar Orcus!

Oscar racked his brain for ideas, but this was a situation where even escaping alone was near impossible.

As he furiously tried to think of a plan, Rasul said, “Hmm... Thanks to Van’s metamorphosis magic, my dream of mass-producing soldiers capable of using ancient magic may just end up a reality... But now that I think about it, it would be a shame to scar Lady Reisen.”

“What?”

“I mean, think about it? Aren’t you interested in seeing what kind of children a union between a Reisen and the demon lord would produce?”

Ignoring the fact that Oscar had fallen silent, Rasul continued talking. He felt

as though he'd hit upon a truly wonderful idea.

"It's a shame she's not a demon, but... even so, I'd say it's worth a shot."

"You wanna make Miledi your queen?"

"Now now, I never said anything about giving her status. Oh, but don't worry. I'm a feminist. If I take her prisoner, I'll be sure to treat her well at least. Even if she doesn't want to be mine, I'm sure she'll accept my advances if I use you as a hosta—"

Oscar interrupted Rasul's delusions of a glorious future for his demon empire, his voice as cold as ice.

"That future will never come to pass."

He looked quietly at Rasul, his eyes inscrutable.

"I promised Miledi I'd follow her wherever she went, even if that was to the depths of hell. But I'll never let her go to your side."

No matter what the situation was, even if Miledi was taken prisoner, his thoughts were clear.

"I won't let her join you."

Oscar reflexively hugged Miledi tighter. He couldn't tell if it was his imagination or not, but it felt like Miledi snuggled up to him as well.

"Good grief. Hasn't anyone told you that women don't like overly possessive men?"

For a moment, Rasul was overwhelmed by the vehemence in Oscar's voice, but then he smiled and returned to his same light tone. A second later, though, his eyes turned as cold as ice.

"You all are wonderful samples. I will have you become my test subjects."

Crimson mana flared up from Rasul, and his spears shattered Oscar's barrier. Oscar used his Onyx Boots' Footholds of Light to leap into the sky. The spears gathered underneath Oscar, then shot upward. He blew them apart with a barrage of exploding daggers while simultaneously throwing another barrage of searing daggers at Rasul.

Rasul easily shot them all down with his own barrage of flaming blue spears. Then, using an ungodly amount of mana on body strengthening, he jumped toward Oscar, closing the distance between them in an instant. There was a crimson flash as he swung Ignis down at Oscar, and Oscar blocked with his umbrella.

The two fought in the sky, clashing over and over. But it didn't take long before Oscar was cornered. Not only did he have to fight while protecting Miledi, but he also wasn't nearly as skilled a swordsman as Rasul.

He's as good a swordfighter as Vandre... Not only that, but his techniques were all the same. Still, even though Oscar had seen them all before, he wasn't skilled enough to deflect them. He'd just learned a smattering of swordplay for self-defense.

"Gaaaaaaaaah!"

Before long, Ignis started scoring blows on Oscar. Though he managed to avoid taking any fatal blows, he was cut over and over by Rasul's enchanted sword.

"Are those glasses of yours an artifact as well? I want them."

"You're not worthy of them."

Rasul realized it was Oscar's glasses that were enhancing his senses and allowing him to just barely keep up with the demon lord's swordplay. The moment his attention was drawn to the glasses, Oscar activated his favorite ability, the flash of light. Momentarily blinded by the light, Rasul took an involuntary step backward.

Oscar leaped back to try and put some distance between him and Rasul, but the demon lord retaliated against the flash by firing a bolt of lightning.

"Gah!"

Screaming in pain, Oscar nevertheless prioritized Miledi and crashed into the ground back-first. At the same time, the old general cut through Oscar's Shadow Knight, which he hadn't been able to properly control for some time now. No longer occupied by Oscar's puppet, he went to help the Chimeras fight Naiz. Too numb to move, Oscar could only watch helplessly as Rasul's sword

bore down on him again.

“I’ll protect... you...”

To Oscar’s utter surprise—

“Hm!? I see the Reisens are as impressive as always! To think you could still cast magic in that state!”

Though she was suffering from a fever, could barely see, and was trembling with chills, Miledi nevertheless managed to cast elemental spells one after another. The whole time, she mumbled, “I’ll protect you. I’ll definitely protect you.”

Miledi truly was amazing. Even in her condition, her resolve remained firm.

Seeing her heroic determination, Vandre shouted, “That’s enough... You’ve done enough! Just run! Run away!”

He couldn’t bear to watch this anymore. It would be better if Oscar, Naiz, and Miledi all fled without him. *Like hell we’re doing that!* Oscar thought to himself.

“Haha, I’m afraid I cannot allow that.”

Sneering, Rasul countered Miledi’s magic and sent her and Oscar flying with an attack of his own.

“You just sit there and watch, Van. It’s not like you can do anything anyway.”

Vandre hung his head. Rasul’s words brought back bitter memories. Memories of pain, sadness, and helplessness.

“Yes, that’s more like it. You should have just been obedient from the very start.”

If you’d done that, I wouldn’t have done anything to your clan. I would have even spared the test subjects any more pain than necessary...

“No matter how hard you struggle, your fate is to be used. You can’t protect anyone.”

Yeah, that’s how it’s always been. Vandre thought to himself.

I always endured being used, and in the end, I lost everything I cared about anyway. But even so...

“Hold your head up high! Be proud of yourself!”

When I think about how she’s still struggling...

“You have no reason to feel ashamed!”

Who’s she fighting for right now? The guy who got us all mixed up in this mess! The truly shameless thing to do would be to accept my defeat while she’s still fighting!

“Don’t... underestimate me. I... I am the man who’s inherited the blood of demons and dragons.”

Vandre spoke to himself, recalling those horrible memories. Unsealing the memories he’d buried deep inside his heart made his mind churn. But even so—

“Live for the sake of others.”

That person that meant so much to him, that person he’d let die, would never have sat back while others fought for them.

“I am the proud son of Sasrika Schnee, Vandre Schnee! Leader of the Schnees!”

As Vandre declared that to the world, a light as pale and clear as the light of the moon erupted from him. The maelstrom of light surrounded Vandre, obscuring him from view.

“Impossible, there should be a dozen seals blocking your mana!”

The female general keeping an eye on him watched on in surprise.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

There was a thunderous roar, and a second later, she was blown back against the wall.

“Van... I never thought you’d use that power again.”

Everyone watched in awe as the pale light pulsed once, then vanished. A second later, there was a white flash, and a pillar of moonlight shot toward Rasul.

“It’s far too reckless to attempt a transformation while your mana’s sealed. I can’t have you dying on me, you know...”

Frowning, Rasul dodged out of the way. For the first time, he was forced on the defensive. And that was because he knew better than anyone just how deadly that light was.

The light shot through the laboratory. A second later, a bone-chilling cold filled the air. There was a sharp cracking noise and a wall of ice formed in the spot the light had passed through. As crystals of ice danced through the air, a massive winged creature appeared where Vandre had been standing.

“I-Is that a dragon?”

Oscar put his glasses back in place as he looked up in awe. The dragon fired another blast of light at Rasul and fixed one beady eye on Oscar.

“Stop spacing out and run! I can’t maintain this form for long!”

That voice unmistakably belonged to Vandre. It echoed through the room as if it was coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once. It appeared the majestic ice dragon with shimmering sky-blue scales was none other than Vandre.

Vandre turned to Naiz and fired its breath in his direction as well. The two Chimeras and the old general who’d been fighting him leaped back. However, the light that enveloped Naiz was harmless.

Naiz looked down at himself, surprised that he hadn’t been frozen. Even as he stared, Vandre unleashed another roar. Looking up, Naiz saw a wall of ice now separated him from the Chimeras and the general.

Vandre’s dragon form certainly was beautiful, but seconds after he’d transformed, deep gashes started appearing in his scales. His eyes were bloodshot, and it looked like he was desperately straining against something. Judging by what Rasul had said earlier, forcing a transformation while he was still sealed was causing Vandre to take continual damage.

“W-We can’t leave you behind, Van-chan... We’re all escaping together...”

Trembling, Miledi reached out to Vandre. When he saw that, Vandre closed his eyes. He continued pouring his breath into the ice wall to keep it from being destroyed and said, “I can’t leave these guys.”

If Vandre escaped, the prisoners would be subject to hideous experiments again. But so long as Vandre was the only user of metamorphosis magic Rasul had, Rasul had no choice but to accept Vandre's demands that he not perform any experiments that might kill the test subjects. Moreover—

"I... I still haven't... given up on my brother."

Vandre stared at the other side of his ice wall. Miledi had no idea what he meant. However, she knew he was speaking from the heart. More gashes appeared on Vandre's scales, and his mana began to weaken. If he kept his transformation up much longer, he'd die.

Though he was bleeding from all over, Vandre shouted gallantly, "Go! For now, focus on surviving!"

"Van...chan..."

Consciousness fading, Miledi nevertheless called out to Vandre.

"Oscar! You can't let her die! She's not someone who should meet her end here! Isn't that right!?"

"Shit! Goddammit! I'm sorry, Vandre. We'll be back for you, I promise!"

Oscar hefted Miledi up in one arm and turned on his heel. A second later, Vandre's breath reached its limits. Its pale light faded, and a massive impact struck the ice wall. The impact repeated itself over and over and cracks soon spread through the wall. There was a loud thud and Vandre fell to the floor.

A cocoon of pale light enveloped him. And, at the same time, Rasul finally destroyed the wall. As Vandre returned to human form, he watched as Naiz teleported the party to safety. He then looked up as he heard footsteps approach him.

"You got me, little brother."

Rasul's tone was cheerful. He didn't seem the least bit concerned that Oscar and the others had escaped. But even so, despite the fact that he was bleeding from every orifice, Vandre smiled. *Serves you right...*

Vandre had no idea if Rasul read his thoughts or not. However, the demon lord just looked down at him and said, "Elga, Lestina, send messengers to every

corner of the kingdom. I want every demon to know they're wanted, and that they're wanted alive."

"As you wish, Your Highness."

The two generals shot Vandre a bitter look, then hurried out of the room. That was the last thing Vandre saw before he lost consciousness.

Meanwhile, Oscar and the others reappeared at the base of the mountain the capital was located on.

"Haaah... Haaah... How's Miledi?"

Panting, Naiz turned to Oscar.

"She's lost consciousness. It doesn't look good. We need a place to rest... Somewhere with a doctor, preferably."

Oscar's expression was grim. He and Naiz both knew there was nowhere safe for them to rest within the demon kingdom.

"For now, let's get out of here. Naiz, can you teleport us again?"

"Yeah."

Naiz laid a hand on Oscar's shoulder. Not only because it was easier to teleport people when he was touching them, but also to console Oscar. Though it was obvious from the strength of his grip that Naiz was every bit as frustrated as Oscar was.

What sounded like a dragon's roar reached their ears. The two men looked up at the demon lord's castle.

"We're coming back, for sure."

"Yeah, you can count on it."

Frustration and determination warring within them, the two men teleported away.

Chapter III: The Demon Army vs. The Liberators

A fierce wind whipped through the steel smithy every time the hammer was brought down onto the anvil. The floor had a massive circle that soundproofed the room and dampened shockwaves. A bald man stood at the anvil, working tirelessly.

“Hmph, faster.”

His voice was as rough and rugged as his features. There was a sharp glint in his eyes and his lips were pursed in a thin line. His face was creased with worry, and there were more wrinkles on his forehead than there should have been for someone his age. The man at the anvil was Laus Barn, Commander of the Holy Templar Knights. The hammer he was swinging looked plain and rather crude, nothing more than a slab of metal slapped onto a log, but it was in truth one of the strongest artifacts the church possessed.

He was alone in the smithy, and the way he repeatedly brought his hammer down on the anvil seemed almost like some kind of holy ritual. But despite how engrossed he appeared in his task, Laus’ mind was preoccupied with something else entirely.

Miledi Reisen... The girl he’d met two months ago on the western seas, as well as what had happened there.

So she’s the one who inherited the divine priestess... Belta’s will. Miledi had been nothing short of awe-inspiring. She’d blazed like the sun, wiping away the dark clouds that hung over everything in Laus’ life.

“Wherever you go, I’ll always be there to oppose you!”

That was the first time Laus had faced anyone brave enough to resist him.

“I’ll fight against you and your shitty God to the very end!”

She was the polar opposite of Laus, a man who refused to resist. Her burning resolve had etched itself inside Laus’ heart.

“Come at me if you dare, puppets of god. I’ll teach you what it means to be human!”

Laus smiled bitterly as he recalled her words. *Puppets, huh...? I can’t very well deny that.* Her declaration that she’d teach him what it meant to be human still stuck with him even now.

Two months had passed since their confrontation. Two whole months. But even so, Laus remembered everything like it was yesterday. In fact, it felt as though his memories were getting even more vivid as time passed. He’d kept his heart shut tight to avoid feeling anything all these years, but Miledi had just come and wrenched the doors open.

A world where people can live freely... Though Laus would never say it aloud, he was unconsciously beginning to believe in that dream. Part of the reason he’d come here to forge was because he wanted to get these thoughts out of his mind.

He was one of the cornerstones of the church’s might. Free will was his mortal enemy, an ideology he was meant to stamp out. He needed to forget his encounter with Miledi. No, he needed to beat it out of him. Unneeded emotions were to be discarded. He couldn’t afford to feel anything.

“Baldy.”

He couldn’t afford to—

“Yes you are! I can see your receding hairline clear as day!”

Miledi’s grinning face popped into Laus’ mind.

“Hmph!”

On second thought, anger was an okay emotion to feel. He swung his hammer down harder than before and a massive shockwave spread out from the anvil. The shockwave reached the walls, and the magic circle on the floor activated, dampening the impact.

“Haaah... Haaah...”

How long had he spent here? As he stopped to catch his breath, Laus realized he was drenched in sweat. Steam rose from his shiny head, which most

definitely, was not bald. Or rather, he'd shaved his head to be bald, but he could grow a full head of hair if he wanted to! Though he was still angry, Laus' mouth unconsciously formed into a faint smile as he thought back to Miledi's joking attitude.

He practically never smiled even in front of his family, so he was shocked to find that he was smiling now. For some reason whenever he thought of her, the shackles he'd placed around his own emotions started to loosen. *Sheesh, what a troublesome girl. Belta, you sure found one hell of a successor.*

Laus sighed as he thought back to the priestess who'd saved his life.

"So, how long have you been watching?"

Laus' voice echoed through the smithy, which he should have been alone in. A young man suddenly appeared from the doorway. He was thin, had swept-back black hair, and a nervous expression. The hand jutting out of his right sleeve was made of metal.

"So you noticed. What were you forging?"

The smiling young man was one of the Holy Templar Knights' three division commanders, Araym Orcman. Wielder of the special magic Divine Blaze.

"If you want to hide from me, you'll need a way to hide your soul."

"That's actually impossible."

Araym walked over to Laus and handed him a towel. As Laus wiped the sweat off his forehead, Araym said, "It's almost time for the meeting, so I came here to get you."

"Hrm, already? Sorry, I lost track of time."

As he said that, Laus realized something. He cocked his head and thought *If you came to get me, why were you hiding? You could have just called out to me right away.* Laus' inquiry must have shown on his face, since Araym looked down and said, "You seemed to be lost in thought."

"You didn't want to disturb me?"

Laus shook his head and started walking toward the door. Araym watched him go and asked in as level a voice as he could manage, "Laus-sama, may I ask

you something?”

“Hm? What is it?”

“That day, when we fought on the western sea, what did that heretic say to you?”

“Which conversation are you referring to?”

Like Araym, Laus kept his voice perfectly level. Laus didn’t turn around, but Araym stared resolutely at Laus’ back and said, “What did that heretic, Oscar Orcus, tell you?”

“.....”

“It seemed to me that his words left you shaken. Are you—”

“Araym.”

Araym made to walk up to Laus, but that one word from the Commander stopped him in his tracks. Laus’ voice was so utterly devoid of emotion that it was terrifying.

Laus looked over his shoulder and said, “Are you interrogating me?”

“O-Of course not!”

Araym broke out in a cold sweat, feeling intimidated by the pressure Laus was emitting. Realizing he’d been disrespectful, Araym hurriedly bowed his head.

“Let’s go. We don’t want to be late for the meeting.”

“Yes, sir. My apologies for stopping you.”

Laus looked forward again and walked out of the smithy. Araym raised his head and watched his Commander leave. There was respect in his eyes, but it was clouded by a darker emotion. Araym kept watching until Laus was out of sight. Even after Laus was gone, Araym eyed the doorway for a few seconds longer.

“Laus-sama... You are the Commander of the splendid Holy Templar Knights. You are our guiding light. Please... Please don’t forget that.”

Araym’s words were barely louder than a whisper.

Laus entered the meeting room and found everyone else was already present. Once the pope made his appearance, the meeting would begin.

This place is like a bed of thorns... Whatever I do, I feel like I'm going to get stung. Well, I guess that's nothing new. Laus hardened his expression and walked forward. Everyone turned to him, their gazes piercing through him. Aside from one person, they all disliked Laus.

The moment Laus took his seat one of them said, "Well, well, if it isn't Laus-dono. You sure are full of yourself, walking in last."

"Unbelievable. If I was in your position, I would never be so careless."

The first man who spoke was unnaturally thin and had frizzy long hair. The second had a mustache shaped like a horseshoe and had a much larger build. The former was the Commander of the Third Division of Templar Knights, Zebal Igan. The latter was the Commander of the Fourth Division, Morcus Greant.

The Templar Knights were the church's regular army, and they were split into four divisions. Members of the Templar Knights who showed exceptional promise were promoted to one of the orders that comprised the Three Pillars of Radiance. It was for that reason that upper-ranking members of the regular Templar Knights coveted Laus' position. All of them would be happy to see him fall. But while they were happy Laus had failed in his most recent mission, the loss of an entire division of Holy Templar Knights was a failure so great that it affected the prestige of the church. Outwardly showing their joy at Laus' failure would be seen, not only as disrespectful, but also treasonous.

"Zebal, Morcus. Restrain yourselves. Your petty insults sully the good name of the Templar Knights."

The woman who spoke was the Commander of the First Division of Templar Knights, and therefore the Supreme Commander of the entire order, Lilith Arkind. She had long blonde hair, dark green eyes that glimmered with wisdom, and was scarcely 27 years old. It said much about her ability that she'd managed to become Commander of the Templar Knights at such a young age. And indeed, the other division commanders both feared and respected her. Zebal frowned and turned away while Morcus shrugged his shoulders and shut his mouth.

“My apologies, Laus-dono.”

“No worries.”

Laus closed his eyes and casually replied to Lilith’s apology. Displeased with Laus’ irreverent tone, Commander of the Templar Knights’ second division, Strauss Malkyrion, raised an eyebrow. The man’s admiration for Lilith bordered on hero worship, so he didn’t take kindly to any hint of disrespect directed at her.

“Laus-dono. While you may be the Commander of the Holy Templar Knights, and the sole member of the church capable of using ancient magic, you still have no right to speak so casually to our commander. Do you realize how much work she’s had to do to reform the division you lost?”

“Leave him be. It is an honor to be granted the responsibility of reforming the Holy Templar Knights. Not once have I thought it a chore to handpick men to send to the illustrious Holy Templar Knights!”

Strauss looked away unhappily. Generally, when members of the Three Pillars of Radiance needed to be replaced, they were chosen from the pool of knights and Atavists who possessed special magic and were part of the church. Under normal circumstances, it was the commander of the respective knight order that was in charge of choosing who to replace lost members, while the captains of the respective templar knight divisions were required to find replacements for any members taken out of their ranks.

In other words, not only were the various commanders of the three pillars able to take whoever they wanted, it was up to the Templar Knights to figure out how to replace their lost members. However, Laus had found this unfair so he’d given Lilith the right to decide which members of her knights were promoted to the Holy Templar Knights. To Strauss, however, it seemed like Laus was just pushing bureaucracy he didn’t want to deal with onto Lilith.

“Commander Lilith.”

Laus closed his eyes and called out to her. Realizing he was angry, Lilith bowed her head.

“My apologies, once again, for the rudeness of my subordinates.”

“It’s fine. I’m grateful for your assistance in reorganizing my division. You have a discerning eye. All of your replacements are wonderful knights.”

“I see... That is good to hear.”

Lilith looked down as she said that. She had an enormous amount of respect for Laus, as he’d managed to make it to the Commander of the Holy Templar Knights while only being five years older than her. Details of Laus’ defeat had already circulated throughout the church, but Lilith wasn’t disappointed in him at all. She realized he’d been up against a particularly difficult opponent. But it was because she respected Laus so that she didn’t know how to respond when he thanked her.

“Laus, you shouldn’t be so taciturn.”

The man who’d spoken this time was a middle-aged man with long black hair and a monocle. He was the Commander of the Paragons of Light, Mulm Allridge. He addressed Laus casually, as they were longtime comrades who’d joined the church at roughly the same time.

“I’ll talk more when it’s necessary.”

“What I’m trying to tell you is that it’s important to say things that aren’t necessary as well.”

Mulm was quite sociable, the polar opposite of Laus. His rank was equal to Laus’ and at a glance, it seemed like the two of them were friends. In truth, Mulm believed they were. However, Laus had never confided his true feelings to Mulm.

“I’ll do my best.”

“You always say that. You’re a real handful, you know that?”

Mulm shrugged casually, and the sixty-year-old man sitting next to him opened his mouth.

“Indeed, your best may no longer be good enough, Lord Barn.”

“Lord Distark.”

Laus opened his eyes and looked at the old man. If he didn’t meet his gaze it would be seen as disrespectful, for Baran Distark was a cardinal. He wasn’t any

old cardinal either, but the leader of the four cardinals. His rank was equivalent to that of the prime minister's of other countries. He seemed like a docile old man who always happened to have a troubled smile on his face.

"Your most recent failure has had repercussions that have affected the prestige of the church."

The church had imposed an information blackout so no other countries knew of their failure. But the knight orders within the church were all aware of it. Many had been disillusioned when they learned that the very symbol of the church's might had been defeated. The past few weeks, Baran had been forced to run around and attempt to restore faith in the church."

"I have read the reports about these heretics but... you mustn't doubt the righteousness of our cause, Lord Barn. Your faith remains unshaken, correct?"

"Come now, Lord Distark. Now you're just being rude."

Mulm tried to mediate between Baran and Laus, but the cardinal didn't back down. A hint of anger entered his voice and he said, "If your faith was unwavering, then you should have been able to defeat any enemy, no matter how powerful. If our lord wills us to exact divine punishment, then such punishment must be possible to execute. Is that not so?"

If Laus agreed with Baran, it would mean admitting his faith wasn't strong enough. But if he disagreed, it would mean admitting that those who believed in Ehit were fallible. Moreover, it would mean that Ehit had indeed tasked Laus to do something that was impossible. No matter how he replied, Laus' position would only get worse. Behind Baran's docile exterior hid a cunning and crafty man who poisoned all he touched.

In the silence that followed, Laus said resolutely, "It's as you say."

"Oho! So you admit that despite being the Commander of the Holy Templar Knights, that your faith is lacking!"

Baran wasn't trying to disparage Laus. But he was furious that the Commander of the Holy Templar Knights, the pride and glory of the church, had smeared mud over the church's name. He didn't care how powerful Laus' adversaries had been. All that mattered was that he'd failed to carry out Ehit's

will. Regardless of his reasons, the mere fact that Laus had failed was tantamount to betrayal.

Unfortunately for Laus, Baran's opinion was shared by everyone else at the table. Even Lilith, someone who was aware of the difficulty Laus had faced, believed that it would be better to commit suicide after such a failure than return home alive. She wasn't disappointed in Laus, but she definitely would have taken her own life if the same thing had happened to her. It was for this reason that no one said anything to defend Laus, and just watched him quietly.

"It's as you say, Lord Distark."

"Wha!?"

Laus readily affirmed Baran's words. Publicly, in a room where all of the church's most influential members were gathered. In other words, Laus had just admitted to the most zealous followers of Ehit that his faith in Ehit was lacking. It was only natural that Baran and the others were shocked.

"I am lacking both in body and in mind. My strength and conviction are insufficient."

Laus ignored the shock on everyone's faces and continued talking. At a glance, it seemed as though he was ashamed of his own lack of faith. Because for the first time, everyone was seeing him display emotion. The same Laus Barn who was known for being taciturn and stoic. It was only natural that everyone would assume he was the one angriest at himself for his failures. Though in truth, Laus didn't think that at all.

The one person who hadn't spoken yet also chose to interpret Laus' vehemence as anger directed at himself. He looked at everyone and said, "Calm down, everyone. There is no reason to doubt Laus-dono's faith. Has he not shown time and time again through his actions that he is loyal to the church?"

His name was Kimaris Simtail. He was an old man in his late seventies, and his white hair was parted to one side. He was the leader of the seven archbishops of the church. Furthermore, he was the pope's right-hand man and took care of many of the church's affairs. Naturally, everyone respected him too much to argue.

“Laus-dono is the one most frustrated by his failure. It is for this reason that His Eminence, the Pope, has decided not to punish him.”

Kimaris narrowed his slit-like eyes, his expression inscrutable. There was no inflection in his voice, either. Cowed, the other members of the church nodded, while Laus lowered his head in gratitude.

“Now then, enough idle chatter. His Eminence has arrived.”

A second later the magnificent double doors at the back of the room opened with a heavy creak. Before the doors fully opened, Laus and the others got to their feet and knelt by their seats. After two masked priests finished opening the double doors, a white-haired old man strode into the room. He wore a long, white robe and a long cape of velvet trailed behind him. Two children reverently held up his sleeves so they didn’t touch the floor.

Behind him followed the Commander of the Paladins, Darion Gauze. He was the only member of the Three Radiant Pillars who hadn’t been present in the meeting room. He had short brown hair and average looks. In fact, he seemed so average it was easy to forget he was there.

Everyone watched him walk in silence, the only noise in the room the faint rustling of his clothes. Finally, the pope, Lucifer Slaine Elbard, took his seat. Darion remained standing behind Lucifer, a silent shadow hovering behind him.

“Let us begin.”

Laus and the others got to their feet and sat down. Baran started the meeting off. He gave Lucifer a full report on the political situation of each country, as well as how well their economics and agriculture were faring. He then made suggestions as to what policy the church should take with each country. After a brief Q&A session, Lucifer granted his approval for Baran’s policies. Next, Kimaris gave his report. The knights went after him, and for an hour everyone just exchanged information. Lucifer asked no questions this time, so silence fell after the last report concluded. Everyone was waiting to hear what Lucifer would say. The Pope’s next words surprised everyone, though:

“There is someone I would like to introduce to you all.”

Lucifer waved his hand, and the priests manning the doors silently opened

them. It was practically unheard of for the pope himself to introduce someone, but everyone grew even more surprised when they saw who walked into the room.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, everyone. I am Ainz Arsalk, and I have been granted the position of Oracle by His Eminence, the Pope. I look forward to working with all of you.”

Her clear voice rang out through the room. She looked absolutely stunning. Her silver hair, her silver eyes, and her features were all beautiful. In fact, she looked almost divine. The leading members of the theocracy were speechless. Even though they knew it was rude, they couldn’t find the words to respond to her introduction.

“Lord Ehit wished that she be the next Oracle.”

At Lucifer’s words, the others returned to their senses. Everyone, but Laus, introduced themselves to Ainz. It wasn’t because Laus was speechless that he didn’t say anything. In fact, Ainz’s arrival hadn’t stunned him like it had everyone else. He didn’t say anything because he was utterly terrified of this new Oracle.

