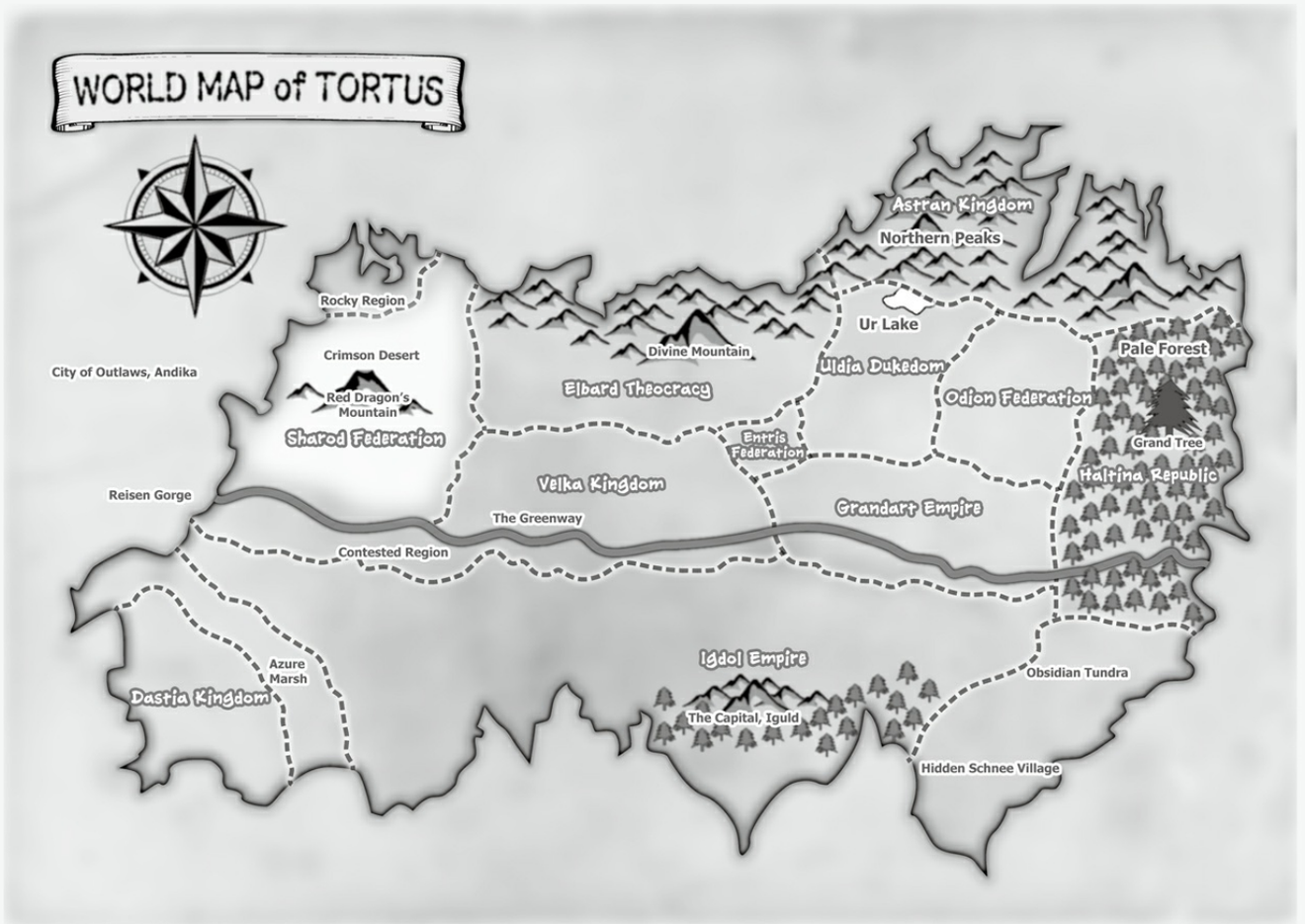
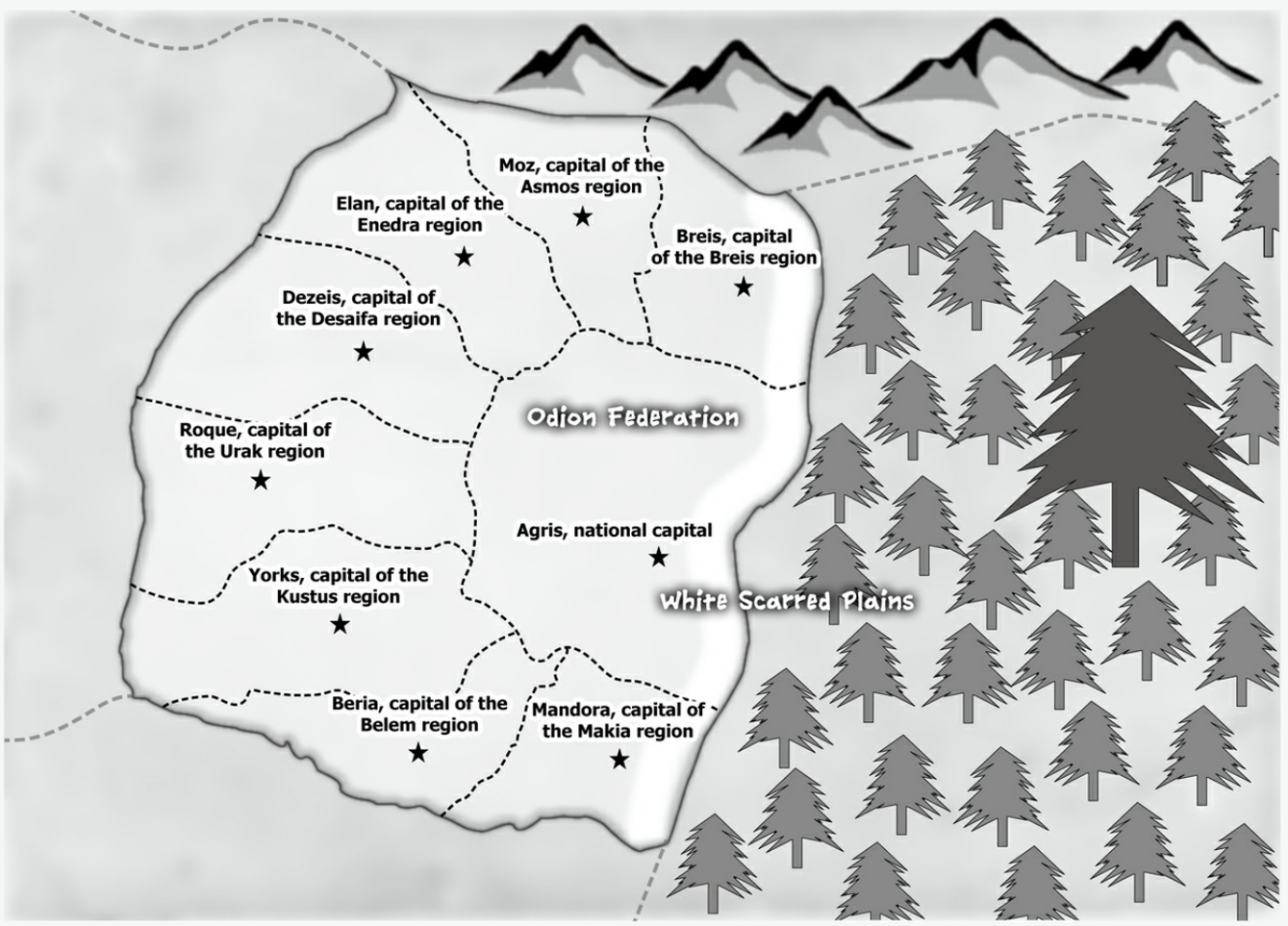

ryo shirakome
takayaki
#4
ARIFURETA:
ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU
ZERO
FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST
ZERO


#4
ARIFURETA ZERO: FROM COMMONPLACE TO WORLD'S STRONGEST
ryo shirakome
takayaki


"WELCOME,
THOSE WHO RESIST
THE WILL OF THE WORLD.
I AM THE QUEEN OF THE
HALTINA REPUBLIC,
LYUTILLIS HALTINA."
LYUTILLUS HALTINA


"HOW DO I LOOK?"
MILEDI REISEN
"YOU LOOK GREAT. IT SUITS YOU PERFECTLY."
OSCAR ORCUS


WORLD MAP of TORTUS
Astran Kingdom
Northern Peaks
Rocky Region
Ur Lake
Divine Mountain
Crimson Desert
City of Outlaws, Andika
Red Dragon's Mountain
Uldia Dukedom
Pale Forest
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


Moz, capital of the Asmos region
Elan, capital of the Enedra region
Breis, capital of the Breis region
Dezeis, capital of the Desaifa region
Odion Federation
Roque, capital of the Urak region
Agris, national capital
Yorks, capital of the Kustus region
White Scarred Plains
Beria, capital of the Belem region
Mandora, capital of the Makia region

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Prologue

Deep within the mist-covered forest was a silent fountain. It stood out among the clearing, like a moonstone inlaid in the forest floor. By the fountain stood a lone woman. Her long silver hair glistened like silk, and her skin was unnaturally pale. She wore a pure white dress, and her generally pale appearance made it easy for her to blend in with the mist. The only parts of her that weren't white were her lips, which were a light pink, and her eyes, which were a striking jade-green.

At a glance, she seemed more like a beautiful spirit than a living being, but she was undoubtedly of the mortal realm. And her long tapered ears made it clear which race she belonged to. She was an elf.

From the looks of it, she appeared to be in her mid-twenties. She had a dignified air to her, which helped to accent her unparalleled beauty. However—

"....." She appeared quite troubled.

Her expression was dark, and her slender fingers fiddled nervously with the pendant dangling from her neck.

"I thought I'd find you here," a man's voice echoed through the clearing. The woman slowly turned around, looking unsurprised.

"Virtus-dono..."

"I've said it before and I'll say it again: You don't need to use honorifics with me. In fact, you can just call me Badd if you'd like," the man said lightly, shrugging his shoulders. This frivolous-looking man was none other than Badd Virtus, the vice-commander of the Liberators.

The same man who had gotten annoyed at how much fun Miledi seemed to be having on her adventures and left a letter saying he was leaving to go on some adventures of his own. Of course, Miledi's travels hadn't been all fun and games, but he'd gotten the mistaken impression that they were from the correspondence she sent him. In other words, he was an immature middle-aged

man who'd gotten jealous of a fourteen-year-old girl. And yet, he was second-in-command of the Liberators.

The young elf chuckled at Badd, and the aloof impression she gave off while silent vanished completely. In fact, it seemed she was quite close to him. Badd's ears reddened slightly in embarrassment.

"Are you saying I shouldn't show respect to the famous Knight Hunter? Even though we're at war with the church?" the elf asked mischievously.

"Err, well, it's just... I might have defeated a lot of knights, but I haven't taken down any real bigshots, so it's not like I deserve all the praise I'm getting..."

"Aren't you one of the leaders of the largest anti-church organization?"

"I-I suppose so, but still..."

The elf went on, talking about how he was on the church's most wanted list and other such things. Had Miledi been present, she would have mercilessly teased Badd about how deeply he was blushing. Badd seemed to realize he was acting unseemly as well, and he hurriedly cleared his throat and changed the subject.

"At any rate, have you recovered from your exhaustion?"

"Yes. I'll be fine now."

"Then we should probably head back. Your guards have been complaining that you vanish far too often. They even had to resort to sending me to find you this time."

"But aren't you the one who taught me how to slip away unnoticed, Virtus-dono? You should be praising me for getting so good at it."

"Every time you vanish, I can feel your guards' hatred for me growing."

The elf chuckled again. In truth, she rarely had opportunities to be alone. Unfortunately, her job, her status, and her lineage required her to be around people most hours of the day. And now that they were at war, her responsibilities were greater than ever. Were she to be captured or killed, tens of thousands of people would die. That was how important she was.

"Well, I can get why you'd want to be alone at times, Queen Lyutillis Haltina."

Indeed, the elf was none other than the queen of the vast territory that stretched across the fog-covered Pale Forest, Lyutillis Haltina. The republic of beastmen that was safe from both humans and demons.

“Now you’re just being mean, Badd-dono.”

Badd had purposely used Lyutillis’ full title as a way of getting revenge at her for not using his first name, and for bringing up his rather embarrassing nickname. Lyutillis pursed her lips unhappily, but it was obvious from the slight blush on her cheeks and the way her ears were twitching back and forth that she was enjoying talking to Badd. In truth, she found it refreshing to converse with someone who spoke casually to her instead of treating her with reverence.

“Sorry, that’s just how I am.”

Though he was apologizing, there wasn’t an ounce of remorse in his voice. Giving up on her attempt at looking angry, Lyutillis smiled and turned on her heel. Her bare feet made no noise as she walked across the forest undergrowth. She wasn’t particularly skilled at walking silently, but the forest itself seemed to be trying to stay silent for the sake of its queen.

She really is like a fairy of the forest... Badd thought absently to himself as he followed behind her. Just walking through the woods made her seem ethereal and otherworldly.



Badd had been born in the Uldia Dukedom and had originally been part of a tribe that worshiped a great fairy they believed lived in Ur Lake. But his tribe, like many others, had been destroyed by the church, their village razed to the ground. Still, his faith in nature hadn't waned in the slightest. Perhaps that was why he found himself so enamored with Lyutillis, who seemed to embody the kind of spirits his tribe had worshiped.

"Badd-dono. What do you think of our prospects?"

Lyutillis' question snapped Badd out of his musings. She hadn't turned around, but was rather looking straight ahead. No, it was more accurate to say that she was looking out toward the future, and she wanted to know what an outsider like Badd thought it had in store for them.

Badd sucked in a deep breath, then gave an answer befitting the vice-commander of the Liberators.

"If our leader can make it here in time, we'll win."

"So you're saying the republic stands no chance on its own? But as long as I live, the forest's barrier is unbreakable. Has history —and the current state of this very war—not proven that it cannot be breached?"

"You mustn't underestimate the church, Your Majesty. If they were to get truly serious..."

Lyutillis came to a stop and looked back over her shoulder at Badd. Her eyes were full of worry. Badd calmly met her gaze and finished his statement.

"No one but Miledi and her friends would be able to stand against them. You would undoubtedly be captured."

Lyutillis despondently cast her gaze downward. A lone flower bloomed at her feet.

"In that case—"

Badd cut her off before she could say any more.

"Please don't think of doing anything foolish. Surrendering won't help anyone. In fact, it will only make things worse."

“Would they refuse to spare my kinsmen even if I promised to use my powers for the church’s sake?”

“If you gave yourself over to them, they would break your spirit. They would turn you into a mindless slave who would willingly give up her life in the name of their god.”

“I am not so weak that I would lose myself.”

“True, you are strong. Stronger than most. You’d probably be able to last for a while. But you don’t understand what the church is capable of. You don’t know how sinister their methods are. Nor what darkness lies at the depths of their twisted religion.”

Lyutillis turned her gaze away from the flower. Her slender shoulders were trembling.

Badd took a step forward and said with conviction, “Please, trust me. Believe in the Liberators.”

“Badd-dono...”

“Our leader might be the most annoying snot-nosed brat in existence but... she’s also our sun. I’m sure she’ll illuminate your future, just like she has ours.”

“.....”

Lyutillis looked up at Badd again and flashed him a fleeting smile. As she resumed walking, she asked, “Incidentally, what exactly makes her the ‘most annoying snot-nosed brat in existence’?”

“She’s a master at getting on people’s nerves, and she always knows what to say to piss you off.”

“My, she certainly sounds like a wonderful leader,” Lyutillis said without an ounce of sarcasm.

“Huh?” Badd said, stopping in his tracks.

“What?” Lyutillis asked, confused by his confusion. The two of them stared at each other for a few seconds. *Well this conversation took a weird turn...* Badd thought to himself.

“Your Majesty! The Templar Knights have joined the front lines! We need you!”

Suddenly, a young leopardman burst into the clearing, interrupting the two of them. Lyutillis and Badd exchanged glances, then ran off in the direction the messenger had come from.

It was time to fight against the church.

Chapter I: War and an Unexpected Reunion

The White Scarred Plains. Technically, it was a region that lay within the militaristic Odion Federation's borders, but everyone knew that the area wasn't actually in the Federation's control.

As for why, the answer was simple. The White Scarred Plains lay on the border of the Pale Forest. As a result, they were covered in a thin layer of mist year-round. Of course, the mist that leaked out of the forest wasn't thick enough to really obscure anyone's vision, or beguile their senses. But whenever someone threatened to invade the forest, the fog covering the plains suddenly thickened. Everything for kilometers around became encased in the same mist that covered the forest. Any army hoping to push into the forest first had to win the battle at the White Scarred Plains. But even if they did, once they entered the forest the mist grew so thick that one could barely see a few meters in front of their face. Whereas on the plains, even when the mist was at its worst, there was at least fifty meters of visibility in all directions. Worst of all, the mist did far more than just obscure people's vision.

"Haaah... Haaah... Dammit!"

A young soldier cursed. He was stationed on the southern fringe of the White Scarred Plains and belonged to the fourth platoon of the Odion Federation Army.

Screams and booms and other sounds of battle could be heard all around him. His heart raced, and cold sweat poured down his face. Some of it got into his eyes, and he took his hand off his hilt to wipe it away. The moment he did, a black shadow entered his field of vision.

"Shaaaaaa!"

"Gah!"

A sword suddenly came at him, and it was only thanks to his countless hours of training that he was able to block the side swing in time and keep his head on

his shoulders. However, the shock of the impact was so strong that it bent his sword and sent him flying. As he sailed through the air, the young soldier realized the blow had dislocated his shoulder as well. He crashed against the ground, the pain snapping him out of his reverie. Though he wanted nothing more than to lie there and whimper, the screams of his comrades motivated him to keep fighting.

“Fireball!” he shouted, raising his one good arm. He was aiming for the tigerman warrior who’d just cut one of his fellow soldiers in half.

Unfortunately, the tigerman had heard him casting. He turned around to face the young soldier, who was still lying on the ground. Though the fireball was nearly upon him, he didn’t bother raising his massive claymore to protect himself. Almost as if to say he didn’t even need to block.

“Dammit!” the soldier shouted as he watched his fireball sail harmlessly past the tigerman. Just as the tigerman had expected it to.

This was the real danger of the fog that covered the Pale Forest. It provided a barrier to all the beastmen within it. Said barrier protected them from all long and mid-ranged magic as well as arrows. Anything shot at beastmen within the fog was redirected, no matter what direction it came from. And the thicker the fog, the more potent the barrier’s effects. Within the depths of the forest, there were even times where soldiers couldn’t swing their swords in the direction they wanted.

Naturally, the beastmen themselves were unaffected by the fog’s misdirection. In fact, their heightened senses meant even the lack of visibility wasn’t an issue for them. The Pale Forest offered the beastmen a massive geographical advantage, while debilitating the offensive potential of any invader. And that wasn’t even the worst part.

“Damn invaders,” the tigerman muttered, stalking over the young soldier to finish him off. But just then, someone came to his rescue.

“Don’t underestimate us, you filthy half-breeds!”

“Captain!”

A man large enough to rival the tigerman in stature swung his massive

halberd down. The young soldier's captain was a master of strengthening magic, and he'd earned himself the title Strongarm within the Odion Federation. Moreover, the tigerman was completely defenseless, since he'd just raised his sword to attack the soldier lying on the ground. The Odion captain had every advantage, and by all rights, he should have cleaved the tigerman in half.

"You owe me for this!"

"Impossible!"

Another beastman slid in between the tigerman and the captain, blocking the captain's halberd. The surprising thing was she was a petite cat girl barely half the captain's size. But her two crossed shortswords had stopped his halberd completely.

On average, beastmen were a lot stronger than humans, but catmen, in particular, didn't have that much more physical strength than humans, so the captain's surprise was natural.

"Uryaaah!"

"Wha—!?"

There was a thunderous boom as the girl kicked the captain in the stomach. Though he weighed over 120 kilograms with all his plate armor on, he was sent flying. That was how powerful her kick had been.

"N-No way... What the hell are you people? When did the beastmen get so strong!?" another soldier shouted.

The young soldier the captain had tried to protect had already been slaughtered by the tigerman. This was an absolute nightmare. Everything the Odion Federation thought they knew about beastmen had been turned on its head. That was just how strong the soldiers of the beastmen republic were.

"Don't falter, men! We're soldiers of the noble federation! The church is counting on us!"

One of the federation's commanders tried to rally the men's flagging morale. Thousands of Odion soldiers answered with a rousing war cry and charged the

girl and her tigerman companion. The tigerman looked coldly down at the charging mob and raised a hand into the air. A second later, hundreds of beastmen of all races appeared from the fog.

“Pass down the forest’s judgment on these disgraceful invaders!” he shouted, and the beastmen answered with a roar that drowned out the Odion soldiers’ war cries. Then they charged forward, colliding with the Odion army’s line. The battle soon devolved into a melee, where the mist’s effects hurt the Odion army the most. Since they couldn’t be sure their arrows or spells would fly true, they couldn’t fire for risk of hurting their own men. Though even if they could have, pinpointing where the enemy was in a melee this chaotic would have been impossible.

The Odion soldiers had no choice but to rely on strengthening magic and their sword arms. Unfortunately, all the formations and tactics they’d devised were useless in this thick fog, especially since the beastmen were far stronger than they’d anticipated. The beastmen were unbelievably fast, seemingly had endless stamina, and possessed superhuman strength. Most weapons couldn’t scratch them, magic wouldn’t hit them, and their punches and kicks were strong enough to crush plate armor.

“Use our numbers to our advantage! Swarm them!”

That was the only tactic that stood a chance of working against the beastmen. The Odion soldiers needed an entire squad to take down even a single foe. Unfortunately, the beastmen also happened to have impeccable coordination, and they ran circles around the Odion army.

“Gah! Where are our reinforcements!?”

The Odion commander started to panic as he saw his units get taken out one by one. Just then—

“You’re mine!”

“Shit—”

The tigerman from earlier slipped past the commander’s guards and charged at him. He swung his claymore at the commander with inhuman speed. In the few seconds before the claymore parted his head from his shoulders, the

commander's life flashed before his eyes. He despaired, knowing that everything he'd accomplished was about to come to an end.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Wha—"

But just before the claymore reached him, the tigerman vanished right in front of the commander's eyes. Or rather, the tigerman was kidnapped. By a pale white dragon, which swooped down out of nowhere.

The tigerman screamed and tried to struggle out of the dragon's jaws. He barely managed to avoid being bitten to death by using his claymore as a wedge, but one of the dragon's fangs still sunk into his back. As he opened his mouth to curse—

"Don't struggle. It's unsightly," the man riding the white dragon said. He was wearing the armor of the Templar Knights. He said something else the commander couldn't quite catch, and the dragon flicked its head upward.

"Uwoooh!?" the tigerman shouted as he was flung into the air. Another white dragon shot out of the fog, and this time the tigerman couldn't protect himself. It bit down on the hapless beastman, killing him instantly.

Blood rained down onto the plains below. The dragon carelessly tossed the tigerman's corpse away, like it was nothing more than trash. The girl who'd saved him earlier looked up furiously at the dragons, as did the other beastmen. Once everyone's attention was on the dragons, a loud voice rang out across the battlefield.

"Brave men of the federation! We have come to reinforce you! Let us crush these filthy animals together!"

The mist in the sky behind the Odion soldiers was blown away in a sudden gust of wind, revealing who had spoken.

"That silver dragon... I-It's the Paragons of Light..."

The Paragons of Light were one of the three strongest pillars of the church. And the silver dragon that the soldiers were looking at was the dragon lord Adra, one of the holy symbols of the Elbard Theocracy. Riding atop it was a

knight wearing a monocle and ostentatious battle robes. There was a massive white bow slung across his back. His short black hair was parted to one side, and he was smiling jovially to the soldiers. He was none other than Mulm Allridge, commander of the Paragons of Light.

Pure white mana swirled around him and his twenty-meter long dragon, making him look even more gallant. He looked every bit like a storybook hero. Adra flapped its wings once, and the resulting gust blew the fog away. The battle lines of the beastmen republic and the Odion Federation were now exposed to all. It was now clear that the beastmen were only fielding 3000 soldiers compared to the federation's 10,000.

"Tch... Scatter! Don't clump up or you'll be targeted!"

An old foxman who was presumably the commander of the beastmen quickly started barking orders. However, at roughly the same time, Mulm began his assault.

"Adra! Show these heretics what it means to oppose Ehit!"

The dragon let out a roar and spread its wings. As it did so, its massive body began to glow. Wrapped in an aura of light as it was, the silver dragon was so beautiful it captivated the entire battlefield. But despite its beauty, all it brought to the beastmen was death and destruction. The light concentrated around Adra's mouth, and it opened its maw wide to unleash a powerful breath attack.

Sound vanished from the world as it was enveloped in an aurora of light. Seconds passed. Finally, sound and color returned to the world. The aurora of light slowly dissipated, revealing a massive hole in the ground.

A crater three hundred meters in diameter now existed where the beastmen army had been. With just one attack, Adra had slaughtered thousands of soldiers. The men of the Odion Federation saw for the first time what the strength of the church's three pillars was really like. However—

"Good grief. They sure don't make it easy. I see they really are stronger than normal."

Mulm furrowed his brows unhappily. His dissatisfaction was understandable.

The beastmen's losses were lower than he'd expected. Instead of the thousands he thought he'd killed, barely 500 beastmen had been hit. The others had scattered the moment the foxman had commanded them to.

Though it had taken barely a few seconds for the aurora of light to reach the beastmen forces, most of them had been able to get hundreds of meters away. The fact that all of them were that agile was unnatural. And of the 500 soldiers Adra's light had struck, only half of them had been killed. The rest were just wounded. The beastmen's toughness was as unnatural as their agility.

Still, the shockwave from Adra's blast had been enough to knock most of the beastmen off their feet. A third of them had been hit hard enough that it'd take a few minutes before they could rejoin the fray.