“Laus.”

“Ah... My apologies. I am Laus Barn, Commander of the Holy Templar Knights.”

It was only when Lucifer called his name that Laus hurriedly introduced himself. It took everything he had to keep his voice from shaking. He was lucky that everyone else had been captivated by Ainz for so long. If they’d all introduced themselves right away, he wouldn’t have been able to compose himself in time. Beads of cold sweat dripped down his forehead.

“Everyone, I have come here to deliver a message to you.”

Ainz smiled at everyone, her tone charming. Zebal and Morcus had already fallen for her.

“When revolution comes to the world, Seven Children of God shall appear. Their ancient talents shall bring either ruin or rebirth. Prepare yourselves, for a storm is coming.”

“Is that—”

Kimaris’ slit-like eyes widened, something that almost never happened. Ainz nodded to him.

“This is an oracle from Lord Ehit, yes.”

The knights murmured in excitement to each other. They’d just been given a message from Ehit himself. For people who’d devoted their lives to serving him, there was no greater honor.

But a second later, Ainz’s expression grew grave and she said, “We have already identified five of the seven.”

One was, of course, in this room right now. Everyone turned to Laus. He was capable of using ancient magic, the magic of the gods. Ainz looked up to the heavens and continued her prophecy.

“One is the ruler of gravity. The former heir of the Reisen family and currently the leader of the heretic organization known as the Liberators— Miledi Reisen.”

Kimaris and the others frowned bitterly.

“Another is the maker of artifacts. He, too, is a Liberator— Oscar Orcus.”

Ainz took two sheets of paper out of her sleeve. They were pictures that had been taken on the western seas by someone who possessed the special magic Spirit Photography.

“Yet another is the master of space. He is also a Liberator— Naiz Gruen.”

One picture showed Miledi holding back the sea with her magic alone. Next to her, Oscar threw a barrage of enchanted swords at the Holy Templar Knights. Each sword was powerful enough to be a national treasure. A short distance away, Naiz opened portal after portal, teleporting ships to safety. The second picture showed—

“There is also the empress of restoration. Another Liberator— Meiru Melusine.”

Meiru restoring a rotted ship to its former glory. Ainz then turned to Laus.

“Lastly, we have the arbiter of souls— Laus Barn.”

Laus felt like someone had driven an icicle into his heart. Despite Ainz's overwhelming beauty, her emotionless eyes terrified Laus. Ainz turned away, a worried expression on her face. To Laus, she looked like a puppet desperately trying to mimic human emotions.

"As I am sure you all are aware, four of the five known Children of God are heretics."

"It is utterly deplorable that Lord Ehit's own children would rise up against him. Have those heretics lost their minds!?"

Baran slammed his fist against the table in anger.

"Even those with divine power can have their heart corrupted by evil. Lamentable as it is, it's not too late. We can still show them the Light of Lord Ehit."

I'm pretty sure if you tried to show Miledi the "Light of Lord Ehit," she'd just give you the middle finger... Laus thought absently to himself.

"More importantly, there remain two other Children of God."

"Oh, yes. We must show them the light of the church before their hearts are corrupted!"

Kimaris' voice burned with ardent fervor.

"Indeed we must," Ainz replied, and Kimaris blushed slightly.

"The location of one of them was revealed to me in an oracle."

Everyone cheered. Oddly enough though, the Pope had not said a word ever since he'd told Laus to introduce himself. Ainz had completely taken over the meeting, and the knights were getting more and more pumped up. On the other hand, Laus felt chilled to the bone.

"A child of god exists somewhere deep within the country inside the Pale Forest."

"D-Doesn't that mean... that child of god is a mong— Sorry, forgive my rudeness... a beastman?"

"That is the most likely possibility, yes."

The mood in the room suddenly turned dark. The church believed humans were the ultimate race. On the other hand, beastmen were seen as blasphemous, half-blood mongrels. There were, of course, beastmen who were a mix between spirits of the earth, forests and humans instead of a mix between beasts and humans, like dwarves and elves, but they didn't possess mana either. On top of that, they worshiped nature instead of Ehit, so the church viewed them as lesser beings as well.

"This is yet another trial Lord Ehit has imparted unto us," Ainz said.

"A trial..."

Kimaris turned Ainz's words over in his head, and she nodded at him.

"Among the ancient magics, there is one that allows a person to remake themselves."

"Oh, I understand now! We need to set an example to the other races. We have to show that Lord Ehit's grace can wipe away all impurity and return people to their proper forms!"

Followers of Ehit believed all races other than humans were impure. However, they had been granted an opportunity to wipe away that impurity. Kimaris and the others' goal was now to save that Child of God from their own impurity. Kimaris' passionate speech reignited the fire in the knights' hearts, and they were once again excited for their mission. It was then that Lucifer finally spoke.

"I have orders for you."

Everyone hurriedly straightened their backs and turned to the pope.

Once the room was silent, Lucifer declared, "Investigate the beastmen republic. Secure the Child of God, no matter what it takes, and bring her to this holy sanctuary."

Everyone responded "As you wish," simultaneously. However, the amount of emotion in those few words was staggering. Until now, the church's investigation of the Pale Forest had been pretty half-hearted. Exploring the forest was a difficult task, but now the church had a good reason to pour its best resources into it.

It's possible... the Republic will...

More cold sweat poured down Laus' forehead.

"This meeting is adjourned... Laus, follow me."

"Y-Yes, Your Eminence."

Kimaris and the others were surprised Lucifer had asked specifically for Laus, but right now their attention was focused on their new mission. They would save this Child of God and purify them of their heathenness. That was the only thing they were thinking about right now.

While everyone filed out of the room, Laus followed Lucifer to the double doors he'd come in from. Darion and the Oracle came as well. Beyond the doors was a marble hallway covered in luxurious carpet. As they walked down the hallway, a pair of priests came to attend Lucifer. Both of them stared at his feet, not daring to look up at him. Every single person, Laus included, showed no outward emotion.

Before, Laus wouldn't have questioned any of this, but now it all seemed so strange to him. Just as that thought ran through Laus' mind, the pope addressed him.

"It seems your peers have been quite critical of you."

"The fault lies entirely with me, Your Eminence."

Laus bowed his head in contrition.

"There is one other wielder of ancient magic in Igdol."

"Huh? I-I see."

The sudden change in topic caught Laus off-guard. Especially since he was expecting to be blamed for his failure.

"Somewhere out of our sight, events are being set in motion."

"You mean... the demon lord is preparing for war?"

Lucifer nodded slowly. Laus was even more confused now. According to Baran's reports, the current demon lord was focused on internal affairs and seemed to be showing no signs of war preparations.

How does he know about all of this? Laus turned to Ainz. But then Lucifer spoke again, bringing Laus' attention back onto him.

"War will come. For certain."

It seemed almost like Lucifer was speaking to himself.

"The demon lord cannot help but fight against humans. It is the reason for his existence."

Lucifer came to a halt and turned his gray eyes on Laus.

"The demon lord's beliefs will always drive him to war."

"....."

Laus had no idea how to respond to that. Nonplussed, all he could do was nod.

"Laus."

"Yes, Your Eminence?"

"The storm is nearly upon us. You are Lord Ehit's vanguard. I expect much from you."

In other words, this is my chance to redeem myself, huh? Laus was finally beginning to see where Lucifer was going with this. He knelt in front of the Pope and bowed his head.

"I am prepared to give my life and my soul for the cause."

Nodding, Lucifer resumed walking. Darion and the priests passed by Laus, who was still kneeling behind the pope. But when Ainz reached Laus, she stopped.

"This is our Lord's will. Do Him proud."

"Yes, ma'am. It is an honor to be trusted by Him."

For a moment, Laus hesitated, wondering if there was any deeper meaning to Ainz's words. But in the end, he bowed his head to her. Satisfied, Ainz walked off. Once everyone was gone, a wave of exhaustion washed over Laus. The Oracle Ehit had appointed was a soulless, empty puppet. She was the one Ehit had wanted to deliver His Will. Laus shivered unconsciously. He felt as though

he’d just been weighed down by heavy chains.

His work for the day done, Laus headed home. Not only did he have a high-ranking position in the church, but he was also a member of the noble Barn family. His house was a palatial mansion located within the residential district closest to the capital’s palace. When his carriage arrived at the gates to his house, the gatekeeper reverently opened the way for him.

“Laus-sama! Welcome home!”

“Yeah, thanks.”

The gatekeeper was a young man in his mid-twenties. He had smooth, ash-brown hair and he revered Laus. His name was Reinheit Ashe, and Laus had personally handpicked him for this job. Reinheit wasn’t particularly strong, and he didn’t possess any outstanding abilities.

However, he did have the special magic Pure Soul, which allowed him to resist any and all external influences on his mental state. Brainwashing magic and the like didn’t work on him. Like Laus, he hadn’t been brainwashed by the church.

Of course, that didn’t really change anything. The only reason Laus had picked Reinheit specifically for this job was because he’d felt safer with Reinheit at the gates than anyone else.

Naturally, Reinheit had no way of knowing any of this. All he knew was that the Commander of the Holy Templar Knights had handpicked him to be his gatekeeper. Reinheit had been born in the countryside, and the only reason he’d been invited to the capital was because the church had discovered his special magic. However, his abilities were considered the weakest among the Atavists. When he’d first left his hometown, his village had cheered him, but as time passed, he realized he had no hope of advancement. Before long, he started to worry that he might end up letting his village down. Which was why when Laus selected him to be his gatekeeper, he was overjoyed. Since then, he’d had nothing but respect for the Commander.

“Laus-sama, are you feeling unwell?”

“Hm? What makes you say that?”

“Oh, it’s just, you looked a little more haggard than usual.”

“I must really be losing my touch if you can see through me.”

“P-Perish the thought! You won’t be losing your touch for another thirty years at least! Please don’t joke about something like that!”

“Do you truly think so? Well, you’re right in that I’m a bit tired today. You have a good eye, Reinheit.”

“O-Oh, I just... Ehehe.”

Laus walked up to the entrance of his house, chatting with Reinheit. After seeing the fanatic zeal his fellow knights had shown toward Ainz, it was refreshing to see someone who wasn’t insane about Ehit.

“I’ll return to my post then, Laus-sama.”

“Mmm, keep up the good work.”

“Yes, sir.”

Reinheit saluted and turned back around. Laus watched him go for a few seconds, then opened the door. The moment he did—

“Welcome back, Dad!”

A young child rushed over to him. His glossy gray hair was parted to one side, and he had intelligent eyes. He was Sharm, Laus’ eight-year-old son.

“You’re still awake, Sharm?”

“I stayed up because Mom said you were coming home today!”

Smiling, Laus lifted his son up. Normally, his work kept him cooped up in the palace or the main cathedral, so he didn’t get to see Sharm often. That was probably why he was so susceptible to smiling whenever he did.

“Welcome home, Dear.”

“It’s good to see you, Ricolis.”

The woman who’d come out to greet him was Ricolis Barn, Laus’ wife. She had pale blonde hair that was braided at the back.

“Have you eaten?”

“Not yet.”

“Then let’s see what we can get for you.”

Ricolis gave a few instructions to a nearby servant, then walked gracefully over to the dining hall. Laus followed behind her, talking with Sharm all the while. As soon as Laus took his seat, food was brought to him. Sharm sat next to him and watched his father eat with a smile. Ricolis sat down as well and sipped on some tea while Laus ate.

At a glance, Laus’ family seemed perfectly happy. But then the last remaining resident of the house showed up to break the illusion that this was a perfect family.

“So you’re back, Laus.”

“Mother.”

The woman who’d entered the dining room was Debra Barn, Laus’ mother. Though she was 54, she looked much younger. Despite that she always seemed to have a stern look on her face. Debra sat down at the dining table and turned her stern gaze to Laus.

“The other day, one of the empire’s dukes offered his daughter’s hand in marriage. He said he didn’t mind if she was your second wife, either. I won’t allow you to refuse this time.”

Debra was asking Laus to take another wife right in front of Ricolis. This wasn’t because she hated Ricolis, though. In fact, even Ricolis said, “My, what wonderful news. You should absolutely accept.”

Debra nodded and added, “All people of Elbard belong to Lord Ehit. It would set a bad example for you to have only one wife. One of your duties is fathering as many children as possible, in the hopes of producing an heir capable of using Lord Ehit’s magic.”

“Your mother’s right, Dear. While I was lucky enough to give you three children... there is no harm in trying to propagate your divine bloodline further.”

Like everyone else in Elbard, Debra and Ricolis were devout followers of Ehit.

Meaning they were fanatics whose beliefs and values all revolved around him. Ricolis had mentioned this earlier, but Laus had two children aside from Sharm as well. Ricolis herself had been chosen for Laus by the Pope and his Cardinals. They'd wanted someone from a good family with a lot of magic potential for him. As a result, the other two children he'd had with Ricolis both possessed special magic and had a high aptitude for regular magic. They'd already been taken to the main cathedral to be brainwashed.

Both had been taken from Laus' house when they were five, and he hadn't seen them for years. Chances were the next time he saw them, they'd be pious followers of Ehit. Sharm also showed promise when it came to magic, and it was just a matter of time before the cathedral whisked him away too.

However, Ricolis wasn't sad about losing her children. In fact, she was overjoyed that her children had the opportunity to serve Ehit.

Debra felt the same way. Laus had had five siblings, and all of them had died serving in the Holy Templar Knights just like his father. Yet, Debra hadn't been sad when any of them had died. After all, she considered martyrdom an honor. When Laus' siblings had died, Debra had been happy that they could finally join Ehit's side.

This was why neither Ricolis nor Debra had any qualms about pushing Laus to have as many kids as humanly possible. The only person within this twisted theocracy that wanted to love a single woman, actually raise his kids, and grieve when his family died... was Laus.

"I'm busy with a mission. His Eminence personally tasked me to take care of something. I don't have time for marriage talks."

"That's what you always say."

Debra let out an exaggerated sigh. Ricolis looked troubled by Laus' statement as well. Laus pretended not to notice and continued silently eating his food.

Realizing that his parents were about to start fighting Sharm hurriedly said, "D-Dad, listen to this! The other day, I..."

Ricolis shot him a look that said "Not now" and Sharm trailed off. But then Laus said "Go on," and he brightened up again.

Laus had been surreptitiously casting spirit magic onto Sharm, just like he had with all of his other kids. Even if they were doomed to end up in the cathedral, he wanted to at least let them live free from the church's maddening influence for a little while. Spending time with his kids was both relaxing, because of how innocent and free they were, but also worrying because he knew they'd eventually be brainwashed.

Sharm started telling Laus about the history topics he'd studied today, and asked a bunch of questions regarding them. All of his questions were insightful, hitting on topics that his textbooks hadn't covered. While Laus was by no means a doting parent, he couldn't help but smile when he saw how wise his son already was. Laus gladly answered all of Sharm's questions, until one caused everyone present to freeze.

"Dad, all demons are evil heretics, right? But I learned in class that the current demon lord hasn't started any wars. Could it be that there are good demon lords out there?"

"Sharm! How could you even ask that!?"

Ricolis' gentle demeanor vanished and she rounded on Sharm. Seeing his mother's reaction, Sharm realized he asked something he shouldn't have and paled.

"What made you think that?"

Laus' heart started beating faster as he considered the prospect of a "good" demon lord.

"W-Well... if everyone in Elbard is good because the Pope is good... I was thinking that if the demon lord was good, all the demons might become good too... That way, you wouldn't have to go fight, Dad."

"....."

Sharm's words were full of kindness. The kindness of a son thinking of his father. But Laus could neither praise his son nor do anything to calm Ricolis' wrath. Because he'd suddenly realized something that made him extremely uneasy. *The Pope is like a living avatar of God... Ehit's Will given flesh.*

Laus thought back to what the Pope had told him. "The demon lord cannot

help but fight against humans. It is the reason for his existence."

The demon lord was like the demons' pope. Another living avatar of God. The demon lord was always the strongest demon of their generation, and they were venerated by demon society. As far as Laus knew, there was no one else the demons treated like that. Laus had always thought that the demons saw the demon lord as their god. But what if—

"The demon lord's beliefs will always drive him to war."

What if "the demon lord's beliefs" weren't his convictions or what he valued. But instead, they referred to the deity the demon lord revered.

"Ah!"

Laus felt as though someone had thrust a blade of ice into his neck. It was as if that soulless puppet was suddenly standing behind him.

"This is our Lord's Will."

"So that's what she meant..."

Laus slammed his fist against the table, spilling his wine glass. *This is a chance to redeem myself? I'm an utter moron!*

That hadn't been a second chance, but a warning. A warning that he needed to remain the church's vanguard, regardless of what truths he uncovered.

No, it's possible... that Ehit has already seen through everything. And he's just enjoying watching me squirm. What if the sinking of Andika and the leviathan's revival had both happened because Ehit had willed it? A red stain spread through the pure white tablecloth. To Laus, it looked like a horrible omen.

"D-Dad. I-I'm sorry... I..."

Returning to his senses, Laus realized Sharm was trembling in fear. Even Ricolis and Debra were so shocked by Laus' anger that they forgot to scold Sharm.

"Sorry, Sharm. I'm not mad at you."

"R-Really?"

Calming himself down, Laus patted Sharm on the head. Only then did Sharm

sigh in relief. After a brief pause, Laus decided to voice something he normally never would have.

Ignoring the fact that Ricolis and Debra were present, he said, “I think that’d be good too, Sharm.”

“Huh?”

“I... think it’d be nice. If there was a good demon lord.”

“Oh... Yeah. Yeah! It’s a good thing, right!?”

“Yeah.”

Laus watched his wife and mother glare at him in disapproval, but he ignored them and continued patting Sharm’s head. Impatience and unease stirred within him. But at the same time, Sharm had lit a small but steady fire within him.

Miledi felt as though she was drifting through a sea. Her consciousness was hazy, but she could distinctly make out a light in the distance. She had no idea if it was hot or cold where she was, but she felt compelled to head to the light. Swimming with all her might she made it to the light and—

“Mmm...” Opened her eyes.

She found herself looking at an aquamarine ceiling. The ceiling was tinged with orange, and she turned to see a lantern softly illuminating the room.

“You finally woke up. Thank goodness...”

A quiet voice filled with emotion reached her ears. Finding speech still too difficult, Miledi instead turned to the direction of the voice. The light of the lantern illuminated a familiar face: Oscar’s. Even through his glasses, Miledi could tell there were deep bags beneath his eyes. Tears of relief sprung to Oscar’s tired eyes when he saw Miledi was awake.

Miledi was still half-asleep though, and she wasn’t able to fully process what was going on. Despite that, a vague sense that she was safe washed over her. Basking in that feeling, Miledi stared silently at Oscar.

“Hm? Miledi?”

When Oscar called her name, the feeling multiplied exponentially. Oscar then reached out and touched her forehead. His hand felt soft and cool. Miledi closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation.

“You still have a fever.”

Oscar took his hand back. A small “Ah” escaped from Miledi’s mouth.

Don’t take your hand off me, you bastard!

“Do you feel up to drinking something?”

Oscar spoke gently and held out a thin metal rod. It was arched, with a hole in one end. Attached to the hollow end was a cup. When Oscar mentioned the word drink, Miledi suddenly realized how thirsty she was. She opened her lips, and Oscar brought the cup to her mouth. She sucked on it greedily, taking a few large gulps. As the liquid slid down her throat, her consciousness grew more clear. Whatever was in the cup was tart and delicious. Miledi realized it was more than just fruit juice when she noticed her energy returning to her. Oscar had mixed healing potions and vitamin drinks with it. Once she’d drunk her fill, Miledi turned back to the boy by her bedside.

“O-kun?”

Oscar nodded and said, “Yep, it’s me, O-kun.”

He smiled jokingly. Feeling oddly embarrassed, Miledi pouted at him. At the same time, her mind finally started processing where she was.

“What happened to me... and where are we...? I thought we... Oh yeah—”

Miledi struggled into a sitting position. That simple action caused her head to spin.

“Calm down. This is the Schnee clan’s hidden village. We’re safe.”

Oscar gently lowered Miledi back into bed. But Miledi tried to get back up again. Her fragmented memories told her that one of her comrades was in danger and that she needed to help him.

“A lot happened, but right now, you need to rest. You can’t do anything in that state.”

Oscar gently rebuked Miledi and forced her to lay down a second time. He then wiped her forehead and neck with a wet towel. Miledi grumbled, but she obediently let Oscar take care of her. *Fine, I'll stay in bed for a bit longer.*

"What happened to me? How long will it take before I'm healed?"

If she needed rest to get better, then she'd rest with all her might. But first, she wanted to at least know what was going on, or she wouldn't be able to sleep.

Sighing, Oscar answered, "You ended up catching a local disease."

"What kind of disease?"

The artifact Rasul had used debilitated its target. Judging by the fact that Oscar and Naiz had been unaffected, he could only affect one person at a time. Since the Reisens had always been the demons' most dangerous enemy, he'd chosen to use it on Miledi. The reason Miledi had started feeling unwell the moment they landed was because she'd actually caught a local disease. Rasul had taken advantage of that and strengthened the symptoms, which was why his artifact had been so potent.

"Apparently, after you get infected with this disease once, you build a resistance to it."

However, that only happened if the patient recovered naturally. If Meiru used restoration magic to cure Miledi, she'd still be susceptible to it. The Schnee had already given Miledi the required medicine, and she was on the path to recovery. So for now, it would be better if she rode the whole thing out naturally instead of using magic to accelerate the process.

"I see... Haaah, I can't believe I ended up getting sick now of all times... How pathetic."

Miledi pulled her blanket up to her chin and sunk into her pillow.

"Really this is our fault."

"Huh?"

Miledi shot Oscar a confused look and he smiled bitterly.

"Recently, you've gotten more relaxed, right? That's a good thing, but..."

Oscar dipped his towel in a bucket of water and wrung it out.

“For the past couple of years, you’ve had to push yourself as hard as possible to protect everyone and take care of the Liberators.”

Miledi had been fighting desperately this whole time. She hadn’t had time to get sick.

“But now you’ve got us.”

“.....”

Ever since meeting Oscar, though, Miledi had found comrades who were strong enough to protect her.

“So your body probably thought it was okay for you to rest for once.”

According to Oscar, that was why Miledi had gotten sick. After wringing out the towel, Oscar carefully placed it on Miledi’s forehead. As the moist towel cooled her feverish body, Miledi felt her consciousness grow dim.

Ah, so that’s what it was... She turned Oscar’s words over in her mind.

“Curse you, O-kun. I’ll make you pay for this.”

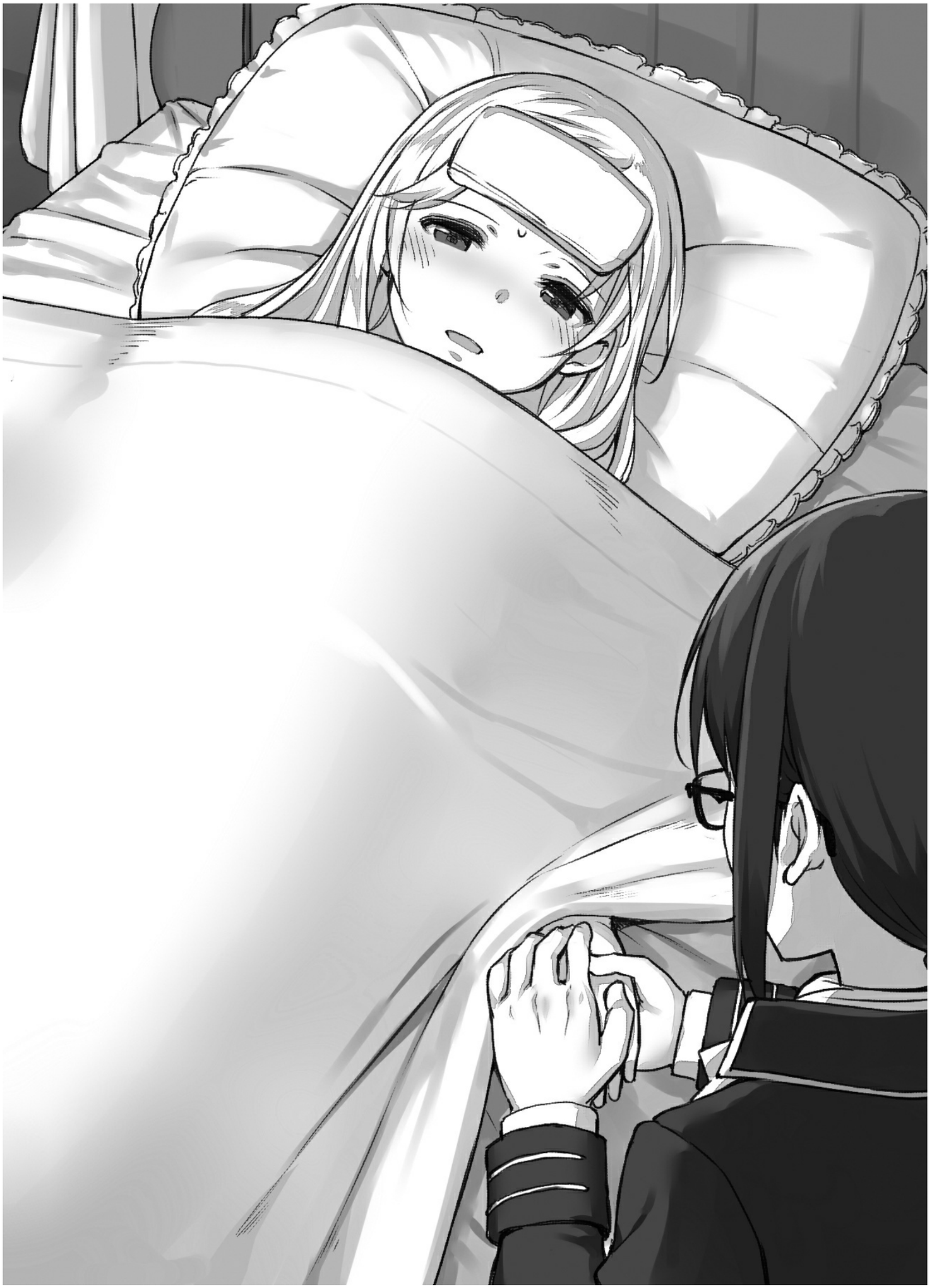
“I said you’ve got ‘us,’ so why are you singling me out?”

Miledi harrumphed and closed her eyes. After a few seconds, she said, “O-kun, are you still here?”

“Yeah, I’m right here. By your side.”

“Mmm...”

Miledi shifted underneath her blankets. Her hand poked out of the covers. Oscar gently grabbed it, thinking it was rare for her to be this spoiled around anyone but Meiru. The moment Oscar’s fingers wrapped around Miledi’s, she relaxed completely. In seconds, she was breathing deeply. Oscar sat by her side, watching her sleep. His smile was exceedingly gentle.



“Oh my, how adorable! Just watching them melts my heart!”

“Wawawah, Meiru-oneechan, we shouldn’t disturb them!”

“Fufu. Oh, Oscar. You really do love Miledi, don’t you?”

Oscar’s smile suddenly stiffened and he turned around.

“Why don’t you guys come in?”

Oscar did his best to keep his voice even, but it was extremely embarrassing knowing his family had seen that. *I know I’m tired, but how could I not notice they were there!?*

“Oh, sorry Oscar. I tried to stop them, but they wouldn’t listen.”

The first one to come in was Ruth. Following behind him was an apologetic Corrin, a grinning Meiru, and a smiling Moorin.

“Is Miledi-chan doing okay?”

“Yeah, looks like it.”

Meiru sighed in relief when she saw Miledi was sleeping peacefully. Ruth and the others looked relieved as well. It was understandable, considering how bad Miledi had looked when Oscar and Naiz had first brought her here. That was the first time Ruth and the others had seen Oscar look so worried too. Despite the fact that Oscar himself had been exhausted after their battle with Rasul, he’d spent two whole days nursing Miledi without rest. He hadn’t even spent much time talking to Ruth and the others, though it had been their first meeting in months. That was how bad Miledi’s condition had been.

According to the Schnee clan’s doctor, if she’d been treated even a day later, she might not have survived. And so, Oscar’s worry had been understandable.

“We should let Miledi rest. Let’s go somewhere else.”

Oscar tried to get to his feet, but was pulled back down. It seemed Miledi had no intention of letting go of his hand. Sighing, Oscar tried to pry Miledi’s fingers off of him.

“Mmm...”

But the moment he did, she started to groan. She absolutely wasn’t going to

give up on his hand.

“It’s fine. Let Miledi-chan have what she wants for now.”

Meiru waved her hand, and a thin membrane of water surrounded Miledi. It soundproofed the space around her and kept the air pure. Oscar turned around in his chair and smiled sadly at Meiru.

“Sorry. I didn’t even explain anything to you.”

“It’s fine. Naiz-kun told me most of what happened. It sounds like you guys had it rough.”

“Yeah... What’s Naiz doing now?”

“He’s been caught.”

Oscar didn’t need to ask who he’d been caught by. Susha and Yunfa had been waiting ages for Naiz’s return, but when he’d finally come back, he’d been too busy looking after Miledi to spend time with them. So it was hardly surprising that they’d managed to kidnap him now that Miledi’s condition had stabilized. Just then, a pale-blue blob of sticky liquid appeared on Meiru’s shoulder.

“Come to think of it, I never thanked you either, did I?”

The slime bowed its head as if to say “think nothing of it.” The slime was, of course, Batlam, who was supposed to have been burned to death by one of Rasul’s generals. Oscar thought back to when he’d first discovered Batlam was still alive.

After Naiz had teleported everyone out of the castle, the two had stopped at a nearby spring for a short rest. Oscar especially had needed to heal his wounds before they went any further.

He’d cast Benison Aura on himself and had been wondering where he’d find someone who could treat Miledi, or preferably find some way to rendezvous with Meiru, when Batlam had suddenly popped up on his shoulder. It seemed the part of Batlam that Lestina had burned had actually been a clone that had mimicked the main body. In truth, the part of Batlam that contained his mana crystal had been a tiny piece of slime that had hidden inside Oscar’s clothes.

It seemed the demon lord had done something to prevent Vandre from

contacting Batlam, but the diligent butler-slime had nevertheless known what it needed to do. It guided Oscar and Naiz to the Schnee village. However, the two of them hadn't been able to reach it immediately. The demon lord had possessed an artifact that allowed him to broadcast messages to all his nobles instantly, and there were wanted posters for Oscar, Naiz, and Miledi everywhere.

Since every demon was more or less capable of combat, every village had gone on high alert and posted heavy guards. Even if Oscar and Naiz had attempted to sneak in with disguises, they would probably have been reported just because they were people the villagers didn't recognize. Besides, all cities and towns required identification to enter. As a result, Oscar and Naiz had been unable to rest at inns, and they'd been forced to take circuitous routes through forests and mountains. On top of that, they had to constantly stay on high alert.

The demons' coordination and unity had been terrifying. For the first time, Oscar had realized how it was they'd managed to control almost an entire continent despite being so few in number. Even the normal villagers were accomplished mages. And all of them wanted the reward for capturing the thieves who'd snuck into the demon lord's castle. No matter where Oscar and Naiz went, the demon army's patrols always caught up to them within a few hours. Eventually, they even managed to figure out the range of Naiz's teleportation abilities and posted ambushes in the locations he brought the party to.

All the while, Miledi's condition continued to worsen. Realizing that time was of the essence, Oscar had proposed a risky plan to Naiz. He would take care of all the fighting, and Naiz would focus on using his mana only to teleport the party. Oscar had been forced to fight continually, all on his own. Knowing that if Naiz became too exhausted to teleport, Miledi would be doomed, so he'd let Naiz rest while he kept a lookout. Despite being utterly exhausted, Oscar had continued to valiantly fight alone, knowing that defeat would spell death.

They continued like that for three whole days. By that time, Oscar looked more like a beast than a man. He'd had to fight continually, protecting Naiz and Miledi from any threat that came at them. However, time was running out. Miledi was barely hanging onto life by a thread. Oscar became so desperate

that he infiltrated a village and threatened a demon doctor into treating Miledi. Of course, the doctor just gave her useless medicine and secretly tipped the demon army off, so Oscar and the rest had to flee again.

It was then that Naiz finally ran out of mana, and the party was forced to flee into a nearby forest. While they tried to squeeze in as much rest as possible, they spotted a cloud of dust coming toward them. Realizing it was over, Oscar and Naiz prepared themselves for one final stand. It was then that Meiru and the Schnee clansmen swooped down on wyverns and rescued the party.

After all their trials and tribulations, they'd made it to the rendezvous point that Batlam had set up. They'd just barely made it in time, too. Once Oscar and the others were secured, the Schnee took them far to the east.

Meiru had paled when she saw how serious Miledi's condition was, and she'd quickly cast restoration magic on her. Miledi's fever had faded and color returned to her face, but only momentarily. Before long, her symptoms returned. Oscar and Meiru had both started to panic, but then one of the Schnee knights had told them he recognized the disease and that it was possible to treat it back at their village. Reassured, but still impatient, Oscar and Meiru finally reached the Obsidian Tundra where the Schnee lived. Oscar had bundled Miledi up in his coat and followed the Schnee deep into the coldest ravine he'd ever visited. Inside the ravine had been a series of frost caverns, which was where the Schnee village was.

The moment they'd arrived, Ruth and the others had come running over. But their smiles had frozen and they'd stopped in their tracks when they'd seen the expression on Oscar's face. He'd run right past them, yelling, "We need a doctor! Miledi's—"

"Oscar-kun? Are you okay?"

"Hey, Oscar. Don't you think you should rest too?"

"Yeah, Onii-chan. You look pale."

Oscar snapped out of his reminiscing. It wasn't like him to space out like this. Once Miledi had woken up, he'd been so relieved that the adrenaline left his system and his exhaustion hit him all at once. But while he knew he needed rest, Oscar felt like it was his duty as an older brother to spend at least some

time with his siblings. Oscar reached out with his free hand and ruffled Ruth's hair.

"I saw what happened during your guys' escape from the Reisen headquarters. You did good, Ruth. You were really cool. I knew I could count on you to take care of everyone."

"Wh-Why're you bringing that up all of a sudden..."

Ruth looked down, embarrassed. Oscar then turned to Corrin and patted her head as well.

"You did good too, Corrin. Not just during the escape, either. I know from your letters that you've always been looking after Dylan and the others. Thanks."

"Ehehe..."

Corrin grinned and fidgeted bashfully. Moorin smiled and hugged all of her children.

"You've been working hard too, Oscar. You should be proud of yourself."

"Thanks, Mom."

Oscar relaxed inside his family's warm embrace. But then he noticed that Meiru was looking apologetically at him. After spending a few seconds trying to find the right words she said, "I'm sorry..."

Oscar already knew what she was apologizing for. He smiled awkwardly at her and shook his head. That simple action made his head spin.

Moorin looked down at him and said, "Oscar, get some rest."

It had been nearly five days since Oscar had gotten any decent sleep. He was at his physical and mental limits.

"Yeah, I will... If Miledi wakes up to find me collapsed next to her, she'll... Man, I don't even want to think about how much she'll tease me."

Smiling wryly to himself, Oscar once again tried to disentangle his hand from Miledi's.

"Good. The others want to talk to you too, but I'll let them know you're

sleeping.”

“Thanks, Meiru.”

Oscar tried to free his hand as he talked, but Miledi simply refused to let go. She also started grumbling again if he pulled too hard. Meiru smirked at him.

“You can’t leave her, Oscar-kun!”

“No, but...”

“Here you go, Onii-chan!”

“Corrin?”

Smiling, Corrin handed Oscar a blanket. It was as if she’d brought it with her because she’d known this would happen.

“Just sleep here with Miledi-oneechan.”

While Oscar realized Corrin’s suggestion was pure and innocent, he couldn’t take it that way.

“No, I mean...” he muttered, trying to refuse. While he wouldn’t be sharing a bed with Miledi, sleeping next to her when they weren’t camping out was a bit improper. At the same time, though, Oscar didn’t know how to explain that to Corrin without corrupting her.

“Oh my, Oscar-kun. Are you worried you might do something unspeakable to her while she’s ill and can’t move?”

“Absolutely not!”

Corrin looked timidly up at Oscar and asked, “Onii-chan, do you do unspeakable things whenever you’re alone with Miledi-oneechan?”

“I don’t!”

“Then here, take this blanket. You need to cover yourself when you sleep.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks.”

Meiru gave Corrin a look that seemed to say “Good job!” Feeling trapped, Oscar turned to Ruth, his only ally... only to find that Ruth wasn’t there. He’d already left.

You've grown wise, Ruth... Oscar thought absently to himself. Meanwhile, Meiru and the others beat a hasty retreat as well.

Oscar looked down at Miledi. Her face was still a little red from the fever, but she was sleeping peacefully. Feeling like a moron for being so worried about spending time alone in a room with Miledi, Oscar adjusted his glasses.

"Guess I'll sleep."

Oscar wrapped the blanket around himself, leaned back against his chair, and closed his eyes. In seconds, he was asleep.

Miledi opened her eyes again, feeling completely refreshed. She blinked a few times, then muttered, "Huh."

She sat up and tried to stretch, but then realized one of her hands was connected to something.

"Oh..."

Looking down, she saw Oscar sleeping peacefully at the side of her bed. His face was next to her legs, and his hand was holding hers. A second later, she remembered what she'd done when she last woke up.

"N-Nowaaaaaaaaah!"

Miledi writhed in embarrassment. *I can't believe I asked him to hold my hand! What am I, five!?*

She cradled her head with her free hand. A second later, she blushed as she realized the only reason Oscar was sleeping here was because she hadn't let him go. Gently, she tried to pry her hand free. But this time, it was Oscar who refused to let go.

"O-O-kun, can you please let go?"

Her request was surprisingly polite, but unfortunately for Miledi, Oscar was fast asleep. Naturally, her voice didn't reach him. At a loss for what to do, Miledi groaned to herself. She calmed down a little when she realized Oscar was deep asleep, though. She had no idea how much time had passed since they left the demon lord's castle, or what had happened in that time. But

judging by the fact that Oscar was sleeping like the dead, she knew that he'd protected her with his life. Before she knew it, she was caressing Oscar's hair.

"Thanks, O-kun," she whispered quietly.

Just then—

"My, how adorable."

"Wow... Miledi-oneechan's so cute..."

"Miledi-san's so pure."

"Sue-nee. This is what you need to use your powers for! You have to write a story about Miledi-oneesan!"

Miledi turned toward the door, her neck creaking like a rusty hinge. There she saw Meiru, Corrin, Susha, and Yunfa all poking their heads into the doorway.

"Nuwaaaaaah!?"

She leaped out of bed, dragging Oscar up with her.

"Wh-What is it!? Are we under attack!?"

The past three days had been so harsh that Oscar had trained himself to get up at a moment's notice. He quickly put on his glasses and drew his Black Umbrella.

"You're the one doing the attacking here, O-kun! I can't believe you'd sneak into my room while I was asleep! You lecherous beast!"

Miledi hugged herself in an exaggerated manner, acting like her usual annoying self. Seeing that Oscar didn't bother to argue but instead turned to Meiru. Meiru met his gaze. The two of them nodded to each other.

"She's cured."

"Indeed she is."

Miledi turned to them and complained, "Look, I know I'm annoying, but could you at least not measure my health by how annoying I am?"

Oscar opened his mouth to argue but before he could— "Wait, did you hear that annoying tone!? Listen up everyone, Miledi's cured!"

“You’re right! Our leader’s only ever that annoying when she’s in good spirits!”

“Damn, it’s been ages since I’ve heard her be this annoying!”

“I see she’s amping up her annoyingness to eleven right away!”

Footsteps pounded down the hallway.

“They do respect me... right?” Miledi muttered, tears in her eyes. The door swung open with a bang and Marshal, Mikaela, Shushu, Eve, and Tony all poured into the room.

“Yo, Miledi! Looks like we both made it out alive!”

“Thanks to Meiru-san we didn’t lose anyone except Forest and James.”

“I heard you guys saved Tim too. Apparently Tart didn’t make it, but... thank god you got to him in time, Leader.”

“The hell’s wrong with you, Miledi!? How’d you lose to some shitty demon lord!? I bet it’s because you’re too busy swooning over this guy here, isn’t it?”

Marshal, Mikaela, Tony, and Shushu all congratulated Miledi on her recovery in their own way. Unwilling to wait their turn, everyone else started talking to Miledi all at once. While she realized they’d all been worried about her, Miledi couldn’t deal with this many people all at once. It seemed Miledi was fated to be paraded around like an idol no matter what branch she visited. Just then, Miledi’s savior appeared.

“Stop crowding around her, you morons! She’s still sick!”

A tall, stern-looking woman with a sharp voice walked into the room. Her black and red hair swayed back and forth behind her as she walked up to Miledi.

“Y-You’re...”

“We meet again, Lady Reisen.”

She was the same warrior Miledi and the others had met at the cave, Margaretta. Standing next to her was an old woman with a bent back. She had the same dark skin as Margaretta, but her hair was pale blonde. The old woman

wordlessly walked up to Miledi, then checked her pulse, her eyes, and her breathing, then smiled and nodded.

“It looks like you’ve made a full recovery. If our doctor says you’re fine, then you’re definitely fine,” Margaretta said.

“Oh, uhh... Umm, I’m Miledi Reisen. Thank you very much for saving me.”

Miledi bowed her head to the lady. Oscar and the others turned curiously to the old woman. The old woman nodded again, then turned around and walked off.

“Linnel lost her voice long ago. She wasn’t being rude, she just can’t talk.”

“Yeah, but I could tell she was still speaking to me. Her eyes were saying ‘You’re welcome. Take care now.’”

“I see...”

Margaretta was surprised Miledi could so easily read Linnel’s thoughts when she wasn’t even part of the Schnee clan. Her frown, which looked so much like Vandre’s, vanished and she smiled at Miledi.

“There’s a lot we need to discuss and I’m sure you want to talk to your leader as well, but for now you all need to get out of the room.”

Marshal and the others opened their mouths to protest but Margaretta cut them off.

“What, are you guys going to stay and watch while she gets dressed?”

When she said that, everyone stiffened. Indeed Miledi had just gotten up so her hair was still a mess and sweat drenched her clothes. In fact, the room even smelled faintly of sweat.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaah! Stop sniffing you guys! Get out!”

Marshal and the others started sniffing the air, so Miledi used gravity magic to throw them all out.

Twenty minutes later, Miledi had bathed and dressed so she went to the large living room where everyone was gathered. The first thing she said upon

entering was, “Huh!? Why does Meru-nee look so fluffy!?”

She stared at Meiru, shocked. There were probably far more important things that she should have said first, but Miledi couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Meiru, the same girl who’d insisted on wearing her swimsuit wherever she went, was covered from head to toe in a thick fur coat.



“After coming here I’ve discovered that... I’m not very good with the cold.”

“Even though you’re always wearing a swimsuit!?”

“The cold in this tundra penetrates even my temperature-regulating water barrier.”

It seemed until now Meiru had used water magic to stave off the cold so she could continue wearing her swimsuit. At first, she’d refused the coat Margaretta had offered her when they’d arrived at the Obsidian Tundra, but soon enough, Meiru had realized the tundra’s cold was more than she could handle. Grudgingly, she’d eventually given in and taken the coat. The caverns themselves were inhabited by bug monsters that generated heat, so the village was a bit warmer than the surrounding tundra. Houses were especially warm since they had heating. But because Meiru had always regulated the temperature around her with water magic, she was exceedingly weak to the cold. As a result, she only felt comfortable taking the coat off indoors. The room they were currently in was also indoors, but it was less heated than the others. Personally, Miledi wanted to enjoy staring at Meiru for a while longer, but she realized the meeting was waiting on her. She cleared her throat and looked at each and every one of her comrades. Then she beamed and declared, “Alright everyone, good work making it out alive. I knew I could trust you guys to survive!”

Marshal and the others grinned at her. A second later Miledi’s smile vanished and she solemnly closed her eyes.

“Now let’s have a moment of silence for James Sont and Forest Dyron, who fought to the bitter end to protect us.”

The room fell silent and the Liberators closed their eyes. Everyone then opened their eyes at once, in perfect sync. Miledi once again smiled softly at her comrades. It was then that she noticed something.

“Hm? Where’s Dylan-kun and Katy-chan? They’re... not sick, are they?”

At Miledi’s question, Marshal and the others turned to Oscar. Meiru shrunk back, hiding her face in the depths of her hood.

“Huh? Hold on. What’s going on, guys?”

Meru-nee's got restoration magic, right? She should have been able to fix Dylan-kun and the others, right? Miledi paled as she looked at everyone's expressions.

"Miledi, it'll be faster if you see for yourself. Follow me."

Oscar got up and opened a nearby door. Somewhat relieved by the fact that Oscar was acting calm, Miledi nodded and followed after him. The room Oscar took her to appeared to be the sickroom. There were ten beds lined up against the walls, and all of the people who'd been transformed into soldiers by the church were lying on them. All of them were completely still. Their eyes were open, but seeing nothing. Miledi gasped. In the two beds at the very end were two people who were sitting up.

"Dylan-kun! Katy-chan!"

Miledi recognized them instantly. Because Corrin had taken care of them every day, their hair was made and their clothes were clean. They looked no different than they had when Miledi had first seen them. On top of that, their eyes were open. When they heard their names the two children stirred and turned toward Miledi. But the moment Miledi looked into their eyes she realized something was wrong.

"Dylan-kun? Katy-chan? It's me, Miledi. Don't you recognize me?"

Their eyes weren't empty, and they reacted to voices, but they were nothing like the lively children they'd been.

"Meiru's restoration magic wasn't enough."

"Huh?"

Miledi turned to Oscar in disbelief. Oscar just stood there quietly. Meiru was behind him, looking crestfallen.

"You see, Miledi-chan, my restoration magic did work. Their bodies went back to the same way they were before. But the part my restoration magic couldn't cure was..."

There was one domain where restoration magic was powerless. The soul. The Artifact the bishop had used to transplant the souls of ancient warriors into

Dylan and Katy's bodies—Ehit's Eyes—directly interfered with a person's soul.

"I could try to force it, but it would be like trying to filter ink out of water while blindfolded. Even for someone of my talents, it'd be risky."

In the worst case, Meiru's magic could put such a huge burden on Dylan and Katy's souls that they'd become empty husks.

"I... see."

Miledi looked down sadly. She knew how badly Oscar had wanted to cure his siblings. Meiru was just as distraught over the fact that she hadn't been able to live up to everyone's expectations. Oscar smiled at the two of them.

"Don't look so down, you two. If anything, we should be glad since we have proof now."

"Proof of what?"

"Well, now we know for a fact that Dylan and Katy's souls are still in there somewhere."

Had their souls been completely overwritten by Ehit's Eyes, they wouldn't react when someone called their names. On top of that, they even listened to instructions. While they didn't seem to exhibit any will of their own, they could at least feed themselves if told to.

"According to Corrin, after they woke up, Katy refused to eat any food that had bitel beans in them."

Oscar's smile grew softer. Bitel beans were nutritious, but they were also bitter, and Katy hated the taste. The fact that Katy's food preferences were the same as before proved that her soul was still alive somewhere inside her.

"Most importantly, though..." Oscar grabbed Dylan's hand. Surprisingly, Dylan squeezed it back. Likewise, when Ruth, Corrin, or Moorin held their hands they held them back as well. It was like Dylan and Katy were trying to tell everyone they were still here.

"I think— No, I'm certain those two are fighting."

"Fighting what?"

“The souls of the soldiers stuck inside them. In fact, they might have been fighting long before Meiru used her restoration magic on them.”

“I see... Yeah, you’re probably right. They’re your siblings after all, O-kun.”

“Yeah...”

Oscar turned to Meiru.

“Thank you, Meiru. Because of you, they’re well enough to open their eyes again. I’m grateful, truly.”

“Oscar-kun...”

Ruth and the others thanked her as well, and Meiru smiled awkwardly. But then she realized getting depressed when everyone was genuinely thanking her would be rude to Oscar and the others.

“Sorry, Oscar-kun. But your kind smiles won’t be enough to make me fall for you. I’m not as easy as Miledi-chan.”

“Hey, I’m not easy either!”

Miledi hotly protested against Meiru. But the other Liberators who’d been watching near the entrance all said things like, “Actually she might be kinda easy?” and “That’s one of her good points though,” and “I’d say she’s more dumb than easy.” Miledi shot her comrades a glare.

“Naiz-sama. Sue-nee and I are easy!”

“B-But only for you, Naiz-sama!”

“Shut up, you two.”

Naiz gave Miledi a pleading look, begging her for salvation, but she turned away and pretended not to see anything. His noble sacrifice helped brighten the atmosphere though, and Oscar turned to Meiru with an exasperated look on his face.

“Besides, I made some Artifacts enchanted with restoration magic. So we’ll be able to keep using Meiru’s magic on them regularly even when she’s not here.”

It was then that Miledi noticed Dylan and Katy, as well as the other patients, were all wearing necklaces. The necklaces had coins dangling from them. While

they weren't exceptionally powerful Artifacts, they continually cast a minute amount of restoration magic on the wearer. It was possible the constant application of restoration magic would lead to Dylan and Katy eventually making a full recovery.

"Oh, and we have one other hope too."

Oscar adjusted his glasses. They flashed momentarily, though that shouldn't have been possible considering where the room's light source was. Miledi instantly guessed what he was getting at.

"You're talking about the Commander of the Holy Templar Knights, Laus Barn, right?"

"He could use magic that affected the soul directly."

"Next time we see him... I won't let him escape."

Oscar's glasses flashed again. He was definitely making it happen on purpose. Either way, it seemed Oscar had locked on to Laus. Seeing that the conversation had reached a satisfying breakpoint, Margaretta walked up and said, "Are we done here? I'd like to speak with all of you."

Her serious expression caused everyone to tense up.

"Yeah. There's a lot I need to talk to you about too."

Miledi's joking tone disappeared, and she put on her leader face. Margaretta led the group to a large meeting room. The Liberators naturally congregated to one side while the members of the Schnee clan ended up on the other. The two sides sat down on the carpeted floor. The carpet was made from the wool of a monster that was very good at retaining heat, so the floor was just as warm and comfortable as Miledi's bed had been.

There were around thirty members of the Schnee clan in total. Some were old, some were children, but all of them bore traits from various races, not just demons. There was also one silver wolf that looked identical to the ones that had saved Ruth and the others standing in the corner.

"Allow me to formally introduce myself. My name is Margaretta Schnee. I'm the captain of the Schnee clans warriors and acting chief."

“I’m Miledi Reisen, leader of the Liberators.”

Margaretta nodded and brought Miledi up to speed on what had happened while she was asleep. Oscar provided details as well, telling Miledi what had happened during their journey here.

“Now then, I’m not very good with pleasantries. We don’t have the time for them anyway.”

Once the status report was done, Margaretta moved right into the main topic.

“You’ve probably noticed, but most of us were once test subjects. We were saved by Van-sama and our clan name comes from his mother, Sasrika-sama’s, clan name. In other words, though we are all one clan, none of us share the same blood. Margaretta looked into Miledi’s eyes, then bowed her head.

“Please, O leader of the Liberators. Aid us in rescuing our brethren and our clan chief. And if at all possible, please take us under your protection.”

Margaretta bowed so low that her head was scraping against the ground. The other Schnee clan members all bowed to Miledi as well. This was the only option left for them. They couldn’t afford to abandon Vandre or the other test subjects, and if they did succeed in rescuing them they’d be hunted by the demon lord for the rest of their days. They were too valuable for him to let go.

By themselves, they lacked the strength to fight Rasul. No other country would take them in either. After all, harboring the Schnee clan meant making an enemy out of the demon lord. And naturally, no human country would take them. Either they waited to be executed, or they acted now.

And right now the only allies they could turn to was the organization that opposed the world. While the Liberators had been defeated by Rasul once before, they still had four ancient magic users. Most importantly though, the Liberators were trustworthy. Of course, Margaretta knew she was clutching at straws. She was asking for far more than was reasonable. And yet, Miledi just smiled and said, “Sure, we can do that!”

Margaretta was floored. *She’s agreeing just like that?* She looked completely flabbergasted.

“See, what’d I tell you?” Marshal turned to Margaretta. While Miledi had

been asleep, Marshal had talked to Margaretta as the Liberators' representative and told her, "Our leader'll agree to your request for sure."

"B-But you saw firsthand just how powerful the demon lord is! And we even... used your comrades as hostages..."

"Van-chan already told us all about that. It's fine."

Miledi knelt down in front of Margaretta and lifted the demon's face up.

"We're Liberators. It's our mission to liberate people from the shackles of an unfair and tragic fate."

But there was something even more important than that.

"Besides, Van-chan's already one of our comrades."

Miledi wouldn't let him escape her now. Even if Vandre and the Schnee clan turned their backs on her, she'd still save them. And she'd keep hounding them until they became her comrades. Just like she had with Oscar and the others. There was no way Miledi was going to just slink away after the demon lord had trounced her and she'd been saved by the guy she'd come to save. Her regret at being unable to save Vandre was still burning as fiercely as ever.

"I'd be happy if you volunteered to fight with us. But you don't have to fight if you don't want to. I... No, we'll protect you all the same."

There was no hesitation in Miledi's voice. Oscar and the others all nodded resolutely as well. Margaretta and the others stared at the Liberators in awe. Miledi took a step back and smiled fearlessly at the Schnee clan. She gave them all a big thumbs-up and said, "Sure maybe we made a tiiiiiny miscalculation last time! But this time we'll prove to you guys that this demon lord's no match for us! We'll beat the shit out of him and save everyone! This beautiful genius here is the strongest mage in the world!"

Margaretta and the others squinted as they looked up at Miledi. She was as bright as the sun. A second later, Margaretta lowered her head again. It was hard to tell if she was grateful, or feeling something else entirely.

"Y-You don't have to bow to me!" Miledi said hurriedly and tried to lift Margaretta's head up.

“We’re sorry about her. Our leader always goes on about how she wants people to respect her and stuff, but when people actually show her respect, she starts freaking out. So you can just treat her like dirt, it’ll be fine.”

“Hey, Oscar. You trying to pick a fight?”

Miledi glared at Oscar. Seeing that, Margaretta and the others exchanged glances, then smiled wryly at each other. All of the Liberators had similar expressions as well. As everyone bonded over their shared understanding of Miledi, she loudly cleared her throat.

“There’s one thing I need you to tell me though.”