"Now then, let's wipe them out before they manage to regroup," Mulm said with an arrogant smile, and Adra roared in response. A flock of white dragons rose up behind Mulm. The church's holy dragon knight unit had arrived. At roughly the same time, a group of knights riding giant white wolves thundered onto the battlefield as well. With the addition of their ground unit, the entirety of the Paragons of Light had entered the fray. Just as he was about to give the order to charge, Mulm noticed a silhouette closing in on him from above.

"Wha—"

"Dang, he saw us."

A slender, blue-haired harpy wearing a white robe shot out of the clouds, his spear aimed at Mulm. He narrowed his slit-like eyes and shouted, "All units, charge! Show these bastards who the sky really belongs to!"

Several hundred harpies suddenly appeared from the fog, all diving toward the Paragons' dragon unit. Some of them had slingshots, which they used to hurl small objects that looked like fruit at the dragon knights. They burst in midair, dousing the knights and their dragons in a fine powder.

A few seconds later, the dragons started screaming in anguish. It seemed the powder was capable of burning the dragon's noses with its scent. Taking advantage of the knights' momentary panic, the harpies rained spears down upon them. Some unseated the knights, while others pierced the wings of their dragons.

“Damn half-breeds!” Mulm shouted. He then ordered Adra to blow the powder away with a flap of its wings and unslung his bow. He didn’t seem to have any kind of quiver, but the moment he pulled the string back, an arrow of light appeared on the bow.

“Die, you inferior scum!”

He loosed, and the arrow of light streaked toward the slit-eyed harpy. The harpy immediately dodged to the side, but to his surprise, the arrow changed trajectory to follow him. Not only that, it split mid-flight, turning into a barrage of ten arrows.

Mulm wielded one of the seven holy Artifacts of the church, the Divine Bow. It allowed him to create arrows of any element and imbue them with all sorts of special effects. On top of that, the arrows would split mid-flight and chase their target for eternity. Best of all, though, the bow strengthened the user’s base stats and upped their perception abilities as well, including giving them the Farsight skill.

Most people would have despaired in the face of such overwhelming might, but it seemed this harpy was a cut above the rest. As the arrows bore down on him, he turned to face them and opened his eyes wide.

“Howlstorm!”

Unlike most other beastmen, he was able to use magic. His name was Nirke Zouk, and he was the commander of the republic’s aerial division. The special magic he possessed was called Galeforce, and it allowed him to manipulate the wind. One of the many abilities he’d developed with it was Howlstorm, an attack that allowed him to shoot a tornado out of his mouth.

The spiral of wind destroyed the barrage of light arrows with ease. But Mulm wasn’t the slightest bit perturbed. He had Adra fly above Nirke and fire its aurora breath at him. Though the fact that Nirke possessed magic hadn’t surprised him, Mulm was still incensed that a mere beastman could use even a fraction of Ehit’s holy powers. As he watched the light bear down on him, Nirke began to panic. But just then—

“Commander!”

One of his subordinates rushed forward and tackled Nirke out of the way. Unfortunately, that meant he took the full brunt of Adra's aurora blast instead.

"Kyle..." Nirke muttered, grieving for his fallen comrade before he turned angrily to Mulm.

"I guess I should have expected as much from one of the church's strongest orders... He's on a different level than those federation chumps."

Still, Nirke had achieved his objective. Namely, to buy time.

"Hrm? That blasted fog again!?"

Mulm's expression stiffened as the fog he'd blown away started creeping up again. He ordered Adra to blow it away with another flap of its wings, but this time the fog remained.

"Tch... So it really can't be eradicated... What a pain."

The gusts of wind Adra created did nothing more than cause the fog to swirl around itself and thicken further. Even the Paragons of Light weren't immune to its disorienting effects, and Mulm was well aware of that. Shaking his head, Mulm ordered his knights to group around him.

"No, simply calling it a pain would be a disservice. This is clearly the work of Ehit's magic. Truly, it is a sight to behold."

There was a fanatical gleam in Mulm's eyes. His calm smile vanished, replaced by a mad grin. Meanwhile, Nirke and the others faded away into the fog. The beastmen on the ground recovered their wounded and did the same.

"We've dealt them a severe blow, which is good enough for now! Group together and retreat!" Mulm shouted, his voice amplified by magic. Before his unit could be completely enveloped in the fog, he turned Adra around and led them back to camp. He looked back over his shoulder as he retreated, making sure he hadn't lost anyone. As he gazed out toward the forest he couldn't see, he muttered, "Fear not, beloved child of god. For I, Mulm, shall save you."

Another battle, the largest one of the opening engagements, was still going in the central area of the White Scarred Plains. Thunder rained down from the sky,

scorching the plains all over.

“Wait for me, child of god! I’m coming to save you!”

The source of that thunder was Lilith Arkind, commander of the Templar Knights. Though she was their commander, she was out on the front lines, shooting bolts of lightning at every beastman she could find. Her originally long blonde hair had been cut short to make her look more ferocious, and she truly was a terror on the battlefield.

“Who’re you calling a child of god, you damn fanatic!”

Ten beastmen leaped at Lilith from all sides. They were all wolfmen, and they moved with expert coordination. Unfortunately, that wasn’t enough.

“Sh-She’s too fast...”

Before they could swing their swords and spears down at her, she cut through all of them.

“My lightning is the wrath of Ehit! No filthy beastman will ever touch me!”

Lilith stabbed her sword into the ground in front of her. Lightning shot out of it in every direction, electrocuting all the beastmen around her. Then, with a flash, she disappeared and reappeared within another formation of beastmen. Lilith swung her sword in a wide arc, shooting lightning all around her in a circle. The beastmen were sent flying before they even had time to shout. Even the federation soldiers couldn’t help but shudder at Lilith’s display of might.

It was this special magic of hers, Thunderclap, that had allowed her to rise to the position of Templar Knight commander at the young age of 27. Not only could she cast lightning magic instantly without incantations, but she could also cover herself in lightning, allowing her to move at near light speed.

“Dammit! That woman’s a monster! Is the mist not ready to be redeployed yet!?”

“There’s someone who keeps getting rid of it. What the hell is the scouting unit doing!? They need to find who’s responsible!”

There was indeed someone on the church’s side who was thinning out the fog in the area. They weren’t using wind to blow it away, so whatever their

methods were, they weren't physical.

Lilith and her unit timed their strikes for when the fog was at its weakest, and the beastmen army was slowly getting pushed back. Of course the beastmen had sent assassins out to find who was weakening the fog and kill them, but so far they hadn't succeeded.

"Fugyaaah!?"

A bunny girl suddenly careened into the beastman camp, as if flung there by something.

"Sui!"

"What happened to the caster!? Did you find them!?"

"You could worry about me a little too, you know!" the girl named Sui shouted.

The white combat uniform she was wearing was rather tattered, and her ears were drooping. Though she was part of the weakest beastman race, she'd managed to rise to the top of the republic army's scouting division at the tender age of sixteen. And right now, she was fighting for her life.

"Oho. Did you really think I'd let you assassinate Zebal?"

"Eeeeeek!" Sui screeched and scrambled backward, not even bothering to get to her feet. Staring scornfully down at her was Lilith.

"Do you honestly believe I would let a mere beastman take out the commander of our third division? And a puny rabbitman at that? Are you insulting me!?"

"I'm sorry, I got ahead of myself! I promise I won't do it again, so please forgive me!"

Sui prostrated herself before Lilith. Though she was a commander of one of the five army divisions, she had not an ounce of pride. Even her beastmen comrades groaned in exasperation. However, they were used to this behavior of hers, so they didn't reprimand her.

"Really, I mean it! I realize someone like me can't possibly beat you guys now! Do what you want with me, I surrender! I should have known I wouldn't be able

to beat the famed Templar Knights! Who would have thought you guys had someone who could assimilate into the fog and take partial control of it!? Well, it looks like he can't attack while he's in that state, but he's really good at hit and run tactics involving becoming solid for just a second, then vanishing into the mist again! Really, you've got one hell of a—"

"Silence!"

Even as she prostrated herself, Sui told her comrades everything they needed to know about their quarry, Zebal Igan, as fast as she could. Furious, Lilith stepped forward to cut Sui's head off, but her sword missed its mark.

"This as far as you'll go, church bitch!"

"You're finally here, Valf!"

To be more specific, a wolfman suddenly jumped in front of Sui and blocked Lilith's sword with his gauntlets. He had long grey hair and a wild, unkempt beard, both of which actually accented his rugged good looks. He was also the man Sui had been waiting for, the commander of the republic's commando unit, Valf Rugal.

Lilith harrumphed dismissively. She doubted any filthy beastman could stand against her lightning. She sent sparks down her body and into the wolfman barring her way.

"What!?"

But before they could reach him, her body suddenly tilted to one side, as if the ground was trying to suck her toward it.

"Raaah!"

As Lilith's stance broke Valf batted her sword away with one hand and swung his other down at the Templar Knight commander, his claws aiming for her neck. If his blow connected, she would undoubtedly die. But Lilith's title wasn't just for show. She was a seasoned fighter who'd fought countless fierce battles. She quickly sent lightning shooting off in all directions, her body glowing with electricity. Tough though he was, Valf couldn't prevent his muscles from momentarily spasming as lightning coursed through him. Of course, he resumed his attack almost instantly, but that split-second delay was enough for Lilith. She

brought her sword up just in time to block his claws. With a roar, Valf unleashed his full force and sent her flying, but Lilith was able to use her lightning abilities to magnetize herself to the ground and land safely a short distance away.

“That just now... Was that special magic? A mongrel like you doesn’t deserve such power.”

“Who knows. Why would I tell human scum like you?”

Valf grinned ferociously at Lilith. However, Lilith’s guess was right on the mark. What Valf had used to make her lose her balance earlier was indeed special magic. His special magic was Float Field. Though it had an extremely limited range of one meter and could only be activated for a few seconds at a time, Valf could orient the gravity of anyone within his sphere of influence. His special magic synergized perfectly with his hit and run tactics, and it made him the strongest close-combat fighter in the republic. But right now, cold sweat was pouring down his back. Because the Templar Knight commander had managed to block his strongest, sure-kill blow. Not only that, she’d escaped from it unscathed. Of course, he didn’t let his fear show.

He glared at Lilith, his bloodlust a match for her own. But just then, a panicked voice called out to the Templar Knight commander.

“Commander, behind you!”

Lilith reflexively turned around and saw Zebal’s back, shrouded in mist. He was close enough to be touching her, his twin daggers raised up above him, blocking another dagger aimed at Lilith’s head.

“I’m sorryyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!” Sui shouted as she tried to drive her dagger past Zebal’s guard and into Lilith’s brain.

“Be careful, Commander! That rabbitman has some kind of special magic that lets her turn invisible!”

Indeed, Sui’s special magic, Refraction, allowed her to bend the light around her, making her invisible. On top of that, she was a rabbitman, a member of the cowardly race that was most adept at hiding their presence. Her innate abilities, combined with her special magic, made her nigh impossible to detect. Lilith might have been distracted by Valf, but even then the fact that she’d lost sight

of Sui meant her skills worked on even the church's best.

"It's just one after another, huh? How dare you blaspheme Lord Ehit like this!"

She couldn't stand the fact that two beastmen of all people possessed Ehit's gifts, and that she was actually being pushed back by them. In a fit of rage, she attempted to throw out another burst of lightning, but Valf stopped her.

"Sui, it's do or die!"

As he shouted that, he activated his Float Field and completely destroyed Lilith's sense of balance. Then, he rushed forward, intent on ending this.

"Annoying pest!"

"Leave this irksome rabbitman to me!"

Zebal used his own special magic, Liquefaction, to turn his arm into a blade of water and launched a counterattack against Sui. However, Sui somersaulted backward, making full use of her race's natural agility. And, as she dodged to safety, she activated her special and started turning invisible. Then, at the same time, she shouted, "I don't wanna dieeeeee!"

Then, she pulled a small flask out of her pocket and sprayed green liquid everywhere.

"You coward! How dare you use poison again!" Zebal shouted, his expression furious. He quickly cast water magic to swallow up the green liquid. The reason he hadn't been able to warn Lilith right away was because she'd actually got him with the poison vial last time, and he'd had to waste precious minutes detoxifying himself. The fact that a member of the weakest beastman race had managed to one-up him, an illustrious Templar Knight, galled him to no end.

"Don't blame me! I'm just following orders! Please, try to understand!"

Not only did Sui have no pride, but she also had no compunctions over shifting the blame onto others. But despite her apparent cowardice, she collected accurate information on the Templar Knights' key figures and disseminated that information to her comrades with surprising alacrity. Plus, she'd even slowed them down with poison and other cheap tricks. All of this

was possible because she was extremely adept at running and hiding.

“I’ll kill you, dammit! I’ll fucking kill youuuuuu!”

Zebal’s anger finally got the better of him. But before he could do anything—

“If we all work together, there’s nothing to be scared of! Plus, that means it’s not just my fault!”

The earth started to rumble. The rest of the scouting division suddenly appeared, launching a surprise attack on Zebal. All of them were highly skilled at manipulating their presence, so no one had noticed them until now. And while they couldn’t deal any fatal blows, their combined harassment was extremely irksome. Plus, their leader was famous among the republic for being a genius at pissing people off. The worst part was that despite how annoying she was, her comrades couldn’t deny she was extremely good at producing results.

“Hawawawawah!”

But eventually, Zebal managed to land a blow on her. No matter how skilled she was, she couldn’t match up to a Templar Knight division captain.

“I’m gonna cut those disgusting ears off your head!” he shouted as he stalked over to where Sui was laying on the ground. Out of the corner of her eye, Sui saw Valf finally get beaten down by Lilith and drop to his knees. Her other comrades were also being pushed back by the Templar Knights as well.

“Bahahahahahaha. My work’s done!” she said with a triumphant smile. Before Zebal could ask her what she meant, a thick fog rolled in.

“Blast, not this mist again.”

Within seconds, the battlefield was covered in mist. This time it was so thick that Zebal knew his special magic wouldn’t be enough to dissipate it. Within seconds, the tables turned.

“You filthy mongreeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeel!”

In the brief instant that Zebal had been distracted, Sui had vanished once more. The other beastmen had found a second wind as well, and they started pushing the federation soldiers back.

“Captain Zebal! We need to retreat while we still can!” one of Zebal’s subordinates shouted.

“Ngh, not until I’ve made mincemeat out of that rabbit bitch!”

Zebal knew that it was dangerous for his unit to stay in this fog for long. But even so, he couldn’t leave until he’d ripped the guts out of that girl who’d run circles around him. As he gritted his teeth in anger, Lilith suddenly appeared by his side in a shower of sparks.

“Retreat, Zebal.”

“B-But...”

“There’s no need to rush. It’s not like they have anywhere to run. Besides, locating the child of god takes priority.”

Pushing on here would only incur needless casualties. The main goal of this war was to gain information, so there was no need to fight when they were at a disadvantage. Zebal knew that as well, and so, after a deep breath, he nodded.

Leaving the hapless federation soldiers as bait, the Templar Knights organized an orderly retreat.

On the north end of the White Scarred Plains, the Odion Federation’s first division was embroiled in a fierce engagement.

A circle of white fire covered the battlefield. It beat back the mist, creating an arena within the plains that was free of the forest’s influence. The flames had been created by one of the Holy Templar Knights’ division commanders, Araym Orcman, using his special magic, Divine Blaze.

“Ngh, damn knights. Without the mist, we’ll have a hard time fighting them even with Her Majesty’s buffs...” A three-meter-tall bearman muttered, gritting his teeth. His name was Sim Gato, and he was commander of the beastman army’s infantry, which was their largest unit. Not only that, he was the head general of the entire military.

At first, he’d done a splendid job of pushing the federation soldiers back, but then the Holy Templar Knights had joined the fray and burned the mist away

with their fire. Now his army was on the back foot. Though it wasn't the flames that were Sim's biggest problem.

"Here he comes again. Everyone who isn't a squad captain, retreat! Brace yourselves, guys!"

Sim's deep voice boomed across the battlefield. A second later, a huge shadow blocked his view of the sun. A giant warhammer was coming down on him. He raised his halberd to block the meteoric blow.

There was a resounding crash of metal against metal, and shockwaves rippled out from the point of impact. The ground Sim was standing on depressed a few inches, creating a tiny crater and cracks in the earth around it.

"Uwooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!"

Sim's muscles screamed in pain and a feral roar escaped through his gritted teeth as he weathered the blow.

"As I suspected... you possess special magic that lets you control the force of impacts. Furthermore, your strength is unnatural, even for a beastman," the owner of the massive warhammer, Laus Barn, mused. He stood in the air, using the power of his enchanted iron boots to create footholds for himself.

As he'd guessed, Sim's special magic, Shock Wall, allowed him to redirect the force of impacts, as well as amplify the force of his attacks that relied on shockwaves or penetrative force. By all rights, Sim should have been completely immune to any attacks made by blunt weapons, especially since Sim's physical strength was greater than anyone else's in the beastmen republic. However, despite being a human, Laus was seemingly beating Sim in a contest of strength.

Of course, that was because he was using his ancient magic, spirit magic, to use an advanced version of Limit Break that powered up the soul as well as the body. The fact that Sim was able to survive Laus' blows in the first place was what was really deserving of praise. But while he could survive Laus' onslaught, Sim was by no means Laus' equal. The reason Sim had told everyone else to retreat was because he knew what would be coming next. Laus pushed down harder with his hammer, then unleashed another burst of spirit magic.

“Soul Shock!”

“Ngh!”

Laus’ jet-black mana rippled outward, delivering shockwaves directly into the souls of anyone nearby. Many of the weaker beastmen were knocked unconscious and toppled to the ground. Even the squad captains and lieutenants staggered from the force of the shockwave.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“So you can resist even this!?”

With another bestial roar, Sim thrust his halberd forward. Laus was forced backward, and a brief look of admiration and surprise flitted across his face. That being said, Sim’s full-power thrust hadn’t even been able to hurt him. Laus quickly regained his balance and brandished his trusty warhammer once more. Like Mulm’s bow, Laus’ hammer was one of the seven holy artifacts of the church.

A tail of back mana trailed behind the hammer as he swung it down this time. It all happened so fast that Sim didn’t even have time to activate his special magic to protect himself, and the blow sent him flying.

“Gaaah!”

Sim struggled to his feet, using his halberd as a crutch, and surveyed the battlefield. Thanks to Lyutillis’ buffs, most of his men were still alive. However, the rank-and-file soldiers had been rendered unconscious by Laus’ Soul Shock. And even the stronger ones who’d managed to weather it had been severely rattled. As a result, they were barely able to protect themselves from the onslaught of the Holy Templar Knights.

“Your Majesty... do you still need more time? Ngh, did those church bastards wait for the moment she was exhausted before attacking?” Sim muttered.

The church’s knights had launched a few raids before today. But every time they came, the fog barrier had assisted the beastmen in fending the church off. While most of the beastmen couldn’t go toe-to-toe with the Holy Templar Knights even with the fog’s help, the stronger ones were at least enough of a threat that the church was forced to retreat. But it seemed the church had

realized it was quite taxing for Lyutillis to control the fog with such pinpoint precision and had waited for her to exhaust herself before committing to another assault.

Sim refocused his attention on more immediate concerns and shouted, “We can’t keep this up. Abandon the first defensive line, guys! Retreat to the second defensive line at the forest entrance!”

The beastmen had only chosen the White Scarred Plains as their battlefield to keep the forest from being harmed. However, the fog was not nearly as strong on the plains as it was within the forest, and they couldn’t use their poisons, traps, and other guerilla tactics nearly as effectively on open ground, meaning they were fighting at a disadvantage here.

The federation soldiers were weak enough that the beastmen could take them here on the plains, but now that the church’s strongest warriors had arrived, they’d have to accept that the forest would take some damage. Besides, the Holy Templar Knights had pushed the beastmen so far back that the trees were already visible in the distance. Realizing there wasn’t much to lose, the beastmen immediately retreated.

“Laus-sama! Have you found the child of god!? If not, allow me to set fire to the forest and smoke her out!” Araym shouted, eager to burn the heretic beastmen.

Burning down a forest that enemy forces were hiding in was a simple but effective tactic. Up until that point, no army had even made it to the forest, so it hadn’t been attempted before, but now the humans finally had a chance. However, Laus hesitated. He watched as some beastmen carried away their unconscious comrades, while others desperately tried to protect their incapacitated friends. The sight moved him, and as he stared at the forest that was the beastmen’s home, his words stuck in his throat.

“Laus-sama?” Araym asked, doing his best to keep his voice even.

With a quiet sigh that no one heard, Laus replied, “I cannot sense the soul of the ancient magic user! Permission to burn down the forest granted! Push their battle lines as far back as possible!”

“Roger!”

Araym's lips curled into a twisted sneer, and he raised his hand. The flames keeping the mist at bay vanished, and a sphere of burning white-hot fire appeared above him.

"Not on my watch— Eruption!" Sim roared as he swung his halberd down into the ground. Using his special magic, he sent the shockwaves racing across the earth, directly toward Araym. Laus quickly swung his own hammer down, canceling Sim's attack with a shockwave of his own.

"Ngh. Lieutenant Nascis, stop him!" Sim shouted as he did his best to fend off Laus.

A young elf stepped forward and changed the angle of his bow. He was Nascis Fluke, leader of a 1000-man unit. A dozen or so of his best archers changed targets as well, and they launched a volley at Araym. However—

"Repent, sinners!" Another volley of arrows struck down the ones heading for Araym. Unlike Nascis and his men's arrows, these arrows were made of steel and they cut through friend and foe alike as they swatted down any threat to Araym. Furthermore, once they were done, they made a sudden U-turn in the air and headed straight for Nascis.

This was the special magic of the brigade commander Lelaie Argeson, Arrows of Atonement. She was one of the few who'd survived the disastrous invasion of Andika, and her frustration at her loss there had motivated her to train harder than ever. Her homing arrows had grown much stronger since she'd fought Miledi and the others, and it took a team of dwarves with tower shields to block them. Though they managed to keep Nascis and his men safe, it was too late to stop Araym.

"Be purged in the holy fires of Ehit, you filthy beasts!"

Araym unleashed his mini-sun, which was over twenty meters in diameter, at the forest. The air crackled as it passed, burning from the flames' immense heat.

"Retreaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!"

The beastmen were already scattering before Sim said anything, but there were still a good deal of unconscious warriors left where the sphere was going

to land. Just as Sim braced himself for the loss of hundreds of his men, as well as good chunk of the forest—

"The time for judgment has come— Egxess."

A man's voice rang out across the plains, and the sphere of fire suddenly started to shrink. In seconds, it was no bigger than a small child. The agile beastmen could easily get their unconscious comrades to safety against a fireball that small. By the time the fireball landed, there was no one in the area. Plus, it was so small that it set fire to only a minuscule fraction of the forest.

"Wh-What the!?" Araym screamed as his eyes nearly popped out of his skull. He had absolute confidence in his special magic and couldn't believe that anyone had stopped it. The other Holy Templar Knights were shaken as well. A moment of silence fell over the battlefield as everyone tried to process what had just happened. Only Laus had the presence of mind to leap back to safety. He warily eyed the forest.

"Good grief. I guess it was arrogant of me to think I could eat all of a division commander's special magic. Still, I put a lot of effort into that one. Now I'm depressed."

A lone man casually walked out of the forest's fog.

"...A human?" Laus mused as he raised an eyebrow in surprise. The man had none of the physical features unique to beastmen. Everything from his long black hair, to his sparse beard, to his sharp eyes were no different from a normal human's.

But it should be impossible for anyone but beastmen to navigate that forest... Laus thought to himself. The other knights were thinking the same thing.

Enjoying their confusion, the man said, "Oh yes, I'm human alright. Down to the very marrow of my bones."

Grinning, he swung the massive jet-black scythe resting on his shoulders. It whistled through the wind, the blade nearly as big as he was.

As the gust of wind created by his swing passed over the tiny fire created by Araym's shrunken fireball, the flames flickered, then got sucked into his scythe. It glowed indigo as it absorbed the flames, and Araym's jaw dropped open. His

flames were supposed to be unquenchable unless he willed them to disappear. The knights stared warily at the newcomer, unsure of how to respond. It was Sim who eventually broke the silence.

“Virtus... Thanks for the save! You guys, hurry up and get outta here!”

The remaining beastmen snapped out of their reveries and vanished into the trees. One might have expected the Holy Templar Knights to recover their wits as well and give chase, but they were too terrified to move. Of course, their fear was understandable. They’d heard the name Virtus before.

“You’re... the Knight Hunter, aren’t you?”

“Damn, busted already? And here I wanted to act all cool and mysterious.”

Badd Virtus, the famed Knight Hunter, shrugged his shoulders. He was the church’s most wanted heretic, but at the same time, he was also the enemy every knight feared. Over the past few decades, he’d slain hundreds of knights and never once been caught. Many of the church’s smaller temples and monasteries had been completely annihilated by this man. His famous scythe, Egxess, was a special artifact that could absorb the mana of any spell it touched and send that spell back at its caster. Even those who didn’t belong to the church called him the Grim Reaper.

“What is a human like you doing here?” Laus asked, his sharp gaze making it clear he wouldn’t take kindly to lies. Thanks to his spirit magic, he’d be able to tell right away whether or not Badd was telling the truth. Badd knew that as well, and his expression grew serious.

“I’m looking for a wife.”

“.....”

Silence fell over the battlefield once more. Araym’s face trembled in rage. He couldn’t believe Badd had given Laus such a flippant answer. He and the other knights turned indignantly to Laus, but to their surprise, they saw that he looked shaken. Thoughts of asking him to let them turn Badd into mincemeat flew out of their minds.

“L-Laus-sama?”

“I don’t believe it... I sense no falsehood from your soul.”

“Of course you don’t! I’m 100% serious here!”

Badd had indeed come to the forest to look for a wife. And his expression as he said that was resolute. It was as if searching for a wife was a more serious matter than a duel to the death with Holy Templar Knights.

After a few seconds, Araym muttered, “Damn, Knight Hunter. I can’t believe you have the power to deceive even our commander.”

“Hang on, Araym! He’s probably using some kind of artifact to hinder Laus-sama’s powers! His own magic can’t possibly resist Ehit’s might!” Lelaie shouted in reply.

What!? He already has one artifact that’s on par with the seven holy relics, and you’re saying he has another that’s capable of resisting even the commander!? Truly, you are a force to be reckoned with, Knight Hunter... Araym thought. Many of the other knights seemed to be thinking similar things, judging by the fear on their faces.

“Is it really that hard for you guys to believe I’m actually just looking for a wife? Do I really look that hopeless?” Badd muttered softly to himself, looking somewhat depressed. But a second later, his grin returned.

“Yo, Sim. Looks like everyone’s finished retreating. And the barrier’ll be back in a few seconds. You should get out of here too.”

“Hmph. Crafty as ever, I see.”

At Sim’s reply, the knights suddenly returned to their senses. They’d let Badd’s sudden appearance and his strange mannerisms take up all of their attention, so it was only now that they realized he’d managed to buy time for everyone without even lifting a finger.

A thick fog rolled out of the trees, covering the plains. This time the mist was so dense that not even Araym’s Divine Blaze could burn it away. The tiny patch of forest that he’d managed to burn regrew in an instant as well. As Badd and Sim vanished into the fog, Lelaie let loose a volley in anger.

“Don’t fuck with me, you beasts! I’m not letting you escape!”

Her arrows were made of metal, so Badd's Egxess wouldn't be able to eat them. She loosed three arrows at a time and fired nine shots faster than anyone could blink. She also boosted her arrows with wind magic, increasing their speed until they were just streaks of light. However, Badd didn't seem the least bit daunted by Lelaie's volley.

"Whoa there..."

He simply thrust Egxess in front of him and started rotating it with one hand. Lelaie's arrows were diverted to either side as if they feared even touching the scythe. Badd deflected Lelaie's full-power volley without even breaking a sweat. He used his scythe to absorb the homing magic imbued in them as well, preventing them from changing directions.

Just then, another knight burst from a thicket to the side of Badd, hoping to catch him by surprise. Like Lelaie, she was one of the survivors of the Andika debacle, Apri Erebos. Her special magic, Revelation, allowed her to intuit at any given point in time what the optimal course of action would be. And so, she thrust her rapier directly at Badd's heart.

"You sure are a lively one."

"Wha—?"

Badd parried her rapier with just his index finger. Though Apri was shocked, she didn't let that slow her down. Instead, she immediately drew the dagger hidden in her surcoat and tried to stab Badd with it. A second later, her instincts started screaming at her to run. Trusting in her gut, she leaped back as fast as possible. A gust of wind brushed past her bangs as she landed. Badd's scythe had passed by where she'd just been standing.

"Oho. You've got a sharp intuition, young lady."

As Apri was struggling to regain her balance, Badd followed up with a roundhouse kick that boasted as much power as a warhammer. He hit her square in the stomach, and she was sent flying. But before Badd could finish her off, Laus charged.

"Hrmph!"

"Hot damn!" Badd shouted as he looked up at the warhammer bearing down

on him. But while Laus' blows had been strong enough to keep even Sim, the beefiest beastman, pinned in place, Badd just chuckled and blocked the hammer with his spinning scythe. Egxess seemed to suck Laus' hammer into itself before sending it careening off to the side.

"Here, you can have this back."

"Don't underestimate me!"

Badd spun Egxess around again, a trail of black mana following after the scythe. He used the force of Laus' own blow to accelerate his scythe and swing it diagonally down at Laus. Laus used brute force to fight against the laws of inertia and forcibly pulled his hammer back up in time to block. However, Badd just flicked his wrist, subtly altering Egxess' trajectory. The scythe slid past Laus' hammer and headed straight for his shoulder.

Laus pivoted on his back foot to dodge, then whirled around and lunged forward. He was hoping to catch Badd off-guard with a shoulder tackle. But Badd dodged to the side and circled around behind Laus.

The two fighters had switched places. Knowing another attack was coming, Laus whirled around and swung his hammer in a wide, horizontal arc.

Badd swung Egxess up from below and lifted Laus' hammer up so it passed harmlessly over his head. He spun the scythe again, creating fleeting black circles in the air. Laus' holy hammer and Badd's demonic scythe clashed, the peal of metal on metal ringing out across the battlefield.

Laus continued hammering down on Badd from all directions, seemingly ignoring the laws of physics. On the other hand, Badd kept increasing the speed of his scythe's revolutions, deflecting every blow Laus threw at him. Badd's scythe was spinning so fast it looked like a circular black barrier. A miniature typhoon sprung up as Laus' blows energized the wind created by Badd's spinning scythe, and the scythe's rotations amplified the force behind Laus' hammer.

"Impossible... He's fighting on even ground with Laus-sama?"

Araym and the others watched on with unabashed awe. But after a few minutes of fighting, Laus finally saw an opening to use his spirit magic. He knew

Badd's scythe could absorb magic, but he was hoping it wouldn't be able to do the same to ancient magic.

"Soul Shock!"

"It's harvest time, Egxess!"

Laus' jet-black mana shockwaves were cut apart by Badd's scythe, which started to glow indigo once again. However, Egxess wasn't able to eat all of Laus' spell, and vestiges of the shockwave still reached Badd.

"Heh... I already know I can stop that spell of yours by moving the mana in my body around in a circle," Badd said with a smirk. His mana control was nowhere near Miledi's level, but he was still skilled enough to resist a weakened Soul Shock.

Badd licked his lips as he blocked Laus' signature move. Laus quickly leaped back, putting some distance between him and Badd. The Holy Templar Knights, who'd been able to do nothing but watch, let out the breaths they'd been holding.

"Your martial skills are truly impressive... Though that artifact may be aiding you, you're able to match me despite not possessing any special magic."

"I'm honored you think so highly of me," Badd said as he shrugged his shoulders casually, keeping Egxess spinning all the while. While he seemed composed, Badd was actually breaking out in a cold sweat. Thanks to Miledi's reports, he knew exactly what Laus was capable of. Including the fact that Laus could exponentially multiply his stats using spirit magic. Though he was fending off Laus with ease for now, Badd was already fighting at full strength.

Man, ancient magic should be against the rules... he thought with a bitter smile.

On the other hand, Laus was amazed. In the decades he'd served the church, he'd never once heard reports of Badd using any kind of special magic. Meaning his ability to deflect any and all physical attacks came purely from his skills as a fighter. Not only that, he was even able to use the force of his opponents' attacks to empower his own. Godlike was the only word that accurately described his skills. Or in his case, perhaps devil-like. Either way, he'd long since

surpassed anything normal humans were capable of.

Badd watched out of the corner of his eye as Araym and the other knights finally started surrounding him.

“On the other hand, you’re not much of a threat, huh?” Badd said with a provocative sneer. Though it sounded like he was trying to goad Laus, these were actually his true feelings.

“Seems like you’re conflicted about something.”

“Ah—”

For the briefest of moments, Laus’ gaze wavered. His hesitation passed in an instant though, and only Badd saw it.

I knew it. From the moment I saw him, I could tell he was different from those other church idiots... Well, that’s good for me! During their battle, Badd had started seeing signs of Laus’ internal conflict. He was certain that Laus was wavering. But more importantly, he was certain that Sim had finally completed his retreat. The mist was growing thicker by the minute, and both the Holy Templar Knights and the federation soldiers were starting to think it was time to retreat.

“Now then, I think it’s time we called the curtains on act one. All this fighting’s gotten me tired, and it’s time I went home.”

“Like hell you’re going anywhere! We’re gonna bury you!”

Incensed, Araym started gathering his holy white flames. The other Holy Templar Knights readied their weapons as well. Even Laus stared sharply at Badd, waiting for the slightest opening.

But Badd just grinned and shouted, “It’s time for a slaughter, Egxess!”

The jet-black scythe was suddenly enveloped in a massive aura of power. Realizing what was about to happen, Laus shouted, “Everyone, protect yourselves!”

A second later, thousands of indigo-colored blades of mana shot out of the scythe in all directions. Badd hadn’t used the mana he’d absorbed from Araym’s Divine Blaze to restore his own, he’d kept it in the scythe. Not only that, he’d

been feeding Egxess his own mana during the fight. And now all that mana was raining down on the Holy Templar Knights. But they were called the church's strongest for good reason. All of them either put up defenses in time or canceled out the mana blades with their own special magic. However, Badd's onslaught succeeded in keeping them pinned in place for a few seconds. And once the storm was over, Badd was nowhere to be found. In the silence that ensued, Laus sighed.

"Let's retreat."

Grinding their teeth in frustration, his men followed.

"Rescue the child of god who has been held prisoner by the barbaric beastmen."

That was the mission the church's knights had been given, and that was the reason the Elbard Theocracy had declared war on the Haltina Republic. A month had passed since the start of hostilities.

The theocracy mobilized 11,000 knights for this war. Lilith's first division consisted of 5,000 templar knights, as did Zebal's third division. On top of that, Laus had brought 500 Holy Templar Knights with him, and Mulm had brought 500 Paragons of Light. Cardinal Baran Distark had also brought fifty priests with him to take care of the child of god once she was safely rescued from the beastmen. Rescuing the child of god was a mission that had been granted to the knights from Ehit himself, according to the oracle who conveyed his will.

Honestly, the church should have mobilized every single knight in their order for this war, but they couldn't leave the theocracy completely undefended. And so, the templar knights' second and fourth divisions had remained behind, as well as the paladins who guarded the pope. That being said, each division of the templar knights was strong enough to be a match for the entire armies of other countries. Each of the church's three pillars boasted similar strength, though their numbers were much smaller. Though the theocracy had mobilized only a fifth of their total forces, they were clearly serious about this invasion.

Moreover, they'd enlisted the help of half of the Odion Federation's total forces, a whopping 100,000 soldiers. The church had the right to requisition

troops from other countries in the name of Ehit, and they'd made use of that authority here. Since the Pale Forest was a natural fortress, the church had known this war would drag on, and that they'd need a base of operations, which was why they'd gotten the federation involved.

It took ten days to reach the forest from the theocracy in the church's latest airships. While the church's knights were en route to the Pale Forest, the Odion Federation's army had been ordered to begin fighting. The federation knew they wouldn't be able to push their way into the forest, but they were confident they'd be able to complete the mission assigned to them at least—namely, to scout out the republic's forces and thin their numbers if possible. Lastly, they were to try and pinpoint the whereabouts of the child of god.

Judging by their early skirmishes, and using what knowledge they'd gleaned from past wars, the federation had surmised that the republic had around 100,000 soldiers or so. Barring a few exceptions, none of them were capable of using magic. While the beastmen were physically stronger than humans, the federation's troops had received extensive training. Moreover, they were all capable of using strengthening magic, so the federation had been confident they could at least go toe to toe with the beastmen. Though the fog would prevent them from invading the Pale Forest, the federation had believed the beastmen themselves wouldn't be a threat. They just had the lay of the land on their side, nothing more. Indeed, that was how it had been in the past. But then the federation actually had begun their invasion and got their asses handed to them by the beastmen.

"To think we'd barely even make it to the edge of the forest despite dispatching of the Paragons of Light *and* the Holy Templar Knights..." Baran Distark muttered from his seat at the head of the table. He was sitting in a meeting room within the castle in the capital of the Odion Federation, Agris. The castle had been converted into a temporary military headquarters and the church members and federation generals were currently holding a war council.

Laus and Mulm sat to either side of Baran, followed by Lilith and Zebal, then the respective knight orders' vice-captains, then the priests Baran had brought with him, then finally the federation's generals. Baran sat at the head of the council because he was currently acting as the pope's representative. Normally,

Baran hid his crafty nature behind a mask of good-natured kindness, but his frustration at the lack of progress was causing his mask to slip. His priests and the federation generals were all pale-faced, worried that their faith was being brought into question because of their failures.

“Th-This is all the federation’s fault! If they weren’t so useless, maybe we might have made some progress!” one of the priests shouted.

“He’s right! For all their talk about having a strong military, they sure didn’t do much! I bet they were holding our glorious knights back!” another claimed.

“Don’t those federation fools understand that this is a mission from Ehit himself!? They must be lacking in faith if they let themselves get done in by a pack of barbaric mongrels!”

In an attempt to assuage their own fears, the priests were making the federation into a scapegoat.

“I’m terribly sorry... but the beastmen proved to be stronger than our estimates—”

“Don’t bother making excuses!”

You sure talk big, for a bunch of incompetent pencil pushers who did nothing to help! Detref Ernst, the king of the Odion Federation, as well as the general of its armies, thought to himself. He was well past sixty, but he cut almost as imposing a figure as Laus. Despite being a pure-blooded human he was two and a half meters tall, with a heavily muscled frame. His hair and mustache were white, and he wore an eyepatch to cover the eye he’d lost in a previous war. Not only was he a great general, but he was an accomplished politician as well.

Unfortunately, his display of humility only emboldened the priests to berate him further.

“Ancient magic must be the cause of this,” Laus muttered in a heavy voice, and the room went silent. Everyone turned to him. His eyes were closed, and his arms were folded across his chest, but he remained intimidating.

The priests realized they were being reprimanded, and they shrunk back. Upon looking around, they realized Mulm was giving them exasperated looks, Lilith seemed to be doing her best to control her anger at them, and Zebal was

tapping his finger on the table in irritation. Even Araym and the other vice-captains were giving the priests ice-cold glares.

Baran cleared his throat. “This is a war council. I understand you’re frustrated, but if you want to play the blame game, do it somewhere else,” Baran proclaimed as if to express the wishes of all the knights present.

“W-We’re terribly sorry,” the priests murmured, chastened. But what they and Baran didn’t know was that Laus, Mulm, and the other knights’ anger stemmed from something else completely.

“Lord Barn. Could you please explain what happened?” Baran asked.

“There isn’t much to explain, Lord Distark. The beastmen’s strength was far greater than it should have been... but they should be incapable of using body strengthening, and even if there is one among them with special magic of that nature, that person wouldn’t be able to strengthen the entire army. Ancient magic is the only thing that could achieve such a feat.”

“So what you’re saying is the ancient magic this child of god uses is related to strengthening?”

“Yes. But it’s not just any old body strengthening. My knights encountered multiple beastmen who could use special magic, and their magic surpassed ours as well.”

Which means this “child of god’s” ancient magic lets her enhance people’s magic as well as their physical abilities. In fact, it might allow her to enhance all of someone’s parameters...

His voice heavy, Laus added, “Though I do not know how the beastmen are being strengthened, that strengthening is as powerful as my second tier Limit Break.”

“So their stats have been doubled...”

Laus’ spirit magic allowed him to remove the limiters on his soul and buff himself in the same way Limit Break would. The most he could amplify his stats by was fivefold, but going that far caused immense recoil once the magic wore off, so Laus had different tiers he went up to depending on what the situation called for. There were eight tiers in total, and his second tier only doubled his

stats.

“I agree completely with Laus. The harpy that I fought possessed special magic strong enough to take down a holy dragon. And the rest of his unit was just as fast and agile as my dragons.”

Mulm’s special magic, Consecration, allowed him to both brainwash monsters and enhance their abilities. Not only that, he could grant them the power to use light magic. As a result, every beast the Paragons of Light used were protected by barriers of light magic that could only be penetrated by advanced-class and above spells.

“Though it galls me to admit this... there’s a rabbitman girl in their scouting legion who’s a serious threat. Once she vanishes, I suspect no one but Laus-dono would be able to find her,” Zebal added through gritted teeth. His frustration was obvious. Lilith, who seemed just as irked, also spoke up.

“Not only can she disappear, but she can also make her presence disappear as well. The mists don’t part as she passes, either. You can’t even see her footprints anywhere. She’s probably the beastmen army’s most dangerous assassin.”

Lilith went on to talk about the wolfman who could momentarily manipulate gravity in a small radius around him.

Sighing, Laus said, “Considering how hard-pressed we were, it’s not surprising that the federation would suffer losses. Especially since we had no information on the beastmen’s new abilities until now. If anything, we should be thanking the federation soldiers. It’s only because of their support that we weren’t surrounded. You have my gratitude, Detref-dono.”

“...You honor me, sir.”

Detref blinked in surprise. Then he realized this was Laus’ way of apologizing for the priests’ uncouth behavior, and he smiled to himself.

“Incidentally... you mentioned the fog was different from usual?” one of the priests asked awkwardly, trying to change the subject.

Baran replied, “After going over past records, I’ve concluded that this fog is no natural phenomenon. It’s being artificially created.”

Normally, the fog only covered the forest, but whenever the beastmen were threatened, it expanded to cover the plains as well. This happened consistently over the past few centuries. And so, logically, it made sense that there was someone in the forest capable of controlling the fog and that the power to do so was passed down from generation to generation. It followed that said someone was the ruler of the republic.

“That being said, in the past, the fog never came back thicker in the exact spots where it was cleared away, nor was it capable of eluding our attempts to push it back.”

Frowning, Araym added, “The speed at which the forest regrows is unnatural as well. Past records state any trees that were burned or cut down returned within a day, but...”

Armies had tried burning down the forest in the past too. However, the damaged vegetation would return within a day, after which the soldiers that had tried to burn the forest down inevitably found themselves trapped in the center of the woods and systematically eliminated. But this time, the section Araym had burned with his Divine Blaze had grown back in seconds. Lilith crossed her arms and lapsed into thought.

“If the child of god’s power is to enhance all other powers, then...”

“She must have used her powers on the beastmen republic’s king. Or perhaps she is their king.”

Mulm turned to Laus as he finished Lilith’s sentence. Under normal circumstances, the church’s knights would have gladly fought to the death, martyring themselves for the cause. But this time around, they’d been far more cautious, retreating whenever the fog got too thick. The reason for that was because they were preserving their forces until Laus could pinpoint the location of the child of god. Not only could he see the souls of others, but he could also tell when people were lying, so he could interrogate beastmen on the battlefield. As a result, he’d discovered that the ancient magic user was most likely manipulating the fog and that she had yet to step foot on the battlefield herself.

“None of the beastmen have said a word to me. It seems someone has

informed them of my abilities.”

The possibility that there may have been a spy within the church sent the meeting room into an uproar, and everyone’s eyes filled with suspicion.

“I know who told them. It was the Knight Hunter.”

Laus’ tone was forceful, as if he was reprimanding the others for suspecting their own. But his rebuke fell on deaf ears. The words “Knight Hunter” had grabbed everyone’s attention.

“What!? Laus, the Knight Hunter is here!? Hang on, if he’s the one who leaked that information... then does that mean he’s working with the republic!?”

“I believe so.”

Mulm’s eyes widened in surprise. The Knight Hunter had wiped out one of his platoons a while back, and he’d sworn revenge. But right now, Mulm was more shocked that the republic had allowed a human inside.

“Tch, that bastard... He probably came here because he smelled blood in the air,” Zebal hissed, slamming his fist onto the table. Like Mulm, he’d lost a lot of his men to the Knight Hunter, as had Lilith, who was silently fuming.

Still, that solved one mystery. No one doubted that the Knight Hunter, of all people, would have somehow managed to figure out Laus’ abilities.

“Getting back on topic, I think it’s almost certain the child of god is the beastmen republic’s king. Or queen, rather. Even if the beastmen remained silent, I could read their reactions to my questions. Their queen is an elf who can use ancient magic.”

Everyone in the room fell silent. Not because they were stunned, but because they were overcome with joy.

“Finally, some good news. Splendid work, Lord Barn.”

“I was simply fulfilling my duty, Lord Distark, nothing more.”

“Shrugging off praise like that really is a bad habit of yours, Laus,” Mulm said with a cheerful smile.

At any rate, the knights now knew who to look for. The time had finally come

to save the child of god. At long last, they would be able to complete the mission granted to them by Ehit. But while everyone else looked ecstatic, Laus just closed his eyes.

“Now then, all that remains is to figure out how to deal with the fog,” Baran mused. So long as the fog remained, the church couldn’t invade. It had been bad enough on the plains, but they knew it’d be many times worse within the forest.

“The holy dragons’ wind gusts, Zebal’s Liquefaction, and Araym’s Divine Blaze were all able to clear away portions of the mist, but none of them were able to harm fog that was being directly controlled by the child of god...”

“How about an aerial bombing raid from above?”

“We don’t know where the child of god is hiding! What if we hurt her by mistake!?”

“I see what you mean, but... her strength rivals Lord Barn’s does it not? Surely she could survive a bombing strong enough to kill beastmen?”

“Even so, attacking a child of god would be blasphemy!”

The priests and federation generals argued back and forth for quite some time. The Pale Forest was a natural fortress that hadn’t been breached for centuries. Finding a viable solution wouldn’t be easy.

“Hrmmm... Vexing though it is to admit, I believe a frontal assault is our only option.”

By which, Baran meant continuing as they had been so far, and duking it out on the White Scarred Plains. Even if they couldn’t push their way into the forest, consecutive battles would exhaust the republic. Though the forest was a perfect fortress, it was also their only sanctuary. The beastmen had nowhere else to run. On the other hand, the theocracy could gather troops from all across the continent to drag this war out for as long as necessary. In a war of attrition, the theocracy had the upper hand.

During the last battle, the knights had ascertained that it took some time for the thicker fog to roll in after they cleared the usual mists away. Seeing as only the normal fog was present when just the federation was fighting, it was likely

the ancient magic user needed to rest before summoning the more powerful fog. Even she wasn't invincible. The longer this war dragged on, the more exhausted she'd get, which in turn would slow the regeneration of the forest and the appearance of the mist. Attacking in waves was the best and only way to wear the republic down. In the past, the church hadn't been willing to expend so many resources just to wipe out some beastmen, but no amount of sacrifices was too many to secure a child of god.

Baran looked over the gathered members and, seeing that everyone was resolved, nodded.

"Very well. I see we've all agreed that this will be a war of attrition."

After sending off a messenger to report his decision to the pope, Baran turned to Detref.

"Detref-dono. We will need you to replenish your forces."

"...As you wish," Detref replied in a controlled monotone. Though he didn't let it show on his face, he was thinking about how much this would cost his country.

"There's no need to look so glum. I have already told the pope to ask the Uldia Dukedom to join this war as well."

"You have my gratitude."

Just how long will this war last?

If Uldia, which was a relatively fertile nation, joined the war, there wouldn't be any need to worry about supplies. However, Detref knew it would be his men who'd bear the brunt of the casualties. And it would take a lot of deaths before they could wear down the beastmen republic.

For a moment, Detref considered asking the Grandort Empire for help as well, but then thought better of it. The empire and its powerful mages were humanity's bulwark against the demon nation of Igdol.

Their troops shouldn't be mobilized for this war unless absolutely necessary. Besides, for all we know, this invasion of the Pale Forest might have been their idea. We've been growing as a nation, and they probably want some way to

keep us in check... Detref thought darkly.

No one else paid Detref any mind as the meeting wrapped up, but Laus noticed his brooding expression. Though Detref was the largest man in the room, he seemed awfully small in that moment.

After the war council had ended, Laus aimlessly wandered around the city alone. Araym had insisted he go with Laus to guard him, but Laus had forcefully brushed him off.

Laus had noticed the dark looks Araym gave him from time to time. At first, he'd thought Araym resented him for making him serve as both division commander and as vice-commander of the entire knight order. But now he knew that wasn't it.

He doubts my faith. But I can't tell if he's keeping an eye on me of his own volition or if someone else ordered him to... Either way, Laus didn't bother trying to put on a show of faith for Araym.

The pope and the church's new oracle had both made it clear to him that his job was to serve as the knights' vanguard, regardless of what his personal beliefs were. It was a bit late for him to be caring about appearances. And so, he'd shaken Araym off and went out alone, despite knowing that it'd raise Araym's suspicions.

Laus avoided the denser parts of the city and wandered the smaller side streets. The city seemed to be in a somber mood. Not only had the federation suffered massive casualties in the last few fights, not even the assistance of two of the church's three pillars of radiance had been enough to secure victory.

Stalls stood empty along the main thoroughfares, and the city's squares were all but deserted. The few people walking through the streets averted their gazes and hurried away whenever they saw someone from the church. As pious followers of Ehit, they should have been glad to see such a large church presence in their city—especially since the theocracy's knights were here to recover a child of god, something every true believer should have been overjoyed to participate in. However—

"The death of your loved ones puts everything in a new perspective..." Laus

muttered. It was something that should have been obvious.

Had the federation soldiers overwhelmed the republic, or at least been able to hold off the beastmen until the church's knights arrived for a dramatic reversal, the people of Agris would likely have extolled Ehit's virtues in the streets. They would have been drunk on glory, exuberant that they had played such a vital part in Ehit's master plan. But instead, the federation's soldiers were being sent off to die as scouts while the church's knights sat back and waited.

"Is this really what will bring the most happiness to the most people?"

Laus had been asking himself that question ever since he got here. Though he despised the church and its methods, he'd been able to continue working for them by convincing himself that forcing people to give up free will would bring the greatest amount of happiness to humanity as a whole. But now, he wasn't so sure. Looking up, Laus spotted a young boy hiding in the shadow of a nearby building.

"Ah..."

Laus stopped in his tracks, feeling as though his heart had been pierced by a blade of ice. The boy couldn't have been any older than ten, but he was glaring at the church's strongest knight with a look of pure hatred, as if Laus were the source of all evil in the world.

Within seconds, the boy's mom appeared and hurriedly shooed him inside, but Laus remained rooted to the spot. The boy's anger and hatred had been burned into his memory. His father had probably been killed in this senseless war.

Laus suddenly thought back to his own son, Sharm. He'd last seen his family the day before he left the theocracy.

Still standing in the middle of the street, Laus dredged up his memories of that meeting.