“What is it? If it’s something we can answer, we will.”

There were actually a number of things Miledi wanted to know but she started by asking the thing that was bothering her the most.

“Van-chan said that he hadn’t given up on his brother. What did that mean?”

“I... see. So you still believe in Rasul-sama, Van-sama...”

Margaretta looked momentarily surprised, but then she nodded in understanding.

“What exactly happened between those two?”

“It’s a long story.”

With that forewarning, Margaretta launched into the story of Vandre’s birth. In truth, it was Rasul and Vandre’s father—the previous demon lord—who’d begun experimenting on demons in an attempt to create soldiers capable of opposing the church. No one knew what had given the demon lord that idea. Naturally, the previous demon lord had quickly run into multiple roadblocks, but he fervently continued his research like a man possessed. But even as the sacrifices mounted, he was unable to make any progress. But then, one day something changed. He managed to capture a dragonman. Specifically, the ice dragon who was Vandre’s mother, Sasrika Schnee. Dragonmen were even rarer than vampires, so it was only natural that Sasrika ended up catching his fancy. Eventually, a child was born between him and her.

“And that child was Van-sama.”

“I see. So Van-chan could transform because his mom was a dragonwoman.”

“I heard the story from Naiz-dono, but I never imagined he would really be able to transform.”

Margaretta looked both sad and happy at the same time. Miledi gave her a puzzled look. Margaretta continued her story, as the answer to Miledi’s question lay there.

“The previous demon lord’s experiments started slowing down as he realized his attempts were getting nowhere. Though from the start it would have been impossible for him. Since he was trying to make mixed-race demons not through breeding, but by transplanting the magic and traits of various races onto others.”

It was common knowledge that mixed-race children exhibited traits from both of their parents. But the previous demon lord hadn’t wanted to wait for children to grow up. He’d wanted a way to create battle-ready soldiers quickly. Which was why when Vandre had discovered his metamorphosis magic at the age of six, the previous demon lord saw his chance.

“Van-sama was born within the dungeons along with us, and that was where he spent his early years. But once his magic appeared, he was allowed to live in the palace. Of course, he wasn’t treated like royalty. Because of his mixed blood he was shunned and treated more like a servant than anything. However, it was still a better life than living in the dungeons.”

At the same time, the previous demon lord canceled his human experiments and started focusing on building a massive monster army. Vandre had begged his father to free his mother as well as Margaretta and the other test subjects, and let them live normal lives. That had been his condition for creating the monster army the previous demon lord had wanted. The previous demon lord agreed, believing it would be easier to control Vandre that way.

“Thanks to Van-sama’s benevolence, we were granted a temporary reprieve.”

Sasrika and the test subjects were given a mansion a short distance from the palace, which was where Vandre lived as well. To the public, it seemed like everyone was Vandre’s servants, but in truth, they lived like a family. However, those peaceful times didn’t last. Once Vandre had built up a sufficiently large

army for the previous demon lord, he launched an invasion against the humans. After a long and bloody struggle, the war had ended in a stalemate. While the monster army had been effective, it hadn't been enough. Furthermore, it had been wiped out in the conflict. That had led the previous demon lord to conclude that Vandre alone wasn't enough. Growing greedy, he broke his promise to Vandre and raped Sasrika, hoping to produce more children capable of using metamorphosis magic.

"When Van-sama learned what had happened, he went berserk."

"Makes sense..."

The amount of pressure Vandre had been constantly under, coupled with the fact that his mother had just been assaulted, was just too much for him.

"It was then that he awoke to his other power... draconification."

Vandre completely lost himself in anger and went on a horrific rampage. Because he was still young, he lacked the power to actually defeat the previous demon lord. However, Vandre injured him gravely enough that the old demon lord decided to execute Vandre for this affront.

"Huh? But... Oh, so that means..."

Obviously, Vandre was still alive. Meaning someone else had been punished for his crime. When she realized the truth, Miledi looked down forlornly. Oscar and Naiz bit their lips worriedly. Finding their sympathy endearing, Margaretta smiled sadly.

"It's as you've guessed. Sasrika-sama transformed in order to protect Van-sama. Ironically, that was what it took to bring Van-sama back to his senses."

Though Sasrika had had multiple seals placed on her, she'd given her life to transform and protect her son. Bleeding from all over, she'd nevertheless squeezed out the last of her strength to fire her breath at the previous demon lord. Margaretta and the others had been present during that fight, and the scene of Sasrika protecting Vandre was still seared into all of their memories.

"Mom! Mooom! It's all my fault!"

After his mom had died, Vandre had held her and cried for hours. Ever since

then, Vandre had been unable to transform. Any time he tried he would become dizzy and feel like vomiting. If he pushed himself, he'd just lose consciousness. His mother's death had traumatized him. When Margaretta and the other Schnee clansmen had learned that Vandre had forced himself to transform to let Miledi and the others escape, they'd thought back to Sasrika's death. While they knew it must have pained him to transform, they were proud that he'd managed to overcome his trauma and inherit his mother's strength.

"Having lost Sasrika-sama, Van-sama was like an empty shell. The demon lord decided to let him live because he realized controlling Van-sama in this state would be easy. Of course, we tried to support him, but..."

Vandre's wounds had been too deep. To this day, Margaretta and the others regretted being unable to help Vandre when he needed them most. It vexed them that they'd been incapable of healing a single boy's broken heart. In the end, it was someone else who ended up being Vandre's, as well as the whole Schnee Clan's, pillar of support.

"In the palace, there was only one person who was kind to Van-sama."

"Was it the current demon lord, Rasul?"

"Correct. Unlike his father... Rasul was a kind man."

Rasul had been wise, and excelled in both swordplay and his studies. He was always working for the good of his people and was the ideal prince. He'd always treated Vandre like a true brother, even though they had different mothers, and he'd openly wept when he'd heard news of Sasrika's death. The previous demon lord had hated him. Especially since Rasul was constantly arguing that they should try and make peace with the humans. No one was more of a pacifist than him. Vandre had always respected Rasul, and in time, Rasul's kindness helped Vandre recover from the death of his mother. Everyone believed the bond between the two siblings was unbreakable. In truth, Rasul loved Vandre so much, that he usurped the throne from his father, who hadn't intended on abdicating for another forty years, because he was tired of watching Vandre get used and abused by the demon lord.

"That's nothing like how he acts now."

"What happened to him?"

“Yeah, he’s just going down the same path his father was now.”

Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz all thought back to the Rasul they’d met.

“That’s something we don’t know either. We all thought Rasul’s rule would be one of peace and prosperity. All of us, including Van-sama, believed that he’d lead us to a glorious future.”

But the day after his coronation ceremony, Rasul suddenly changed. He began stockpiling weapons and resumed the experiments his father had stopped. When Vandre, his precious brother, asked him why, Rasul said he’d just been using him all along. When Vandre had broken down in tears, Rasul had just sneered and sent him to the dungeons. Fearing for the safety of the test subjects, Vandre had broken them out, and escaped all the way to the Obsidian Tundra. There, he’d spent a few years living in hiding. But the Schnee clan that he founded couldn’t escape Rasul’s clutches forever. Because of the tundra’s climate, the village was unable to sustain itself. Vandre’s familiars were able to hunt down meat for the villagers, and he often flew to the mountains on his wyvern to gather fruits and vegetables. But it was exceedingly difficult to procure spices, or clothes, or building materials for shelters. Which was why Vandre had regularly snuck into nearby villages to buy any necessary goods. During one of those trips, Vandre noticed there were posters all over the village. They were detailing the new policies the demon lord was putting into place. However, built into them was a subtle message to Vandre and the others. Rasul was gathering more test subjects for his experiments. And that he’d only stop if Vandre turned himself in. It was a declaration that Rasul would find him, no matter what it took.

“It’s possible Van-sama still believed in his brother. Perhaps there was something that was forcing Rasul-sama to take such drastic measures.”

So Vandre had ignored the warnings of his clansmen and headed back to the demon lord’s castle. His plan had been to convince Rasul to stop. He wasn’t the same weak kid he’d been. He’d grown much stronger. So he was confident that even if he failed, he’d at least be able to free the test subjects from Rasul and escape. But he’d made one miscalculation. Rasul had grown stronger as well. Far stronger than Vandre had thought possible. Rasul hadn’t just collected a bunch of new Artifacts. His mana pool had expanded in size as well, and his

magical proficiency was much greater than before.

“But Van-sama had left insurance behind: Batlam. Through Batlam, he was able to communicate with us, as well as spy on Rasul-sama. That was how he found out that Rasul-sama had discovered your organization and was planning on kidnapping your comrades. So we started our own investigations as well.”

From there, they’d scouted out the Reisen headquarters. Their plan had been to make contact and ask for the Liberators’ help in saving Vandre, but Rasul’s chimeras had gotten there first. After finishing up her tale, Margaretta sighed tiredly. Miledi took a deep breath and started sorting out her emotions. Both sides remained silent for a few minutes, until Miledi finally spoke.

“I understand now. Thank you for telling me this.”

She then added, “But that demon lord pisses me off, so I’m still gonna beat the shit out of him!”

Then why’d you ask about him? However, Miledi’s smile was so overpowering, all Margaretta could say in response was, “I-I see,” her expression stiffening. Miledi harrumphed and said, “That pretty boy needs to be taught a lesson. I’m gonna show him who’s the strongest once and for all! Bwahahaha!”

Miledi was starting to sound more like a demon lord and less like a heroine.

“We did promise we’d come back for Vandre.”

“Yeah. It irks me that the demon lord thinks he can stop me just by sealing my spatial magic.”

Oscar and Naiz were ready to fight. Crafty as always, Oscar quickly began suggesting new Artifact ideas to use against the demon lord. Like Miledi, he had an evil grin on his face.

“This man needs to pay for tormenting my cute little Miledi-chan.”

Meiru’s voice was filled with a surprising amount of vehemence. Though she was smiling gently like usual, her eyes were as hard as steel. She was resolved to protect her comrades this time around.

“In that case, we’ll leave the demon lord to you guys while we go save

everyone," Marshal said.

"I'm gonna kill those cloaked bastards this time!"

"Don't do that. They're victims too, remember? By the way, Oscar-san, can I ask for some new Artifacts?"

At Marshal's suggestion, Shushu slammed a fist into her palm while Tony smiled fearlessly. The other members of the Reisen branch all stood up and declared their intent to fight as well. No matter what obstacles stood in their path, the Liberators would keep moving forward. When the Schnee clansmen saw the Liberators' determination, they got fired up to fight as well. Amidst the battle cries of both the Schnee and the Liberators, the strategy meeting for how to rescue Vandre began. Tears of joy welled up in Margaretta's eyes as she watched the Schnee and the Liberators link arms and become comrades in truth.

"What's wrong, Ma-chan?"

"M-Ma-chan? Are you talking to me?"

Margaretta turned to Miledi, who'd come to stand next to her.

"Yeah, it's a cute nickname right?" Miledi replied, smiling mischievously. She grabbed Margaretta's hand and said, "Come on, you've gotta join the meeting too. You're everyone's captain, aren't you?"

"Yeah... You're right."

Margaretta joined the others, looking surprisingly happy for someone who was about to head into a battle that would decide the fate of her people. It was almost like she was certain she'd be able to win the future she desired.

"That is all I have to report. You have my deepest apologies, Your Majesty."

A bitter voice echoed through the demon lord's castle. The voice belonged to a sharp-eyed old demon, the prime minister of Igdol, Karm Tranlit. After the incident in the laboratory, Rasul had issued a nationwide search for Miledi and the others. But the last time anyone had seen them was three days ago, and it was now day six of the search. Karm had just finished telling Rasul about how

they'd lost Miledi's group.

"Well, I imagine they were able to meet up with the Schnee clan. I honestly wonder where their village is hidden..."

Seeing Rasul's smile, Karm inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed he'd managed to avoid displeasing the demon lord. Still, it frustrated him that he couldn't complete the task his lord had assigned him. Just then, someone else butted into the conversation.

"Your Majesty, don't you think you've had enough fun?"

A well-built demon man with short red hair stepped forward. He looked to be in his late thirties, and there were deep wrinkles in his forehead.

"Forgive me, Angol. But we've found not only Lady Reisen, but two other ancient magic users. Surely you can see why I'm in high spirits?"

"But in the end, they managed to escape."

Angol Mittlight was one of Igdol's top three generals. When it came to pure destructive might, no one was as strong as him.

"Are you questioning Rasul-sama's decision?"

Another one of Igdol's top three generals and the only woman among them, Lestina Ascion, glared daggers at Angol. Angol gave her an exasperated look and replied, "It is our job as His Majesty's retainers to give him candid advice, not blindly follow him. If you have nothing to add, be quiet."

"I'll burn you to a crisp, you brute."

"Stop it, you two. You're in the presence of the demon lord."

The third and final general, Elga Insut, admonished the other two.

"Now now, calm down everyone. Van's still with us, so they'll come back eventually. We just have to capture them when they do. Isn't that right?"

Knowing that arguing any further would be disrespectful, the three generals simultaneously bowed to Rasul. However, Karm couldn't help but want to get one last word in.

"Your Majesty. I know I've said this many times already, but please stop

referring to that mongrel by such a familiar nickname."

"I'll think about it."

Though Rasul said that every time, he never changed how he called Vandre. Of course, Rasul believed that demons were the superior race. Furthermore, he also believed in keeping the demon race pure. Vandre was nothing more than a test subject and a convenient source of firepower for Rasul. But that was precisely why Karm and the others couldn't understand why Rasul refused to stop referring to Vandre by his nickname. Of course, the demon lord was the avatar of their god. He was someone revered by all demons. So Karm had no choice but to accept that Rasul had his reasons.

"Now then, if that's all you have to report, I'll be leaving. You three should prepare for battle."

"As you wish. But where are you going?"

Rasul turned to Karm and answered, "To see my precious little brother."

Smiling pleasantly, Rasul left the room.

Rasul's footsteps echoed across the walls as he headed to an isolated dungeon chamber. Originally, this room, which was about the same size as Rasul's research laboratory, was meant to hold important members of enemy states. The chamber was large enough to house multiple prisoners, but right now, there was only one. Rasul stopped in front of the one occupied cell and said cheerfully, "Yo, Van. How're you feeling?"

"....."

Naturally, the lone prisoner tied down with chains of sealstone was Vandre. He was still covered in wounds from his previous transformation. Transforming into a dragon while sealed had been akin to a child bound by thorns suddenly growing to the size of an adult. The seals had bitten deep into Vandre's body, and he was gravely injured. Furthermore, to prevent Vandre from trying to escape again, Rasul had cut the tendons in his legs and broken his arms. However, the fire in Vandre's eyes was still burning as strong as ever. He glared at Rasul.

“Was executing a few people not enough to cow you?”

In retribution for Vandre’s attempted escape, Rasul had executed a few prisoners in front of Vandre and the remaining test subjects. He’d wanted to show them that there was no hope of escape from the demon lord.

“Why?” Vandre muttered quietly. Rasul cocked his head and Vandre raised his voice.

“Why did things come to this? What happened to you?”

Rasul stared blankly at Vandre for a moment, then sneered.

“Do you truly still believe in me? Or is it just that hard for you to accept reality?”

Rasul looked pityingly down at Vandre and said, “That was all an act, Van.”

“.....”

“I told you on the day of my coronation ceremony. The kind brother you looked up to never existed. Who in their right mind would consider a half-breed like you their family?”

At best, Rasul had seen Vandre as a cute, loyal little pet. Rasul sneered again.

“Everything you believed in was an illusion.”

Those peaceful days Vandre had spent with his mother and his clansmen had been nothing more than a pleasant fantasy. In truth, his bond with Rasul had been a lie and there was no future for him or his clan.

“That’s not possible.”

Vandre glared at Rasul, determined to face the cold reality staring down at him head-on. In an attempt to bring the old, kind Rasul back, Vandre said, “Brother, if everything was truly a lie, why do you still braid your hair?”

“What?”

Rasul hadn’t expected that question. For a moment he seemed to hesitate, and he unconsciously reached for the one part of his hair he always braided.

“Just braiding that tiny section of hair... isn’t very becoming for a demon lord, is it?”

“.....”

Vandre’s hair was braided the same way, though his braids were about to come undone. Honestly, Rasul always felt as though the half-braid didn’t suit him. But despite that, he went through the effort of braiding his hair every single day.

“You’re the one who gave me this braid. Even though you were the crown prince, you loved playing pranks and making people laugh.”

One day when Vandre had been asleep, Rasul had snuck into his room and braided his hair like this. He also used oil and wire to make sure Vandre couldn’t undo the braid when he woke up either. Vandre got so mad when he found out that he stopped speaking to Rasul. So, Rasul had done the same braid to his own hair and said, “See, Van? Now we match. We’ll make this the new fad in Igdol. That way it won’t be embarrassing, right?”

Ever since, the two brothers had continued braiding just one section of their hair. At the time, Vandre had been too embarrassed to say it, but today he knew it needed to be said.

“I always thought our braids were like a symbol of our bond. So, brother. How come you still keep tying that braid if everything was a lie?”

“I see...”

Smiling faintly, Rasul brought his hand up to the base of his braid and sliced it off. He was severing all bonds with Vandre. Vandre’s eyes widened in surprise, and Rasul chuckled.

“I was just doing it out of habit. I never imagined something this silly would give you hope.”

“Bro...ther...”

Vandre hung his head and ground his teeth. Enjoying his brother’s anguish, Rasul said cheerfully, “You know, Lady Reisen will be coming back here.”

“Ngh.”

Vandre thought back to that girl who’d shone brighter than the sun. She’d swore she’d save Vandre. And for some reason, Vandre had believed her. But

now, he didn't even know if it was possible for him to be saved.

"Aren't you looking forward to it?"

"Looking forward to what?"

"The moment where I teach that self-righteous little girl the harsh reality of the world."

"What do you plan on doing to her?"

"Hehehe. I like that look in your eyes, Van. Seems like you found something else to believe in. I can't wait to teach you how misplaced your faith is once again."

"I asked you what you plan on doing to her."

"Well... let me give you a hint. What kind of expression do you think that straightforward girl will make when she finds out she's just started a war?" Rasul sneered, and in that moment, Vandre was forced to acknowledge that he wasn't looking at the old, kind Rasul anymore. The demon lord's expression was just that disgusting. Somewhere deep in his heart, Vandre had wanted to believe that there was some reason Rasul had been forced to change so drastically. And watching Miledi keep fighting to the bitter end had given him the courage to entertain that hope. He'd believed he could discover his brother's true intentions and bring him back to normal. But seeing Rasul's ugly sneer had convinced him.

"You're not my brother."

"That's right. Looks like you finally decided to accept reality, Van. Congratulations."

Rasul turned on his heel. He'd had his fun; it was time to leave. As he walked out of the dungeon, he said without turning back, "You'll be back to work tomorrow. I want another monster army. Once I destroy the church, Dastia's next."

"What!? Don't tell me you plan on killing all the vampires!?"

"The southern continent has no need for races other than demons. Besides, I need more test subjects. This is a good chance to take out two birds with one

stone. You better work hard, Van. Your precious comrades' lives are depending on you doing a good job."

"Rasul, how far will you fall!?"

Vandre's shout echoed through the walls, but the only reply he received was the sound of the heavy dungeon door closing shut. It felt as though his future had just been closed shut as well. Vandre sat in the darkness for ages, agonizing. Eventually, he lost track of the passage of time, and he started reminiscing about his mother. Even though he was a child Sasrika had never asked for, she'd loved him all the same. As far as he could remember, she'd always been gentle and wise. Around the time Vandre had grown old enough to realize it was strange for someone to be born and raised in a dungeon, he'd asked his mom, "Mom, don't you hate this?"

By this, he'd meant everything. The previous demon lord, her circumstances, and even Vandre himself. Considering how much she'd suffered, it wouldn't have been strange for Sasrika to curse everything and everyone. But to his surprise, his mother had said, "A dragon's fangs exist to shred through one's own weakness. A dragon's eyes exist to see the truth. And a dragon's talons exist to tear through evil. The blade of reason is the only weapon a dragon needs." That was the wisdom that had been passed down through generations of dragonmen. Though she'd been in a dingy dungeon, Sasrika had looked so dignified when she'd taught Vandre those precepts. It was at that moment that Vandre had discovered what true nobility was. However, putting Sasrika's precepts into practice was easier said than done. Indeed, Vandre hadn't been able to control his emotions and gone berserk when he saw what the previous demon lord had done to his mom. But as a result of that, he lost her. The wounds the event had left in his heart were still bleeding.

"Live for the sake of others, so that others will want to live for your sake."

Those were the words Sasrika had imparted to Vandre just before she died.

"Mom... I tried to live like that," Vandre muttered softly, his voice despondent. He no longer knew what to do.

"But I think..."

It was because Vandre existed that the previous demon lord had been able to

raise an army to invade. It was because he existed that so many people had been sacrificed to make chimeras. And it was because he existed that another war would begin.

“Should I... really be trying to live?”

If he died, his clansmen would give up on rescuing him. Rasul might continue his experiments, but he’d eventually realize producing results without Vandre was impossible and give up.

“Mom...”

Feeling utterly defeated, Vandre voiced the one thought he swore never to entertain.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have been born after all...”

The moment he said that a voice replied, “Don’t be stupid.”

A second later, a burst of light suddenly appeared on the wall next to him. Vandre was speechless. The light was pure gold, like the warm light of the sun. Sparks ran along the length of the wall, and then a hole appeared where the light had been. A familiar face poked its head through.

“F-Four-eyes!”

“Sup, muffler-man.”

Oscar adjusted his glasses and muttered, “Tch, I forgot the real you had your muffler stolen away.”

After a brief moment of shock, Vandre returned to his senses and shouted, “Forget about me! Save my comrades and get out of here!”

“Why, is this a trap? Well, it doesn’t really matter even if it is.”

“I’m being serious here.”

“Yeah, well so am I.”

Oscar grabbed Vandre by the collar and lifted him up.

“What the hell is this crap about how you shouldn’t have been born at all, huh!? I don’t ever wanna hear that shit from you again! Next time you say that I’ll choke you to death with your own muffler!”

Oscar's words were all over the place. But the anger in his eyes was crystal clear. When he realized that Oscar was getting angry for his sake, Vandre suddenly wanted to cry. But he held back his tears. Oscar was the one guy Vandre refused to cry in front of.

"But even if you save me, the demon lord will just gather more test subjects... I can't escape from him. The same thing will just happen aga—"

"Shut the fuck up. It's too late to stop anyway."

"What?"

Suddenly, the entire castle shook as a massive impact hit it.

"Don't tell me..."

"Carve this fact into your mind. Our leader *always* likes to make a flashy entrance."

Miledi was no doubt announcing her entrance to the demon lord up above. Vandre opened his mouth to argue further, but then stopped when he sensed something coming their way.

"Ability ten, Hallowed Ground."

A second after Oscar deployed his barrier, a fireball hot enough to melt the cell's bars hit the two of them. Had Oscar not blocked it, both he and Vandre would have been severely burned. As the flames faded away, Oscar saw a silhouette at the end of the corridor.

"I see a mongrel's howls travel far."

Lestina walked into the corridor, sneering as if to imply Oscar was some stray dog that had been lured in by Vandre's screams. There were two swords at her hip. She snapped her fingers, and gray-robed chimeras started appearing out of the shadows. There were close to fifty of them. Another group of fifty elite demon soldiers appeared on the other side of the corridor as well, trapping Oscar and Vandre. Though there were no black-robed chimeras it was still 100 against one. And one of those 100 was one of the top three generals in the country.

"Oscar, you—"

“Don’t worry. There’s already another squad rescuing the test subjects.”

Oscar’s purposely obtuse answer irked Vandre.

“That’s not what I’m trying to say! There’s no point in saving me! Just run!”

Of course, Oscar was no fool. He wore glasses for a reason, after all. Oscar quickly transmuted the shackles off of Vandre, then tapped his chest. Batlam poked his small head out of Oscar’s coat. Vandre’s eyes widened. He was equal parts surprised and overjoyed. Batlam transformed into a muffler and wrapped himself around his master to support him.

“God, you turned into such a wimp over these past few days. Listen up. Close your mouth, plug your ears, and keep your eyes shut.”

“Oscar!”

Oscar turned his back to Vandre and stepped out of the cell, facing his enemies head-on.

“Oh, you’re not going to run?”

Lestina’s smile grew wider. She looked over at the wall Oscar had transmuted his way through.

“You sure you shouldn’t be by the demon lord’s side?”

Lestina snorted dismissively.

“Rasul-sama’s victory is assured, regardless of whether I’m there or not.”

“I see. Glad to hear it. Can’t have you going to save your precious demon lord.”

“You bastard... You couldn’t even touch Rasul-sama before, so what makes you think it’ll be any different this time?”

Oscar shrugged his shoulders. He twirled his umbrella in one hand and adjusted his glasses with the other. He gave Lestina a carefree smile.

“If you think you’ve already got us figured out then why not try me? Bring it on. I’ll beat all of you to a bloody pulp.”

Oscar gave Lestina the middle finger, and she screamed, “I’ll burn you to ashes!”

Her demon soldiers all began casting. They barely needed any incantation before they were able to summon a barrage of flame javelins to hurl at Oscar. Fifty spears of fire plus Lestina's extremely large lance of pale blue flames shot at Oscar. Lestina's lance looked more like a compressed Azure Blaze than a regular Crimson Javelin. In fact, its flames were so hot it had probably surpassed the level of an Azure Blaze even. If Oscar took that head-on, he would almost certainly end up as nothing but ashes. It was unlikely even his Hallowed Ground could stop it. But Oscar didn't look worried in the slightest. As the barrage of flames headed toward him, the ring on his finger glinted. A second later, six black tower shields appeared in front of him.

"Fool! The heat wave will kill you anyway!"

Lestina grinned triumphantly. But a second later, her demon soldiers screamed in pain.

"What!? You countered everything!? No, you reflected our spells back at us!?"

Lestina and her demons' magic had indeed hit the lower three floating shields protecting Oscar. But a moment later those spells had shot back out of the remaining three shields floating above the first three. Right back at the demons. These were one of Oscar's new artifacts, the Onyx Shields. They were of course quite sturdy, but more importantly, they had spatial magic portals affixed to their surfaces. Spells that hit one shield were shot back out of the corresponding portal on the other. In some ways, this was the strongest defensive artifact Oscar had ever made. He'd needed a way to both defend against a large number of enemies while also counterattacking, so he'd developed these while resting in the Schnee village.

"Ding ding ding. What was it you said? The heat wave will kill me anyway?"

Oscar's cheery voice echoed through the corridor. He'd deployed his umbrella's Hallowed Ground to protect him from any residual heat. Lestina couldn't stand his relaxed attitude, and it pissed her off even more that he'd managed to take out 40% of her forces in an instant. Seething, her entire body started glowing red-hot.

"Oh, is that your special magic?"

“It’s called Inflame, Oscar Orcus. And it’ll melt even your bones!”

Lestina drew her swords and charged at Oscar. The flames around her were so hot they’d burned away her clothes. She looked like a person made of magma. Her swords were likely some manner of artifact, since they didn’t melt in her hands. Instead, her magmafication spread to them as well, turning them into blades of heat. While Lestina charged, the gray-robed chimeras split up and attacked Oscar from all sides. Oscar raised a gloved hand and said, “Omnidirectional thread barrier, activate.”