The night before his departure, his family had thrown him a celebratory feast. They had thought it a great honor that he'd been selected to go on the mission

to retrieve the child of god. But while this was meant to have been a celebration, the atmosphere in the Laus mansion had been strained.

The reason for that was the conversation Laus and Sharm had a while back.

“I think it’d be nice if there was a good demon lord.”

That was how Laus had responded to Sharm’s question. However, that was something a proud follower of Ehit should never say. Naturally, his wife Ricolis and his mother Debra had been furious. They’d said he was a bad influence on Sharm and that the esteemed commander of the Holy Templar Knights could not afford to act like this.

Sharm had, of course, immediately apologized, and Laus could have not bothered to even answer the question. He could have continued to pretend like there was nothing wrong with where he was, closing his eyes to the problems all around him.

But after meeting Ehit’s new, inhuman oracle and learning that the church’s god desired nothing but war and strife, he’d started feeling a little rebellious. And so, he’d rejected Sharm’s apology and told his son he’d said nothing wrong. Ricolis and Debra had looked at him like he was a heretic, but he’d been beyond caring at that point.

Since then, no one had brought up the conversation. Even mentioning it had become taboo in the Barn household. Everyone was trying to pretend that it had never happened.

“You’ll finally be able to meet someone like you. Aren’t you glad?” Ricolis said during their banquet.

“But she’s been captured by those filthy beastmen, hasn’t she? Poor girl... Laus, you have to be the one to save her. She might be wary of the others, but surely she’ll trust a fellow child of god like you,” Debra added.

Both of them looked like they were forcing themselves to make conversation, and their smiles seemed plastered on. Laus responded with brief grunts, feeling just as awkward as they did.

Sharm had been the only cheerful one at the table, but after a while of awkward conversation, he put his knife and fork down. Everyone turned to him,

and he looked down hesitantly.

Gripping the hem of his pants, he asked in a trembling voice, “Father?”

“What is it, Sharm?”

Putting his own problems aside for a moment, Laus waited quietly for his son to speak. He watched out of the corner of his eye as Ricolis and Debra exchanged uneasy glances.

Seeing that Sharm was still hesitating, Laus opened his mouth to reassure him. But before he could, Ricolis asked, “What is it, Sharm? Is there something you want to ask?”

Sharm raised his head, then recoiled at the cold look in his mother’s and grandmother’s eyes. But seeing that his father at least seemed willing to listen, he gathered his nerve and asked, “Father... is it a sin... to get along with beastmen?”

Sharm’s eyes were filled with more sadness than any child should have had to bear.

“Are you still going on about nonsense like that, Sharm!?” Ricolis shouted, losing her temper. She jumped to her feet and raised her hand to strike him. But before she could, Laus stood up and grabbed her.

“Sit down, Ricolis.”

“Don’t you understand, dear!? Sharm’s—”

“I said, sit down.”

Laus’ voice was firm. Gritting her teeth, Ricolis reluctantly returned to her seat. Debra glared at Laus, her eyes cold as ice.

Ignoring her, Laus knelt in front of Sharm and asked, “I thought I already told you it was. So why are you asking?”

Trembling, Sharm nevertheless met Laus’ gaze and said with conviction, “Instead of going to war with them, wouldn’t it be better to get along with the beastmen? We could just help the child of god without taking her away from her home. Is war... really necessary? Do you have to fight, Father?”

Sharm's voice was full of worry for those who would lose their lives in this war. One might have said his words were just the ramblings of a naive child who was ignorant of how harsh the world was. But Laus couldn't bring himself to think that way. Sharm's words had nearly brought him to tears.

Laus gently ruffled his kind, wise son's gray hair. Sharm's carefully combed hair got all tousled, but he didn't mind. In fact, he'd put his own tiny hand over his father's, as if begging him to keep going.

"I do. Because this is what Ehit wants," Laus said gravely. That was the unvarnished truth. "And if it is what Ehit wants, then surely... it is in some way connected to bringing the most happiness to the most amount of people possible."

However, Laus' next words were what he hoped was the truth, rather than what actually was.

"The most amount of happiness... to the most people..."

Sharm looked back down, his expression troubled. Even Laus didn't really believe what he'd said, so it was hardly surprising his words hadn't convinced Sharm. Still, Sharm knew this was the only answer he would receive. And so, he instead clung to his father's arm and tried a different approach.

"But Father, if you and the church are fighting for most people's happiness... who's fighting for all the rest?'"

"....."

Laus was momentarily at a loss for words. Not because he couldn't think of an answer for Sharm, but because he could.

He knew. He knew all too well. He'd witnessed the existence of a group that fought for the people the church trampled upon.

Laus had no idea how Sharm interpreted his silence, but after a few seconds, the child's face brightened and he said, "If there's someone like that out there, then..."

"Then?"

"It'd be nice if you could fight together with them, Father. That way, everyone

could be happy.”

Again, Laus was at a loss for words.

“A future like that could never come.”

That was the answer the past him would have given. But the present him couldn’t bring himself to say those words. Confused by his own hesitation, Laus eventually mumbled, “You might be right.”

“Lord Barn. Is something the matter?”

A deep voice snapped Laus out of his reminiscing. Turning around, he saw a figure so broad he almost mistook it for a wall. He directed his gaze upward and saw a stern, one-eyed face looking down at him.

“Detref-dono.”

“Is there a reason you’re just standing in the middle of the street like that? If you’re lost, I can guide you.”

It was only then that Laus realized how strange it must have looked for him to just be standing there spacing out in the middle of a random street. Even if people didn’t recognize his face, his ostentatious battle garb both marked him as someone important and made him stand out. In fact, a small crowd had gathered at the ends of the street, with people peering curiously at him. Of course, no one but Detref had been brave enough to approach him.

“How embarrassing. It seems I got a bit too lost in my thoughts.”

“I see...”

Detref stroked his beard thoughtfully. After a few seconds, a question suddenly occurred to Laus and he asked, “Incidentally, Detref-dono, what are you doing here? Without any guards, too...”

“I could ask you the same thing, but... I was looking for you.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to express my thanks.”

Laus cocked his head in confusion.

“Have I done something to earn your gratitude?”

“You grieved for the deaths of my men and tried to give meaning to their sacrifice, did you not?”

It was then that Laus realized he was talking about the meeting earlier.

“I simply spoke the truth.”

“Perhaps so, but your words were reassuring nonetheless. Moreover, you were respectful even to the likes of me. I may be the king of a nation, but as the leader of the Holy Templar Knights and a child of god, my status is nothing compared to yours.”

Detref gave Laus a kind smile, which made him feel extremely awkward. Though Laus already had wrinkles on his face, he was still barely 32. Detref was easily old enough to be his father, and indeed it felt somewhat like his father was praising him. Noticing Laus’ discomfort, Detref quickly changed the topic.

“If you happen to be free, would you mind showing your face at my men’s barracks? A visit from the esteemed Commander Laus Barn would boost morale.”

“...Gladly.”

There’s something else he wants to talk about, isn’t there? That was the reason Laus had agreed to Detref’s proposal.

The king of a nation and the leader of the Holy Templar Knights walked quietly through the tense streets without any guards. Eventually, they ended atop the fifty-meter wall that protected the city of Agris.

Most of the federation’s troops were stationed in barracks inside the walls. Three different flags flew from the north edge that Laus and Detref were standing on.

“The insides of the walls have enough space to house all the soldiers of the Angriff region, but since we’ve recruited troops from three other regions as well, some of the soldiers have needed to camp outside.”

It seemed to Laus as though Detref was implying that because the church’s knights had taken up the best lodgings in the city, the other soldiers had no

choice but to camp out in the elements.

He raised an eyebrow, but Detref hurriedly said, “I did not mean that as a slight.”

Laus frowned sullenly, then, in an attempt to change the topic, he said the first thing that came to mind.

“They look tired.”

“The Odion Federation’s soldiers are strong, but... while it pains me to admit it, the battles have not favored us.”

The unexpected strength of the beastmen had caused severe casualties on the federation’s side, and almost every soldier had lost a friend by now. Laus looked down at the exhausted troops for a few minutes.

Eventually, a few of the soldiers noticed Laus and Detref standing on the walls. They looked up at Laus not with awe and respect, but with unbridled fear. They had no faith that Laus and his unit could defeat the beastmen, and they were just afraid of what unreasonable demand the church would make of them next.

Their spirits had been broken.

Unable to bear the sight, Laus gritted his teeth. Chances were, most of the soldiers he was looking at today wouldn’t be alive by the end of the war. Defeating the republic would cost the lives of this entire army. And the only one who’d benefit would be the theocracy.

All of this was being done in Ehit’s name. All of this was being done because Ehit willed it. Millions of humans and beastmen would lose their lives, all to please Ehit.

“Laus Barn. I am glad you agreed to accompany me.”

Don’t say that! Laus desperately wanted to shout that at Detref. He knew exactly what the king was implying. He knew why Detref had brought him there.

The federation’s king wanted Laus to give the men’s death meaning, even if only a little. He wanted Laus to grant the men pride, pride that they’d fought alongside the commander of the Holy Templar Knights. That way, they could at

least die with their heads held high, instead of cowering in fear. But more than anything, he wanted Laus to end this war as fast as possible, so that deaths could be kept to a minimum.

However, Detref's expectations were too high. Laus had survived so far by killing off his own hopes and desires and blindly following orders. He wasn't capable of delivering what Detref was asking.

"Soul's Repose."

So instead, he sent out gentle, undulating waves of black mana to soothe the spirits of the tired soldiers.

"Is that..." Detref muttered in surprise. The soldiers camped outside the walls seemed just as shocked. But as the seconds passed, the fear and exhaustion weighing upon them vanished, and their pale faces began to fill with color. Those who'd been watching Laus and saw him cast it seemed to doubt their eyes.

"This magic soothes the spirits of those it touches, granting them relief. It's not a solution to your problems, but it's better than nothing."

"So this is the power... of a child of god..."

As Detref's soldiers regained their liveliness, he turned to Laus and bowed deeply.

"Thank you for sharing your divine power with us."

"I really didn't do anything all that special."

Laus didn't sound like he was acting humble. If anything, he sounded a little bitter.

"As I thought... you really aren't like the others in the church."

A statement like that would have gotten Detref executed for heresy if he'd said it to any other knight or priest. But Laus could tell it wasn't meant as an insult.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that. But never speak those words again," he replied sternly.

Laus turned on his heel and strode away, as if fleeing from the soldiers down below who were happily cheering his name. But before he got very far, Detref called out to him.

“Laus-dono, please take this!”

Laus turned over his shoulder and saw Detref holding a robe out to him. He must have gotten it from one of his men while Laus wasn’t looking.

“If you wish to be left alone, you’ll be needing this.”

“Thank you.”

He saw right through me, huh? Laus thought to himself as he put on the robe. Then, without a word, he stalked off. But he could tell Detref was gazing warmly at him as he left.

Once he’d descended from the wall, he resumed aimlessly wandering the streets. Worried that he might attract attention even with the robe Detref had given him, he stuck to the smallest alleyways he could. Eventually, the hustle and bustle of the city faded away and he found himself walking in silence. But the silence didn’t last.

I guess... that’s the sound of the world cracking... His ears began playing tricks on him and he started hearing cracking noises coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

The sudden transformation of the beastmen. The strange new oracle of Ehit that had no soul. The exhausted soldiers of the federation. Their king, who spoke blasphemy despite professing himself to be a pious believer. And the seemingly miraculous gathering of ancient magic users that seemed to be happening here. Each and every one of those events was like another crack in this world, and Laus could hear the echoes of those cracks in his soul.

In an attempt to clear his thoughts, he shook his head, and a small side alley at the end of the street caught his eye.

“Come to think of it, that alleyway looked a lot like this too, didn’t it?”

Laus thought back to the time when he’d resurrected the previous oracle of Ehit and allowed her to escape the main cathedral. He’d set her free into the

theocracy's capital in a back alley much like this one. It had been near the edge of the city, in a dingy part of town that no one went to.

"But you didn't flee. You kept moving forward. Even when you faced a dead end, you found a way over it until finally... your dream reached someone."

Now the girl who'd inherited her will was starting to change the world.

"If... If I'd run away with you back then..."

How differently would my life have turned out?

"Don't be stupid," Laus told himself, shaking his head. More likely than not, the church would have sent their best knights after him, and both he and Belta would have been caught and executed. He had no doubt the only reason the church had let Belta go was because he'd opted to stay, so imagining what would have happened if he'd tried to run too was pointless.

The church would never have allowed that future. They would never have allowed Laus the freedom to live as he pleased.

Sharm would be disappointed in me if he could see me now... Laus thought as he sighed to himself. He looked up at the sky, staring at the god who resided beyond it.

"Is even this part of the scenario you've plotted out, you bastard?"

Laus smiled bitterly to himself. He was acting like some small-time thug, thinking he'd taken a point off of Ehit just by calling him a bastard.

"That girl hit the mark when she called me a puppet of god... No, I'm even lower than that, aren't I?"

The girl he was referring to was, of course, Miledi. Laus' lips curled up in a self-deprecating smile as he thought of her.

Miledi had been stubborn, resolute, and brighter than the sun. He did not doubt that if she saw him now, she'd taunt him for his indecision. Or maybe she'd just laugh at him. He could easily imagine her going, "And you call yourself the church's strongest knight!? Hahahaha, what a joke!"

"Hmph... Do your best to build up your strength while we're dancing to Ehit's tune."

Laus smiled wryly to himself, realizing he'd just been rooting for the enemy. His thoughts always got jumbled up when he started thinking about Miledi. Infuriating as she was, he couldn't deny that she was inspiring. Laus sighed again, sounding wearier than before.

"I guess I should go back," he muttered quietly and turned on his heel. If he spent any more time alone he'd start hating himself.

"Will you be able to... destroy god's script?"

Laus had no doubt Miledi would have answered, "Of course!" without hesitation if she'd been there to hear his question.

"Hm?"

"Eek!"

As Laus walked out of the alley, he accidentally bumped into someone. No matter how distracted he might have been, the church's strongest knight should never have failed to notice someone nearby.

Frowning at his own negligence, he looked down at the person he'd inadvertently knocked to the ground. Judging by the tone of her voice, she was likely a girl. She was about half Laus' height and wore an oversized white robe that hid her features. Still, no matter how small she was, Laus should have noticed her.

Her presence is unnaturally slight... That was the main reason Laus had bumped into her. Like Laus, the girl was suppressing her mana and her presence to avoid notice. For a moment, Laus thought a beastman spy with some kind of camouflage special magic had snuck into the capital, but then the girl spoke.

"O-Owww, my butt," the girl moaned, rubbing her backside. Her laid-back reaction made it obvious she couldn't be a spy. Still, he figured he should take a closer look at her just in case. After all, if she really was just a normal person, it wouldn't do to leave her lying on the ground like that.

"Sorry. I got so wrapped up in my thoughts that I didn't look at where I was going."

"Oh, it's fine. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going either... Though,

you were being really inconspicuous.”

Hm? Haven’t I heard this voice somewhere before? Laus thought to himself. As the girl grabbed his hand and pulled herself up, he realized it was the voice of the girl he’d been thinking about moments ago.

For her part, the girl seemed to recognize Laus’ voice as well. She cocked her head thoughtfully and tried to get a look under his hood.

Their eyes met. Laus stared at Miledi and Miledi stared at Laus.

Time came to a halt. The two ancient magic users just stood there, still holding hands.

Wind whistled through the alleyway, blowing the hoods off of both their heads. Miledi’s blonde hair glimmered in the sunlight, and her sky-blue eyes seemed to pierce through Laus. It took a few seconds for Laus to register that he was looking at the church’s sworn enemy, and for Miledi to realize she was staring at the commander of the church’s knights. And finally—

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?”

“Nuwooooooooooh!?”



Instead of the laugh Laus had been envisioning moments before, Miledi let out a scream, and Laus responded with a yell just as loud. This was the first time in his life he'd been so surprised.

"What are you doing here, Laus Barn!?"

"What are you doing here, Miledi Reisen!?"

The two veteran warriors were in perfect sync. They were so shocked that they'd forgotten they were still holding hands, too.

"Nghhh. What kind of magic did you use to show up just when I was thinking about you!?"

"Gah! What kind of magic did you use to show up just when I was thinking about you!?"

It appeared Miledi had been thinking about Laus just like Laus had been thinking about Miledi. Had there been anyone else present, they would have thought Miledi and Laus were good friends.

Instead of letting go, the two tugged at each other's hands. It looked almost like they were father and daughter, with the father trying to drag his unwilling daughter back home. Had they suddenly met any other foe, both Laus and Miledi would have instantly started attacking, but both of them had their reactions delayed because they'd been thinking about each other. And once they finally did start fighting, their scuffle was quite unseemly.

"Dammit— Heavensfall!"

"Take this— Soul Shock!"

The two of them fell back on their ancient magic, but they failed to realize that they were so close to their opponent that they'd be affected by their own spells.

"Bwuh!? Gyaaah!"

"Hrngh!? Ngh!"

As a result, they were both flattened into the ground and shocked by Laus' spirit magic. Never before had either of them made such an elementary

mistake.

Fortunately, the shock of being slammed to the ground and hit with a spirit jolt brought them back to their senses. The two let go of each other's hands and gingerly got to their feet. They brushed the dust off their robes and coughed awkwardly as they backed away from each other.

"Commander of the Holy Templar Knights, Laus Barn."

"Leader of the Liberators, Miledi Reisen."

The two muttered each other's names, their voices far more serious than before. It looked like they were pretending their earlier exchange never happened. Both of them were also pointedly not mentioning the fact that their faces were beet red. They stared intently into each other's eyes, trying to look as imposing as possible. And eventually, the embarrassment faded away and the two inwardly breathed sighs of relief.

"Allow me to ask you again. Miledi Reisen, what are you doing here? Did—"

Laus abruptly cut himself off. "Did Ehit guide you here, too?" He knew that was a foolish question. Miledi didn't seem to notice his hesitation, though. She looked up at his head, and her eyes went wide.

"You're bald!?"

The word bald echoed loudly through the street. Laus' veins bulged in anger, accentuating his baldness.

"You're bald!" Miledi repeated herself. Except this time, she also helpfully pointed at his head. "Like, super bald!"

"How dare you! I am not bald!" Laus shouted back, his anger getting the better of him. Unfortunately, as he stepped menacingly forward, the sun shined brightly on his smooth head, emphasizing his baldness.

"Ah, your head, it's too bright!"

"Are you insulting me, you bitch!?"

Miledi held up a hand to shield her eyes and took a few steps back. Even though she'd firmly held her ground when facing Laus at Andika, she was being overwhelmed now.

“H-How did you lose all your hair so fast... Wait, did the stress of losing to me make it all fall out!?”

“I didn’t *lose* my hair, I just shaved my head!”

“Huh!? Did you... have to shave your head as penance for losing!? I knew the church was cruel, but I didn’t know they were this depraved!”

“Don’t just accuse the church of everything! I did this of my own free will!”

Laus knew the church was an unscrupulous institution, but he couldn’t help but pity it a little when he heard her continuously blame it.

That aside, his fury was reaching a boiling point. He grabbed Miledi’s shoulders with his broad hands and said in a menacing voice, “Listen up, little girl.”

“Y-Yes?”

“I am *not* bald.”

Laus enunciated every world carefully, his voice deadly serious. Miledi awkwardly looked away, unable to meet Laus’ piercing gaze. A second later, she paled as she suddenly realized something.

“I-I’m sorry...”

Her apology was filled with genuine remorse, and she looked oddly guilty.

“Just curious, but what exactly are you apologizing for?”

“U-Umm, I just didn’t realize you were that bothered by your hair... When I called you baldy before, I was just trying to rile you up, ’cause you were really strong and I needed to distract you. But I didn’t think you were actually so worried about going bald that you’d shave all your hair off right after—”

“I’m not worried about going bald!”

“I’m sorry. Even if we are enemies, I shouldn’t have made fun of something you’re so sensitive about!”

“Like I said, I don’t care about my hair! I’m not going bald anyway, so there’s nothing to worry about! Besides, my son loves my new look! He said I looked cool!”

Miledi's jaw dropped open. She couldn't believe what she'd just heard.

"You're *married!?* And you have a kid!? No way!"

"Why do you look so shocked!?"

"I-I mean, you just don't look like the kind of person who has a family! Your wife must be amazing if she agreed to marry you! Wait, did you threaten her!?"

"How dare you even suggest such a thing!"

"Oh no, I have to apologize to your son, too. His father's hair ended up like this because of me... He must be so sad..."

"Sharm is a pure boy! He meant it when he said I looked cool! Though, my wife seemed a bit..."

"I'm so sorry! I didn't mean for this to happen!"

"You better be sorry! Sorry for ever existing!"

"You want me to apologize for being born!? That hurts! How could you say that to the greatest, prettiest, smartest mage to have ever lived!? Do you have no soul!?"

"Where on earth does that overwhelming confidence of yours come from!?"

"From the knowledge that I'm a living miracle, of course!"

Laus looked at Miledi, completely nonplussed. He then weakly let go of her shoulders, and she took a few steps back.

After a moment, she bowed her head to Laus and said, "Ummm, I mean it. I really am sorry... I didn't realize calling you bald would hurt your fa—"

"If you apologize one more time, I'm going to kill you."

"Ah, okay."

The venom in his voice had convinced Miledi to zip her lips. Laus and Miledi took a few seconds to catch their breath and calm themselves down.

Finally, Laus sucked in a huge breath and asked, "Why are you here?" in a voice that showed he meant business. This time, he wouldn't let anything distract him.

Of course, if he was a truly loyal servant of the church, he wouldn't even have asked that. Instead, he would've just gone straight to fighting.

Miledi met Laus' gaze, trying to see what she could discern from his quiet, gray eyes. Laus did the same, peering intently into Miledi's sky-blue irises. He wanted to know what kind of person Ehit's former oracle entrusted her will to. The two stood there in silence for only a few seconds. But to them, it felt like hours.

Eventually, in a resolute voice, Miledi said, "I'm here to stop this war."

That was the answer Laus had been expecting. He groaned to himself and closed his eyes. The wrinkles on his face grew deeper as he knitted his eyebrows together.

Seeing his expression, Miledi could tell he was conflicted. What exactly he was conflicted about she didn't know, but she was surprised he was willing to show his hesitation to a heretic who'd claimed she'd come to stop this holy war.

Now it was Miledi's turn to wait for Laus' answer. He may have been the church's strongest knight, but he was also the one who'd supposedly saved Belta's life.

And as she waited for his reply, Miledi thought back to the series of events that had led her to that point.

Chapter II: Queen of the Forest

“So, Miledi. What’s the plan?” Oscar asked, his tone somewhat nervous.

Miledi and the others were currently deep within the forest that separated the Igdol Empire and the Obsidian Tundra. A month had passed since their battle with the demon lord. The group had remained there to keep an eye on Rasul and make sure he wasn’t brainwashed by Ehit again, as well as to help the chimeras he’d been experimenting on rest and recover.

But then suddenly, they received a report that the Elbard Theocracy had declared war on the Haltina Republic, as well as a plea for aid from Badd Virtus, the supposedly missing vice-commander of the Liberators.

The Liberators knew full well how the church would treat the Pale Forest’s beastmen if it managed to conquer the republic. It would be a tragedy the likes of which hadn’t been seen in the history of Tortus. And so, naturally, Miledi and the others were going to help.

However, a war of this scale hadn’t been seen in decades. After the messenger had delivered his report, Miledi had gathered all the Liberators and Schnee clansmen who had gone out to patrol and informed them of the situation. She’d then informed them of her intention to go to save the republic, leading to the current situation where Oscar had asked what the actual plan was.

Miledi considered Oscar’s question for a few seconds, then sucked in a breath and said, “Me, Meru-nee, and Nacchan will go on ahead.”

The other Liberators and Schnee clansmen started muttering among themselves, but Oscar just raised an eyebrow.

“This is a race against time. This combination is the fastest way to get to the Pale Forest.”

“Naiz-kun can teleport, you have gravity magic to help us speed things along, and you’ll need my restoration magic to replenish people’s mana, correct?”

“It takes, what... three months to reach the Pale Forest by horse from here? So even going at full speed, it’ll take us four days.”

Miledi wanted to get even one extra ancient magic user to Badd as fast as possible. And having heard her reasoning, Oscar nodded in understanding.

Of course, he and Vandre weren’t slow by any means. Vandre could fly through the sky while Oscar had plenty of transportation-related artifacts. If they all went together, the others would have more time to rest, too. But there was another reason Miledi was leaving the two of them behind.

“You want us to get everyone safely settled in different villages first, don’t you?” Oscar asked, his eyes closed. Vandre, Marshal, Margaretta, and the others being left behind all looked at Miledi.

“Yeah. O-kun, please finish moving everyone as fast as possible.”

Originally, this location had just been a small stronghold for Jinglebell, the Liberator scout who kept an eye on the demon territories. But now, all the non-combatants from the old Reisen Gorge village were here, as well as the chimeras Rasul had created while being controlled by Ehit’s artifact. Miledi and the others had been in the middle of making arrangements to move them to permanent residences in other villages.

The beastmen’s plight was important, of course, but Miledi wasn’t going to just abandon these people. Providing safe haven for those who’d already been rescued was also part of the Liberators’ job. And Oscar understood that as well.

“Gotcha. We’ll get this done quick.”

He nodded to Miledi, fighting against his desire to go with her. Miledi gave him a warm smile, then turned to Vandre.

“Van-chan, you’ve managed to create enough familiars for everyone, right?”

“Yeah, I can start moving people anytime.”

Originally, Miledi was planning on transporting everyone using one of Naiz’s teleportation gates. But now that this new crisis had emerged, there wasn’t time for that. Oscar had made a few artifacts capable of teleporting people, but they couldn’t move people as far as Naiz. And that was why Vandre’s familiars

would be the ones transporting everyone.

He'd lost a lot of them when he'd rescued Ruth and the others from the Reisen village, and then lost even more during the raid on the demon lord's castle, but he'd replenished their numbers over the past month. But while he had as many familiars as before—

"How strong are they? Will they be able to protect the new village?"

"No, I haven't created the leader-class monster needed for that. We've got Marshal and the others here, but... they might not be enough."

Vandre's stronger familiars were capable of independent thought and acted on broader orders from him, but he only had three of those left. His butler-slime, Batlam, his wyvern, Uruluk, and his wolf, Kuou. All of which he'd hoped to bring with him to help with the war effort. As a result, he'd need to make a new leader-class monster to protect the new village.

"Well, don't worry about it. I'll make a new one in time."

"Alright. But if you're worried about your brother, Van-chan, maybe you should stay behind..."

"You don't need to worry. Rasul will be fine. Besides, I'm a Liberator now. No way I'll sit back and be the only one not fighting. I bet the rest of my clan feels the same way, honestly."

Vandre turned over his shoulder to Margaretta and the others, and they instantly dropped to one knee.

"Van-sama is correct, Miledi-dono. The Schnee Clan stands with you now."

"Thank you..."

Miledi gave Margaretta a bashful smile, then turned to Marshal and the other Liberators.

"I'll keep you guys updated on the situation as I learn more. Marshal, you're in charge of deciding who to leave behind to guard the new village and who to send after us. Oh, but make sure you bring Mikaela with you, okay?"

"Got it. That village already has a guard team, so Mikaela and I will come join you, at least."

“Mhm. We’re going to need my Soul Sight on the battlefield.”

“Yep. I’ll be counting on you two. Also Jinglebell, I want you to keep monitoring the demon empire for now. But if we need to start rallying troops, you should abandon this outpost and head to the new Liberator village.”

“Roger, Miledi-chan. But it’s such a shame. If I’d had another two days, I could have completed the frilly dress I was sewing for Meiru-chan...”

“Th-That was close... I nearly had to wear that monstrosity...” Meiru muttered quietly to herself. Jinglebell had started sewing a new dress for Meiru because she believed that Meiru’s current outfit was too revealing. Oddly enough, Jinglebell didn’t seem to think the same of her own attire, which covered even less than Meiru’s. Though right now, Jinglebell was wearing a dress similar to Miledi’s. Her massive thighs peeked out from between her skirt and knee-length socks. Miledi gave Jinglebell a grateful look, knowing that Jinglebell had purposely said that to lighten the mood.

“Miledi, are you gonna leave right away?” Oscar asked.

“Yep. Thanks to the Treasure Trove you gave me, I’m ready to travel whenever. Can you head out right away too? Someone needs to tell the villages what’s happened.”

“Yeah, I can. Miledi...” Oscar mumbled. He placed a hand on Miledi’s shoulder and looked her in the eyes.

“I’ll catch up as fast as I can, so please don’t do anything reckless until I get there, okay?”

Miledi nodded solemnly, realizing this was a heartfelt warning. She could tell he was really worried about her. Unsure of how to reply, she just looked quietly up at him. But then, a few seconds later, she realized everyone present was staring at them. And that they were all grinning.

Miledi quickly slapped Oscar’s hand away and said, “D-Don’t treat me like a kid! I can take care of myself! Sheesh, you really are obsessed with me, aren’t you, O-kun? I know you get lonely when I’m not around, but you’re gonna have to learn to let me go eventually!”

She spoke so fast her words slurred together, then ended her speech with an

awkward laugh.

Oscar narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. Then, after a brief silence, he said, “Naiz, take care of Miledi for me. You’re the only one I can count on to keep Miledi from pissing the beastmen off so much that they ban her forever.”

“Good point. I’ll keep her annoying personality in check. I’ll make sure she brushes her teeth, too.”

“Thanks. Don’t let her snack in the middle of the night, either.”

“Hey! I told you I can take care of myself! I’m a fully grown—”

“Meiru, I’m counting on you too.”

“Leave Miledi-chan to me. I’ll make sure she makes her bed every morning.”

“Don’t forget to remind her to wash her hands before eating.”

“Of course! I won’t let her be a picky eater, either. You can count on me!”

“How many times do I have to tell you, I’m not a kid! Stop making fun of me!”

Red-faced, Miledi angrily stomped on the ground. At long last, everyone’s tension drained away. The other Liberators started poking fun at Miledi too, saying things like, “Don’t forget your handkerchief, Leader!” and “Don’t stay up too late now!”

When a lull in the conversation finally occurred, two young girls suddenly ran up to Naiz. They’d been waiting for their chance to say their farewells to him.

“Naiz-sama, please stay safe! I’ll be waiting for you to come back to me!”

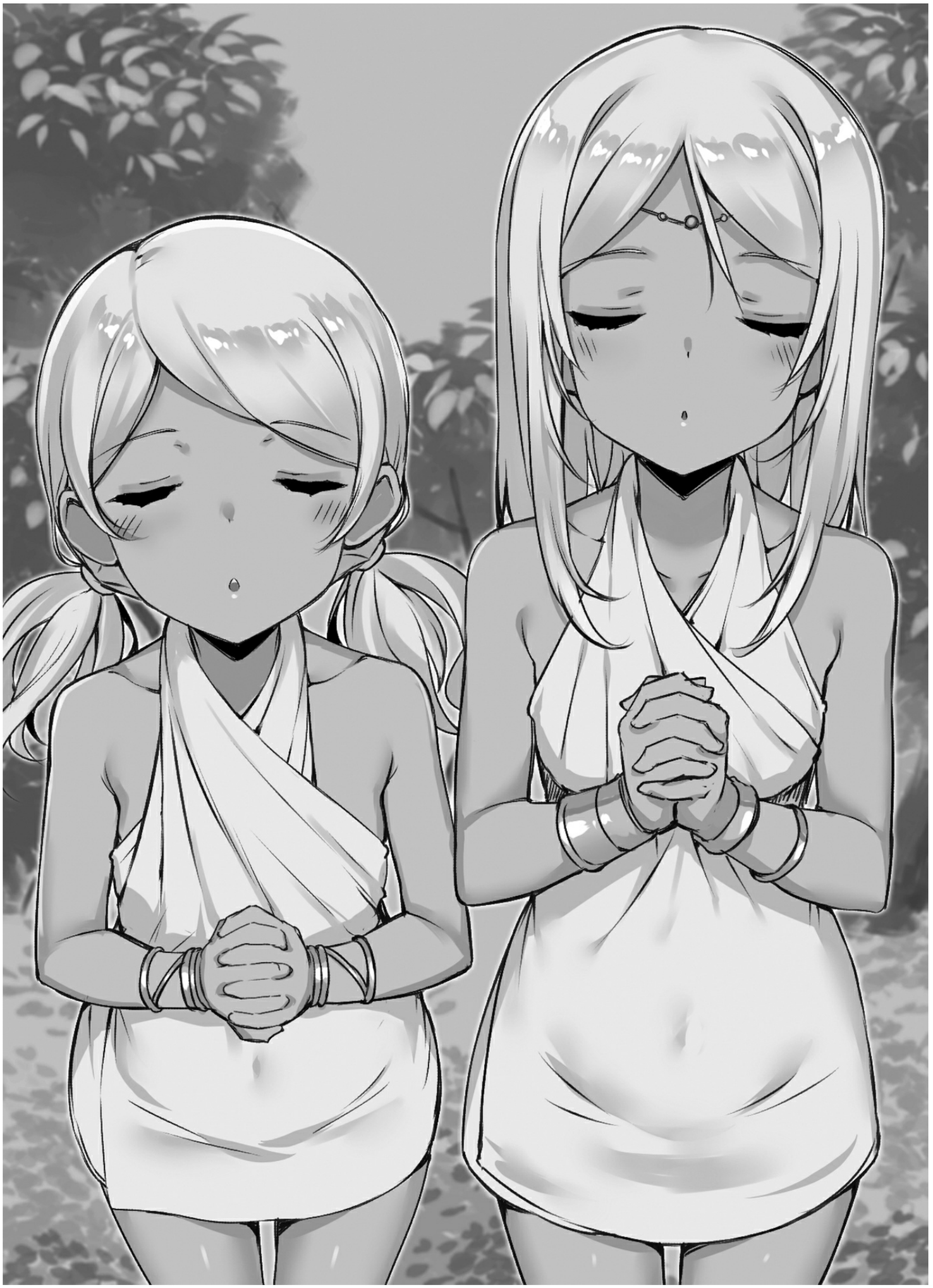
“You have to come back alive, Naiz-sama! Also, you have to promise to marry us!”

“A-Alright. I promise— Err that I’ll come back alive, not that I’ll marry you!”

Cold sweat poured down Naiz’s back as he tried to stave off Susha and Yunfa’s advances. The two girls brought their hands together in front of their chests and looked up at him with pleading eyes. With how assertive they were, it was hard to believe they were just twelve and ten years old. Susha especially. One had to wonder where she’d learned how to act so seductively.

Naturally, Naiz, who was nearing thirty, had no interest in girls that young.

But though his expression stiffened, Susha didn’t stop pushing. She sidled up to him, closed her eyes, and presented rose-colored lips to Naiz. She was obviously waiting for him to kiss her. Seeing her older sister act like that emboldened Yunfa, and she followed suit. Of course, it’d be a crime for Naiz to actually kiss them. However, the girls had tried getting one out of him every day in the month that he’d been here.



Fortunately, Naiz was perhaps the only ancient magic user with common sense. He'd been mature enough to find ways to turn Susha and Yunfa down without hurting their feelings. Likely, he would do the same now. And as he searched for the right words—

"Kiss them! Kiss them! Kiss them!"

"Dammit, Miledi!"

Is this your way of getting revenge!?

Grinning, Miledi egged Naiz on, clapping in time with her words. She even did a little dance.

"Oscar, Van, shut that moron up!"

Oscar and Vandre awkwardly averted their gazes. Even though they were always at each other's throats, they were oddly in sync there. Naiz gave them a wounded look, hurt by their betrayal. But as much as Oscar and Vandre wanted to help, they couldn't. Because Susha had given them a positively terrifying look when Naiz had asked them for help. The last thing they wanted was to bring Susha's wrath down upon them. Meanwhile, the other girls all picked up Miledi's chant. They knew how much Susha and Yunfa cared about Naiz, and they wanted to see the sisters' love rewarded.

"Kiss them! Kiss them! Kiss them, you pedophile!"

"I'm not a pedophile!" Naiz shouted, as he always did when this conversation happened.

Meiru and Shushu went as far as to join Miledi in clapping and dancing as they added their voices to the chant. Buoyed up by the support, Susha and Yunfa turned back to Naiz and raised their faces expectantly.

Naiz slowly backed away, looking like a lamb being brought in for the slaughter. When he saw that, Oscar's pity overcame his fear of Susha and he opened his mouth to help. But before he could say anything, something flew into his stomach.

"Huh? Katy? What's up?"

Katy was hugging Oscar's waist with all her might. Seeing that, Corrin ran over

as well.

“Stop that, Katy. I know you don’t want Onii-chan to leave, but he has to do this, okay?”

Corrin tugged on Katy’s shirt, gently admonishing her. Katy turned around and slapped Corrin’s hand away. She then pointedly turned up her nose at her sister.

For a second, Corrin just looked blankly at the hand Katy had slapped away, but then she puffed her cheeks out and yelled, “Bad Katy! You’ve been acting like a spoiled brat these past few days! Onii-chan has something he needs to do, so get off of him!”

This time, Corrin grabbed Katy and pulled much harder, but Katy still refused to let go.

“Hmph. I always knew you were as much of a pedophile as Naiz, four-eyes,” Vandre said dismissively as he looked over at Oscar. As always, Vandre was able to rile Oscar up like no one else.

Oscar glared coldly at Vandre and said, “Bah. Is spouting insults all you know how to do, you phony artist? The fact that you think there’s anything perverted about me hugging my sister proves you’re the real pervert. Should’ve known a muffler-loving monster would be so off in the head.”

“How dare you badmouth my muffler, you four-eyed freak!”

“Maybe I wouldn’t insult your muffler so much if you didn’t keep shit-talking my glasses!”

This was hardly the first, or even the tenth argument Oscar and Vandre had had this past month. But really, their constant bickering just showed how close they were. The other Liberators just watched on in exasperation. They knew this argument would keep going for a while at least.

Oscar adjusted his glasses, the lenses glinting dangerously, while frost started gathering around Vandre as he twirled his muffler around his neck. A short distance away, another problem was brewing.

“Hey... Dylan. I really hope you don’t remember this when you come back to

your senses. You'd die of embarrassment if you knew what kind of stuff you're getting up to right now," Ruth muttered quietly to Dylan, who was standing next to him. The young Synergist was getting rather exasperated with Dylan's recent antics.

Like Katy, Dylan's soul had been supplanted by that of an ancient warrior. After Oscar had saved them from the church, the two of them had been in a coma until Meiru's restoration magic had helped them regain consciousness. But while they were conscious now, the effects of the church's artifact were still weighing down on their souls. They still couldn't speak, and the most they could do was follow simple instructions.

However, enough of their ego had recovered that their latent desires had come to the surface. For example, though Katy adored Oscar, she'd rarely let herself act spoiled around him. But this past month, she'd clung to him nonstop. On the other hand, Dylan had normally been the perfect gentlemen, but recently his perverted side had been coming out in full force. Right now, he was mesmerized by the bouncing of Meiru's boobs as she danced along with Miledi. Marshal walked over and ruffled Dylan's hair.

"Hahahaha. No man can resist a view like that! You should just be honest with yourself and enjoy it, Ruth."

Abe, the pessimistic monkeyman, and Tony, Marshal's disciple, strode over as well. Both of them seemed to have no compunctions about ogling Meiru either.

"Holding back your desires is bad for the body, Ruth. That over there is art. You may as well appreciate it."

"'Sides, if Meiru-neesan didn't wanna be stared at, she wouldn't dress that boldly. If anything, not looking would be rude when she's putting those babies out on display."

"Why are all the grown-ups around me like this...?" Ruth muttered despondently. Ironically, he was more mature than the adults. No amount of cajoling would make him abandon his gentleman's creed. However, Marshal's word seemed to have had a huge impact on someone else.

"I see, so Meiru-san's Marshal-san's type..."

Marshal and Ruth both whirled around to find Mikaela looking glumly down at the ground behind them.

"*Sniffle...* I should have known... Marshal-san would never pick a perverted peeping Tom like me over a beauty like Meiru-san... *Sob...*"

"Whoaaaaaa, hold on, Mikaela! Don't cry! Your hobbies don't bother me at all, I swear!"

Some time back, the other Liberators had learned Mikaela was using her special magic, Soul Sight, to peep on Marshal while he was in the bath or changing in his bedroom. Badd's letter had helped Mikaela momentarily forget her shame, but now it came back in full force, and she started wringing her own neck.

"Oh yeah. I forgot you had a crush on the captain, Mikaela," Ruth said.

Hearing it laid out so plainly like that caused Mikaela to blush, and she quickly covered her face with her hands. Most of the Liberators from the former Reisen looked on in shock. Though some of them had suspected that was the case, this was the first time they'd received confirmation. Only the housewives from the village seemed unsurprised.

Marshal, who didn't seem all that opposed to the idea of dating Mikaela, blushed slightly and looked away. It was cute how innocent a man in his mid-forties was, but unfortunately, none of the guys watching appreciated his cuteness. Just then, a bright flash filled the air.

"Hey, Miledi. Why're you wearing those glasses? Those're the special artifact Oscar made just for you, aren't they?"

"So I can take pictures of you, of course!"

"Why're you taking pictures!? Ah, you're gonna show Badd, aren't you!?"

"You and Badd were the two eternal bachelors... I'm sure he'll cry tears of joy when he hears you've finally found someone!"

"You fiend! That's not how he's going to react and you know it! Hand those glasses over!"

Marshal charged toward Miledi, who quickly started running. Meanwhile,

Susha and Yunfa had nearly finished cornering Naiz, who was fearing for his life. Meiru had taken over Miledi's role as cheer captain, and she and the other girls continued egging the sisters on. Oscar and Vandre were still arguing relentlessly, while Katy clung to Oscar, and Corrin tried to pull her off. Dylan continued inconspicuously ogling Meiru's boobs while Ruth tried to rein him in. The serious atmosphere that Badd's letter had created was all but destroyed. Everyone was going to depart in a few minutes, but the clearing was in chaos.

"Oh my, they're such unruly children. Margaretta-san, could you please get them in line for me?"

"A-As you wish, Moorin-dono."

Moorin, who had basically become the de facto Mom of the Liberators, turned to Margaretta, the strait-laced warrior of the Schnee Clan. For a moment, Margaretta looked unwilling, but then she nodded to Moorin and turned to the rest of her clansmen.

"You heard Moorin-dono! Calm everyone down and, uh... get them in the right mindset for a journey!"

"R-Roger!"

"Batlam, restrain Van-sama! Kuou, you stop Oscar-dono! Let's move, men!"

The Schnee clansmen started running around the clearing and restoring order. Most of them had serious personalities, so they were able to quiet the unruly Liberators relatively quickly. It probably helped that Moorin was smiling menacingly at all the unruly children too.

"Stop goofing off and get to work!" she said in a booming voice, and Miledi and the others settled down almost instantly. Looking contrite, they wrapped up their preparations and set off on their respective journeys.

It was noon, three days after Miledi, Naiz, and Meiru had left for the Pale Forest. They were currently flying in the sky a few dozen kilometers away from Agris, the capital of the Odion Federation.

"So that's... the Pale Forest."

“That’s what it looks like from a distance? Amazing...”

Naiz and Meiru stared at the massive sheet of fog that spread out below them like a cloud. At the center of the endless white fog was a mountain of mist that rose over a kilometer high. They couldn’t see any of the greenery hidden within the fog, nor could they even tell where the forest ended and the plains began.

So this is what the forest looks like in wartime... Naiz thought, awed by the sight.

“Haaah... Haaah... This is my first time seeing it, but this is good. If the fog’s this thick, it means the republic hasn’t lost yet... Haaah... Haaah...”

Miledi was pale-faced and exhausted, but she still smiled in relief as she looked down at the fog. She’d used gravity magic to fly herself, Naiz, and Meiru a few hundred kilometers, so her mana was almost completely spent. Naiz, who’d been teleporting the party before that, and Meiru, who’d been using restoration magic on the two of them nonstop, looked about as tired. Fortunately, their grueling trip was finally over.

“Miledi. I’m gonna teleport us into the southern tip of the capital, okay?”

Naiz turned away from the forest and focused his gaze on the city of Agris. A massive army was camped to the east of the capital, and it was clear even from this distance that soldiers were patrolling the streets.

“Sure. It looks like the gates are heavily guarded, so the only way in is teleporting. But are you sure you can manage it, Nacchan?”

“Yeah, just give me a second.”

Naiz fished a pair of glasses out of his pocket. They were a special artifact Oscar had created for Naiz. He’d made specific pairs for everyone, actually. Vandre’s constant insults seemed to have renewed his determination to spread the gospel of glasses. And honestly, they were so convenient that Naiz and the others couldn’t help but use them too.

“Those gates are heavily guarded alright. Sneaking past them’s gonna be tough. But... it looks like the city’s barriers aren’t strong enough to block spatial magic. I think I can get us onto one of those rooftops.”

Naiz was able to analyze the barrier surrounding the city thanks to the glasses' mana sensing abilities. Furthermore, thanks to the Farsight enchantment on them, he could get a detailed view of his destination. The rooftop he was aiming for was a few dozen kilometers away, the limit of how far he could go with his current mana reserves.

"I knew I could count on you, Nacchan!" Miledi said, giving him a thumbs-up.

A second later, the scenery around the three of them shifted. They were standing on the roof of a building. The building was close enough to the city walls that Miledi could have had a conversation with one of the sentries if she so desired. Fortunately, all of them were looking outward, and no one had seen three figures suddenly materialize on a rooftop. Still, their proximity to the soldiers gave Miledi and the others a start.

"Haaah... Haaah... Is there anyone in the alleyway?" Naiz asked, panting. Meiru strode over to the rooftop's far edge and looked down.

"We're safe. There's no one down here."

"You rest, Nacchan. We can get down a building easily enough."

Miledi lent Naiz her shoulder and staggered over to where Meiru was standing. Just as the three of them jumped off the roof, one of the sentries on the wall happened to turn around. As they landed, the three of them held their breath, waiting to see if anyone raised the alarm. One minute passed, then two. No one came rushing over to the alleyway they were in. It seemed their infiltration had been successful. Miledi and the others heaved a sigh of relief. They took a few minutes to catch their breath, then Miledi pushed off from the wall she was leaning against.

"Nacchan, you should probably show off swords. The branch here is a weapons shop, so you'll blend in better if you're armed. Come on, it's this way."

Miledi nonchalantly walked into the street. Naiz took his twin scimitars out of his Treasure Trove and belted them on before following her. Meiru also took out her whip sword as she trailed behind Miledi.

"There's not a lot of people here..."

"That's a surprise. I figured everyone would be overjoyed that their city was

chosen as a base for the church's holy war."

A few people were roaming the streets, but far less than one would expect considering this was a nation's capital. Moreover, the few people Miledi and the others passed all looked glum. No one spared their party a single glance. It was as if an aura of despair had settled over the entire city.

"The federation must be having a hard time if people are this depressed... I guess the republic's warriors were stronger than the church expected?"

Badd's letter hadn't gone into much detail. All he'd said was that a war had broken out and that he needed assistance. He'd probably avoided going into specifics because he'd been worried the letter might be intercepted. Seeing as the theocracy had gone all-out for this war, it wouldn't have been surprising if they'd been trying to control all information going in and out of the area.

That being said, Badd had neglected to even provide a rendezvous point, which was a bit of a problem. And as a result, Miledi had come to the city so she could visit the Liberator branch for the Angriff region. Seeing as Badd had sent her a letter, he must have visited the branch office at some point. Meaning he was either waiting for Miledi and the others there, or he'd left behind a message for them.

Miledi kept a wary eye on her surroundings as she led Naiz and Meiru through the city. After a few minutes, she stopped in front of a large, three-story building. It looked like a minor noble's mansion. An iron signboard emblazoned with a pair of crossed swords resting above a suit of armor hung from the wall. Beneath the picture were the words "Almeda Weapon Shop."

"That's quite a crowd..."

"They look like adventurers... no, mercenaries?"

"Yep, they're mercenaries, Meru-nee. All the adventurers probably fled to some other country when they heard war was brewing."

Miledi came to a halt a short distance from the store's entrance. While the Almeda Weapon Shop was a Liberator branch office, it was also one of the most renowned stores in Agris. The store had purposely distinguished itself in the hopes that it would prevent the church from growing suspicious, but that,

unfortunately, meant that it had become a mecca for mercenaries as well. The store was so packed that a line had started forming outside it. Or rather, a disorganized mob of people jostling each other in an attempt to shove their way in. Miledi and Meiru weren't keen on trying to make their way through that—especially since they didn't look like the kinds of people who had any business in a weapons store. Miledi had no doubt they'd cause a commotion if they tried to squeeze in now. And so, she led everyone to a nearby back alley.

"When in need, use O-kun's glasses!"

Miledi put on the red-rimmed glasses Oscar had made for her. He'd enchanted them with Mikaela's Soul Sight, so they could see through walls and other obstacles.

"Oscar-kun's glasses just keep getting more and more useful," Meiru mused.

"Yeah, but I'm not sure I like this see-through power he added to them. I just know O-kun's gonna give in to his desires and start peeping on me now!" Miledi replied.

"He actually might. Despite appearances, Oscar-kun is quite the pervert."

Naiz ignored the two of them and swept his gaze south. Honestly, as a fellow man, he sympathized with Oscar.

"Hmmm... I don't see the branch chief, Howzer, anywhere. That means he's probably at the safe house. Nacchan, you put your glasses on too. You need to see where the safe house is so you can teleport us there. Actually, do you have enough mana left for that?"

"Just barely."

"Ufufu. You better not look at us with those see-through glasses, Naiz-kun."

"There's no way I'd ever do that. If I did and Susha found out... Ugh, I don't even want to think about it."

"Naiz-kun... That's surprisingly pathetic of you."

Poor man, he's already been whipped by Susha-chan... Meiru thought sadly to herself.

While Meiru was lost in her thoughts, Miledi showed Naiz where to look to

find the safehouse.

“Oh, there he is! You see that one-eyed, one-armed dude who looks like a gang boss? You see him, right?”

“Yeah, the guy in a wine-red shirt with scars on his face. He looks pretty strong... I’m surprised he’s part of the support team and not one of our fighters.”

“Well, he used to be the leader of a huge mercenary company. But then the church hired him for this one war, and when things started going south, they used his company as bait... He lost most of his comrades in that fight, and since then...”

“I see...” Naiz replied with a solemn nod. He then put a hand on Miledi and Meiru’s shoulders, and a second later, they were inside the safe house.

“Wh-What the—!?” someone shouted as Miledi, Naiz, and Meiru materialized on top of a table. Howzer and the other members of the Angriff region branch were gathered around the table, looking at a map Miledi and the others were now standing on. Howzer instantly assumed they’d somehow been discovered by one of the Templar Knights and readied for battle.

“Who the hell do you think—? Wait, is that you, Leader!?”

“Yo, Howzer, everyone! Long time no see!”

Miledi struck her usual pose, raising one leg slightly and making a peace sign with her right hand while she winked at Howzer. Her smug grin made it clear she expected everyone to be overjoyed by the sight.

“There’s only one person in the world this annoying! Chief, that has to be our leader!”

“Yeah, no way a Templar Knight could imitate that level of annoyingness! That’s our Miledi-chan alright!”

“It’s been a while, you annoying brat!”

“Don’t just pop up out of nowhere like that; you nearly gave me a heart attack! Damn, I should’ve known our leader would somehow find a way to be even more annoying!”

Once they realized it was Miledi and not an enemy raid, the members of the Angriff branch all relaxed and happily welcomed their leader.

“Oh Miledi-chan, you’re such a celebrity. People fawn over you everywhere we go,” Meiru said with a smile.