Blood suddenly splurted from the chimeras that had leaped at him from behind and from the sides. They’d been cut by Oscar’s new and improved metal wires. These were so fine that you had to strain your eyes to even see them. He’d used them in conjunction with his regular, more visible wires to lead the chimeras into a trap and chop off their legs. Even if they felt no pain and regenerated unbelievably quickly, they couldn’t do anything without feet. He then fired small, Lightning Field-enchanted daggers at each of them, binding them with electricity. He figured their own regenerative abilities would stop the bleeding and keep them from dying. Meiru could restore their legs later, so he didn’t feel bad about mutilating them. The remaining demon soldiers faltered when they saw how easily Oscar had taken out the demon lord’s supersoldiers.

“Your petty tricks won’t stop me!”

Lestina didn’t stop charging, however, and her superheated body easily cut through Oscar’s wires. Once she was close enough, she swung her burning red swords down at him.

“Wha—”

But the sleeves of Oscar’s coat wrapped themselves around her swords and held them in place. To Lestina’s utter surprise, Oscar’s coat neither melted nor even caught fire. It just glowed faintly as it pushed her swords back. He’d added a new feature to his Ebony Coat— Diamond Skin. Back in the Schnee village, Oscar had upgraded his coat with Marshal’s help.

“Yikes, that’s hot. Can’t say I want you hugging me.”

Still too shocked to react, Lestina could only watch as Oscar held up his gloved palm in front of her. He was far enough away that he wasn’t touching her, but a

second later Lestina's vision went dark.

"Ah!?"

As she flew backward, she realized she'd passed out for a moment. Lestina glared at Oscar as she crashed into the ground.

"You bastard, that power belongs to—"

Oscar had also upgraded his Sable Glove by adding the mana shockwave skill Rasul had used to it.

"We've got someone who can convert mana into shockwaves too. That skill looked like it was pretty handy, so I copied it. Though my helper was quite... repulsed by the fact that she shares a skill with the demon lord."

While Oscar was talking, the demon soldiers reformed themselves and hurled magic at him again. A torrent of fire, ice, wind, and lightning came down on Oscar.

"Man, you guys are annoying. Can't you just be quiet for a bit?"

Oscar reflected their spells with his Onyx Shields and accessed his Treasure Trove again. When the demons saw what he'd summoned this time, they paled. Oscar had brought a golem. It was black, four meters tall, and had a sword in each of its hands. That by itself wasn't too surprising, but the speed at which it moved was unbelievable. When the demons saw it charging at them they muttered, "I-It's a monster..."

They blasted the golem with fire, wind, earth and ice blasts, but twenty new arms sprouted from various points on its body and it cut all of the magic down with the swords equipped in each arm. It crashed into the clump of demons, sending some of them flying. Once it was inside their formation it sprouted an extra hundred arms and knocked all the demons out with the flat of its blades. This was a new Shadow Knight Oscar had developed, the Hundred Arm Asura.

Its head was covered by a fierce-looking helmet and there were several circular openings on its back, which was where its arms stretched out from. Oscar had come up with the idea for it when he'd realized there was no need to stick to convention and make only human-shaped golems. As a result, he'd been able to create a demon of war, equipped with 100 different enchanted,

artifact-level swords.

“I guess I should be careful not to kill your demon warriors. If you lose too many troops the church will try to invade and then there’ll be casualties among civilians.”

“D-Don’t fuck with meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

Oscar ignored Lestina’s rage. He dodged the few chimeras who’d escaped his threads and managed to circle around behind him, then activated his umbrella’s Wall Blast and swung it at them. His umbrella crushed both of their legs and they flew backward like pinballs. Lestina finally managed to recover enough to get to her feet, but before she could charge again, two regular Shadow Knights blocked her path.

“That special magic of yours is pretty powerful, but how long can it last?”

It took a large amount of mana to superheat one’s body to this point. So long as Oscar fended her off with his knights, she’d eventually run out of mana and collapse.

“You bastard! Fight me like a man!”

“No thanks. I don’t like pushy women.”

Because Oscar was using most of his concentration to control his Hundred Arm Asura, his knights were lacking in finesse. Still, it wasn’t hard to block Lestina’s attacks since she’d become so impatient. Oscar pretty much ignored Lestina while he mopped up the remnants of the demon soldiers and the chimeras. Oscar lacked the kind of explosive destructive power Miledi and Naiz possessed. But this right here was the reason his comrades considered him the scariest ancient magic user; he was extremely versatile. He had no weak points, and once he knew what his opponent’s skills were, he could devise countermeasures.

“Vandre.”

“O-Oscar...”

Was he always this strong? Vandre thought, overawed by the show Oscar had just put on.

“I won’t make any excuses for losing last time and failing to rescue you. We’re partly to blame for your current despair.”

Oscar used a barrage of enchanted daggers to keep the remaining chimeras at bay. Two managed to slip through and attack him from two sides, but he casually dodged as if he’d seen it coming. As he leaped aside, he dropped an exploding sword on the floor, blowing the two chimeras away. Several Metamorph Chains and superfine threads shot out from the center of the explosion as well, cutting off the legs of a few more chimeras. Once the threads rendered the chimeras immobile, Oscar sent electric shocks through his chains to restrain them. After the shocks knocked the chimeras out, he threw them at other enemies who were still conscious. As soon as they hit someone else, Oscar unfurled his umbrella and detached the canopy. As it flew into the center of the corridor, he sent a blast of electricity running through it and down the spiderweb of superfine threads that he’d set up. Because he didn’t want to kill anyone, he used Spark Plasma instead of Thunderlord’s Judgement. Any chimera caught in the electric net was knocked unconscious, and the net doubled as a barrier protecting Oscar from the demons’ spells. As lightning flashed all around him, Oscar shouted, “If you say you’re too tired and you can’t fight anymore, that’s fine!”

A few of the chimeras charged through the electric barrier, lightning crackling all around them. It seemed they were capable of nullifying electricity with their own lightning magic. They swung their lightning-clad talons down at Oscar. He retracted his umbrella’s canopy and leaped back. At the same time, he dropped some spare gloves at their feet and used his mana shockwaves to crush their legs. As they fell toward him he hooked their necks with the handle of his umbrella and tossed them aside.

“But don’t you ever dare give up on your own life!”

A massive ball of fire suddenly illuminated the dim dungeon. Lestina had cast Azure Blaze directly on herself. Thanks to her Inflame her body was able to withstand the blast, but Oscar’s Shadow Knights were blown away. The shockwave from the blast caused Oscar to stumble, and one of the chimeras managed to sneak beneath his guard and stab his leg. At the same time, another one punched him the side.

“Ngh. Vandre! No one in the world has a life that belongs only to them! You’re not allowed to throw away a life that exists to help others!”

“I shouldn’t have been born” was possibly the saddest thing Oscar had ever heard. Though he knew it was taboo to divert his attention from a fight, Oscar couldn’t help but turn back to Vandre. By using his glove’s shockwaves he blew the two chimeras next to him away and blocked Lestina’s swords with his umbrella. But the heat from her swords still burned his skin. Vandre wanted to yell at Oscar to focus on his own fight, but then he was suddenly reminded of his mother’s words.

“Live for the sake of others.”

He didn’t know why those words popped into his head just then, but before he knew it he was shouting, “What would you know!?”

“I don’t know anything. Because you don’t tell us about yourself! Which is why—”

“Stop ignoring me, you filthy human!”

Oscar activated the third of his Black Umbrella’s abilities, Jet Stream. A torrent of water shot out of his umbrella, hitting Lestina square in the chest. The water vaporized upon hitting her body, but she was still forced to take a step back. As soon as there was some distance between them, Oscar slammed his floating Onyx Shields into her. Not even looking as she was blown back, Oscar stared into Vandre’s eyes and screamed, “You absolutely can’t die! You have to live, or we won’t be able to learn anything about you!”

A few chimeras surrounded Oscar. He deployed a full-strength Hallowed Ground around himself and gave new orders to his Hundred Arm Asura, which had finally finished neutralizing the demon soldiers. Oscar used himself as bait to bring the chimeras close to him, then had the Asura throw all of its enchanted swords at them. The hundred blades rained down on the chimeras, drowning them in magical effects.

“Don’t forget, you’ve already saved so many lives! My comrades, as well as your own family! You saved all of them!”

Explosions, heat waves, lightning bolts, skewers of ice, and petrification balls

assailed chimeras. Explosions and flashes filled the air, making it impossible for Vandre to make Oscar out. But a few seconds later a gust of wind blew away the smoke, revealing Oscar standing alone. He'd taken a bit of damage from his own attack too. He was scratched up in places, and his breathing was heavy. Still, he'd managed to perfectly control all 100 swords to minimize the damage to himself. On top of that none of the chimeras were dead. He'd managed to perfectly render all of them unconscious.

Oscar had sworn to protect Vandre's family, so protect them he would. His strength was dazzling to someone like Vandre.

"So no matter what you do, I'll keep saving you."

"So that others will want to live for your sake."

The second half of his mother's final words flashed through Vandre's mind. Though Oscar pissed Vandre off, he also resembled Sasrika.

"So Vandre. Just shut up and let me save your ass."

Vandre was speechless. His heart was so full of emotion that he didn't know how to describe what he was feeling. So instead he just said, "You're getting sloppy."

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Oscar heard a sharp scream behind him. Turning around, he saw Lestina encased in a block of ice. Vandre had just cast the strongest ice spell, Frost Purgatory. As he'd inherited the blood of an ice dragon, his aptitude for ice magic was unparalleled. Even though fire was the antithesis of ice, Lestina's weakened Inflame hadn't been able to fend off Vandre's Frost Purgatory. Finally, Lestina's mana ran out, and Vandre's spell encased her naked body in ice. The sight was surprisingly artistic. Oscar turned back to Vandre and asked, "So that's your fetish?"

"Learn to make better jokes, you stupid four-eyes."

Oscar shrugged and sat down next to Vandre. The two of them leaned against the wall and sighed. Oscar propped up his umbrella and cast Benison Aura, causing a shower of healing light to rain down on them.

“Is this some new kind of torture? I don’t wanna share an umbrella with a guy like you. That’s physically revolting.”

“I don’t like it either, but this is more efficient. Stop being so selfish, sheesh.”

“Please, you’re barely even injured.”

“Well if your wimpiness is cured maybe you don’t need my healing magic after all.”

“Tch. Hey, my shoulder’s not all the way inside. Lean the umbrella toward me.”

“Don’t you mean ‘please lean the umbrella toward me, Oscar-san?’”

“Huh?”

“Oh?”

Oscar and Vandre glared daggers at each other as healing light rained down on them. Eventually, they both realized the other wouldn’t back down and they simultaneously clicked their tongues and looked away.

“You made sure to save my comrades too, right?”

“Yeah, the Reisen headquarters guys and your clan members are rescuing them now. Once they’re all free they’ll evacuate using wyverns.”

“Those guys...”

“Oh yeah. You better apologize when we get back. Your clansmen were practically begging us to save you.”

“I see...”

As Oscar and Vandre rested, the sounds of fighting up above grew louder. It looked like Miledi was going all out. There was a huge boom, and dust fell from the ceiling as the building shook.

“You know...” Vandre said.

“Yeah?”

“I’d rather die than have everyone thinking I’m a spineless wimp.”

“And?”

“I’ll fight with you. Not for the sake of this world. I don’t care about Miledi’s dumb revolution. Even if the gods are gone, the world’ll still be full of unfair bullshit.”

Oscar listened quietly to Vandre’s speech. Vandre turned to him and, eyes burning with resolve, declared, “But I’ll gladly fight anyone for your guys’ sake. So let’s do this with a bang!”

“Hmph. Try not to get in my way.”

Say whatever you want, I’ll prove I’m useful... Vandre thought and closed his eyes. Oscar, too, closed his eyes and focused on recuperating. Both men were smiling.



A few minutes prior. After speaking with Vandre, Rasul had returned to the throne room. There, he got to work. He held audiences with influential citizens and listened to their claims.

The populace saw Rasul as a peaceful and wise demon lord. Unlike his predecessor, who'd cared for nothing but war, Rasul seemed to be focusing on domestic affairs. Of course, eliminating all other races and proving the superiority of demons was the wish of most demons within the empire. That being said, they didn't constantly want to be at war. While every demon was a capable fighter, those who weren't career soldiers received little compensation during wartime for their battle contributions.

Naturally, any demon would gladly throw their livelihood and even their life away if the demon lord ordered them to, but that didn't mean they wanted to hear those orders. Which was why most demons respected Rasul for focusing on bettering their lives. Indeed the previous demon lord hadn't even held audiences with his citizens, so the fact that Rasul did helped increase his popularity.

Thanks to the image I've built up, even if I do start a war, the demons will just think I had no other choice. That the peace-loving demon lord was forced to turn to war due to factors outside his control. They'll probably hate other races even more for how barbaric and cruel they are. Rasul absently thought about the way the people saw him as he watched a fat merchant prostrate himself before him. The previous demon lord's military rule had worked well. But Rasul found doing things the same way to be boring. So he'd decided to make his rule "just" instead. He wanted to fashion himself as the demons' hero, a benevolent ruler who protected his people, but crushed the cruel and barbaric humans.

Everything is still going according to your plan, My Lord. So I hope you don't mind me ad libbing a few of the less important details.

Rasul gazed up at the heavens, his expression oddly ecstatic. At the same time, it felt like he heard static noise buzzing in the back of his mind.

Hm? Is that just my imagination? Unconsciously, he brought his hand up to where his braid had been. When he'd come back from the dungeons, the head maid had shrieked when she'd seen his uneven hair. She'd then insisted she tidy

it up.

“So, brother. How come you still keep tying that braid if everything was a lie?”

Well, whatever. As Rasul swept his hair back, his internal monologuing was suddenly interrupted.

“Y-Your Majesty? Have I done something to offend you?”

The merchant looked up at Rasul, sweating profusely. Prime Minister Karm, as well as his two guards Angol and Elga, shot him curious looks as well. Realizing he’d let himself get too distracted, Rasul smiled ruefully. He opened his mouth to tell everyone it was nothing, but before he could, a soldier rushed into the throne room.

“I’m terribly sorry for interrupting you, Your Majesty, but...”

“What’s happened!?”

Elga questioned the panicking soldier.

“There are intruders in the underground dungeon! We’re—”

Before he could finish with the words “under attack” a loud voice interrupted him.

“Miiiiiiileeeeeeeeediiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

“Hm?” “What?” “Isn’t that voice...?” Rasul’s generals and prime minister all looked up in confusion.

“Impaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaact!”

There was a loud boom, and the throne room’s ceiling shattered.

“Your Majesty!”

Elga and Angol protectively jumped in front of Rasul. The rubble from the destroyed ceiling curved and fell straight toward Rasul. His generals swept aside the rubble with ease. But at the same time, someone else groaned in pain. A gust of wind blew away the dust cloud that had formed, revealing a lone girl.

“The super beautiful genius mage...”

Miledi made a sideways peace sign, raised one leg, and winked at Rasul.

“Miledi Reisen is... here!”

As Miledi struck her pose, a halo of light appeared behind her. She’d actually bothered using light magic to add special effects.

“Y-You uncultured swine!”

Karm, who’d been knocked to the ground by the shockwave, shouted at Miledi. He hated that she’d trashed the sacred throne room, attacked Rasul, and most importantly, knocked him flat on his back. Oh, and there was also the fact that Miledi had landed directly on top of the merchant, and was still standing on his back while he was unconscious. Meiru and Naiz dropped down after Miledi. They quietly whispered in her ear, “Sorry, Miledi-chan, I couldn’t steal it.”

“I couldn’t either. It looks like spatial magic just doesn’t work on the demon lord.”

In truth, when Miledi had made her entrance, Meiru and Naiz had surreptitiously tried to steal Rasul’s artifacts. Specifically, they’d been trying to get the two that protected him from gravity and spatial magic. But the demon lord had easily deflected Meiru’s water whip and Naiz’s portals.

“Ah well. It would have been nice if it worked, but I didn’t think it’d go that easily.”

While Miledi whispered back to them, Rasul started clapping.

“My, how wonderful. Well done, Lady Reisen. That was quite the impressive entrance.”

“Oh, did you fall in love with my dazzling performance? You sure know how to flatter a lady! But sorry, I just can’t go out with someone who looks so repulsive! Too bad!”

Rasul’s smile faded a little. He turned to Angol and Elga. The look in his eyes seemed to be saying, “Is that really the heir of the Reisen clan? You know, that super dignified family?”

He then turned back to Miledi and said, “Hmm, I see you brought a new comrade with you. Is she Oscar Orcus’ replacement?”

“I heard you did some pretty horrible things to my cute little sister. I’m here to do the same to you.”

Meiru smiled gently, but that smile didn’t reach her eyes. In fact, her eyes were burning with sadistic rage. “My, how scary. I guess I need to eliminate such scary intruders for the sake of my country.”

The air behind Rasul suddenly warped. The two black-robed chimeras canceled their camouflage and revealed themselves. At the same time, one of Rasul’s rings began to glow. The one that weakened Miledi.

“Mrrrgh.”

“There there, I’ll heal you right back up.”

Miledi suddenly felt lethargic, but then Meiru’s sunset-orange mana enveloped her.

“Alright, I’m back in it!”

“I see. Come to think of it, my subordinates’ reports did mention you’d recruited a restoration magic user.”

“Hehe. Your tricks won’t work on me anymore! I’ve got this, too!”

Miledi held up the necklace she was wearing. Hanging from it was a ring that looked different from the Treasure Trove ring Oscar had given her before. This was another one of Oscar’s new artifacts, the Ring of Renewal. It was enchanted with the restoration spell Transient Infinity, which preserved something in its current state by continually restoring it to the state it had been in a second before as each second passed. Naturally, it wasn’t as powerful as when Meiru cast the spell herself, but it was enough to restore Miledi back to fighting strength every ten seconds, which was at least enough to combat Rasul’s artifact.

“Oh, you already developed countermeasures for my artifacts? In that case, I’ll just make you submit through brute force.”

“Do you really think you can do that?”

Rasul drew Ignis, his enchanted sword. At the same time, his two chimeras and two generals readied their weapons. Furthermore, Karm had retreated to a

safe distance and was already chanting a spell. On top of that, Rasul's guards were pouring into the throne room. In seconds, Miledi's group was surrounded. But she ignored the newcomers and kept her gaze fixed firmly on Rasul.

"I don't know the true you."

"Hm?"

"But I believe the person in front of me isn't the true you."

Miledi was convinced there was more to Rasul. She refused to believe that the kind Rasul that Vandre and the Schnee clansmen had come to love was just a lie. As for why, that was because—

"Because that's what Van-chan believes."

"You know Van himself already accepted that everything he believed in was an illusion, right?"

"In that case, I just need to find out for sure if that's all there is to you."

It was precisely when her comrades were wavering that Miledi needed to remain firm. Since she was everyone's leader. Miledi thrust her hand out and pointed her index finger at Rasul. "Prepare yourself, demon lord. Because I'm here to tear through deceptions and bring judgment upon the wicked."

Miledi was determined to find out why it was that Rasul had changed and what his true thoughts were now. She wouldn't leave until she knew the truth. But regardless of what the truth was, Rasul had harmed the people close to her.

"Listen up because I'm only gonna say this once."

Elga and Angol stiffened up. They realized the prodigy of the Reisen family had just gotten serious. But this Reisen wasn't like the others.

"I'm gonna beat the fucking shit out of you!"

Because she made her declaration with a fearless smile. The last heir the family of stoic executioners had produced was nothing like her predecessors. She was cheerful, wild, and unbelievably annoying.

"Talk is cheap."

The first to respond to her was Angol. He quickly raised his weapon, a spiked

flail, and swung it at Miledi. The ball end of the flail, which was as large as a human head, shot forward like a cannonball. But Miledi struck it down with her gravity magic. The moment the flail struck the ground, the floor shattered. Angol's swing had been enhanced with his special magic, Pulverize. It allowed him to vibrate objects at a super-high frequency, exponentially upping their destructive potential. As chunks of marble flooring flew through the air, the two black-robed chimeras dashed forward. They activated their Limit Breaks right away, and they moved so fast their figures blurred. Their plan was, of course, to stick to Miledi and Naiz, thus preventing them from using their ancient magic. But before the chimeras could reach them, a portal opened up underneath Miledi, Meiru, and Naiz's feet. The party dropped into it, and the chimeras' attacks whooshed harmlessly over their heads. A second later, the group reappeared in separate corners of the room. The gauntleted chimera rushed toward Miledi, while the one with the assassin's dagger headed for Naiz.

"If you can't reach me, you're not even a threat."

As the chimera with the assassin's dagger bolted toward Naiz, he teleported again. It chased him again, but every time it got close Naiz teleported away. Completely abandoning conventional movement methods, Naiz repeatedly teleported himself around in a ten-meter radius, easily outpacing the chimera.

"Stop letting him toy with you!"

Elga stepped forward, rebuking the chimera. But the moment he did—

"Whoa!?"

"You've got good instincts."

Naiz teleported behind him and slashed at his back. Elga just barely managed to raise his ax in time to block. But he was only able to fend Naiz off for an instant. Naiz used the Treasure Trove Oscar had given him to quickly summon a second scimitar into his free hand and slashed horizontally at Elga, cutting deep into his back. Screaming in pain, Elga rolled forward to put some distance between him and Naiz. The chimera with the assassin's dagger rushed at Naiz while he was occupied, but Naiz just teleported away again before it could get in range. This time Naiz teleported right in the middle of Rasul's guards and sent them all flying with a Void Fissure. A short distance away, the gauntleted

chimera had succeeded in closing in on Miledi.

“Aren’t you forgetting someone?”

But Meiru showed up on its flank and swung down at it with her cutlass. The chimera didn’t even spare her a glance as it dodged to the side, but then a torrent of water suddenly rushed at it. Without any time to react, the chimera was swallowed up by the fierce current and borne away. Seeing as she was surrounded by water, Karm launched a powerful lightning spell at Meiru. However—

“Impossible!”

“Oh, you didn’t know? Perfectly pure water doesn’t conduct electricity.”

Meiru created an arch of water and rode atop it. Though she was inside an enclosed room, she managed to nimbly weave her way between combatants by controlling the flow of her arch. This was Meiru’s preferred style of combat. But since she knew there wouldn’t always be an ocean wherever she was, Meiru had spent the past few days storing a massive amount of pure water inside the Treasure Trove Oscar had given her. She wanted to prove she could fight at full strength even on land, so that Miledi would respect her again.

“Then I’ll vaporize you along with your water!”

Karm summoned a massive sphere of flame above him. He flung it at Meiru but a portal appeared in the water beneath her and she teleported to a different part of her stream. Karm’s fireball just hit empty water, creating a vast amount of steam. But steam was still water, just in gaseous form. And water was Meiru’s domain. She sent the superheated steam hurtling toward the gauntleted chimera, who was once again trying to close in on Miledi. Even if chimeras didn’t feel pain, their movements naturally slowed when they were covered in burns. And that slowdown gave Miledi enough time to fire gravity spheres at Elga, Angol, and all the imperial guards. The soldiers and generals were sent flying by the force of those gravity spheres.

“It seems I’ll have to deal with you myself, Lady Reisen.”

Rasul activated the ability of his boots and shot toward Miledi at breakneck speed. He swung Ignis at Miledi, his form perfect.

“I already told you I’m not interested in repulsive guys like you, so stop clinging to me.”

Miledi leaned backward as she taunted Rasul. As his bloodred sword passed over her head, she let herself fall to the floor and through the portal that suddenly appeared. She then reappeared behind Angol.

“Here.”

“Gwaaaaaaah!”

Using her gravity magic, she slammed him into the floor. But by using body strengthening at the last minute, Angol managed to avoid being crushed to a pulp. He wasn’t one of Rasul’s best generals for nothing.

“Come now, don’t ignore me!”

Rasul chased after Miledi, but before he could reach her she disappeared into another portal. A second later a huge torrent of water shot toward Rasul and Angol. They leaped to either side, avoiding the torrent just in time. But then a massive black sphere appeared in the space between them. Angol prepared himself to fight the pull of gravity, but Rasul just smiled, confident his artifact would protect him. But to his surprise, the sphere didn’t try to drag him or Angol in. Instead, it sucked in all the nearby water. Then—

“Gaaah!”

“Ngh!”

Tiny jets of water shot out of the sphere at supersonic speed. They were compressed enough to cut through the walls and ceiling, so naturally, they left numerous gashes on Angol and the chimera’s bodies as well. Rasul managed to protect himself by deploying his earring artifact’s barrier, but that barrier soon began to crack. This was Miledi and Meiru’s new combo skill, Leviathan Assault. By combining Meiru’s water magic with Miledi’s Spatial Severance they’d been able to recreate the high-speed water jets the Leviathan underneath Andika had shot out. Meiru had also put fragments of her cutlass into the water as well, increasing the jets’ cutting power. Realizing his artifact’s barrier wouldn’t be enough, Rasul deployed another barrier with his own mana.

“Lightning Spear— Overload!”

Lightning Spear was an original spell Miledi had created by packing three Thunderlord's Judgements into a single compressed spear, thus increasing its penetrating power. She threw her spear at Rasul's barrier, and though it resisted her spear for a moment, it started cracking after a few seconds.

"I suppose I should have expected as much from—"

"Azure Spear— Overload!"

Next, Miledi summoned a spear packed with three Azure Blazes and fired it at Rasul as well. Narrowing his eyes, the demon lord poured more mana into his barrier. At the same time, he activated his shadow manipulating artifact, the Void Ring, and had his shadow wrap around his barrier to strengthen it. His barrier was now strong enough to withstand attacks that could raze entire castles, but even that wasn't enough to stop Miledi.

"Focused Divine Wrath!"

Divine Wrath was the strongest light spell in existence. It irked Miledi that its name alluded to the power of god, but she nevertheless cast it with ease. A blast of white light surrounded by sky-blue sparks slammed into Rasul's barrier, cracking both his shadow fortification as well as the barrier itself.

"Your Majesty!"

"Damn you!"

Karm, Elga, and Angol watched with furious rage as Miledi pounded away at Rasul. They wanted to go to his aid, but they were caught in Meiru's current. However the gauntleted chimera had now recovered and it dashed toward Miledi, intent on stopping her. The other chimera that was chasing Naiz also swapped targets to Miledi, as did the remaining Imperial Guards. But all of them were stopped in their tracks by another barrage from Miledi and Meiru's Leviathan Assault.

"Ngh, so this is the power of teleportation?"

"This isn't good!"

Indeed, Naiz had placed countless portals around Miledi's Spatial Severance, allowing him to transport the jet streams it shot out wherever he wanted. Naiz

had placed corresponding portals all over the ceiling, but he hadn't stopped there. He'd also placed a bunch of tiny portals inside the stream of water Meiru was moving across the room. As a result, he was able to redirect the jet streams all across the room, striking at everyone's blind spots. By adding Naiz into the combo attack, they'd created something unbelievably powerful *and* omnidirectional.

"That woman's the one holding them together. Target Meiru Melusine first!"