“No, this isn’t the kind of popularity I’m looking for. This isn’t how I want to be remembered,” Miledi muttered, drooping to her knees in defeat. Indeed, everywhere she went, Miledi’s reputation for being annoying preceded her.

“Uh, anyway, can you get off the table, Leader? Also, that guy behind you’s collapsed. Is he gonna be okay?”

“Ah, Nacchan! Are you okay!?”

Naiz had used up every last drop of mana in that final teleport. The reason the party had ended up on the table was because he hadn’t been able to control his magic perfectly. He’d actually meant to set them down in a corner of the room. The other branch members helped lower Naiz off the table, then those who could use light magic cast spells to transfer some of their mana over to him. While that was happening, Miledi introduced Meiru and Naiz to everyone.

“I see. We’d actually sent guides out of the city to help sneak you in, since we figured you were coming... Though I guess if you can teleport, you didn’t need them. I should’ve known your new comrades had powers as ridiculous as yours.”

Miledi briefly summarized how their journey had gone from the southern continent to here, then asked, “So, Howzer. Where’s Badd? What’s the situation like?”

Under normal circumstances, Miledi would have spent more time reminiscing and enjoying their reunion, but this was an emergency. As soon as they heard Miledi use her leader voice, the other Liberators all quieted down as well.

“That dumbass is in the republic. He’s become the queen’s advisor.”

“Huh? What!? The queen’s advisor!? How did that happen!?”

Miledi knew Badd had gone to help the republic, but she’d figured he would end up as a mercenary for the beastmen or something like that. After all,

beastmen mistrusted humans. It was frankly unbelievable that they'd not only let him into the forest, but into their inner circle.

"According to him, the queen..."

"Go on..." Miledi said with some trepidation.

The grimace on Howzer's face did not inspire confidence. She was worried Badd might have been captured and was being called an advisor in name only while actually being treated like a prisoner. Maybe there was some reason he'd been forced to return to the republic after sending his letter, rather than wait here for Miledi.

As Miledi waited with bated breath, Howzer finished, "...is totally his type."

"...What?"

"That dumbass ran straight back to the forest after handing over his letter. We tried to stop him, but he kept shouting crap like 'I've finally found the one! Don't get in my way!' I have no clue how the hell he got into the queen's good graces, though. Fucking dumbass."

"O-Oh, I see."

Howzer's already scary face was twisted in rage. He kept muttering "dumbass" under his breath while Miledi's face stiffened.

"Let's forget about that moron for a moment. Excuse me, Howzer-kun. But what exactly is the church's objective with this war?"

"D-Did you just call me Howzer-*kun*?"

Howzer was fifty-five years old. He couldn't believe a woman less than half his age was calling him "kun." After a few seconds of stunned silence, the Liberators working under him started chuckling. He shot them all a murderous glare, and they quickly shut up.

"This is just how Meru-nee is, so you're gonna have to get used to it. She has to act like a big sister to everyone. It's like she has some kind of complex about it."

"Tch... Figures our Leader's comrades would be just like her."

“Hey! What’s that supposed to mean, Howzer? I’ll have you know that I’m the embodiment of common sense.”

We’re going to get nowhere at this rate... the other Liberators thought in exasperation. Naiz regained consciousness around the same time and politely introduced himself to the Liberators taking care of him.

Ah, this is the one guy who actually *has common sense...* they all thought.

“So, what’s the church’s goal with this war?” Naiz asked, getting everyone back on track.

Sighing, Howzer dropped his argument with Miledi and gave Naiz his full attention.

“The queen of the republic is just like you, Leader.”

“Oh... you mean she’s an ancient magic user?”

Miledi and the others easily inferred the rest. The church had started this war because they wanted to capture her. Since this was a fight over an ancient magic user, the church would keep going until one side or the other was obliterated. That also explained why the beastmen were doing so well. Their unnatural strength and the overwhelming power of the mist barrier all made sense if an ancient magic user was aiding them.

“So even with the commander of the Templar Knights, the Paragons of Light, and the Holy Templar Knights, they still haven’t breached the forest? The republic’s queen must be amazing,” Miledi muttered.

“She is. But the church hasn’t gotten serious yet. Far as I can tell, they’re half-assing this. Probably because they’re more interested in finding out where the ancient magic user is than overwhelming the beastmen,” Howzer replied.

Miledi nodded in understanding, and Howzer added with a shrug, “Anyway, this is the message Badd left us. ‘I’ve already told the republic about you guys. Come to the forest, they’ll let you in.’”

“Where in the forest are we supposed to go?”

“Anywhere’s fine, apparently. Once you’re in the trees, the queen will be able to sense you.”

“Wow, that’s impressive... So, how’re the support branches around here reacting?”

“The support branches in the area have sent out a summons to all the fighters in the nearby village. The biggest unit’s gonna be coming from the northwest. It’s the one lead by old man Salus. His plan is to hit the supply convoys coming from Uldia.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. Nice thinking, Sal. But...”

“What? Is there something we should be worried about?”

“The empire, probably.”

“Because of what you told us about the Demon Lord?”

Howzer’s face scrunched up in concern.

“I read your reports, but I wanted to ask you directly. Is it really true? Was the Demon Lord actually being manipulated by the church’s god?”

Humans and demons had been at war for as long as anyone could remember. Their faiths were at odds with each other, and both sides had slaughtered millions in the name of their respective gods. But if what Miledi had said was true, then those supposedly opposed gods were actually in cahoots. It was a shocking revelation. So shocking that Howzer’s brain still hadn’t finished processing it. He and the other Liberators looked expectantly at Miledi.

“It’s all true. All of the wars in history were orchestrated by those shitty gods up in heaven. It looks like they enjoy watching us pitiful mortals fight.”

“Dammit... So the church’s top brass know they don’t actually have anything to fear from the demons? That means they can bring the empire’s troops in without worry, since they know there won’t be an invasion.”

Howzer scratched his head in frustration.

“But, Leader. We don’t have enough troops to stall the empire’s army. Maybe if we called in all the guys we’ve sent to other regions, but it’d take half a year to get them all here.”

“Good point... Well, there’s still the possibility the empire won’t get involved. Even if the church knows there’s nothing to fear, they still need to come up

with a convincing excuse for the empire.”

“They could just use their authority to force the empire to help.”

“Sure, but it would make the people suspicious.”

At this point, it was impossible to be sure whether or not the empire would join the fight. Especially since the federation had already pledged their aid. A militaristic nation like the Odion Federation wouldn’t fall that easily.

“But well, after I got your report, I sent some of our better spies to scope out the empire.”

“Wait, really!? I knew I could count on you to be on top of things, Howzer!”

“I wasn’t just gonna ignore a report from you, Leader.”

“Oh, you. I’m glad you trust me so much!”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t let it get to your head, you annoying brat.”

Miledi’s tone had softened, and it looked like she was about to exit Leader Mode. Realizing he didn’t have much time left, Howzer decided to finish up the rest of his reports before she went back to being super annoying.

“Anyway, Leader. We were thinking of abandoning this branch office and moving somewhere else.”

Originally, Howzer had wanted to vacate the area before the church’s knights arrived. After all, this was a warzone. Hiding from the church when they were swarming the city streets wouldn’t be easy.

“Oh yeah, that’s fine. I was just about to suggest the same thing actually. In fact, you should get out of here as fast as possible... Thanks for staying behind to deliver Badd’s message, though.”

“Don’t sweat it. We were just doing our job.”

Howzer affectionately patted Miledi’s head.

“Cut that out!” Miledi shouted, trying to squirm away. But despite her words, she was smiling. The other branch members smiled as well, finally allowing themselves to relax.

After that, Howzer and Miledi discussed specifics, then the meeting came to a

close.

Miledi would have preferred to head straight to the Pale Forest, but she knew everyone was exhausted. Besides, she planned to fly in from above, so it was better not to leave while it was bright out. And so, the party decided to rest until nighttime. They ate the warm meal Howzer's subordinates prepared for them, then snuggled into bed.

About an hour after they went to bed, Miledi opened her eyes. In truth, Miledi hadn't been able to sleep at all. While her lack of mana had left her physically tired, her mind was awhirl with thoughts. She looked over at Naiz and Meiru, who were sleeping peacefully on their beds. And, careful not to wake them up, she quietly slipped out of the room.

Eventually, she found Howzer in the conference room, writing a letter.

"Howzer, I'm gonna go out for a bit."

"Huh? Why?"

"I wanna see the state of the federation's army with my own eyes."

Miledi pulled on a robe as she talked, and Howzer narrowed his eyes at her.

"That's not like you. What's bothering you so much?"

"N-Nothing! There's nothing on my mind!"

You're a terrible liar, you know that? Howzer thought with a wry smile.

"It's just, you know, this is a war. I'm kinda nervous, that's all," Miledi said unconvincingly.

"Do you think I'm dumb? You're the last person who'd get cold feet at the thought of fighting the church."

Howzer looked like a gruff old man, but he was far more perceptive than he appeared. It was one of the reasons he was this branch's chief. Moreover, he was still a seasoned warrior, despite missing an arm and an eye. It was why his comrades respected him so much. Plus, he'd looked after Miledi when she'd first joined the Liberators. Back then, she was inexperienced, but she'd still gone out helping as many people as she could. And as a result, she'd often overextend herself and come back hurt. And whenever she had, it was Howzer

who'd scolded her for it. Indeed, Howzer was the first person to ever smack Miledi on the head for her stupidity.

The other senior members of the Liberators, like Esperado's branch chief Rigan and the HQ chief Salus tended to spoil Miledi. Badd didn't, though. Regardless, the point was, Miledi saw Howzer as a father figure. The kind of father who always nagged his kids, but still looked out for them. Still, Miledi hesitated to tell Howzer her worries.

"A-Anyway, I'm just gonna go out for a bit!"

She turned away from Howzer, who was scrutinizing her carefully, and grabbed hold of the doorknob. Before she could leave, though, Howzer called out to her.

"Miledi."

His tone was serious. He hadn't called her leader, but rather used Miledi's name. Miledi turned back, then flinched at the earnest, unyielding look in Howzer's eyes.

"The world is starting to change. At least, that's what I think."

"Howzer?"

Miledi gave Howzer a confused look. He ignored it and continued his speech, enunciating every word as if to impress its importance onto her.

"For so long, we endured. We hid in the shadows and held our breath. We stood by and watched the innocent die, but even so, we endured and built up our strength. Believing that someday we'd be able to free everyone from the shackles of oppression."

"...Yeah."

Miledi was listening intently now. Howzer sucked in a deep breath, then said, "The time has finally come for us to take center stage. To see whether biding our time was worth it. Whether it meant anything."

This war would be the prologue, the opening chapter to the Liberators' mark on history, which was why—

"You don't have to worry about us. You don't need to protect us. We've all

decided to follow you, Miledi Reisen. So use our lives as you see fit. For the sake of the world, for the sake of the future, for the sake of mankind's freedom, order us to do what's necessary."

Even if that means ordering us to our deaths.

Silence followed Howzer's declaration. Miledi looked into his eye, matching the intensity of his gaze. Howzer had scolded her, comforted her, and conveyed his resolve to her all in one go. Miledi processed it all silently for a few seconds, then curled her fingers into fists.

"Yeah... I know, Howzer. Don't underestimate the great Miledi!"

After a solemn nod, Miledi grinned and gave him a thumbs-up. Howzer harrumphed, and his stern expression vanished.

"When you go up the stairs, enter the fifth changing room. There's a backdoor leading to an alleyway there. We just finished making it, actually."

With that, Howzer returned to writing his letter. Miledi stared at him for a while longer, a mixture of respect and exasperation lining her face. But then she spun on her heels and walked up the stairs.

Once she was out of the shop, Miledi wandered the city, sticking to mostly deserted back alleys. And as she walked, she mulled over Howzer's words.

It feels like he saw right through me... The reason she couldn't sleep *did* have something to do with the church, but it wasn't because she was scared. Ever since she'd heard the Holy Templar Knights were in the city... No, ever since she'd heard there was a war, the thought had been sitting in the back of her mind.

"Laus Barn... I'll have to fight you again, won't I?"

After the battle in Andika, Oscar had told her about his conversation with Laus. And about the fact that Laus might have been the one who'd saved Belta's life the first time around. Of course, there was no proof.

But still... He's an ancient magic user, so it's definitely possible. Besides, he's not anything like the other church fanatics... And that was why Miledi was already half-convinced Oscar's theory was true. She truly believed Laus had

defied the church to give Belta a future, meaning he was partly responsible for shaping Miledi into who she was today. He'd helped her turn into a human girl instead of letting her become the emotionless head of a family of executioners.

It was those thoughts that Miledi had been reluctant to share with Howzer. Belta had been a star of hope for the Liberators. Even after her death, her will lived on in everyone. Indeed, the slogan "A world where the people will finally be free" was something that the Liberators had inherited from Belta. If she'd let the others know that the leader of the church's knights was responsible for saving her life, there was no doubt many of the Liberators would hesitate to raise their weapons against Laus.

Miledi wanted to believe everyone's resolve would remain firm, but she couldn't be sure. And since she couldn't be sure, she couldn't afford to share her worries with Howzer. Miledi trusted her comrades, but she didn't blindly put her faith in them. The last thing she wanted to do was give them more to worry about. Still, she couldn't shake the burning desire to meet Laus again.

Laus Barn. What were you thinking? If you went so far to save Belta, why didn't you run away with her? Why are you still working for the church if you defied Ehit once already!? Dammit, nothing you do makes any sense! Miledi pulled at her hair in frustration. An old housewife who'd just happened to be passing by saw her, then hurriedly shuffled away. From her perspective, it looked like a robed figure had suddenly gone crazy.

It was only when she noticed the housewife running away from her that Miledi finally returned to her senses. Sighing, she started coming up with a plan to meet secretly with Laus. She circled the alleys, trying to think of some method that wouldn't attract attention. An hour or two later, around the time the sun was beginning to set, Miledi—

"Hm?"

"Eeek!"

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to defeat me."

"Ah..."

Laus' reply snapped Miledi out of her reminiscing. Looking up, she realized he already had his back turned to her. She had no way of gauging what kind of expression he was making.

"You want to avoid causing a scene here too, don't you? Go. When we meet on the battlefield... we'll settle this for good."

Laus began walking away. But while it seemed like his reply was a rejection of Miledi and her goals, it seemed to her more like he was trying to convince himself to reject her. And so, she asked, "Why did you save Belta?"

Laus froze mid-step. Miledi's words had bound him in place. But he didn't reply. Because he himself didn't know the answer to her question.

"What... exactly are you fighting for?" Miledi followed up with another question.

"For a world that brings the most amount of happiness to the most people."

Laus' reply was devoid of emotion. As if it was the default answer he'd trained himself to give to that question. Which was why Miledi smiled upon hearing it.

"I see you didn't say god."

"...That's what god wants as well. I'm merely enforcing his will."

"Really? Do you really believe that? Look me in the eye and tell me."

A few minutes ago, Laus had been scolding Miledi, but now she was the one doing the scolding. She stared at Laus' hunched back, her gaze unwavering. But even then, Laus didn't turn around. To Miledi, he looked like a wounded, exhausted lone wolf. Originally, he'd been a proud, unyielding protector of the weak, but now he'd been chained and muzzled, reduced to a whimpering mutt who had no choice but to obey. Still, he'd kept telling himself there was something he could protect, and he'd continued throwing himself into fights he didn't wish for. But eventually—

"You've lost hope, haven't you?"

"What do you know about—!?"

As Laus glanced over his shoulder he trailed off, stunned by the piercing look in Miledi's sky-blue eyes. She wasn't disappointed in him, angry at him, or even

belittling him. She wasn't looking at him like he was the enemy.

"If, during this war, I can prove to you that I won't lose to anyone, that I can be your hope, then... will you join forces with me?"

Miledi's eyes were sparkling with hope. She'd seen something in Laus that had convinced her he could still be saved. She was convinced that if she just reached out to him, her word would break through his cynicism.

"What do you...?" Laus whispered, his voice hoarse. It was hard to tell if that was because the invisible collar around his neck was tightening, or because he was overwhelmed with emotion. Miledi at least seemed to believe it was the latter. Smiling, she proudly declared:

"I promise you, Laus Barn. I'll win back your freedom for you!"

"....." Laus was at a loss for words. He stared at Miledi, who met his gaze with a fearless smile.

After a few seconds of silence, the two of them suddenly turned toward the alley entrance.

"Araym, huh...?"

It appeared Araym had been searching for Laus, and he'd finally found him. If Araym had personally gone to look for Laus, there was likely some kind of emergency going on. Either that, or Araym's obsession with Laus had reared its head again.

Laus slowly closed his eyes. When he opened them again, his expression was as cold as ice.

"Get out of here before I change my mind about killing you."

"Okay."

Miledi turned on her heel and dashed toward the alley's other exit. But just before she was out of sight she turned back and shouted, "Laus Barn! Thank you for saving Belta! It's because of you that I am who I am today!"

Miledi's worries from earlier had vanished, and there was a beatific smile on her face. Laus said nothing in reply, and Miledi quickly vanished before Araym arrived. A second later, the Holy Templar Knights' vice commander turned

around the corner. Sighing, Laus turned around to meet his subordinate's suspicious glare. But his thoughts were still focused on his conversation with Miledi.

Thanks to their coincidental reunion, Miledi was no longer conflicted. She headed back to the Liberator branch office with a new spring in her step. But her joy was short-lived, as Howzer greeted her with a smack to the head upon her return. She'd said she'd just be going for a little walk, but then had disappeared for hours. Little wonder he'd been worried about her.

Normally, Miledi disappearing for hours at a time wouldn't have been that big a deal, but they were in the middle of enemy territory during a war. Moreover, Miledi's mana still hadn't fully recovered. And so, she'd been forced to sit down and listen to Howzer lecture her for hours on end about how she needed to act more leaderlike. By the end, she was in tears, crying, "Waaaaaah! I'm soooooorry!" The other Liberators watched with smiles on their faces, commenting how she hadn't changed a bit from when she'd first come here four years ago. Around the time Miledi's knees were starting to go numb from sitting on them for too long, Naiz walked in.

"Why can't you just sleep when you're tired like a normal person?" he asked with an exasperated look on his face. Fortunately, his arrival brought an end to Howzer's scolding. He grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and bodily threw her into bed, ordering her to rest. Now that her fears had been assuaged, Miledi was able to fall asleep right away this time.

A few hours later, in the dead of night, Miledi stood in front of her fellow Liberators in the deserted weapons store.

"Alright, Howzer, everyone. We'll be going now."

Miledi's mana had recovered enough that she was fit to travel at least. Naiz stood next to her, and a snoring Meiru lay in a sleeping bag at her feet.

"Shouldn't you wake her up first?" Howzer asked, looking bemused.

"Waking Meru-nee up is impossible."

Technically, Meiru was half-awake. When Miledi pinched her cheek and

shouted, “Wake up Meru-nee, it’s time to go!” Meiru at least poked her face out of the sleeping bag. She just looked like a turtle the whole time.

“Come on, Meru-nee.”

“The republic’s managing to fend the church off, right? We’ve still got time, Miledi-chan. Let’s just go tomorrow.”

“Shut up and get out of the sleeping bag.”

“Don’t wanna.”

Meiru had been sleeping for over eight hours already. It seemed she was quite enamored with this particular sleeping bag. The weapons store was rich enough that they were able to afford high-quality sleeping bags. Of course, the branch office in Esperado had possessed wonderful beds too, but Meiru was especially fond of whatever local materials this sleeping bag had been made out of.

“Miledi-chan. I’m not the kind of person who can keep going nonstop. I need to take breaks. A lot of breaks.”

“Liar. Back when you were a pirate queen, you got the preparations for that coup d’etat done at the speed of light.”

“That was because I needed to save Diene. I can do anything if it’s for my little sister’s sake.”

“Aren’t I like your honorary little sister!? Do this for my sake!”

“Diene>>>>>>An insurmountable wall>>>this sleeping bag>Miledi-chan.”

Annoyed, Miledi tried to drag Meiru out of the sleeping bag. But right as she reached down, a blast of water hit her in the face. Meiru had smacked her with the magic version of a water gun. This sleeping bag was Meiru’s new paradise, and nothing could get her to leave it. She had reverted to a sloth.

Miledi wiped her face down with a handkerchief that Naiz handed her, then turned back to Howzer with a stiff expression.

“See what I mean? This is why we’ll just take her like this. You don’t mind losing one sleeping bag, right?”

“Not really, but... are you sure you should bring someone like that with you?”

“It’ll be fine... probably. When it really matters, she’s reliable.”

As Miledi said that, Meiru started snoring again. Sighing, Miledi scooped the sleeping Meiru into her arms while the other Liberators gave her sympathetic smiles.

“Anyway, we’ll be going now. You guys better evacuate quickly too!”

“Yeah, don’t worry about us. Tell that idiot Badd we said hi. Naiz, take care of those two for me, okay?”

“I will. You guys take care.”

Naiz nodded to Howzer, then teleported his comrades out of the Angriff branch office.

The fog within the Pale Forest was as dense as the rumors said. The moon was hidden by clouds, making visibility within the sea of white even worse. However, there was one thing the rumors seemed to have been wrong about.

“Hey, Nacchan. Does your sense of direction feel messed up?”

“Nope, not at all. At least not as far as I can tell.”

Miledi and Naiz’s sense of direction didn’t seem warped by the fog like it was supposed to. Miledi fired a wind blast at a nearby tree as a test, and it hit right on target.

“I guess this is what Badd meant when he said the republic would let us in?”

“The forest isn’t resisting us like it does everyone else, I guess.”

“In that case, you probably didn’t need to teleport us this far out from the Grand Tree.”

It was common knowledge that the republic’s capital was somewhere near the Grand Tree, though most humans had never seen it. Chances were that was where Badd was too. But Miledi had told Naiz not to teleport directly there because she hadn’t wanted to spook the beastmen by suddenly showing up out of nowhere.

“You can never be too cautious. Besides, this is territory humans like us were never meant to step foot in. Also... you’ve noticed, haven’t you?”

“Yeah... There’s a weird presence here. It feels like someone’s watching us.”

The air within the forest was different, as if this were a separate world. Furthermore, Miledi definitely felt someone’s gaze on her, though she couldn’t tell from where. Nervous, Miledi and Naiz waited for their welcoming party to approach them.

“I can’t believe Meru-nee can sleep through this...” Miledi muttered as they waited.

“Tell me about it,” Naiz replied, looking down at the sleeping bag.

Meiru was still breathing deeply, clearly fast asleep. Her ability to fall asleep literally anywhere was godlike, especially since she could wake up at a moment’s notice if necessary. Unfortunately, now that they’d taken this sleeping bag, Meiru would probably make use of it more often than ever. And right as that thought crossed their minds, and they considered disposing of the sleeping bag, Miledi and Naiz heard a voice in the distance.

“Nacchan, did you hear that!?”

“Yeah, it sounded like a scream.”

The high-pitched voice likely belonged to either a woman or a child. Miledi and Naiz exchanged a brief glance, then dashed toward the source of the scream. Incidentally, Naiz carried the sleeping Meiru in his arms. They moved as fast as they could through the dense undergrowth.

Twenty seconds later, their vision suddenly cleared up as they reached a village where the fog wasn’t present. The settlement was encircled by a sturdy fence, and currently, five beastmen were fighting a group of three monsters right outside it. Behind them, a young dogman girl was lying on the ground. From the looks of it, she’d encountered the monsters first, and the other dogmen had come to help her when they’d heard her scream. However, they were currently being pushed back. There was something strange about these monsters.

“Tiger monsters covered in auras of light?”

“Those aren’t regular monsters! They belong to the Paragons of Light!”

There wasn’t any time to contemplate what the church’s monsters were doing within the forest, since one of the tigers suddenly unleashed an explosion of light that sent the beastmen flying.

One of the beastmen managed to stay on his feet and stop the tiger monster’s charge. But the other two tigers circled around him, heading for the defenseless girl. It almost looked like they were competing to see who could eat her first.

“Nacchan, you take the right one!”

“Roger!”

Miledi reoriented her gravity to fall forward, while Naiz teleported in front of his quarry.

“Not on my watch!”

He grabbed the tiger’s head in an iron grip and slammed it to the ground. Then, he used a spatial shockwave to shatter its skull. A small crater appeared on the ground where Naiz cast his shockwave, and the tiger died instantly. At the same time, Miledi made her move.

“Miledi Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiick!”

Miledi’s gravity-enhanced kick hit the other tiger square in the back of the neck. There was a sickening crunch, and the monster was sent flying. It crashed into the village’s fence, then slowly slid to the ground in a lifeless heap as blood spilled from its eyes and ears.

Miledi and Naiz’s arrival was so sudden that the other beastmen didn’t know how to react. The final tiger bared its fangs at the stunned dogman, but before it could strike, Miledi flattened it. All that remained of it was a bloody stain on the floor. While the other villagers started rushing over after hearing the commotion, Miledi squatted down in front of the dog-eared girl.

“Are you okay? Did you get hurt anywhere?” she asked with a gentle smile. The girl looked Miledi up and down, then turned to Naiz, who had run up next to her. When she saw the bundle in Naiz’s arms, she suddenly paled.

“Eek! Humans!? Please don’t kill me!”

“Huh!?”

The girl backed away, tears spilling from her eyes. Miledi sat there blankly, wondering what about her smile had scared the girl so much.

Eventually, the other villagers arrived on the scene. They too looked from Miledi to Naiz, to the bundle in Naiz’s arms, then paled.

“B-Bastards! How dare you try to kidnap a little girl!”

“How did humans get this far into the forest, anyway!?”

“Dammit, where are our warriors!?”

“Release that dagon at once!”

“Have you no mercy!? How could you wrap her up in a sleeping bag like that!?”

“I knew humans were all evil— Wait, a sleeping bag? Also, is it just me, or does she look really happy in there... A-Anyway, we won’t hand our family over to you!”