Elga's shout echoed through the room. He'd realized they were being led around the nose because they'd split up to deal with all the ancient magic users simultaneously. Miledi was being protected by the other two while Naiz could freely teleport wherever he wanted, so he'd singled out Meiru first. If they could just deal with her and get rid of the torrent of water flying across the room, Elga knew the demons could retake the advantage. Furthermore, since Meiru was healing-focused, Elga was certain her combat prowess wasn't as high as the other two. His thought process was rational, and it was certainly important to take out a party's healer first. Unfortunately for him, his one miscalculation was that the Liberators' healer wasn't some dainty priestess, but a master of ancient magic and a pirate queen to boot. The two chimeras instantly answered Elga's command and pincered Meiru. The chimera with the assassin's blade pierced Meiru's heart, while the one with the gauntlets pulverized her organs with a well-placed punch.

"That hurts."

Meiru had little training in the martial side of combat so she couldn't easily dodge or block blows. She was indeed the easiest person to attack. But that meant nothing in the face of her ancient magic. So long as she didn't die instantly, she could heal even fatal blows. And naturally, she had more experience restoring herself than anyone else. While she was the easiest to hit, the pirate queen Meiru Melusine was also the toughest to kill. The two chimeras drew their weapons back, planning to strike again.

"I'm afraid I can't let you escape, my half-brethren."

Meiru disassembled her cutlass into a whip sword. She then accessed the Treasure Trove attached to her cutlass' hilt and brought out even more

sharpened fragments to elongate her whip. This was a new artifact Oscar had designed specifically for Meiru, the Limitless Whip Blade. The whip sword wrapped around the two chimeras, binding them to Meiru.

“Sleep for a while, my pitiful brethren.”

The two chimeras struggled to escape their bindings, but the more they fought the more the blade fragments sliced through their skin. Realizing they couldn’t escape they instead turned to attack Meiru, but before they could, a powerful electric shock ran through the whip sword. Of course, it hit Meiru as well, but she cast restoration magic as it did, healing her instantly.

After a moment the shock passed, and white smoke rose from the two twitching chimeras. Meiru released them from their bindings, and they fell limply to the floor. Though they weren’t moving, Meiru bound them with Oscar’s sealstone shackles just in case, rendering them completely powerless.

Meiru had no time to take a breather though, as Karm, Angol, Elga, and all the Imperial Guards bombarded her with magic. However, their attacks vanished into the ether as Naiz used spatial magic to disperse them.

“Fufu, you can use your magic freely now, can’t you?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Meiru.”

Meiru sat down on her water arch while Naiz appeared next to her. He’d been focusing on evasion while the chimeras had been chasing him, but now he could go on the offensive. He drew his twin scimitars and dropped into a sword stance. Though his martial skills had atrophied while he’d focused on mastering his spatial magic, he was now determined to regain the proficiency he’d lost. A second after he drew his sword he heard the sound of shattering glass behind him. Miledi had finally broken through Rasul’s barrier.

“Your Majesty!”

Elga and Angol tried to rush to the demon lord’s aid. Meanwhile, Karm and the Imperial Guards bombarded Meiru and Naiz with magic.

“You take care of those guys!”

“I suppose you’ll be taking the demon lord then?”

Miledi gave her two comrades a thumbs-up, and they started mopping up the remnants of the demon lord's forces. The moment Rasul's barrier broke, a vast amount of mana surged up from within him. He was emitting more mana than any one person should be capable of storing. *No wonder they call him an avatar of their god. It's like he's drawing power from the heavens.* Miledi thought to herself. A second later, Rasul vanished, only to reappear right in front of Miledi.

"I think I'll have you sleep for a little bit."

Rasul flashed Miledi a charming smile and thrust his palm in front of her face. One of his rings started to glow, the one that activated his mana shockwave.

"Ugh, get away from me you creep."

Though Rasul's smile was enough to make other ladies swoon, Miledi just made a disgusted face. The ring on her right hand began to glow as well as she accessed her Treasure Trove.

"Hm?"

"Too baaaaad, that won't work either! Ahahaha!"

Rasul's bloodred shockwave parted to either side, passing harmlessly by Miledi. She'd deflected it with the fluttering, translucent cloth she'd attached to her shoulder. This was an artifact Oscar had made specifically for Miledi, the Guardian Angel's Raiment. It absorbed the shockwaves Rasul could emit and redirected them to the edges of the cloth. It was woven from Oscar's metal threads and was capable of cushioning the wearer against all sorts of impacts and magical attacks. So long as any part of the cloth touched an attack, it could freely control the mana contained within the attack to redirect it. It was quite large as well, so even Miledi, who was bad at close quarters combat, could get by just holding it up in front of her. Indeed, Miledi easily managed to block Rasul's enchanted sword with it as well. It deadened the impact of his swing, and while a few of Oscar's threads frayed, the cloth didn't rip. His artifact was sturdy enough to stop even Ignis. Furthermore, it was also enchanted with restoration magic, so it was continually repairing itself, albeit a little slowly. Rasul's eyes widened in surprise as the cloth managed to block both his shockwave and his sword swing.

"Eat this!"

“Oh?”

Miledi wrapped the cloth around Rasul’s neck, and it blasted him away. Rasul used his shadow to support him and safely regain his balance.

“If gravity magic doesn’t work, then how about this!?”

Countless metal spheres appeared around Miledi. Oscar had transmuted them to be super dense, and though each was the size of a fist, they each weighed over a hundred kilograms. Miledi grinned and hurled them all toward Rasul. Rasul’s artifact only nullified gravity magic in his immediate vicinity, so it couldn’t stop Miledi from using it to shoot superheavy balls at him. A barrage of spheres bore down on Rasul.

“I see you’ve really thought this through!”

Rasul’s shadow barrier wasn’t powerful enough to stop superdense spheres accelerated by gravity magic. Nor was his sword sharp enough to cut through them. His shockwaves wouldn’t be able to nullify them either. Forced to dodge, Rasul activated his earrings’ barrier as he weaved between the barrage.

“Hey, how does it feel? Even though you’re an artifact user, you’re getting owned by artifacts. Feels bad, doesn’t it? Bahahahaha!”

“Ngh.”

Rasul narrowed his eyes dangerously. But before he could shoot back a retort, one of Miledi’s spheres hit his barrier. The impact caused him to stagger, and once he stopped moving he was a sitting duck. Balls slammed into him one after another, sending massive cracks through his barrier.

“You’re not even fighting with your own strength!”

Trapped in place, Rasul nevertheless attempted to taunt Miledi.

“You’re right, this is O-kun’s strength. O-kun’s here, protecting me.”

Miledi smiled happily, an expression that seemed wholly out of place on a battlefield.

“Kakakakakaka! See, this is the difference between an artifact *user* and an artifact *maker*! Get owned, you third-rate loser! Bahahaha!”

Miledi was as proud of Oscar's accomplishments as she was of her own. Her tone was so annoying that Rasul's arrogant smile finally vanished. But even when Miledi was being annoying, she didn't let up on her fierce assault. The final sphere she sent at Rasul shattered his barrier. The burden of maintaining it until now had been so great that his earrings shattered as well.

"Alright, I think it's about time I get serious," Miledi said, her tone flat. She was concentrating too hard to sound annoying now.

Rasul, who'd been about to charge at her, stopped. Goosebumps rose all over his body. And a second later, Miledi unleashed her true power.

"Blitz Blaze Javelin— Overload."

A flaming spear covered in lightning shot toward Rasul.

"It's time— Ignis!"

As expected, Rasul's magic-cutting sword sliced through Miledi's spear with ease. But she didn't seem worried in the slightest.

"Crimson Javelin— Meteor Shower."

A hundred flaming spears appeared above Rasul and shot toward him like a meteor shower.

"So now you're going for quantity over quality? What a boring strategy."

Sneering, Rasul split his shadow into a hundred pieces and blocked the spears.

"Ice Storm— Starfall."

Countless blades of wind and pillars of ice fell from the open ceiling, all aiming for Rasul.

"You're just wasting your mana."

Ignis glowed with a ghastly light, and Rasul swung down with all his might. That one swing was enough to blow away the entirety of Miledi's barrage.

"Earthstorm— Hellbringer."

All the rubble in the room rose up and shot toward Rasul. He shot down the rubble using his own earth spell, and said in exasperation, "How long are you going to—"

“Freezing Torrent. Lightning Spear. Ice Fang. Earth Shaker. Flare Blitz. Aqua Slicer. Tornado.”

“D-Damn you.”

Miledi’s unbelievably massive barrage of magic wiped the confident look off of Rasul’s face. Magic of every element shot toward him, blotting out his field of view. Miledi was overwhelming him with a wall of magic. Rasul used his shadows, Ignis, and his own exceptional magical abilities to fend off Miledi’s assault, but he was slowly pushed back.



On the other hand, Miledi's attacks kept growing stronger. She started casting her spells faster, and her aim grew more precise.

"Spark Plasma. Hellfire Tsunami. Micro Ocean. Celestial Flash. Pale Gaol."

"You're casting advanced-level spells at that speed!?"

Rasul blocked the barrage of thunder with a barrier, cut down the wave of fire with Ignis, blasted the tsunami of water apart with his mana shockwave, shot down the blade of light with his own magic, and blew away the petrifying white smoke with his shadows. There was no opportunity for him to launch a counterattack. He had to keep his distance, and couldn't bring the battle to close quarters, where he had the advantage. Miledi had him completely pinned down with magic.

I never imagined this generation's Reisen would be so strong she'd be a match for the demon lord. Indeed, Miledi was fighting on equal terms with the demon lord, the strongest member of a race that was already known for being the strongest mages. In fact, if it wasn't for his array of legendary artifacts, he would be overwhelmed. Meaning Miledi already outmatched him when it came to pure magical skill alone.

No human should have that kind of power. Miledi had of course been blessed with superhuman talent, but she'd also put in an ungodly amount of effort to hone her skills. Rasul couldn't even fathom how much training it must have taken for Miledi to reach this level while still in her teens. And Miledi hadn't even ascended to her final form.

"Cosmos..."

An immeasurable amount of mana rose up from Miledi, dying the entire throne room sky-blue.

"Impossible..."

For the first time since becoming demon lord, Rasul was worried he might actually lose. Countless miniature suns started orbiting around Miledi.

"Crusher."

Each sun was comprised of a combination of Azure Blaze, Thunderlord's

Judgement, and Divine Wrath, the three strongest spells. And there were over a hundred suns. The multicolored suns hurtled toward Rasul, spelling certain death.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Rasul screamed in pain, something Miledi and the others hadn’t ever heard before. All of his skill combined wasn’t enough to stop the barrage of suns, and he was blasted against the wall. The wall exploded outward, a sight that could be seen all throughout the capital. But no one watching expected that it was their demon lord that was on the losing end of that exchange.

“I told you I’d beat the shit out of you!”

Panting heavily, Miledi grinned and pumped her fist into the air. After that she fell to the ground, too drained of mana to keep floating.

“Yes yes, well done. You’re amazing, Miledi-chan.”

“Seriously Meru-nee, stop treating me like a kid.”

Meiru caught Miledi before she hit the floor. She started returning her water to her Treasure Trove and cast restoration magic on Miledi.

“We’re pretty much done here too. The guards just kept coming so we plugged up the entrances.”

Miledi looked over and saw Elga, Angol, Karm, and all of Rasul’s guards lying facedown on the floor. A number of other guards were stuck outside the demolished throne room, an invisible barrier keeping them from entering. Naiz had used spatial magic to cut them off. They desperately threw themselves against the barrier, their eyes bloodshot. They were determined to kill Miledi for harming their precious demon lord.

“Th-They’re kinda scary...”

“Well, you are the terrorist who beat up their demon lord.”

“Yeah, what did you expect? Anyway, let’s go see how he’s doing.”

Once everyone was healed, they grabbed Naiz’s hands and he teleported them out of the castle. Rasul had crashed into a nearby tower, and he lay limply on its floor. Miledi and the others descended onto the tower’s roof.

“Good grief. This was just meant to be a sideshow, but it ended up with me getting humiliated.”

Blood stained Rasul’s clothes and part of his face had been badly burned. Panting, he extricated himself from the tower’s wall and leaped up to the roof.

“Rasul Alva Igdol. I’ll have you tell me the truth now.”

Miledi stared intently at Rasul. Her desire to discover the truth hadn’t waned one bit.

“Heh. You and Van really are such entertaining toys.”

“Did you say... toys?”

That word gave Miledi deja vu.

“Did you truly believe I loved Van? That I actually didn’t want to do these experiments, and that I was a man of virtue who was trying to bring people happiness?”

Hilarious. Oh, I can’t believe how cute you two are. I never get bored toying with people like you. Rasul’s thoughts showed on his face, and his expression twisted into a cold, heartless sneer. He looked absolutely inhuman. Naiz and Meiru gave Rasul a disgusted look, but Miledi didn’t seem angry, or upset. She could tell something was wrong here. As her doubt grew, she suddenly felt like she was standing in front of a closed gate.

“Miledi Reisen. The girl who killed even her family for the sake of justice! The blazing sun who fights against the world!”

“Who... are you?”

Miledi asked, confused. Naiz and Meiru turned to Miledi in shock. But when they saw her face, they realized the Rasul reflected in her eyes was a completely different person than the Rasul standing in front of them. Rasul sneered again, his expression dripping with malice.

“I wonder how you’ll feel when you realize you’ve just started a war?”

“What are you plan—”

Before she could finish that sentence, Rasul poured mana into the artifact

located at the top of the tower, activating it remotely. The pealing of a bell echoed throughout the capital. Rasul then flew into the air. Caught off guard, the group chased after him. But Rasul wasn't trying to run. He flew up to the center of the capital and surrounded himself in a cloak of wind. Then, looking down at his citizens, he opened his mouth and shouted, "Behold, my brethren! Standing over there are the church's strongest agents!"

The bell located on the tower amplified his voice, broadcasting it throughout the city.

They stopped in their tracks, surprised by his sudden change in tactics.

"They infiltrated the imperial castle and used cowardly means to slay my soldiers! Not only that, these assailants belong to our most hated foe! For you see, that girl over there is a Reisen!"

The demons down below started murmuring to each other. It was undoubtedly the Reisen family that had caused demons the most grief over the past few decades. In fact, many demons feared the Reisens. So to them, it made perfect sense that a Reisen had been chosen as the church's vanguard.

"Rouse yourselves, my brave, beloved citizens! Though I wished for nothing but peace and focused only on the prosperity of our kingdom, these barbaric humans tried to slay me regardless! It's time we eliminated these inferior creatures once and for all!"

Demons hadn't invaded humans since the reign of the last demon lord. Even when the church had sent raiding parties across the border, they'd avoided escalating into a full-scale war. But now the humans had launched a cowardly sneak attack on their beloved, peace-loving demon lord. Not only that, they'd sent a Reisen to do it. Such an outrageous affront could not go unpunished.

"Punish the cowardly humans for their sins! Show them that it is the demon race that is superior!"

Rasul's speech successfully worked the demons up into a frenzy. He raised his fist high and shouted even louder than before, "The time for war has come!"

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The battle cries of a hundred thousand demons shook the capital. They were

ready to give their lives to bring the hammer of justice down on the barbaric humans. Rasul turned back toward Miledi and spread his arms wide, sneering. Miledi's goal was turning the world into a place of peace and cooperation. And Rasul had just thrown the biggest wrench he could into her plans.

"This miiight be a problem."

"Tch, he's craftier than I thought."

Meiru's gentle smile disappeared, while Naiz ground his teeth in frustration. However, Miledi just met Rasul's crazed gaze. There was no frustration or impatience in her expression. Instead, she looked as though she'd finally figured something out. *He knows how to entice people into a cult-like devotion, and he revels in trampling on the feelings of others. On top of that, Ma-chan said he suddenly changed right after his coronation ceremony. Lastly, he wants to push demons and humans to fight no matter what.*

"You and Van really are such entertaining toys."

That one sentence had helped Miledi connect the dots. Though she had no proof, she was sure her deduction was correct. Once she realized what had happened, anger welled up within her.

"I see... So that's how it is."

"Miledi-chan?"

"Miledi? Are you okay?"

Ignoring the frenzied battle cries down below, Miledi glared at Rasul, her eyes simmering with rage. His sneer didn't waver and he said cheerfully, "So, what are you going to do, Lady Reisen?"

Will you run? Or will you continue fighting me? Or are you going to try and tell people I've been experimenting on demons and that I'm actually evil? Not that that'll work. Rasul waited patiently for Miledi's response, confident that he'd won. Miledi sucked in a huge breath, then used wind magic to amplify her voice.

"I! Love! Allllllllll demooooooooooooooooooooons!"

Miledi's shout echoed through the capital, the emotion in her voice clear to

all who were listening. Utterly confused by her declaration, the demons simmered down and exchanged glances. Rasul was so shocked his jaw dropped open. Even Meiru and Naiz hadn't expected Miledi to try something like this. In the stunned silence that followed, Miledi sucked in another breath and shouted loudly enough to rupture her vocal cords.

"I love all humans! I love all beastmen! I love all vampires, and dragonmen, and humans, and all the mixed races born between them! I love everyone!"

This world was unfair, rife with prejudice and conflict. But even so, Miledi loved this world, from the bottom of her heart. Likewise, she loved all the creatures that lived within it.

"I want to be able to eat a meal together with everyone where we're all smiling and laughing!"

Miledi's unconditional love was so strong it gave the demons pause.

"I want to be able to joke around with everyone! Even if we fight sometimes, I want us all to end every day looking forward to seeing each other again!"

Rasul had finally recovered from his shock. He stared at Miledi as though she were some strange, alien creature. On the other hand, Meiru and Naiz closed their eyes and smiled gently at Miledi.

"Is it wrong to wish for a world where we can all live together!? Is it wrong to hope that humans and demons will one day join hands!?"

Rasul knew he needed to stop Miledi. His instincts were telling him it was dangerous to let her keep talking. She was too much of a threat. However, Meiru and Naiz glared at Rasul, making it clear they'd stop him if he tried anything. Weakened as he was, he couldn't fight them. His mind raced, trying to think of some other way to stop Miledi.

"I don't think it's wrong!"

Her words started having a noticeable effect. The demons were starting to realize that, unbelievable as it was, the Reisen heir actually meant it when she said she loved them. They no longer knew what was real or not, or what they should be doing.

“And you know what, your demon lord doesn’t either!”

The demons grew even more confused. *Weren’t you just fighting each other?* they thought, their gazes turning to Rasul.

“In truth, the demon lord is a kind person! He cares more about the future of demonkind than anyone! He values peace more than war and he loves all of you!”

Vandre and the Schnee clan had believed that the kind, peace-loving Rasul still existed somewhere. And in truth he did. What had transformed him into this monster was—

“It’s the church’s shitty god who’s trying to start this war! He’s the one who—”

Before Miledi could finish, a burst of blinding light appeared from the demon lord’s castle. A second later, Rasul appeared atop the castle’s tallest tower. A giant shimmering magic circle appeared on one of the castle’s undamaged walls, and the tower Rasul was standing on began to glow.

“O-Oi, isn’t this kinda bad?” One of the demons standing in the capital’s central plaza muttered. His worry was understandable. Rasul had just activated the capital’s ultimate weapon. This spell was only meant to be invoked when the city faced a serious crisis, for it was capable of wiping out entire armies. The city needed multiple barriers just to defend against the shockwaves from this spell if it was fired outside the capital. But right now, Rasul was aiming it at Miledi, who was floating above the center of the city. This was more than just “kinda bad.” Judging by the elevation difference between the tower and where Miledi was standing, many people near the center of the city would get caught up in the blast too.

“Nacchan, Meru-nee! We need to get higher or—”

Miledi was planning on flying high enough that the castle’s weapon wouldn’t hit the city. But before she could finish her sentence, a loud voice echoed directly inside Miledi’s head.

“Do you plan to abandon the capital?”

With that one statement, Rasul had rendered Miledi’s group immobile. If they

tried to escape, he'd just blow up the city.

"Though you may be one of His pieces, you are too dangerous to let live."

Cold sweat poured down Miledi's back as she stared at the size of the magic circle covering the castle. Nevertheless, she smiled fearlessly and shouted, "Man, you sure blew your cover quickly! I bet your precious master's disappointed in you! Bahaha!"

Now Miledi had proof that the scum they'd been fighting hadn't been the real Rasul.

"Nacchan! Meru-nee!"

"Leave it to me."

"This'll be a piece of cake."

Meiru and Naiz nodded immediately while Miledi poured all of her mana into creating the biggest Spatial Severance she could. The moment she did, the tower Rasul was standing on fired an aurora of rainbow light at her.

"Like hell we're losing heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeere!"

Miledi absorbed the beam with her Spatial Severance. Though the beam was powerful enough to raze armies, it wasn't powerful enough to escape Miledi. However, there was so much energy contained within the beam that its aftershocks could still hit the capital even if the beam itself was absorbed. Which was why Naiz was protecting the central plaza with a spatial barrier. Meanwhile, Meiru continued casting restoration magic on Miledi's Spatial Severance, preventing it from getting too saturated and exploding. The sky above the capital was covered in multicolored light. And as time passed, the beam slowly began to push Miledi back. She struggled to maintain her Spatial Severance, but it consumed so much mana that she was quickly running out. Meiru, too, was using a prodigious amount of mana to continue restoring Miledi's Spatial Severance.

"Struggle as best as you can, Irregulars. My lord's board has no need for pieces like you."

On the other hand, the demon lord looked to have energy to spare.

“Shit... We have to do something about... that castle.”

Right now the only person capable of destroying the castle wall was Naiz. But he’d expended a huge amount of his mana in the battle earlier, and he’d used up most of what was left erecting a barrier to protect the city. Just as Miledi was starting to worry they might not be able to stop the beam—

“We just need to destroy that castle, right?”

“O-kun!”

Oscar appeared. He adjusted his glasses like usual, and Miledi smiled in relief.

“Blow that thing to pieces!”

“You got it, Leader.”

Neither Oscar’s strongest attack, his Black Umbrella’s upgraded Thunderlord’s Judgement, nor a barrage of enchanted swords would be enough to take out the castle walls. After all, Rasul’s barrier had been enough to stop those attacks.

“Come, my Shadow Emperor.”

An earthquake shook the capital, and the demons looked even more shocked than they had when Rasul had pointed the army killer at them. Miledi and the others were stunned as well. In fact, Rasul was too. It was only natural. After all, Oscar had just summoned a golem knight that was thirty meters tall. It had a longsword in its right hand and a round shield in its left. Oscar had even fashioned a cape for it. With a thunderous roar, it raised its sword. That simple action created a gale of wind.

“Oscar Orcus!” Rasul shouted. He deployed the strongest barrier he could.

“That’s right. I’m Oscar Orcus, the artifact maker.”

And this is one of my artifacts. Oscar raised his hand, and the golem’s sword caught fire. It burned as hot as Lestina had when she’d used her Inflame. Without any hesitation, Oscar had his golem swing its sword down. The sword crashed into the castle with all the force of a natural disaster. Rasul’s barrier put up as much resistance as a piece of paper before shattering, and the castle’s physical and magical wards melted as well. The Shadow Emperor’s blade cleanly cut through the castle. The magic circle fizzled and faded as the golem’s burning

blade sliced it in half along with the castle. As the castle walls tumbled to the ground Oscar shouted, “Go, Van!”

“You don’t need to tell me twice!”

Vandre burst from the ruins of the castle in his dragon form. He shot toward Rasul, who was still off-balance from the shockwave the Shadow Emperor’s swing had created. Rasul quickly fired a few blasts of magic at Vandre, but they all bounced off his scales. Changing tactics, Rasul sent his shadows after Vandre instead, but Vandre dodged them by returning to human form. Weaving between the numerous shadows, Vandre shouted, “Take this, you shitty brother!”

“Van—”

Vandre put all his might behind a single punch and swung at the circlet on Rasul’s forehead. His fist connected, and Rasul was sent flying backward. The demon lord once again slammed into the tower behind him and slumped against the wall. As Vandre snorted dismissively, Oscar came to stand next to him.

“What do you think?”

“Dunno.”

Wondering what the two were talking about, all of them walked over. Vandre stared at Rasul as if trying to discern something. The demon lord slowly staggered to his feet. The circlet on his forehead cracked, then shattered. The moment it did, “Y-You bastard. Shut up!”

Rasul put a hand to his forehead and started shouting to himself. It sounded like he was hearing voices in his head.

“I knew it. So that’s how it is, isn’t it?” Vandre said, his voice trembling. He’d already accepted everything he’d believed in was a lie once, but now he’d found hope again. While Oscar had been healing the two of them, he’d told Vandre of his theory. Rasul had changed drastically the day after his coronation ceremony, and Oscar hadn’t been able to figure out the composition of the demon lord’s circlet. Oscar’s theory was that the circlet Rasul had received during his coronation had been what had transformed him.

“I see. In that case, we’d better save Van-chan’s real brother.”

That brief exchange was enough for Miledi to figure out what was going on, and she smiled. Meiru and Naiz did as well. A second later, an explosion of mana erupted from Rasul. His normally red mana had hints of silver in it now. The spiral of mana reached up into the heavens, and clouds started gathering around the demon lord.

“His mana can even influence the weather? Haha, this is starting to get ridiculous.”

Cold sweat poured down Miledi and the others’ foreheads as they watched the *something* that was pretending to be Rasul step toward them.

“You bastards, how dare you get in the way of my divine mission! Disrupting His plans is the greatest sin there is! Why can’t you ignorant beings understand that!?”

The gathering clouds swirled around the demon lord. His red and silver mana called enough of them to cover the capital. To the demons watching below, he seemed divine. While they were ecstatic that their demon lord was this powerful, a worm of doubt niggled at the back of their minds. *Hadn’t Reisen been the one who’d insulted the church? Did the demon lord truly need to go that far to eliminate someone who’d denounced the one thing other humans held sacred? It was almost as if...*

As that doubt grew, the citizens all looked up. They wanted to believe the demon lord’s wrath was directed at Reisen, and not at them. But they could no longer be sure. Meanwhile, Miledi was standing between them and the demon lord, as if to protect everyone from his divine wrath with that small back of hers.

“I’ll bring the script back on track! Today will be the day I spark a war! I won’t let anyone stop me!”

Even if he had to kill a few of his citizens, Rasul was confident he could convince the populace it had been necessary to strike down Reisen. After all, she’d destroyed the demon lord’s castle, killed his generals, and even damaged Rasul himself. That was more than enough reason for Igdol’s demons to hate her.

“The demons who built up their strength during peacetime will once again declare war on the humans!”

That was the script Rasul’s lord had set out, and he would make sure it was followed. Even if Miledi was one of the pieces his lord had put into play himself, she was too dangerous to let live. *This is all for the sake of my Lord!*

“I’ll crush you beneath the weight of my devotion!”

A hole opened up within the sky. A pillar of light gathered at the center of the cloudy sky. The air shook and the earth trembled as Rasul primed his strongest attack. But Miledi wasn’t afraid.

“Bring it on,” she replied, smiling her fearless smile.

“Don’t think you can toy with people forever! We’ll make you pay for underestimating us, you bastard! I’ll show you that the beautiful genius mage Miledi is invincible!”

Miledi’s own sky-blue mana flared up around her, reaching up into the sky. It was as if she was baring her fangs at heaven itself. Everyone watching was spellbound. This young girl was even more dazzling than their own demon lord.

“She really isn’t embarrassed at all about calling herself beautiful, is she?”

“Personally, I’m quite fond of Miledi-chan’s confidence.”

“This is just how Miledi always is.”

“I dunno about her. Are you sure you guys all want her as your leader?”