Suddenly, Miledi and Naiz realized why everyone was so wary of them. They both looked down at Meiru.

“Mmmmmm, stop being so loud, guys.”

Indeed, from an outsider’s perspective, it did kind of look like two humans were trying to kidnap a dagon woman.

Incidentally, some dagon clans lived within the Pale Forest as well. The eastern edge of the forest bordered the ocean, and the dagons had a large fishing town there. In fact, they provided a lot of the food the republic used and were vital to its functioning.

This isn’t good... Miledi thought to herself.

“Get up, Meru-nee! If you don’t resolve this misunderstanding, we’re gonna be in big trouble!”

Meiru withdrew her head back into the comfort of the sleeping bag.

“Hey, this is serious! What happened to your ability to wake up whenever the situation called for it!? This is no time to be sleeping!”

But Meiru refused to poke her head back out. She looked ready to spend the rest of her life inside that sleeping bag.

We definitely need to get rid of that sleeping bag soon, or Meru-nee’s gonna become a lazy mess.

As Meiru remained unresponsive, Miledi’s panic gave way to anger.

“Get out here already, goddammit!”

Miledi stuck her hand into the sleeping bag and tried to drag Meiru out by force. Just then, ten armed beastmen arrived on the scene. The beastmen who’d been fighting earlier hadn’t really been warriors, but rather part of the village’s watch. The beastmen who’d come now were the real fighters. They looked from Miledi to the villagers, utterly confused.

“Nooo, stooooooop. You can’t take this sleeping bag away from me!”

“I can and I will! I’ll take everything away from you if I have to!”

To the beastmen, it sounded like their dagon brethren was crying out for help. Considering the rather dangerous things Miledi was saying, there was little reason for the beastmen to doubt the humans were evil.

“Save our comraaaaaaaaaaaaade!”

“Don’t let those humans leave here alive!”

The warriors howled and brandished their weapons.

“Oscar, Van. Hurry up and get over here. I can’t handle this insanity on my own,” Naiz muttered, his eyes glazed over. He quickly grabbed his two companions and teleported them behind the beastmen fighters. And at the same time, he surreptitiously put Meiru’s sleeping bag in his Treasure Trove.

“Ah!”

“I can’t believe I didn’t think of that! Nice going, Nacchan!”

Naiz gave Meiru, who’d now fallen to the floor, a glare as cold as ice.

“Hurry up and sort out this misunderstanding, Meiru. I won’t ask twice. Are

we clear?”

“C-Crystal. Sorry, the sleeping bag just felt so good that I stopped thinking straight. I won’t do it again so, uh, Naiz-kun, could you stop looking at me like I’m a worm? Um, actually, nevermind.”

Naiz was the kind of person who rarely ever got mad, but when he did, he became *furious.* Naturally, Meiru decided against provoking him any further. Besides, the beastmen warriors were still charging toward them, so this really wasn’t the time for banter.

Meiru stepped in front of Miledi and Naiz, holding her arms out protectively. Then, in a serious tone that Miledi hadn’t heard since she’d left for the demon lord’s castle, Meiru said, “Please listen to me, these—”

But before she could finish, an ominous rustling noise interrupted her.

“Oh, Meru-nee, look down.”

“Huh?”

Meiru looked down to see a black creature at her feet. The creature spread its wings in front of her, as if trying to tell the beastmen she wasn’t an enemy. However, the creature was quite small, and alone it couldn’t even catch the beastmen’s attention, let alone stop them. But it wasn’t alone. There were tons of them.

Black smoke rose up around Meiru’s feet. A second later, thousands upon thousands of the same black creature which struck fear into the hearts of those who saw it welled up from the ground. More of them started coming out of the fog, surrounding Miledi and the others. In seconds, they were surrounded by a tornado of them.

“Hang on, are those cockroach—?”

“Naiz-kun!”

Before she could ask him to teleport them away, one of the cockroaches landed on Meiru’s face and a few others dove into her cleavage. Meiru plucked the cockroach off her face and watched it scuttle around in her palm.

“Heh.”

She laughed weakly, her eyes rolling into the back of her head. The mental shock of seeing so many cockroaches had knocked her out.

“Meru-neeeeee!” Miledi wailed in despair. However, she didn’t step forward to save Meiru. After all, the dagon woman was covered in cockroaches. No way Miledi was gonna touch them.

“Miledi, stop panicking.”

“Nacchan!?”

Naiz looked unperturbed. Truly, he was a man among men. Miledi clung to him, begging for salvation.

“Just pretend they’re big sesame seeds or something. I’m a fan of sesame seed bread, personally.”

“Oh no, he’s lost it too!”

Upon closer inspection, Miledi realized Naiz’s eyes had glazed over. He wasn’t being brave, he had just escaped from reality. Naturally, Miledi wasn’t any more resistant to cockroaches than the others.

“H-Hold on! Don’t come any closer. Wait, stoooooooooooop!”

On that day, three ancient magic users strong enough to take on even the demon lord were defeated by a writhing black mass of pure evil.

“Heeeeeey, Leader. I’m here to get... What the hell happened?”

By the time Badd came to pick Miledi and the others up, they’d been mentally obliterated by the cockroach swarm. For a while, he just stared at them with a look of disbelief, but eventually, he sighed and started carrying them away.

“Huh!? Where am I!? Who am I!? Oh, that’s right, I’m the world’s most beautiful girl!” Miledi shouted, waking with a start.

“Hey, world’s most... pffft... beautiful leader. You come back to your senses yet?”

“Huh? Wait, is that you, Badd?”

Miledi looked up to see her vice commander poking her shoulder. Not only that, but she was on her feet and walking through the forest. Naiz was next to

her, with Meiru in his arms, and a group of beastmen soldiers trailed behind them, constantly shooting Miledi and the others suspicious looks.

“When did we meet up? Hang on, why are my memories all fuzzy? Did I see a nightmare or something?”

“Oh, well if you don’t remember I probably shouldn’t tell you. There are some things better left forgotten.”

“Huh? But...”

Miledi gave Badd a confused look. She then turned to Naiz, hoping for an explanation.

“Badd’s right. There are some things in the world you should just forget. Honestly, I wish I could forget what happened too...”

“I-I see... Anyway, why are you carrying Meiru princess-style like that? Are you cheating on Sue-chan and Yun-chan? You better fess up, or I’ll tell them.”

Miledi grinned, regaining a little of her usual annoyingness. This was the first time she’d seen Naiz carry anyone so gently. And though he normally got riled up at the mention of Susha, this time he met Miledi’s gaze and said, “I figured we should treat her well, since we’re in beastmen territory right now. But more importantly... she had it worst back there. She’s earned this much at least.”

Naiz looked gently down at Meiru. His kind, mature expression didn’t fit him in the slightest.

“What the heck happened...” Miledi muttered in confusion. At the same time, Meiru groaned and slowly opened her eyes.

“Mmm, I feel like I just saw a horrible nightmare... Huh? Naiz-kun? Are you cheating on Sue-chan?”

Meiru reacted the exact same way Miledi had. Sighing, Naiz dropped Meiru. She landed lithely, then took a look at her surroundings. Like Miledi, her memories of the last few minutes were hazy.

“Ummm, what happened here?”

“Meru-nee. I feel the exact same way as you. But according to Badd and Nacchan, we’re better off not remembering.”

“Why’s that?” Meiru asked, cocking her head to one side.

Badd flashed her a wry grin and said, “Yo, I see you’re awake too. Alright, let me introduce myself again. I’m the Liberators’ vice commander, Badd. Welcome to the Liberators.”

The reason he said “again” was because he’d introduced himself once to Naiz a few minutes. Naiz nodded quietly, while Meiru narrowed her eyes and scrutinized Badd.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Badd-kun. My name is Meiru. Oh yes, how is your search for a wife going? You look quite handsome, but I hear you’re not very popular with the ladies. Is that because of your personality?”

“Nice self-intro. You wanna die that badly, huh?” Badd growled, his face reddening. Grinning, Miledi chimed in with the perfect follow-up.

“Hey, Badd, did you know? Marshal’s been getting it on with Mikaela recently.”

“What!? Fuck! Shit! That traitor, I can’t believe he got a girlfriend before I did! He’s the one who fucking said being a bachelor for life was better than getting married! And with Mikaela, of all people!? Sure, she might be a glutton, but she’s smoking hot! And she’s totally my type, too! Next time I see that fucking bastard, I’m gonna kill him!”

Badd dropped to his knees and slammed the ground in jealousy. His mana-eating scythe, Egxess, glowed with an ominous black aura as he cried. He was really quite immature for a man in his forties.

“Hahaha, you’re exactly like how everyone described you. I think I like you,” Meiru said with a smile.

“Bahahahaha. I bet Marshal wouldn’t have beaten you to the punch if you hadn’t disappeared to go looking for a wife. Hey, how does it feel, Badd? Knowing that you lost even after trying so hard to find a woman? Look, I even have a picture of Marshal and Mikaela blushing together. How does that make you feel? Come on, tell me! Gahahaha!”

Badd looked so pitiful that even the beastmen warriors gave him sympathetic looks. Incidentally, they were now one hundred percent certain that the dagon

woman they thought was being kidnapped was indeed these humans' comrade. No dagon from the republic was that cruel.

"Alright, you two, give it a rest," Naiz said with a tired sigh. Managing Miledi and Meiru without Oscar to back him up was proving quite stressful.

"Badd, the republic's queen wants to see us, right? Hurry up and take us to her."

"Yeah, she does. Thanks for stopping those two by the way... Wait, you're the guy who's got those two sisters pining him after you, right? Tch, popular guys sure have it easy. I don't need any sympathy from you, you damn pedo—"

Badd stopped talking the moment Naiz's icy glare pierced through him.

"Say another word and I'll teleport you three thousand meters into the air and leave you there."

"Ah, I'm sorry."

Naiz's wrath was far more terrifying than anyone else's.

The party hurried to the republic's capital, moving quickly to make up for lost time. There was no road to speak of, since the beastmen didn't want humans who stumbled into the forest to be able to find it, or even know what direction it was in. However, there were plenty of markers that only beastmen would notice. The party made good time, and soon enough Miledi was staring at the capital's massive walls.

The walls were made of massive trees lined up parallel to each other. The fog made it hard to tell exactly how tall they were, but they were bigger than any trees Miledi had ever seen. Their unnatural formation made it obvious that they'd been placed here by people, yet Miledi had a hard time wrapping her head around the fact that these walls were manmade. For humans, a feat like this would have been impossible without gravity magic. Moreover, the trees looked identical, meaning they must have been chopped down in exactly the same way.

At the bottom of this massive wall was an arch-shaped gate. A veil of hundreds of thousands of branches covered the entrance, serving as the gate's doors.

Badd gave a signal, and the entwined branches began to glow. They disentangled themselves from each other and retreated into their respective trees, leaving the passageway open. That spectacle was already impressive enough, but the sight that greeted them on the other side of the gate was even more amazing.

“Wow... So this is what the republic is like...”

“Oh my...”

“.....”

Miledi and the others were at a loss for words. That was just how awe-inspiring the sight was. The fog was completely absent within the city, allowing those within to see the city in its entirety. And the city itself was built out of the trees. Trees so large they likely didn’t exist anywhere else in the world. Whole houses fit inside their trunks, sitting hundreds of meters in the air. The trees’ long branches served as walkways, connecting trunks to each other, allowing people to go from one treehouse to the other without ever touching the ground. The capital was a three-dimensional marvel of engineering that made use of all available space. Because it was late at night, countless lamps filled with multicolored glowing moss illuminated the streets, giving the city an ethereal feel. Most amazing of all, though, was the tree sitting at the center of the capital.

“That’s Uralt, the sacred tree. Impressive, isn’t it?” Badd said, puffing his chest out proudly.

It was impossible not to be moved when laying eyes on it for the first time. It was the largest tree in a forest full of giant trees. It stood nearly a thousand meters tall and was wide enough to look like a wall even from hundreds of meters away. Each of its countless branches was as thick as the trunks of the trees around it. Its leaves were a vibrant green, and every single one was large enough to cradle a child. But surprisingly, it didn’t feel overbearing in the slightest. In fact, just being in its presence made people feel relieved.

“The beastmen have another name for it too. The Mother of the Forest. The tree’s leaves cover the entirety of the capital. As a matter of fact, the city was built around it.”

Badd's explanation finally brought Miledi and the others back to their senses. It was then that they realized they were surrounded by beastmen. They'd actually appeared the moment Miledi and the others had stepped foot in the capital to keep an eye on them, but Miledi had been too distracted to notice. However, the beastmen didn't seem offended that she hadn't seen them. If anything, they looked proud that their capital had awed Miledi and the others so much.

A little embarrassed, Miledi followed their beastman guides deeper into the city. Eventually, they arrived at the base of the Grand Tree. Looking up, they saw a spiral staircase made of branches snaking around its trunk. Further up, branches shot straight out to connect the tree to other trees within the city. There were even elevators to take people up and down. Moreover, there were hundreds of tiny entrances all across the trunk. Judging by the light spilling out of most of them, they were windows.

"Wait, are we going to go *inside* the tree?"

"Yep. By the way, the rooms inside weren't carved. For generations, the ruler of the republic's been able to alter the tree's shape. All they have to do is ask the tree to make a new house inside it, and it's done."

"Th-That's amazing... It's like the tree has a will of its own."

"According to legends, it does. It doesn't talk anymore, but apparently, centuries ago there used to be priestesses who could telepathically communicate with it."

Miledi and the others got into an elevator while Badd showered them with trivia. The elevator came to a stop around one hundred meters up, right in front of an intricately carved wooden terrace. They left their weapons with the warriors waiting on the terrace, then walked into the passageway at the far end.

After a few minutes of walking, the terrace opened up into what looked like a throne room. The room was so vast it was hard to believe it was inside a tree. It rivaled the demon lord's throne room in size. However, it felt far more sacred than the demon lord's throne room. Though it was very sparsely decorated, the few pieces of wooden furniture were so exquisitely carved that they took one's

breath away. Beastmen stood at attention on either side of the room, creating a humanoid corridor leading to the throne. The fact that most of them were soldiers rather than ministers showed that the beastmen were still wary of Miledi and the others.

At the end of the corridor was the throne. It sat atop an altar of wood that grew directly out of the tree and was made from the tree's leaves and branches. Sitting atop it was a beautiful woman wearing a white robe and a crown of flowers. Her jade-green eyes stared quietly down at Miledi and the others. She had an aura of majesty that almost overwhelmed them.

Miledi gulped. She couldn't take her eyes off the queen. Still, she managed to keep her wits about her long enough to advance down the corridor and kneel in front of the young queen. Badd, Meiru, and Naiz knelt as well. But they remained a few steps behind Miledi, indicating that she was their leader.

The queen of the Haltina Republic looked so regal that she seemed almost like an avatar of the Grand Tree itself. She looked down at Miledi for a few minutes, studying her.

Miledi met the queen's gaze, though she remained kneeling. The beastmen started whispering about how she was being disrespectful, but Miledi refused to break eye contact. She wanted to see what kind of story the queen's jade-green eyes told. She wanted to know what kind of person this fellow ancient magic user was. And at the same time, Miledi wanted the queen to see what kind of person she was. Just as she was peering into the queen's soul, she wanted the queen to peer into hers.

The queen of the Pale Forest and the leader of the Liberators continued staring at each other, sharing a silent conversation only they could understand. Finally, once the beastmen's whispers had turned to mutters, the queen broke the silence between them. She smiled gently, as if she understood Miledi at last, and said, "Welcome, those who resist the will of the world. I am the queen of the Haltina Republic, Lyutillis Haltina."

"It's an honor to meet you, Your Majesty. I am the leader of the Liberators, Miledi Reisen. Thank you for allowing us to grace these sacred halls."

Meiru and Naiz looked up at Miledi in shock. They had never before heard her

talk in such a polite tone.

Miledi noted their reactions out of the corner of her eye, and her lips twitched a little. *Did you guys forget that I used to be part of a noble family?*

Lyutillis seemed to find Miledi's reaction amusing, as she hid her mouth with her sleeve and chuckled.

"Hehehe. I see Badd-dono wasn't exaggerating when he called you a tomboy."

Miledi glared at Badd over her shoulder. The vice-commander whistled innocently and averted his gaze. Sighing, she turned back to Lyutillis and said, "Fine, I see there's no point in trying to act courteously. Let me guess, he told you I'm a shitty brat and an annoying leader?"

"That he did. He also expressed his jealousy over how popular you are with the opposite gender."

"I-I can't believe he'd say that to a queen's face... I'm terribly sorry for my subordinate's rudeness. Also, I would like to set the record straight. I am *not* building a harem! Badd's just jealous because girls hate him!"

"Wanna say that to my face, you shitty brat!? Who's the one who keeps sending reports about how much fun you're having with your new comrades, huh?"

"What's wrong with having a little fun? Or are you so jaded you hate it when other people are happy!? You know this is why you're still single, right?"

"I'm gonna kill you!"

"I'd like to see you try!"

Miledi and Badd started squabbling like children in the Haltina Republic's throne room.

Most of the beastmen looked shocked, but Lyutillis found the scene hilarious. But after another chuckle, her expression grew completely serious and she asked, "I've heard about the Liberators from Badd-dono. I know what it is you're fighting for, and that you're ancient magic users just like me. He also told me that you wish to aid us and that without you we will not be able to defeat

our shared enemy.”

Lyutillis paused, sweeping her gaze over the other beastmen in the room. Then, in a cold voice, she said what they were all thinking.

“To be perfectly blunt, everyone here finds that quite hard to believe.”

The mist barrier covering the Pale Forest was absolute. Indeed, in this last battle, it had managed to repel even the church’s strongest knights.

“As a fellow ancient magic user, I believe I can entrust you with this information. My ancient magic is evolution magic. I can enhance any ability I wish with it. Therefore, as long as this barrier, the forest’s blessing, and my warriors remain, the republic cannot be defeated.”

The only reason Lyutillis had agreed to meet with Miledi at all was because of Badd. When he’d learned that the church was going to invade the republic, he’d risked his life to inform the beastmen. He’d wandered into the Pale Forest, which no human had ever returned alive from, just to deliver the news. Even after he’d been captured and interrogated, he continued aiding the republic, telling them everything he knew about the church. It was only because of his resolve and his contributions that Lyutillis had allowed him to become the republic’s advisor and agreed to his request to meet with Miledi.

However, Lyutillis and the beastmen still didn’t completely trust Badd. In fact, the queen had assigned spies to watch his every move, and he hadn’t been allowed to join the fight until Sim and the others were at risk of being killed. That was how deep the beastmen’s suspicions ran. And like Badd, Miledi was a human. Even if she claimed she opposed the church, she had no proof. For all the beastmen knew, she might be a spy. Moreover—

“I’ve also heard that despite this being a war, you refuse to kill anyone not affiliated with the church. That means when it comes to the Federation soldiers, the most you can do is render them powerless, correct?”

Since the Liberators’ goal was to free people from the church’s twisted rule, they couldn’t exactly harm the people they were trying to liberate. After all, unless they truly were complete scum, the soldiers of the Federation were also among the people Miledi wanted to protect. However, as far as the republic was concerned, the Federation was also the enemy.

From the beastmen's perspective, it looked like Miledi just didn't want to hurt her own. They were worried she might try to push her ideals onto them—or worse, side with the humans if it looked like they were getting massacred. As a result, they were unwilling to trust Miledi. It was hardly surprising that Lyutillis said what she did.

"We can protect our homeland by ourselves. If you truly wish to help us, why not go back to the Federation and strike the enemy army from behind?"

Lyutillis smiled again, but this time it was a very cold smile that symbolized the deeply embedded distrust beastmen had for humans. The reason Lyutillis had allowed Badd to stay was because she knew he could be handled. But there was no way she'd be able to stop multiple ancient magic users if they decided to turn against her. That made the risk of betrayal that much greater. Combined with her general mistrust of humans, rejecting the Liberators seemed like the only rational choice to Lyutillis.

"I see. Your suspicion is understandable," Miledi replied coolly. Lyutillis narrowed her eyes, waiting for Miledi to continue. "But since we're being honest here, I'll be frank. You're far too naive if you think you can win on your own. You know nothing about the true terror of the church."

Now Miledi's gaze was as cold as Lyutillis'. Naturally, the beastmen of the republic didn't take kindly to being told they were ignorant and overconfident.

"Don't underestimate us, you bitch!"

"Hmph, I should have known you looked down on us just like every other human."

The two who'd spoken were the wolfman Valf and a leopardman who looked to be one of Lyutillis' personal guards. Of course, the other beastmen looked like they wanted to give Miledi a piece of their mind too. However, Miledi ignored them and looked only at Lyutillis.

"Alone, I'm strong enough to fight on even terms with Laus Barn, the commander of the Holy Templar Knights."

"So what? We can—"

"But there is another enemy I could barely hold my own against, even with

two other ancient magic users to help me. It took everything the three of us had just to survive. That enemy has no soul, and though she looks human, she most certainly isn't. In fact, I doubt she's even alive."

Miledi's words carried an immense weight, and Valf and the others fell silent.

"She is the church's ultimate trump card, the silver-haired Apostle of God."

"Apostle... of God," Lyutillis muttered quietly.

Miledi's gaze grew sharp and she said, "I can say this with absolute certainty. If she appears, the republic is finished. That woman is the crystallization of Ehit's might."

"She's that strong?"

"Yes. Only ancient magic users stand a chance against her."

Miledi then went on to talk about the divine will that had possessed the Demon Lord. She explained that the gods might try to control Lyutillis in a similar manner. Everything about Miledi's demeanor, from her gaze to her tone to her posture, was so serious that the gathered beastmen had no choice but to accept the veracity of her words.

Once she was finished, silence filled the throne room. The beastmen still didn't trust Miledi, but now their fears were bigger than their doubts.

"What is it you want in return for protecting us? Surely you have a reason to risk your lives?" Lyutillis asked softly, breaking the silence. Her gaze was much warmer than it had been a moment ago. It suddenly occurred to Miledi that Lyutillis might have been willing to accept her help all along. But because Lyutillis was the queen of the beastmen, her duty had demanded that she voice their doubts for them. While Miledi couldn't be certain that was the case, she was certain that Lyutillis wasn't the kind of person to discriminate against humans. She had listened to Miledi without bias, after all. Therefore, Miledi decided to reply with equal sincerity.

"Nothing. We just want you to continue being yourself."

Miledi dropped the polite tone she'd been using until now, but no one called her out on it. Because they could tell from the look in her eyes that this was her

true, earnest self. Smiling awkwardly, she scratched her cheek.

“Honestly, I’d normally ask you to join me but... I don’t want to deprive the beastmen of their queen. So all I want is to keep you safe from the church and let you live freely, according to your own will.”

That really was all.

“Please, let me protect you.”

Even if Lyutillis told Miledi to get out, she’d still try to protect her.

“I... No, we swear we’ll keep you safe.”

Miledi needed no reward for doing so. This was her raison d’etre, after all. Miledi looked back at Naiz, Meiru, and Badd. She then looked off into the distance, where all of her other comrades were waiting. *On second thought, I guess there is one thing I want...*

“Actually, would it be possible to make one request?”

“And what would that be?”

Miledi turned back to Lyutillis, meeting the queen’s gaze. The two stared into each other’s eyes for a few seconds, then Miledi said, “We’re going to change the world into a place where people can be more accepting of each other. Doubt me if you want. But once we do succeed, please don’t reject others if they come to you in good faith. At least listen to them if they say they want to get along with you.”

The same way you’re listening to us right now. Miledi’s sky-blue eyes were unwavering as she spoke about her dream. The other beastmen looked at her like she was some kind of strange, alien creature. Some of them frowned, unsure of how to react to her declaration. However, none of them disparaged her resolve. Their anger at her began to ebb away.

Meanwhile, Miledi went back to sounding more respectful, though her tone remained light.

“Of course, Your Majesty, I realize you can’t afford to trust us right away. Allowing three ancient magic users and the famous Knight Hunter to remain in the republic is a huge risk. I understand completely if you have to ask us to

leave. But I would like it if we worked out some kind of signal you could give us if God's Apostle appears, or if someone tries to take control of your personality. That way, we'll be able to rush to your aid anytime!"

We've got Nacchan with us, after all. We can be anywhere in an instant! Miledi thought with a smile. Lyutillis nodded and turned to a well-built, old-looking catman woman standing next to her. The stern woman nodded when she felt Lyutillis' gaze on her. Next, Lyutillis turned to a grizzled bearman warrior, the republic's general, Sim. Looking somewhat unsure, Sim, in turn, looked to his warriors. After gauging their reactions, he turned to Miledi. She resolutely met his gaze, and eventually, Sim also nodded.

"Your Majesty. I have no way of judging how severe a threat this enemy the Liberators speak of is. However, as the leader of our troops, it would be unwise of me to dismiss her warning as nonsense."

"Then you have no objections to them staying here?"

"None, Your Majesty. Assuming their claims are true, that is."

"By that do you mean... Oh, I see. You wish for them to display their strength?"

"Precisely."

Sim looked Miledi up and down, then took a step forward.

"I propose we have a duel. Prove to me that your abilities truly do surpass those of the republic's finest warriors. That your assertions are not just empty boasts."

Miledi nodded in understanding. If she couldn't beat these beastmen, there was no way she could hope to protect Lyutillis.

"Very well," Miledi replied without hesitation. Sim's lips curled up into a feral grin, and he took another step forward.

"Hang on, General. Mind if I fight her instead?"

"Hm? Why, Valf?"

Valf took a few steps forward and said, "Because I'm the strongest close-quarters fighter we've got. Besides—"

“Besides what?”

“She pisses me off.”

Valf glared not at Miledi but at Meiru. Meiru cocked her head, giving Valf a blank look.

“Why the hell are you working with those humans? Why do you follow that brat? Just cause she’s got the same kinda power our queen does? Then shouldn’t you be helping us instead!? We’re your people!”

It appeared Valf took issue with the fact that Meiru was part of the Liberators.