Miledi’s four comrades lined up next to her. At the same time, they unleashed their mana as well. Oscar’s sunlight yellow mana, Meiru’s sunset orange mana, Naiz’s earth brown mana, and Vandre’s moonlight pale mana all joined Miledi’s. The light of Miledi and her comrades was far more beautiful than that of the demon lord’s. A moment later, Rasul struck. The heavens fell upon them all. A blast of light, so large that it blotted out the sky, bore down upon them. If divine punishment existed, this was what it looked like. But Miledi and the others faced it head-on.

“Obsidian Vortex— Azure Burst!”

Miledi compressed an Azure Blaze into a minuscule sphere with her Obsidian

Vortex and started shooting out pillars of fire.

“Shadow Emperor— Thunder Cannon!”

Oscar’s golem raised its shield, which started spinning and emitting sparks. Twelve massive spheres of lightning formed on the edges of the shield, then fused together in the center. The golem then fired a beam of thunder comprised of a dozen Thunderlord’s Judgements fused together at Rasul.

“Serpent’s Fangs— Infinity.”

Meiru’s micro ocean of water turned into a multi-headed snake. Countless sharp steel fragments swirled around inside the current, creating a whirlpool of death. She then fired that whirlpool snake at Rasul.

“Void Cannon.”

The space around Rasul ruptured. Normally Naiz’s spatial attacks were invisible, but this one was so powerful that the tears in space could actually be seen.

“Compound Transformation.”

Vandre transformed into his dragon form and unleashed a metamorphosis magic-enhanced breath attack. The five Liberators’ spells slammed into the wall of light Rasul had sent at them. The force of the clash sent a blast of wind rippling across the entire capital. The wind was so powerful it knocked the demons down below to the ground. But even so, they continued looking up at the sky. At the five warriors battling against the heavens. They couldn’t believe their eyes. Not just because the battle was so intense. But also because humans, a beastman, and a half-dragonman, half-demon were all holding hands and fighting for a common cause. That was something that had never happened before. Had the demon lord ordered it, they would gladly have given up their lives to try and kill Miledi and her comrades. For the prosperity of the demon race, the people of the capital were willing to do anything. But even so—

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

When they saw the girl they were meant to hate fighting so hard to protect them, when they thought back to what she’d told them, they found their hearts wavering.

“I! Love! Allllllllll demooooooooooooooooooooons!” Those words still echoed in the demons’ minds.

“You can do it...”

One demon looked down in surprise as his own child whispered that. He had no doubt his kid had said that unconsciously. Still, any other time he would have scolded him harshly. Right now, however, the father didn’t have the heart to tell his son off. Miledi and the others, of course, had no idea about the change of heart that was taking place down below. They were desperately struggling to fend Rasul’s attack off.

“Is this... how strong our enemy is?”

Slowly but surely, they were being pushed back.

“No, they’re even stronger! But that doesn’t matter! We’ll still overcome them!”

“This is a nightmare! He’s even stronger than that God’s Apostle!”

Cold sweat poured down Naiz’s back. His mana was nearing its limits.

“This is the last time I can restore everyone.”

“At this rate, we’re going to lose. Don’t you have any tricks left?”

Meiru’s complexion grew pale as she squeezed out the last of her mana to restore everyone else’s. Meanwhile, Vandre’s breath started to falter. The party was slowly pushed downward. Before long they’d hit the ground. There wasn’t much time left.

“You pathetic fools! If you refuse to be His pawns, then—”

“Disappear” was probably the last word he was going to say. But for some reason, the demon lord faltered. He cradled his head and screamed, “Stop getting in my way!”

For a moment, the light of his attack weakened.

“This is it! Everyone, now!”

Miledi used up every last drop of mana she had left. She glowed so brilliantly she outshined the press of divine judgment bearing down on them. Oscar, Naiz,

Meiru, and Vandre all followed suit. They gave everything they had for one last attack, barely managing to remain conscious as they did so. At long last, the demon lord's light started getting pushed back.

"Impossible! Where are you drawing such power from!?"

"Carve this into your memory! This is the power of mortals!"

Five different attacks shot up to the heavens, swallowing up the demon lord's light. But then the demon lord's power grew again. It was almost as if he truly was being granted unlimited mana from the heavens. He bore down on them again, as if to prove mortals could never match god. Their attacks reached an equilibrium state once more. Just as they started to panic, the demon lord's eyes suddenly widened in surprise. Then his face twisted in fear. But a second later that expression vanished, replaced by the same hateful look he'd had earlier.

"I won't accept this! Curse you, Liberators! One day, I'll—"

A cocoon of silver light enveloped the demon lord. A second later something shot out of his body and vanished into mist. At the same time, his attack dissipated. Their spells all rushed toward Rasul, and they hurriedly redirected them away from the demon lord. Their attacks pierced the sky instead, blowing away the dark clouds that had gathered around the capital. They disappeared with a flash, shooting toward the heavens.

Rasul was blown away by the attacks' shockwaves, and fell into his old throne room. Too drained to help themselves, let alone Rasul, all of them fell to the ground. Vandre ran out of mana to keep his transformation going and returned to human form. Oscar just barely managed to control his Shadow Emperor in time to stop their fall. He had the golem spread out its cloak and catch them before they hit the ground.

"N-Nice one, O-kun."

"*Pant Pant*. I live to serve, Leader."

Bantering lightly with each other, Oscar and Miledi crawled over to the golem's palm.

"Haaah... Haaah... Did we win?"

The sky was clearing up, and beams of sunlight started filtering through the clouds. Naiz looked absently up at the sky, still not sure they'd actually won. Meiru smiled ruefully, a rarity for her, and replied, "I think it would be more accurate to say... he let us go."

"So that was the shitty thing Miledi said wasn't my brother. I wonder what he wanted."

"Who knows. It couldn't have been good, whatever it was. Anyway, we got out of this alive, so I think it's safe to say it's our win!"

Miledi grinned and threw her hands into the air triumphantly. Oscar and the others exchanged glances, then smiled and brought their hands up to give Miledi a high-five. Once the party had managed to catch their breath, Vandre turned toward the castle.

"Brother..."

"I saw him fall into the throne room."

Oscar squeezed out a bit more mana to send his Shadow Emperor walking toward the castle. It stomped across the demon capital's plaza and stretched its hand out toward the castle's throne room. The party hopped off the golem and Oscar returned it to his Treasure Trove. They found Rasul lying among the rubble, looking completely exhausted.

"Yo, Van... Long time no see."

"Is it... really you, Brother?"

"I sure hope so. What do you think? Do I look sane to you? Am I the brother you know?"

Rasul smiled tiredly at Vandre, and Vandre staggered over to his brother.

"Yeah, you look like the brother I know. The brother... I remember."

"I see... Van."

Tears sprung to Vandre's eyes and Rasul squeezed out the words he'd always wanted to say to his precious younger brother.

"I'm sorry."

“I-It’s fine. I’m not that weak. I’m different from how I used to be... so...”

“Yeah. You’re not like me, who got taken over by some artifact. You’re strong. No, you’ve always been strong. Way stronger than me.”

Rasul reached out and ruffled Vandre’s hair. He caressed Vandre’s braid, then reached for his own hair and tied a new one for himself. Vandre smiled at his brother. *You didn’t have to bother retying it, you know.* Rasul then turned to Miledi.

“Lady Reisen. It looks like I caused you quite a bit of trouble.”

“You bet you did!”

Oscar and Naiz shook their heads in exasperation while Meiru smiled happily.

“In that case, I suppose I need to pay you back somehow.”

Rasul smiled ruefully as he said that, but Miledi shook her head.

“As long as you promise not to hurt Van-chan again, I’ll forgive you.”

“I doubt that... thing will stay quiet. For centuries, he’s used the demon lord’s circlet to do whatever he wanted with this country. I can’t say for certain he won’t come back to take control of me again.”

Rasul was hesitant to make any promises to Miledi. While Vandre had managed to destroy the circlet, Rasul doubted that was the only means they had of controlling people.

“Really? It looks to me like you’re strong enough to fight him off this time.”

Rasul had had his ego sealed away for years. Despite that, he’d fought against his captor and given Miledi and the others the opening they needed.

“Besides, if that thing ever comes back, I’ll be sure to kill it for good and save you.”

“I see...”

“And if you’re still worried, then O-kun’ll figure something out for you!”

Oscar shook his head. Miledi foisting all her work onto him was nothing new. Naiz gave Oscar a sympathetic look and patted his shoulder. Sighing, Oscar opened up his Treasure Trove and pulled out a few chunks of raw ore. Enlisting

Meiru and Miledi's help, he fashioned a new circlet for Rasul. He also borrowed Rasul's help and created a circlet packed to the brim with restoration and anti-brainwashing magic.

"*Pant Pant.* Here you go. Haah Haah. A circlet enchanted with your magic, our leader's magic, and our strongest healer's magic. *Cough*... I've also made it so that if its magic starts getting overpowered, it'll send me a signal... Besides, if you're a real artifact user, you should be able to get even more out of it than that. Bleh."

"I-I see. Thank you... But are you okay?"

"I don't want to move ever again."

Oscar collapsed onto the floor, and the strength drained from his limbs. Miledi's group was exhausted too, but the amount of creation magic Oscar had needed to use had really drained him.

"Fufu, you're quite something."

"That's cause he's O-kun!"

Miledi grinned proudly as she cast healing magic on Oscar. Suddenly recalling something, Rasul grinned mischievously and said, "Indeed. Even when he was up against the demon lord's might, he said something like 'I'll never let Miledi fall into your hands.'"

"Huh?"

After a moment's confusion, Miledi blushed to the tips of her ears.

"Oh my, judging by your reaction... you were conscious when that happened, weren't you?"

"I-I have no idea what you're talking about!"

Miledi pounced on Rasul, and he snickered.

"Brother... I see you still like teasing people."

Vandre shook his head in exasperation. He'd often been on the receiving end of Rasul's pranks when they were young. Just then, everyone heard the thudding of footsteps nearing the room. It seemed the demon soldiers had

come running over here when they saw the demon lord fall. Elga and the others, who were still lying unconscious on the floor, started groaning as well. They'd be awake soon. Vandre turned to the black-robed chimeras. Sensing his intentions, Naiz dashed over to them. His footsteps were a little unsteady because of how mana drained he was, but he managed to pick the two of them up still.

"Van, take this."

Rasul took a transparent octagonal prism out of his pocket. This was the artifact that had bound the chimeras to his will. As he took it, Vandre stared into Rasul's eyes. Rasul said with determination, "Go, Van. This country isn't ready to accept someone like you or the Liberators... At least, not yet. You should serve Lady Reisen for now."

"Brother..."

Vandre closed his eyes. Just then, a gale buffeted the party and a flock of wyverns came down through the hole in the ceiling.

"Van-sama!"

Margaretta and the others had come to pick them up. Marshal came down on another wyvern and yelled, "We got all those gray-robed guys too! Let's get out of here!" Vandre opened his eyes and met Rasul's gaze again. Rasul gasped. The noble look in Vandre's eyes reminded Rasul of his younger brother's mother, Sasrika.

"Alright, Brother. I'll go for now. You better take care of this country, my homeland, for me."

Vandre had referred to Igdol as his homeland. So long as Rasul was Igdol's ruler, it would be his home. Rasul struggled to hold back tears, then nodded as firmly as he could. He then turned to the leader of the group who'd saved his younger brother and said with as much compassion as he could, "Lady, take care of my brother for me."

"Sure... What are you gonna do?"

"I'll start working to make my ideals a reality. I think that's the best way I can thank you Liberators for what you've done."

In other words, Rasul would try to change demon society. He'd strive to make Igdol a country of peace. He believed that was what the Liberators wanted too. Miledi brought a hand to her chest and closed her eyes, digesting Rasul's words. After a moment, she opened them again and smiled innocently at him. Then she turned on her heel and said, "Let's go, everyone!"

They clambered up onto a wyvern, and the party flew off into the sunset. Rasul smiled as he watched them go. He knew he'd never forget them. Not long afterward, his guards came running into the room and his generals regained consciousness. Ignoring the tumult around him, Rasul looked up at the sky and said, "I pray that when the time comes for your decisive battle... history records that us demons were your allies as well."

Rasul would work hard to make that future come to pass. That was both his resolve as the Liberators' ally and his declaration of war against god.

Epilogue

One month had passed since the battle at the demon capital. Miledi and her comrades, the old members of the Reisen branch headquarters, and the entire Schnee clan were currently in the forest bordering the Obsidian Tundra. They'd decided to stay in the southern continent for a while to keep an eye on Rasul. It would also have been hard to cross continents with a group this big and not attract attention. Since, including the chimeras, the group was over 100 people strong.

Still, Dylan and Katy needed a secure place to rest, so the party would need to move eventually. While their bodies were healed, their souls weren't there yet. Miledi had already gotten in contact with the closest Liberator village, and they were making preparations to accept all the rescued test subjects into their ranks. Eventually the plan was to create a new permanent residence for the Schnee clan, but for now, they just needed a place to stay.

Incidentally, Meiru had been the one who'd advocated moving to a nearby Liberator village instead of staying in the Obsidian Tundra first. Mostly because she couldn't handle the cold.

Fortunately, the forest they were hiding in was known as the Forest of No Return to nearby demons, so they avoided it like the plague. Meaning Miledi's party was unlikely to get spotted. The reason it'd been given that name was—

"Oh my, Meiru-chan! You're back to wearing that swimsuit again! What happened to the clothes I made you?"

"P-Please don't make me wear those..."

Meiru's voice was surprisingly meek. That was because she was up against the lord of this forest, a musclebound drag queen. He was the reason this forest was known as the Forest of No Return. Anyone he got his hands on did technically come back, but they were never the same. His name was Jinglebell. He was, in fact, a Liberator. And not just any Liberator either. He was the Liberators' best tailor and the one who'd made Miledi's clothes. Though he was

a demon, he couldn't use magic. Because of that, he'd been persecuted by his peers. In order to escape the bullying, he'd trained his muscles to the point where he could counter magic with brute strength alone. He actually had enough physical power to take on an entire battalion of demon soldiers. Incidentally, Snowbell considered Jinglebell his master.

"Good going, Bell-neesan! Corner her... Ahem, I mean, make sure to dress her up nice!"

"Miledi-chan, I'll make you pay for this later."

Meiru fled from Jinglebell, who was trying to force her into a frilly dress that he'd made. Miledi watched from the sidelines, cheering Jinglebell on. A short distance away, Oscar, Naiz, and Vandre were honing their close combat skills. Though at the moment, Oscar and Vandre were just glaring at each other.

"So what you're saying is, back then, you used those glasses to locate where everyone in the castle was?"

"Yeah. They're amazing, aren't they? I can even use them to get a bird's-eye view of myself."

Some time back, Oscar had enlisted Mikaela's help to enchant his glasses with her Soul Sight. They were the reason Oscar was able to easily dodge attacks in chaotic melees, and why it seemed like he had eyes in the back of his head. It was also what had helped him find where Vandre was when they'd mounted their rescue. Oscar could see through anything and everything at all times.

"I see. So basically, you're a creep," Vandre said bluntly. Irked, Oscar replied, "At least my glasses aren't as stupid as your muffler. Why do you even wear that when it's not cold?"

"Don't insult my muffler. You just have no appreciation for art, you perverted four-eyes."

"Stop insulting my glasses, you wannabe artist."

"What'd you say?"

"You wanna go?"

"Haaah, why do you two have to argue about every little thing?"

Naiz sighed deeply. Recently, Naiz had been saddled with the unenviable duty of mediating Oscar and Vandre's arguments, and it was exhausting him. Susha, who'd come to watch Naiz train, cocked her head and asked, "Is this what they mean when they say best friends fight a lot?"

"They're definitely best friends alright!"

"R-Really?"

"Well, you don't normally see our brother get that emotional about things, right?"

Yunfa, Corrin, and Ruth carried on the conversation. Next to the children, Mikaela dropped to all fours and muttered, "H-He called it creepy... He called my special magic creepy..."

"D-Don't worry about it, Mikaela. No one actually thinks that. Vandre just said that cause he's talking to Oscar, he doesn't really believe it," Shushu said, trying to cheer Mikaela up.

"I-Indeed. Normally, Van-sama never insults people like that. Though it seems he acts much ruder when he's around your leader... and especially when he's around Oscar-dono."

Margaretta wasn't sure how to feel. She was happy Vandre had found friends he could be frank with, but at the same time, Vandre's constant arguments with Oscar caused a lot of other people trouble.

"Shushu's right, Mikaela. We've been saved by your power a bunch of times. No one thinks it's creepy."

"Marshal-san..."

"Besides, it's not like you use it to peep on people or anything. So be proud of _"

A guilty expression suddenly appeared on Mikaela's face.

"M-Mikaela? Don't tell me you..."

"I-It's not what you think! It was just an accident! I wasn't peeking on you on purpose, Marshal-san! It's not like I think you look sexy when you're bathing or anything!"

Everyone started scooting away from Mikaela. Realizing she'd slipped up, she nevertheless tried to defend her honor. But her excuses were interrupted by the flapping of wings.

"Ah, it's Creme-chan."

At Corrin's words, everyone looked up at the descending eagle. It seemed Tim had a message for them. Miledi let Creme land on her head and took the letter tied to its leg.

"Wait, this is from Badd?" Miledi murmured. Everyone was suddenly more interested in the contents of the letter. After all, they hadn't heard from their vice-leader since he'd gone off on his journey. As Miledi read through the letter, her expression suddenly changed. Her eyes grew serious and she bit her lip worriedly. Once she was done reading she looked up and said, "The church... has declared war on the Haltina Republic."

The Liberators stiffened up. Miledi clutched the letter tightly and added, "Badd's in the republic too. He's asking for help."

She looked around at her comrades, and they all nodded firmly to her. No one said a word, but they didn't need to. Everyone was thinking the same thing.

"Let's go. To the Pale Forest."

Everyone could tell this would be a vital turning point in the history of the world.

Afterword

Hello everyone, chuuni lover Ryo Shirakome here. Thank you very much for picking up volume 3 of Arifureta Zero.

The hardest thing about writing Zero is figuring out how to deal with power creep. Miledi's too strong, and Oscar's too versatile. And now that they've got even more ancient magic users on their side, there's practically nothing they can't do. Everyone's so overpowered that their enemies all look like chumps in comparison. And I'm running out of overpowered enemies to throw at them. It's only after I started writing Zero that I realized just how amazing the Liberators really were.

That aside, I really want a Batlam. I want one so bad that I wrote him into every scene I could. Also, I'm sure perceptive readers noticed, but there was something related to Batlam in the main Arifureta story. Of course, Hajime blew it up with one shot, so it didn't get much screen time sadly. I really don't know why I gave Batlam basically the same name as that slime... In the era the main Arifureta story takes place, all slime creatures are called Bachulums.

Chances are *some* people kept on finding ways to mispronounce Batlam's name and one of them stuck so long it lasted through the centuries. Everything is that one person's fault. Also, I keep alluding to her without saying her name, but I'm sure you can all guess who I'm talking about.

Anyway, now the half-dragon, half-demon Vandre has joined the Liberators. As I'm sure you've all noticed, he's great friends with O-kun. I'm thinking next volume, I might write an extra chapter about how Oscar develops a dragon-slaying sword specifically to use on Vandre. For those of you unfamiliar with dragon-slaying swords, I highly recommend reading the Arifureta spin-off manga, Arifureta: I Love Isekai.

Well, I'm running out of space to write, but there are a few things I'd like to promote. Or rather, one thing. The Arifureta anime. I hope you all like seeing Hajime animated. The story will cover enough volumes that Miledi should show

up too, so you'll all be able to see the moment Arifureta went from being Miledi's story to being Hajime's.

Last, but not least, are the acknowledgments. A big thank you as always to Takayaki-sensei for his wonderful illustrations. And, of course, I'm also grateful to my editors and proofreaders. Sorry I always hand you such thick manuscripts. Thank you as well to all the people involved in the publication process. On the manga side of things, I'd like to thank Roga-sensei, Ataru Kamichi-sensei and Misaki Mori-sensei for all your wonderful artwork.

And, of course, thank you, dear readers, as well as my fans on Narou. I'm eternally grateful for your support. I hope you all continue to enjoy what the Arifureta series has in store!

Ryo Shirakome

Bonus Short Stories

In Search of My Beloved Synergist: 2

“I can’t... die yet...”

A desperate voice echoed across the open sea. It belonged to the young, fifteen-year-old, waitress of one of Velnika’s restaurants, Aisha. And this was her tenth day adrift at sea. Her eyes were bloodshot, and she was gripping the ship’s railing so hard her knuckles were white. Mistakenly believing that the young synergist that she’d fallen in love with needed rescuing, she’d gone off chasing after him. Mistakenly believing he was waiting earnestly for her to come, she’d crossed an entire continent and struck out into the ocean. Traveling with her were two adventurers who owed her a debt, or rather adventurers that she’d blackmailed, into joining her misguided adventure. One was the bald Failur, while the other was Scurdy, whose hair looked like the end of a broom. The two of them were currently collapsed atop the ship’s deck. The three of them had originally set sail for Andika, but all three of them were amateurs at navigation. Naturally, their ill-fated voyage had gone off-course, and they’d become shipwrecked. Their mouths were full of ashes and regret, but what they’d have really preferred stuffed in there was food and water.

“I’m sorry, Failur, Scurdy. This is my fault.”

Aisha let go of the railing and slid to the ground. She fell face down on the wooden planks, looking surprisingly contrite. The two men who could have been mistaken for corpses twitched.

“Aisha-chan, if we make it back to the continent alive... will you live together with me?”

Scurdy’s response was so unexpected that both Aisha and Failur looked at him in shock. Aisha suspected that he’d come so close to death that his instinct to leave descendants behind was starting to kick in. However, Scurdy kept on talking.

“Oscar’s gone. He’s far beyond our reach now, so you should just compromise with me and—”

“No way.” Aisha flatly refused him. Her voice was so firm it was hard to believe she looked like she’d been dying a second ago. Her rejection crushed Scurdy’s spirit, but still, he persevered. He knew these might be his last few moments on Tortus.

“I-I understand how you feel, Aisha-chan. But you should try to find happiness closer to—”

“No way.”

“I really love—”

“Absolutely not.”

“Isn’t there even the slightest possibility—”

“Nope.”

“.....”

“This isn’t good, Failur-san. Scurdy-san’s going insane. He’s having delusions about the impossible. But I’ve gotta say, it’s kind of pathetic that he’d get this weak just from three days of no food and no water. I could keep going for another ten years on just my feelings for Oscar-san! Oh, Oscar-san! I won’t succumb to a trial like this!”

“Hic...”

“Don’t cry, Scurdy! You’ll end up wasting even more water!”

However, Scurdy kept crying, wasting more of his precious bodily fluids. Failur kept trying to encourage him but ended up only wasting more of his stamina as he yelled himself hoarse. Aisha ended up wasting both stamina and water as she began seeing hallucinations of Oscar on the boat and chasing after him with tears in her eyes. Before long, the three of them had exhausted themselves so completely they couldn’t even move.

“Hey, you three, are you alright?”

Looking up, the three travelers saw that a large ship had come up beside

them. A young catgirl with beautiful white hair, glinting in the sunlight, was looking over the railing at them.

“S-So beautiful...” Scurdy fell in love with the catgirl at first sight.

Some time later, Aisha and the others were wolfing down food and drink on the deck of the Melusine.

“Calm down, you guys. If you eat that fast, you’ll choke on your food.”

Kyaty, the catgirl who’d saved the three starving travelers, offered them some water. Aisha thumped her chest to help the food stuck in her throat go down, then opened her mouth to thank Kyaty. But before she could, Scurdy butt in.

“Thanks, Kyaty-chan. Not only did you save us, you even made such delicious food! It’s rare to find someone who’s this beautiful and also a good cook!”

“O-Oh, stop it. You don’t need to flatter me, I’ll still take you guys back to the mainland, don’t worry.”

“I’m not flattering you, I mean it! I’ve never met anyone as beautiful as you!”

“S-Stop the empty praise and get back to eating!”

Kyaty blushed and looked away, her ears flapping back and forth. Her adorable reaction made Scurdy even more enamored with her.

“Guess you’ll be alright if you’ve got enough energy to try and woo Kyaty,” Chris, the first mate of the Melusine, said as he walked over to the group.

“Umm, thank you very much for saving us,” Aisha turned to Chris and thanked him on behalf of the group. Chris sat down on a nearby barrel and waved his hand dismissively.

“Don’t sweat it. Anyway, what’re you three doing out here? You trying to reach Andika?” Chris asked as he narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Aisha and her companions were clearly amateurs at navigation, and he couldn’t imagine what business normal travelers would have with the city. Chris and the others had been patrolling the waters around Andika in the Melusine, looking out for suspicious visitors. In fact, everyone on deck was poised to jump on Aisha and the others at any time if necessary. However, Aisha didn’t notice the sharpness

in Chris's gaze.

"Did you say Andika!? You know about the city!?"

Surprised by her sudden vehemence, Chris reflexively drew his sword.

"Y-Yeah, I guess we do."

"Please tell me where it is! I have to get there no matter what!"

"C-Calm down, young lady! Your eyes are bloodshot! And you're way too close to my face!"

"Hurry up and take me there! I need to get there right now!"

"Seriously, calm down! Why do you want to go to Andika so badly anyway!? That place is full of outlaws!"

"For love!"

"Love!? What are you talking about!?"

"I need to destroy all of my rivals and grasp hold of the future!"

"What kind of love is that!?"

Failur finally succeeded in pulling Aisha off of Chris and started calming her down. Once she'd regained her composure, she cleared her throat and said, "I'm searching for someone who I heard is in Andika. His name's Oscar, and—"

Chris and Kyaty exchanged glances. That name was quite familiar to both of them. They turned warily back to Aisha.

"Young lady, what's your relationship with him?"

"I'm his wife."

"His wife!?"

Failur and Scurdy quickly butted in to explain the situation. They also gave a brief summary of how their journey up until now. Aisha continually interrupted their story to talk about how great Oscar was. As the pirates listened to the adventurers' story, they realized Oscar was way more popular with the ladies than they'd ever imagined. But while everyone else was interested to hear just what Oscar had done to make Aisha so obsessed with him, Kyaty turned her

nose up unhappily and muttered, “Hmph, so he’s just a womanizer after all.”

Chris turned to her with a grin.

“What’re you so mad about, huh, Kyaty? Did you fall for him after he praised your maid outfit so much?”

“What!? I don’t care about that stupid—”

“He praised your maid outfit? I need to hear about this.”

“Eek!? When’d you get behind me!?”

Kyaty leaped away when she heard Aisha whisper that from right behind her. She even used her special magic, Acceleration, to put as much distance between her and Aisha as possible. However—

“What’s wrong with this girl!? How’s she keeping up with me!? What’s she doing to move like that!?”

Aisha’s skills at tailing people who knew about Oscar were so advanced they were indistinguishable from magic. And that was why she could keep up with someone using magic. Probably.

“Love makes everything possible! Now tell me, what kind of relationship do you have with Oscar-san!? Did you really service him in a maid outfit!? While wagging that tail of yours and acting all cute!?”

“What the hell are you implying!?”

For some time after that, Aisha chased Kyaty around the deck of the ship, demanding answers. The other pirates found the spectacle entertaining, so they just watched. Meanwhile, Scurdy collapsed into a sobbing heap as he realized Oscar had stolen yet another one of his loves away from him, and Failur just watched everything with a sigh.

Afterward, the pirates brought Aisha and the others to Andika, where they learned all about Oscar’s many exploits in the city. But that is a story for another time.

The Wrong Way to Use Metamorphosis Magic

“Ugh...”

A cute groan could be heard from within one of the houses of the Liberators’ hidden village. The one who’d made that scream was Corrin, and the one who’d caused her to scream like that was Katy. Though Katy and Ruth had yet to recover their egos, they had healed enough that they could follow basic instructions to eat and sleep and take care of themselves. As a result, it had gotten a lot easier for Corrin to look after them. So why was it that Corrin was groaning at Katy, whose vacuous eyes were staring off into the distance? Well, because—

“Katy, you have to eat your vegetables! They’re nutritious!”

Corrin once again brought the spoonful of beans up to Katy’s mouth, but Katy slapped it away. Corrin’s cheeks puffed out indignantly as she looked at the mess Katy had made on the table.

“Bad Katy! You can’t just waste food like that!”

Her eyes still empty, Katy turned away. Even though she couldn’t talk, it was obvious she was flatly refusing to eat the beans. Bidel Beans were very nutritious, and they grew everywhere, including forests. Unfortunately, they were also bitter. Katy had hated them before being transformed into a super soldier by the church, and she hated them still. That being said, this hidden village wasn’t stocked well enough for people to be able to eat lavish dishes.

“I boiled them with sugar for you this time. So please, just try some.”

Corrin once again gently brought a spoonful of beans up to Katy’s mouth. But this time—

“Mmmph!?”

Faster than Corrin’s eyes could follow, Katy grabbed the spoon and stuffed it into Corrin’s mouth instead. Whatever warrior’s spirit had been implanted into her was still alive in there somewhere.

“Jeez! If you don’t cut that out, I’m going to get mad for real!”

Katy once again pointedly turned away. Corrin continued trying to get Katy to eat the beans, but she’d always either slap the spoon away or force the food

into Corrin's mouth instead.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

After thirty or so minutes of that, Corrin was reduced to a sobbing heap. Hearing her cries, Oscar and the others came running over.

"What's wrong, Corrin?"

"Onii-chaaaaaaaaaaan!"

Corrin clung to Oscar and told him what had happened with Katy.

"Come on, Katy. You know you're not supposed to make Corrin cry."

But even when Oscar scolded Katy, she just turned up her nose and looked away. Seeing that, Miledi, Meiru, and the others all smiled. Determined, Oscar grabbed Katy and sat her in his lap. He then scooped up a spoonful of beans. Katy struggled at first, but the moment Oscar wrapped his free arm around her, she went quiet.

"We'll be able to get better food soon, so just bear with it for now, okay? You're a big girl, aren't you, Katy?"

Oscar slowly brought the spoon of beans up to her mouth.

"It won't work, Onii-chan. Katy just won't—"

But much to Corrin's surprise, Katy swallowed the mouthful of beans. When she saw that, Corrin's eyes glazed over and her expression grew stony.

"There, there. That's a good girl. Say 'aaah,' Katy."

"Mmmmmm."

Though Katy's eyes still showed no expression, it seemed like she was happy. Even the way her hair bounced around her head looked cheerful.

"I hate you, Katy."

"Waaah! Hey, Corrin! Stop that! I'm trying to feed her here!"

Corrin was mad that Katy would listen to Oscar, but not to her. And so, she started beating her fists against Katy's legs. However, Katy blocked all of Corrin's attacks and nuzzled up against Oscar. And that, in turn, made Corrin get

jealous as well as even angrier.

“Th-That’s weird. Katy didn’t use to be that clingy. Especially not with Oscar.”

“Huh? Is that true, Ruth-kun?”

Miledi cocked her head at Ruth. According to Ruth, Katy was a tsundere to the core. Normally, she never let Oscar pamper her in any way. In fact, she always tried to act more like an adult whenever he was around. Things had to get really bad for Katy to hug Oscar of her own accord.

Upon hearing that, Meiru looked thoughtfully over at Oscar and muttered to herself, “Since Katy-chan’s will is currently locked in a struggle with the will of the warrior who possessed her, it’s probably likely that her base instincts have come to the forefront, and that’s what she’s expressing.”

In other words, Meiru was implying that despite her attitude, Katy secretly wanted to be pampered by Oscar.

“I see. So that’s why she’ll eat the beans when Oscar’s feeding her. Normally, she’d start crying every time we served them for dinner. Come to think of it, Dylan never really liked them either...”

Ruth glanced over at Dylan. He was methodically eating his beans, but his face was exceedingly pale. And though he showed no emotion, he looked oddly lonely.

“D-Dylan? We haven’t forgotten about you, buddy.”

Ruth turned to Dylan with a stiff expression, but Dylan quietly turned his back to him. He then resumed eating his beans. His lonely back looked so sad that everyone couldn’t help but feel sorry for the neglected child.

“Dylan-kuuun! Cheer up! We haven’t forgotten about you, really! Look, come over here. The amazing Miledi-oneesan will feed you!”

Miledi hurriedly turned to Dylan and spread her arms open for him to jump into them. Dylan glanced at Miledi, then blushed slightly. A glimmer of hope sparked in Ruth’s eyes as he watched.

“His expression’s changing!”

Dylan slowly got to his feet and started tottering over. But he walked straight

past Miledi and fell into Meiru's ample cleavage.

"....."

"M-Miledi, umm, are you okay? You look kinda... scary."

Ruth took a few steps backward. At the same time, Meiru said cheerfully, "Oh my, Dylan-kun. Did you want to play with me that badly!? Fufufu, well, I do like boys who are honest with themselves."

Meiru happily embraced Dylan, and his blank expression softened somewhat. According to Meiru, he was just following his instincts, so it was perhaps expected that he would gravitate to her over Miledi. He was a growing boy, after all.

As he watched, Ruth muttered, "I never knew you were into big boobs, Dylan..."

"Why does it always have to come down to boob size, dammit!?"

Miledi collapsed on all fours in frustration. She felt utterly defeated. But a second later, she suddenly looked up, a brilliant idea coming to mind.

"I know! I can just ask Van-chan to use metamorphosis magic on me and make my boobs huge! Van-chaaaaaan! Van-chan, where are you!?"

She ran around the village, shouting, "Van-chaaaaaan I need you to make my boobs biiiiiiiiiiiiiig!"

That day, multiple eyewitnesses reported seeing a giant ice dragon fire its breath at a young girl.

Invincible Corrin

"Heh, that's fifty matches and fifty losses for you."

"Goddammit!" Oscar's frustrated shout echoed through the square of the Liberators' new hidden village, while Vandre grinned smugly down at him. Oscar was having Vandre teach him how to fight.

"Man, you're pathetic. I thought you'd have improved at least a little by now."

"Oh, I'm *so* sorry I don't have any talent."

“The problem is, if you’re not using your glasses’ abilities, they’re actually just useless. It’s because you’re wearing that crap that your movements are so dull.”

“I’d prefer it if you stopped insulting my glasses. If anything, that muffler of yours is even more useless than my glasses. You should look in a mirror sometime.”

“Insult my muffler one more time and I’ll snap your glasses in half.”

“Do that... and I’ll rip your muffler to shreds.”

The two men glared daggers at each other. The spectators watched on with mild exasperation. They’d grown quite used to this sight already. As they watched, a young girl trotted over to the two of them.

“Onii-chan, Van-oniisan, I brought you towels and water bottles!”

Oscar and, surprisingly, Vandre both smiled as they accepted the water bottles from Corrin. After taking a drink, they both reached out for the towels and accidentally grabbed the same one.

“.....”

“.....”

They exchanged a silent glance. There were two towels, so one of them just had to give this one up and there’d be no problem. But neither of them was willing to give an inch to the other. Oscar adjusted his glasses, while Vandre shifted his muffler. They both tightened their grip on the towel and glared menacingly at each other. But their silent staredown was interrupted when they heard a large ripping noise. Then, they looked down to see the towel had been torn in half. Corrin stared wordlessly down at the ruined towel.

“Err, Corrin, I didn’t mean to do that. This is all because that idiot Van refused to let go.”

“Hey, don’t make this my fault! I’m the one who grabbed it first, so—”

Just as the two were about to start arguing again, Corrin looked up at Oscar.

“Onii-chan, what do you say when you do something bad?” Corrin said that as he stared directly into Oscar’s eyes. Though she was just seven, her reproach carried immense weight.

“S-Sorry.”

Overwhelmed by the pressure, Oscar apologized. Vandre gave him a smug grin, but that grin didn’t last. For once, she was done with Oscar, so Corrin turned to Vandre.

“You too, Van-oniisan.”

“But Oscar’s the one who—”

“Van-oniisan, it’s important to treat things with respect.”

“Ngh... But... Well... my bad.”

Vandre blushed as he was scolded by a little girl. But Corrin wasn’t done lecturing them yet.

“Also, you two should try to get along. Onii-chan, I don’t want you to stop being the kind person I know. And Van-oniisan, if you’re always fighting with people, you’ll cause problems for Margaretta-oneesan, so you should try to be nicer.”

“Yeah, we’re sorry...”

The two men replied simultaneously. Their spirits had been crushed.

“Bahahaha! I can’t believe two grown men are being lectured by a little girl! Hey, you two, how does it feel? How does it feel to have your pride crushed?”

Miledi was thoroughly enjoying this spectacle. And since she was enjoying herself, she decided to expand the range of Corrin’s targets.

“Hey, Corrin-chan! Who else do you have a problem with!? You should tell them what they need to fix so they can improve themselves!”

Miledi walked up and hugged Corrin from behind. For a moment, Corrin seemed uncertain, but then Meiru chimed in as well, saying, “My, that does sound like a good idea. Surely there are one or two things about everyone that bothers you a little.”

“Th-That’s not... true.”

Corrin’s hesitation made it obvious that she didn’t mean that.

“Now now, Corrin. If you’ve got complaints about us, just be honest about

them,” Marshal smiled and egged Corrin on as well.

After looking around uncertainly for a few seconds, Corrin finally made up her mind. Still looking a little reserved, she nevertheless met Marshal’s eyes and said, “Umm, Captain. Could you stop walking around naked after you take a bath?”

“Wha—!?” Marshal stiffened up. He hadn’t expected Corrin’s first complaint to be about him. Also, he only walked around half-naked. He did still wear a towel around his lower half.

“Because whenever you walk around naked, Mikaela-oneesan starts... acting weird.”

“Wha—!?”

Mikaela crumbled to the floor as Corrin basically indirectly called her a pervert. Of course, she was actually one, but that didn’t mean she wanted little girls thinking she was.

“Umm, humans need to wear clothes because we’re civilized animals, so please make sure you wear clothes, Captain.”

“I will, sorry...”

Marshal crumbled to the floor as Corrin basically indirectly called him an uncivilized beast.

“Also, Tony-oniisan. Stop leaving your clothes inside-out when you put them in the laundry.”

“Oh, okay... Sorry.”

“Abe-oniisan... don’t smoke so much... It smells bad.”

“Gah. M-My bad.”

“Shushu-oneesan, you need to eat your vegetables. I’m trying my best to make them taste good.”

“S-Sorry...”

“Susha-oneesan... you need to control yourself better...”

“Huh!? I-I’m sorry...”

“Naiz-oniisan... you don’t have to be that scared of Susha-oneesan...”

Naiz silently crumbled to the floor as well. Normally, Susha would have rushed to console him, but Corrin had just scolded her for being so overbearing, and she was at a loss for what to do. Incidentally, Tony and Abe had also crumbled to the floor. Corrin continued rattling off complaints, destroying every single one of the hardened members of the Liberators. Miledi and Meiru laughed uproariously as they watched the carnage play out before them. Unfortunately, Oscar and the others were too mentally destroyed to even glare reproachfully at them.

“Meiru-oneesan.”

“Huh? SSurely you don’t have any complaints for me...”

“Please try to become less of a mess.”

Meiru took such a huge mental blow that she started vomiting blood. She dropped to all fours and started trembling uncontrollably. That was quite possibly the most shocking thing she’d ever been told.

“Corrin, what about Miledi!? Surely you have something to say to Miledi, too!” Oscar urged Corrin on, hoping to get something to laugh at Miledi about this time.

“Huh? Ummm... not really?”

“Corrin-chan, you’re the best! See? I’m totally perfect! How does it feel, O-kun? Knowing that I objectively have no flaws? Well? Bahahaha!”

“Impossible...”

Oscar’s disbelief was shared by everyone else there. Miledi hugged Corrin and grinned smugly at Oscar.

“I mean, you’re such an amazing person, Miledi-oneesan. You’re everyone’s leader, and you’re strong, and pretty, and...”

“S-Stop, you’re making me blush! Well, I guess it’s all true!”

“Yep. I know the real you is the cool Miledi-oneesan that saved Onii-chan back in the city.”

“Hm? Oh, yeah, I guess.”

“Even though you’re always joking around, that’s just because you’re trying to keep everyone’s spirits up...”

“U-Umm, Corrin-chan? I think you’re misunderstanding some—”

Corrin turned toward Miledi, her eyes sparkling with admiration. In Corrin’s eyes, Miledi was noble, beautiful, strong, and only joked around as a way of encouraging others. In other words, Corrin basically thought of Miledi as—

“You’re like a goddess.”

Everyone turned to Miledi. She clutched her chest and staggered a few steps backward. Corrin’s pure, innocent respect for Miledi was too much for the twisted leader of the Liberators.

“C-Corrin-chan, you’re an angel. But even though you’re an angel, it hurts...”

Miledi could feel her wicked heart being purified by Corrin’s divine grace. Corrin had managed to take out all of the Liberators, including their ancient magic users and even their leader. A feat no one else had been able to manage before. And, as Oscar and the others watched Corrin hurriedly run over to nurse Miledi, they all thought the same thing.

Corrin’s the strongest among us, isn’t she?

Glasses + Maid Uniforms + Crossdressers = War

Within the rocky village the Liberators had created for Andika’s refugees, a certain bunny girl was desperately trying to show Miledi she’d be useful to bring along on her journey.

“Here you go, Miledi. I finished doing your laundry. I’ll leave it over here for you.”

Miledi turned around to thank Kiara for her help.

“Thanks, Kia-chan. Can— Wait, what the heck are you wearing!?”

Miledi’s jaw dropped open when she saw Kiara’s appearance. The young bunny girl was wearing a pure white apron over a frilly, navy-blue one-piece

dress. And on her head sat a frilly white headband.

“D-Does it not look good on me?” Kiara asked as she fidgeted awkwardly, her ears drooping. She looked so adorable that Miledi ended up getting a nosebleed.

“Miledi!? Are you okay!? You’ve been getting a lot of nosebleeds recently, are you sure you’re not sick!?”

“I’m fine, really. You just looked so cute.”

“Isn’t it dangerous if you start bleeding every time you see something cute!? That sounds like a horrible disease!”

Kiara dabbed at Miledi’s nose with a handkerchief to wipe off the blood. Unfortunately, her attempts to help just made Miledi’s nosebleed worsen. After all, the way she panicked was cute too. Meiru, who was standing nearby, had to cast restoration magic to keep Miledi from bleeding to death.

“This is your doing, isn’t it, O-kun?” Miledi asked as she pointed decisively at Oscar, who was adjusting his glasses to hide his expression.

“Kyaty showed me the wonders of a catgirl maid. And, as I suspected, a bunny maid is just as wonderful. Thanks to Kiara, I have made a groundbreaking discovery, Miledi. Animal ears and maid outfits are a godlike combination.”

“You really need to rein your fetish in, O-kun.”

Oscar ignored Miledi’s retort. He had eyes only for maid Kiara.

“Kiara, if you don’t mind, will you allow me to preserve your cute appearance for all eternity?”

As Oscar was a gentleman, he naturally asked for permission before taking pictures.

“O-Oscar-oniisan, you’re just exaggerating now...” Kiara said as she blushed shyly. Her embarrassed fidgeting was so cute that blood started gushing from Miledi’s nostrils again, forcing Meiru to once again use restoration magic.

“I’m not exaggerating at all. Right now, you’re radiant. If I had a maid as cute as you, I’d be in heaven!”

“Hey, don’t say that in front of Miledi!”

Kiara still believed that Oscar, as well as Naiz and Meiru, all had a *special* relationship with Miledi. Though everyone had told her it was a misunderstanding, she was unconvinced.

“Wh-Why are you trying to sweet-talk me when you already have Miledi? W-Wait, don’t tell me you want to have a threesome together with— Haaah!”

“If you want to go to heaven so badly, you perverted four-eyes, I’ll send you there myself.”

Kiara lost herself in her delusions again, while Miledi glared angrily at Oscar. Oscar ignored them completely and focused on taking pictures of Kiara, after he obtained her consent, of course. Only when he was done did he turn to Miledi and Meiru.

“Now then, you two. I’ve made special uniforms for you as well, so—”

“Meru-nee, catch!”

“Aye aye, ma’am!”

Miledi used gravity magic to snatch the two maid uniforms out of Oscar’s hands and sent them hurtling toward Meiru. Meiru then drew her sword-whip and sliced them to pieces.

“Aaaaaah! How could you!? I spent three whole days making those for you two!”

“Your obsession with maids is kinda scary, O-kun...”

“Indeed, even I can’t say I approve of it.”

Oscar fell to all fours while Miledi and Meiru stared coldly at him.

“Umm, I think they’re very cute at least... and they’re fitting clothes for a servant!”

Kiara hoped to become Miledi’s servant, so she was glad Oscar had given her the appropriate uniform. She was also glad to have the opportunity to wear something pretty, since she hadn’t had too many nice clothes back in Andika. Though she normally acted like a rough tomboy, she looked unbelievably cute

in a maid uniform, and her attempts to cheer Oscar up worked somewhat.

“If you want to see a maid uniform that badly, look over here, darling!”

A deep voice boomed from behind the group. Turning around, Oscar and the others saw a terrifying monster whose appearance sapped away their sanity. Snowbell was wearing a sleeveless maid uniform with a short skirt. His thick, muscled arms and legs bulged out from underneath the dainty fabric. The uniform was wrapped so tightly around his massive pecs that it looked like the uniform might tear at any time. The top only covered his chest as well, so his massive six-pack was visible for all to see. But most blasphemous of all was the short skirt he was wearing.

“Bwaaaaaaaaaaah!?”

Everyone who’d been watching Oscar and the others’ lighthearted exchange threw up.

“It’s sexy, right?” Snowbell asked, then struck a sexy pose and lifted his skirt up slightly. Of course, no one wanted to see what was underneath it.

“Aaah!? Meru-nee! Get a hold of yourself!”

The sight was so shocking that Meiru actually fainted. Most of Andika’s refugees had fainted as well. Those who hadn’t run away started screaming incoherently.

“Come, darling! Have your fill of this maid uniform!”

Snowbell flexed, making a few of the buttons on his maid uniform pop off. Any child who happened to see Snowbell started crying on the spot. Pale-faced, Miledi desperately urged Snowbell to stop.

“Please, change! At this rate, there’ll be casualties!”

But while everyone else was panicking, there was one man who bravely got to his feet.

“You heathen.”

Oscar’s eyes burned with a fierce rage. The fire in his eyes was so great it illuminated the frames of his glasses.

“How dare you blaspheme the holy maid uniform, you heathen! You’ve spit on the honor of the god of maids! Such heinous crimes deserve only death!”

Oscar sounded like a member of the church. The only difference was the god he worshiped.

Who the hell is the god of maids? Miledi thought idly to herself.

“What’s wrong with what I’ve done!?”

“Everything!” Oscar casually insulted Snowbell’s very existence, then leaped at the gargantuan man. “I’ll strip you down until you’re nothing but bones, you monster”

“Oh my, how passionate! But if you go that far, I’ll die!”

“Good. That’s what you deserve for besmirching the maid uniform!”

“How dare you call me an ugly heathen! I’ll make you pay for that!”

A huge shockwave spread across the rocky field as the two sides clashed. The maid uniform-wearing heathen and the maid uniform worshiping man were going at it for real. Miledi desperately tried to calm them down, but they didn’t listen. Just as she was considering flattening them both with gravity magic, Miledi’s savior arrived.

“Phew, I just got back with— Wait, what the hell is going on!?”

Miledi turned to Naiz and said in a teary voice, “Nacchan, stop those two idiots! Dump them into the sea.”

“I have no idea what’s going on, but alright.”

Right before the two of them clashed again, Naiz opened a portal, sending them both to the middle of the ocean.

“Our savior...”

“He’s saved us again!”

“Naiz-sama, we love youuuuuu!”

“You’re our guardian spirit! The protector of this desert!”

The residents of Andika all started cheering on Naiz. Their love for Naiz had

grown, while their wariness toward Oscar had also grown. Thanks to this incident, everyone learned one simple formula: Glasses + Maid Uniforms + Crossdressers = War.

Boys' Talk and the Aftermath

One quiet night in the Liberators' hidden village within the forest, all of the men in Miledi's party gathered under a single roof. At their center sat Naiz, gulping down glass after glass of cheap alcohol.

"Uhhh, Naiz, don't you think you're drinking too much?"

Oscar tried to gently warn his friend off drinking anymore. Groaning, Naiz put the cup down. He was already drunk enough that his face was flushed. Sighing, Vandre offered him a few snacks to help the alcohol settle.

"Don't be so pathetic, Naiz. So you've got two girls clinging to you. What's the big deal?"

"Every time I talk to them, it feels like they can see right through me."

"....."

Naiz neither argued back nor insulted Vandre. He simply spoke the truth with such weight that even Vandre paused. In truth, the guys had all organized a men-only drinking night. Oscar had placed multiple powerful barriers to keep anyone not invited out. The reason for all this secrecy was Naiz. Oscar had wanted to create an atmosphere where Naiz felt safe to divulge his worries. And since his worries revolved around Susha and Yunfa, Oscar hadn't wanted any girls overhearing.

"Well, I kinda get what you mean. Susha and Yunfa have been clinging to you the whole time we've been here," Marshal said with a wry smile.

Things had gotten to the point where Susha and Yunfa somehow knew every single word Naiz said every day. Furthermore, they knew everything about his hobbies and preferences. They waited on him hand and foot, acting like they were his wives. Whenever they had the opportunity, they'd sit down on either side of him and monopolize his attention. Yunfa hugged him every chance she got, and while Susha attempted to be more modest in public, she still made

relatively bold overtures all the same. Both of the girls worshiped Naiz with a fervor that bordered on fanatical, and whenever they were with Naiz, the other Liberators couldn't bring themselves to talk to him, even when they wanted to.

"So, what do you think of them, anyway?"

"Isn't it obvious? They're kids. There's no way I'd see them like that."

Naiz gave the common sense reply. Unfortunately, that common sense defense wouldn't last forever. "But as time passes, I can feel their approaches getting more aggressive... I'm scared..."

Recently, the villagers had started asking Naiz when he'd hold the wedding ceremony. Susha and Yunfa had already brought the other women in the village over to their side.

"So why don't you just tell them they're not in your strike zone?" Vandre asked as he pointed a suspicious look at Naiz.

"I did."

Seriously!? Everyone turned to Naiz in shock. Marshal and the others knew exactly what Susha and Yunfa's personalities were like, and they were amazed that there hadn't been some huge incident the day Naiz had told them they were too young.

"You guys are acting like Susha's the demon lord or something," Vandre said, confused. Judging by how terrified Naiz looked as he recalled the moment he'd told them that he wasn't interested in them, Susha may well have been more terrifying than the demon lord.

"To be honest, I am happy that they like me, but... I feel like they're wasting their time fawning over me like this... Man, what do I do?"

Wanting to help his friend, Oscar adjusted his glasses and said, "Sometimes, you just have to learn to give up."

If Naiz gave up, he felt as though he'd be disgracing his dead family. Trying to drown out his sorrows, he downed another cup of alcohol.

"Anyway, what about you, Oscar?" Marshal turned to Oscar and asked that question, trying to change the subject into something more pleasant. Oscar

gave him a confused look, so he added, “I’m talking about Miledi. How far have you two gone?”

“Give me a break. We’re not like that. Neither of us has feelings for each other.”

Oscar waved his hand dismissively. His reaction made it seem as if there really was nothing between them.

“Didn’t you tell my brother you’d never hand Miledi over to a guy like him or something, though?”

“Van!?”

Marshal and the others looked at Oscar with renewed interest.

“Oho, is that so? Just so you know, Oscar...”

“Wh-What?”

“The moment you and Miledi become a couple, half of the Liberators will become your enemy. Namely, all the guys.”

“Well, that’ll never happen but... do you guys seriously like her that much?”

“Of course we do! Yeah, she’s normally just an annoying clown, but her real personality’s amazing! And she’s a beauty to boot! There are tons of guys who are totally in love with her! Come on, even you’ve gotta admit she looks captivating when she’s being serious!”

Oscar adjusted his glasses to hide his expression. But of course, his silence spoke louder than any confession. Realizing he couldn’t defend himself, Oscar instead decided to launch a counterattack.

“Well, what about you, Marshal!? I’m sure you know Mikaela’s raping you with her eyes every time you walk out of the bath, right!?”

“Don’t word it like that! It hits too close to home!”

Marshal had only recently discovered that Mikaela peeked on him in the bath, and he still didn’t know how to process this new knowledge. In order to change the topic, he swapped to yet another target.

“Van, what about you! Are you into that Margaretta woman!?”

“Hell no. She’s family, you moron!”

“Then who’s your type!? Who do you like most out of the girls here!?” Marshal asked as he leaned closer to Vandre. Oscar and the others turned to him as well, their eyes brimming with curiosity.

After considering the question for a few minutes, Vandre replied, “Shushu probably.”

“Are you fucking serious!?”

Everyone stared at Vandre in shock. They couldn’t believe he was into someone as rude and coarse as Shushu.

“She’s got slender legs. I actually asked her to model for me, but I haven’t been able to convince her yet.”

Oh, that’s what you meant... Oscar sighed in relief. However, the topic of people’s types had caught on among the other guys. They started discussing who was their type and who they thought was cute, secure in the knowledge that no girls were around.

Around the time the party was beginning to wind down, Oscar muttered, “In the end, no one said they’d go out with Meiru, huh...?”

There was a brief moment of silence. Then, the guys all looked at each other and said simultaneously, “Sure, she’s hot, but just look at her personality!”

For some time, the guys all joked about how hopeless Meiru was when it came to taking care of herself. Naturally, all of them had forgotten that this “hopeless” pirate queen could use magic to observe the past.

The next day, Miledi returned from her patrol to find Oscar and the other men all standing in the town square.

“Hey, O-kun, everyone! What’re you guys—”

“Yes, Meiru-oneesan is the best.”

“Meiru-sama is wonderful.”

“She’s our goddess.”

“We all love Meiru-sama.”

“Meiru-sama’s so beautiful.”

Oscar and the others simply repeated those lines with dead eyes.

“Meru-neeeeeeeee! What did you do to O-kun and the others!?” Miledi’s shout drowned out the monotonous words of praise Oscar and the others robotically repeated.

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Prologue

Chapter I: The Merry Band of Liberators

Chapter II: A New Ancient Magic User

Chapter III: The Demon Army vs. The Liberators

Epilogue

Afterword

Bonus Short Stories

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Arifureta Zero: Volume 3

by Ryo Shirakome

Translated by Ningen Edited by DxS

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2019 Ryo Shirakome Illustrations by Takaya-ki

Cover illustration by Takaya-ki All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by OVERLAP, Inc.

This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo English translation © 2019 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: November 2019