“Ummm, I can’t really say this is my home, since I was born on the western sea.”

“That shit doesn’t matter. This forest is every beastman’s ancestral home! And now it’s being invaded! Don’t you want to help your brethren!? You belong on our side, not theirs!”

Valf identified more strongly with his homeland than most beastmen. However, that was because he loved his comrades and his country more than anything. And so, he couldn’t stand that a dagon woman like Meiru was part of a human organization.

Miledi realized all of that, but that didn’t make this any less awkward.

“So, uh... what do you want to do about it?” Miledi asked.

“I want you to fight me. And if I win, I want you to swear you’ll let that dagon leave your group and live here in the republic. And that you won’t ever bother her again.”

If Valf won, Miledi and the others would have to leave the Pale Forest. There’d be no point to them being there anyway if they were that weak. But Valf didn’t want Meiru to leave with the rest of them. He was certain she’d be happier living in the republic with her fellow beastmen. In a way, one could say he was thinking of her when he made his proposal. But because his thinking was clouded by bias, it came out sounding more like arrogant self-righteousness. And that really struck a nerve with Miledi.

“Oh? You want to take Meru-nee away from me, huh? Hahaha, don’t get too

cocky, you mutt.”

Though Meiru annoyed Miledi at times, Miledi still loved her. It was hardly surprising that she was angry at Valf’s suggestion. She glared at Valf. There was no way she’d let this wolfman cuck her. As the two of them stared each other down, Meiru chuckled quietly. She was looking at Miledi, a rapt expression on her face.

“Hey, Naiz-kun. Don’t you think it’s cute how Miledi-chan’s fighting so hard to keep me from getting stolen away?”

“No comment.”

“This is where I should jump in and say something like ‘don’t fight over me, you two,’ right?”

“Don’t ask me... Just don’t make things any worse, please.”

“My, how cold. Don’t you feel anything after seeing how passionate Miledi-chan is?”

Though Meiru was joking around with Naiz, she too, had been offended by Valf’s suggestion. She slowly got to her feet, a bloodcurdling smile on her face.

“Hey, mutt. I’ll be the one to fight you. Be glad I’m even granting you this opportunity.”

Meiru goaded Valf mercilessly, beckoning him with her finger. At the same time, she walked over to Miledi and patted her head with her free hand.

“What was that!? You think a dagon like you can beat a wolfman in close combat!? Do ya!?”

“You sure bark a lot for a little puppy. Why don’t you show me what your bite’s like, huh?”

At that, Valf snapped. His eyes twitched, and he bared his fangs at Meiru.

“Fine. I’ll crush you into the ground, you arrogant bitch. But if I win, you’re gonna have to do more than just leave your friends. You’re gonna have to become my servant. I’m gonna beat some manners into you.”

“Ufufufu, sure. It’s been a while since I’ve had the chance to cut loose. I’ve

been dying for someone to vent my frustrations on."

Miledi looked frantically from Meiru to Valf, while Naiz and Sim rubbed their temples, their expressions identical. It was just Lyutillis who looked like she was enjoying this.

"U-Umm, I'll fight, okay? So can you stop provoking Meru-nee, please?" Miledi asked timidly.

"I'm asking as well. If you'd rather not fight Miledi, then I'll face you. But please don't pick Meiru."

Miledi and Naiz both started begging Valf. Unfortunately, he assumed they were panicking because despite being an ancient magic user, Meiru wasn't good at close combat. The reason he had such a fatal misunderstanding was because Lyutillis tended to remain on the backlines herself, and dagons were known for being weak fighters on land. Furthermore, the only frontline ancient magic user he knew of was Laus, and Sim had managed to fend him off at least. Valf didn't understand that the only reason Sim had managed to fight on equal terms with Laus was because he'd been holding back, or that Meiru was actually one of the most dangerous fighters among Miledi's friends. And thus, the stage was set for a tragedy.

"Y-Your Majesty! Please, let me fight instead!" Miledi begged one last time. She desperately wanted to save Valf from the hell she knew awaited him.

"Fear not, I'll stop the fight if things get dangerous. Besides, Valf isn't looking to kill his opponent. The same holds true for your friend, does it not?"

Technically, yes, but you don't understand! He might lose something even more important than his life if he fights Meru-nee! Miledi opened her mouth to say as much, but Valf had made up his mind. He strode to the center of the throne room and dropped into a fighting stance.

Naturally, Meiru was already in position. It was obvious the two of them weren't going to let anyone interfere with their duel.

"N-Nacchaaaaaaaan!"

"Sorry, but I can't do anything. Just pray. Pray this doesn't ruin our relationship with the republic."

“You’re giving up already!?”

“If only Oscar was here...” Naiz said with a wistful look.

He couldn’t bear to face reality. At the same time, he massaged his stomach, which was not dealing with all this stress too well.

“H-Hey, Leader. Is this really that big a deal? I thought you said she was pretty strong in your reports. Plus, she can use restoration magic, right? What’s the problem?”

Badd, who’d just been watching the proceedings as a silent bystander until now, shot his leader a confused look.

“I’m not worried about Meru-nee losing! She just has a bad habit of... Crap, it’s already starting! Meru-nee, you better restrain yourself! Promise me you won’t take things too far!”

Meiru flashed Miledi a reassuring smile and gave her a thumbs-up.

“Don’t worry, Miledi-chan. Half of me is made up of kindness.”

“Yeah, I’m worried about what the other half of you is made up of... Whatever, I’m trusting you!”

“Good. I’m just going to destroy— I mean, teach this mutt what happens when you insult my Miledi-chan.”

“I heard you correct yourself!”

With that, the duel finally began. The rules were simple. Whichever side surrendered or was incapacitated first lost. Lyutillis’ guards returned Meiru’s whip sword to her, while Valf equipped his clawed gauntlets. Sim, who was still a little shaken by Miledi’s sudden transformation from a calm and collected leader to a panicking mess, warily called for the match to begin. “Just don’t kill each other, you two. Begin!”

The moment the fight began, Valf vanished. Or rather, he moved so fast it looked like he vanished. A second later, he reappeared behind Meiru.

“Hah. Pathetic. You didn’t even last a second,” he said with a smirk. Valf’s claws were poised to strike Meiru’s jugular. To most of the spectators, it looked like the victor had already been decided. But the conclusion was so anticlimactic

that even Sim hesitated to call the match.

“Hm? If I recall correctly, the rules say we keep fighting until one of us surrenders or is incapacitated. That’s why I let you have the first move, you know? But I still haven’t been incapacitated.”

“Huh? You a sore loser or something? I’ve got my claws on your neck. It’s ove—”

“How soft.”

Grinning, Meiru stepped backward, impaling her neck on Valf’s claws. Blood spurted from the wounds.

“Wha—!? Idiot!”

Panicking, Valf hurriedly withdrew his claws and took a few steps back. But what happened next shocked him.

“My, what seems to be the problem?”

“Huh? What? Your wounds are... gone?”

Indeed, Meiru’s neck was unscathed. Even the blood was gone.

“Come on, why are you stopping? Didn’t you say you’d crush me? Here, I’ll even stand still for you. Attack me all you want. But you better come at me like you want to kill me. Otherwise, this won’t even be a warm-up for me.”

“D-Don’t underestimate me, you bitch!”

Thinking Meiru had just used some kind of illusion, Valf rushed forward once more. This time he wouldn’t stop his blows just before they landed. He’d avoid her vitals and cut her up until she surrendered. He darted around Meiru, moving faster than the eye could follow.

Holy shit, is this bitch seriously not planning on dodging!? Valf dashed past Meiru’s side and cut at her arm. However—

“Wha—!? You’re unhurt!? I *know* I cut you!”

“Ufufufu,” Meiru snickered provocatively. The spectators were all shocked, but Valf didn’t have time to register their reactions. He leaped forward again, unleashing a rapid-fire barrage of swipes.

“Uwoooooooooooh!”

He cut at Meiru’s shoulders, arms, stomach, and thighs. Though none of the cuts were fatal on their own, she’d need urgent treatment to survive after this. He distinctly felt each and every one of his attacks connect, his claws tearing into flesh. Yet, Meiru remained unscathed.

“I thought I told you to strike to kill. Trust me, even that won’t be enough to win.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...”

There wasn’t even any blood on her. Of course, the reason for that was because she was using restoration magic the moment she got hit. But to those who didn’t know what her ancient magic did, it looked like she was invulnerable.

An icy silence fell over the throne room. Miledi and Naiz shook their heads in exasperation. They knew Meiru was doing this to mentally crush Valf before she annihilated him.

Still smiling, Meiru took a step forward. Valf reflexively backed up a step.

“Come on, my heart’s right here. Stab through it with all your might.”

“A-Are you serious!?”

“But of course. Not that I’ve experienced it, but you probably wouldn’t be able to kill me even if you cut my head off. If you want, you can try that instead.”

Meiru spread her arms wide, as if to say she’d accept anything Valf did to her. But while she looked like she was as benevolent as the ocean, she terrified Valf. After all, she was telling him to cut her head off with a smile on her face. As if she was utterly confident she wouldn’t die unless he was able to vaporize her entire body in an instant.

She’s a monster... Valf thought with a shiver. No matter how magnanimous her expression was, she just looked like the devil incarnate to Valf.

“Are you done?”

As she asked that, Meiru finally drew her whipsword. As it slid out of its

sheath with a metallic snick, everyone shivered.

“If you won’t come to me then... I’ll carve you up.”

Meiru narrowed her eyes dangerously. Before he knew it, Valf was charging forward.

“U-Uwoooooooooooooooh!”

“O-Oh no. Valf, stop!”

Valf was terrified. It felt like he was facing down an evil god. Sim hurriedly tried to stop him, but it was too late. There was a dull thud, and his claws sunk into Meiru’s chest. It was obvious her heart had been pierced.

“Ah...” Valf paled as he realized what he’d done. There was no undoing this, he’d killed her. And yet—

“Now then, I think it’s finally my turn.”

Meiru calmly grabbed Valf’s arm, her voice surprisingly calm considering she’d just been stabbed through the heart. She pulled Valf’s claws out of her chest, and all he could do was watch in dumbfounded silence as the wounds closed up with a tinge of orange light.

“H-How the hell am I supposed to beat that...” Valf muttered in shock.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Meiru brandished her whip sword and said, “You’re not.”

This was the gap that existed between ancient magic users and normal people. There were only seven alive at any given time, and each was the incarnation of unreasonable strength. No warrior, no matter how skilled, could hope to match up to the unfair advantage they possessed.

“Hahaha...” Valf laughed weakly.

She’s way out of my league. I was the one being cocky, not her... Still, Valf’s pride wouldn’t let him admit defeat. He was the republic’s strongest close-combat fighter. If he lost without even putting up a fight, it’d affect the prestige of all beastmen.

It doesn’t matter how broken her magic is, it’s still magic. Once she runs out of mana, she won’t be able to do a thing! I just need to get one good hit in! Even if

I can't win, I wanna wipe that smug grin off her face! All I need to do is—

"Now then, let's begin."

"Huh? Gyaaaah!?"

Meiru's whipsword whistled through the air, slapping Valf on the face. Though she'd casually swung it with one hand, the sword hit Valf so hard he was sent flying. The links of the sword coiled around him as he sailed through the air, preventing him from reorienting himself for a landing. Just before he hit the ground, Meiru flung him forward, sending him crashing into the wall. He gingerly got to one knee, then screamed when he saw what was coming next.

"This is what you get for insulting my precious Miledi-chan."

"Oh, uh, I didn't mean to..."

Valf trailed off as he saw the smile on Meiru's face.

"Come... I won't stop until you're squealing like a pig."

The words coming out of her mouth fit her smile so well it was terrifying. Needless to say, Valf's suffering was just beginning.

In the beginning, Valf used what little strength he had left to fight back, but once Meiru's sadistic switch had been flipped there was no stopping her. She shut him down at every turn, using a combination of water whips and her whip sword to mercilessly rain blows down on him. She also used her restoration magic on him to revive his old wounds, and before long his war cries had turned to pained whimpers. And because Meiru had erected a soundproof water dome around him, Sim wasn't able to hear his cries of "Yield" until it was too late.

"Miledi-chan is a wonderful human being, isn't she?"

"Yes, yes she is, Master!"

"Excuse me? Who permitted you to talk, mutt? I told you to bark your replies."

"Woof! Huh!? What did I just—"

The light vanished from Valf's eyes as he realized he surrendered in both body and soul to Meiru. It was then that Sim finally returned to his senses and started

shouting, “I’m begging you, please stop tormenting him!” At the same time, Miledi restrained Meiru with gravity magic and screamed, “I told you not to go overboard, Meru-nee!”

As the match came to an end, Valf looked off into the distance. His life had been spared, but he’d lost something far more valuable: his dignity. It looked like the slightest breeze could knock him over now.

“Hey, Naiz... Who the hell is that woman?” Badd asked.

“The pirate queen who cowed even the most ferocious hooligans and tamed them into obedient followers. Normally, after this, she’d give Valf some candy and incorporate him into her family.”

“I know she’s another ancient magic user, but I can’t believe you recruited someone like that.”

“Tell your complaints to Miledi.”

Badd looked scandalized. It was hardly surprising. Naiz had made the same face the first time he’d seen Meiru punish someone. Naturally, the other beastmen were terrified of her.

“Hey, Sui! You go challenge that witch! Our nation’s pride is resting on your shoulders!”

“What!? No way! I don’t want to die yet!”

“I bet you could win with your Refraction and presence manipulation skills!”

“I can’t! I tried hiding earlier, but that crazy lady spotted me anyway! Hell, that stoic guy over there’s been able to see me this whole time too!”

It appeared Sui had been hiding in a corner of the throne room this whole time, in case something happened and she was needed.

Incidentally, Meiru had been able to spot her because she’d read from the moisture in the air that someone was breathing in that spot while Naiz had known because his spatial magic had alerted him to the fact that that corner wasn’t empty. When she heard Sui’s whispered conversation, Meiru grinned and turned to the rabbitman girl. Sui squealed and bolted out of the room, abandoning her queen and her comrades.

Sighing, Sim proclaimed Meiru's victory with a troubled expression. While she'd clearly gone overboard, she hadn't technically broken any of the rules. Plus, it was the beastmen who'd proposed this duel. Most importantly though, Sim didn't want to attract Meiru's ire and end up like his comrade had. With that, the Liberators had unequivocally proven their might to the republic.

However, now it wasn't the humans the beastmen were afraid of, but rather one of their own brethren, if Meiru could even be called that. The Liberators may have cleared the beastmen's conditions, but now there was something else to be worried about.

As the awkward silence stretched on, Miledi finally turned to Lyutillis and said timidly, "U-Umm, Your Majesty. I'm terribly sorry for what Meru-nee did. But she only went that far because she was thinking of me so, ummm, if you could find it in your heart to forgive her—"

"She's forgiven," Lyutillis replied flatly before Miledi could finish. The other beastmen turned to their queen in shock.

"Umm, does that mean we—"

"You may stay here. Those were the terms of the agreement, after all. Onee— Ahem, I mean, Meiru-dono has proved her strength, meaning I have no reason to object to your request. None whatsoever."

Hm? Is it just me or... is she leaning forward a little? Also, it looks like she's blushing. And she's talking really fast... Miledi thought to herself. Strangest of all, though, was the fact that she was panting despite not having exerted herself at all.

Did she get that excited over the duel? Also, what was she gonna say when she started saying onee and then cut herself off?

"Parsha, please show Onee— I mean, Meiru-dono and the others to their rooms. Since they'll be guarding me, I insist that you provide them rooms in the palace. Rooms as close to mine as possible. And make sure the maids know to show our guests the utmost courtesy."

"Your Majesty, aren't you letting your guard down a little too—"

"I will brook no objections!"

“...Haaah. As you wish, Your Majesty. But shouldn’t you at least introduce us first?”

The old woman Lyutillis had addressed as Parsha said her full name was Parsha Mill, and she was actually the republic’s prime minister, as well as Lyutillis’ right-hand woman. Lyutillis nodded reluctantly, seeming oddly annoyed.

“This woman is the republic’s prime minister, Parsha Mill. Those standing to my right are this country’s commanders. First, we have the infantry commander, Sim Gato. Then the commander of the army commandos, Valf Rugal. Behind him is Nirke Zouk, commander of the aerial division. That over there is the captain of the royal guard, Craid Ulks. That just leaves... the commander of the scouting division Sui... but she ran away so we can skip over her for now. I’ll introduce the others tomorrow.”

Those were the sloppiest introductions I’ve ever seen... Miledi thought to herself. Lyutillis’ retainers looked down dejectedly, but she ignored them.

“Now that that’s settled, I’m going to take Meiru-dono— and the other Liberators on a tour of the palace. I want to speak privately with my fellow ancient magic users so I won’t be needing any guards. Oh, but you can come if you want, Parsha. Come, let’s go, Onee— I mean, Meiru-sama... and everyone else.”

Craid, the wise leopardman captain of Lyutillis’ royal guard, didn’t even have time to object. He hurriedly tried to say something, but Lyutillis got to her feet and swept past him. Incidentally, it hadn’t escaped Craid’s attention that the queen had gone from calling Meiru Meiru-dono to Meiru-sama. There was a lot he wanted to say, but unfortunately, the queen’s word was absolute.

Sim and the others didn’t look very pleased with this arrangement either, but they relented because Parsha would be going with Lyutillis. Also, Badd offered to stay behind as a hostage, which swayed them.

Smiling in satisfaction, Lyutillis stopped in front of the Liberators and said, “Thank you very much for coming to meet me.”

Then she led Miledi and the others out of the throne room, a strange spring in her step.

“I’ve never seen Her Majesty act like that before...” her retainers muttered as she left.

In a strange turn of events none of them had been expecting, Miledi and the others received a tour of the palace from the queen herself. And in the process, they learned just how much power she wielded. The palace, which was basically the entirety of the sacred tree Uralt, could be reshaped in an instant according to her whims. With one wave of her staff of office, a thirty-centimeter long wand of wood known as the Guardian Rod, she could transform any part of the tree. There wasn’t even any need for them to walk through the halls or climb stairs. Lyutillis could just order one of the tree’s branches to carry them wherever she wanted to go. She was practically one with the tree.

According to Lyutillis, the Guardian Rod was made from a fusion of the tree’s bark and a set of special crystals. It was an artifact that had been made long ago that chose its wielder, meaning one didn’t receive the rod upon becoming the ruler of the republic. Instead, a person became ruler of the republic if they were chosen by the rod. The republic’s monarch could freely control the Grand Tree, manipulate the forest’s mist, and regenerate any damaged part of the forest. They could also create fertile soil that could bear crops regardless of the climate or season. The rod’s powers were quite versatile. The massive trees Miledi and the others had seen around the city were actually part of Uralt’s roots, and Lyutillis could freely regenerate or reinforce those as needed too.

Little wonder she was called the Guardian of the Forest. Especially since her ancient magic, evolution magic, allowed her to enhance all of these abilities to a level never before seen in the forest’s history. Miledi could see why Sim and the others had absolute faith in their queen.

Incidentally, the monsters Miledi and the others had faced upon entering the forest hadn’t been immune to the fog’s effects. And they’d been more of an attempt at harassing the beastmen than a concerted attack. The Paragons of Light had just captured some random monsters and transformed them into sacred beasts, then set them loose into the forest. They were strong enough to take down a few beastmen warriors, but that was all.

At best the Paragons of Light had expected them to accidentally stumble across a village and kill a few civilians. Even if they didn’t manage that, maybe

they'd exhaust a soldier or two. Of course, Lyutillis could instantly sense the presence of intruders in the forest and dispatch extermination squads, so the Paragons of Light knew there was little their monsters could do.

As Lyutillis explained all of that to Miledi and the others, she led them to the tree's apex. The whole thing was covered in a dome of pure white fog, and was perfectly smooth, like a stump. Compared to the base of the trunk, the top was small, only five meters in diameter. But it felt bigger, as branches spread out from the trunk in all directions.

The tree's summit was a special place, and only a select few beastmen were allowed to visit it. Miledi and Naiz were the first humans in history ever to stand here. Naturally, Prime Minister Parsha was not happy about that at all. But of course, Miledi and the others ignored her.

Lyutillis casually waved her rod like a conductor's baton, and the mist cleared away. The sight resembled clouds breaking apart around a particularly tall mountain. The view that opened up before the party was spectacular. The moon shone brightly through a gap in the clouds, illuminating the surroundings. The mist down below sparkled in the moonlight, looking like a sea of jewels.

Miledi and Naiz sighed in wonder as they took in the scenery. Meanwhile, Lyutillis glanced timidly over at Meiru and asked, "What do you think, Onee— I mean, Meiru-sama? The view is wonderful, isn't it?"

"Y-Yes. It's quite enchanting."

"I'm glad you like it, Onee— I mean, Meiru-sama."

"O-Okay? Umm, Your Majesty, why are you so close to me?"

"Come now, Meiru-sama. We may have been born in different lands, but we're still brethren, aren't we? Feel free to call me Lyutillis, or just Lyu if you want."

"E-Err, wouldn't the others get mad if I did that? I'd rather not cause a scene."

Meiru's instincts were telling her that it'd be dangerous to get too deeply involved with Lyutillis. She didn't know why, but this was definitely awkward. However, it seemed Lyutillis wasn't taking the hint. Her ears drooped despondently at Meiru's response, but she still stepped closer and hooked her

arm around Meiru's.

"Please... don't be so cold. We're comrades, aren't we, Meiru-sama?"

"Since when!? We just introduced ourselves a few minutes ago! Please stop sticking so close to me!"

"Don't wanna! I won't let go until you agree to call me Lyu, Onee— I mean, Meiru-sama! No matter what!"

"Seriously, what's gotten into you!? What happened to all that solemn majesty you had back in the throne room!?"

"That's just my public persona. It's important to cut loose when I'm in private. Now call me Lyu."

"Fine, fine, I'll call you Lyu. Happy? Now let go—"

"I'm so happy... I should probably call you onee-sama now, huh?"

"Why!?"

It was exceedingly rare to see the usually calm and composed Meiru this flustered. She seemed at a total loss as she tried to pry Lyutillis off her arm.

Oh, so she was trying to call Meiru onee-sama this whole time... Naiz thought absently as he watched the two of them.

Meanwhile, Miledi turned to him with a panicked expression and asked, "Wh-What do I do, Nacchan!? She's trying to steal Meru-nee away from me!"

"Don't ask me."

Naiz turned to Parsha and asked, "Parsha-dono. Is there a reason the queen is acting like this? And why is she so obsessed with Meiru?"

"Hrmmm. Well... this is sort of a state secret," Parsha replied hesitantly, rubbing her temples. Lyutillis was a constant source of stress for her, and she wasn't as young as she used to be. Naiz felt an affinity with this old woman.

"If it's confidential, I guess I shouldn't ask?"

"No, it's fine. It's not like I can hide it anyway, with the way she's acting. Besides, she's been pretty stressed since the war started. If anything, it's a good thing you guys came when you did. It's allowed her to loosen up. That being

said, I'd appreciate it if you could keep this a secret from the other beastmen."

"Including the army commanders?"

"Yes. It'd affect their morale."

Just what kind of crazy secret is this that they can't even tell the army generals?

According to Parsha, Lyutillis had lost her parents at a young age and had been raised by Parsha's family. This was why only Parsha and a select few of Lyutillis' maids knew this secret about her. Miledi's expression grew serious as Parsha launched into her story. A secret so important that not even the country's generals were allowed to know had to be something big.

"We've tried to cure her so many times, but it's proven impossible..." Parsha muttered regretfully. She did her best not to look at Lyutillis, as if trying to pretend there wasn't any problem at all.

Misinterpreting her expression, Miledi guessed, "Does she have some incurable illness or something? Is that why she got so excited when she heard about Meru-nee's restoration magic..."

"W-Well, she certainly is excited to see Meiru-dono. And I suppose you could say she has an incurable illness of sorts."

Parsha looked hesitant to say anymore.

Is it that serious an illness? Miledi thought to herself.

I guess that explains why they can't mention it to the commanders... It would crush the beastmen's morale if they learned their beloved queen might collapse at any moment. Miledi and Naiz gave Parsha reassuring looks.

"Don't worry. No matter how debilitating the disease, Meru-nee can fix it! So tell us what's wrong with her, Parsha-san."

"Miledi's right, Meiru's restoration magic can do almost anything. Please, explain to us what's wrong with the queen."

Out of the corner of their eyes, Miledi and Naiz watched as Lyutillis chased after Meiru, driving her to the edge of the tree trunk. She looked desperate.

They shot Lyutillis a pitying look, then turned back to Parsha, whose eyes had glazed over. The prime minister said in a flat, deadpan voice, “She’s a pervert.”

Miledi cocked her head, a blank look on her face, while Naiz cleaned out his ears. Both of them looked like they couldn’t believe what they’d just heard.

“She’s a pervert!” Parsha repeated, making it absolutely clear they hadn’t misheard. Her words echoed throughout the apex of the tree, rustling the branches.

“I don’t know where I went wrong raising her, but she’s grown up into a hardcore masochist! She loves being scolded, spanked, and glared at! Why!? Why couldn’t I prevent this!? I’m sorry, Maryu, Jade, I’ve failed you! I don’t even know how long I’ll be able to keep this horrible truth a secret! Every day, the stress grows and my heartburn gets worse!”

“C-Calm down, Parsha-san.”

“N-Not good. She’s started hyperventilating.”

Once she’d started, Parsha just couldn’t stop talking. She vented all the frustration she’d built up over the years. Keeping the queen’s secret had been such a mental strain that she was at her wit’s end.

Incidentally, Maryu and Jade were the names of Lyutillis’ late parents. Both of them had been perfectly normal people.

Miledi rubbed Parsha’s back, helping her calm down and regain control of her breathing. Meanwhile, Meiru gave Lyutillis, who was still clinging to her arm, a terrified look. Parsha’s shouting had been loud enough that both of them had heard it.

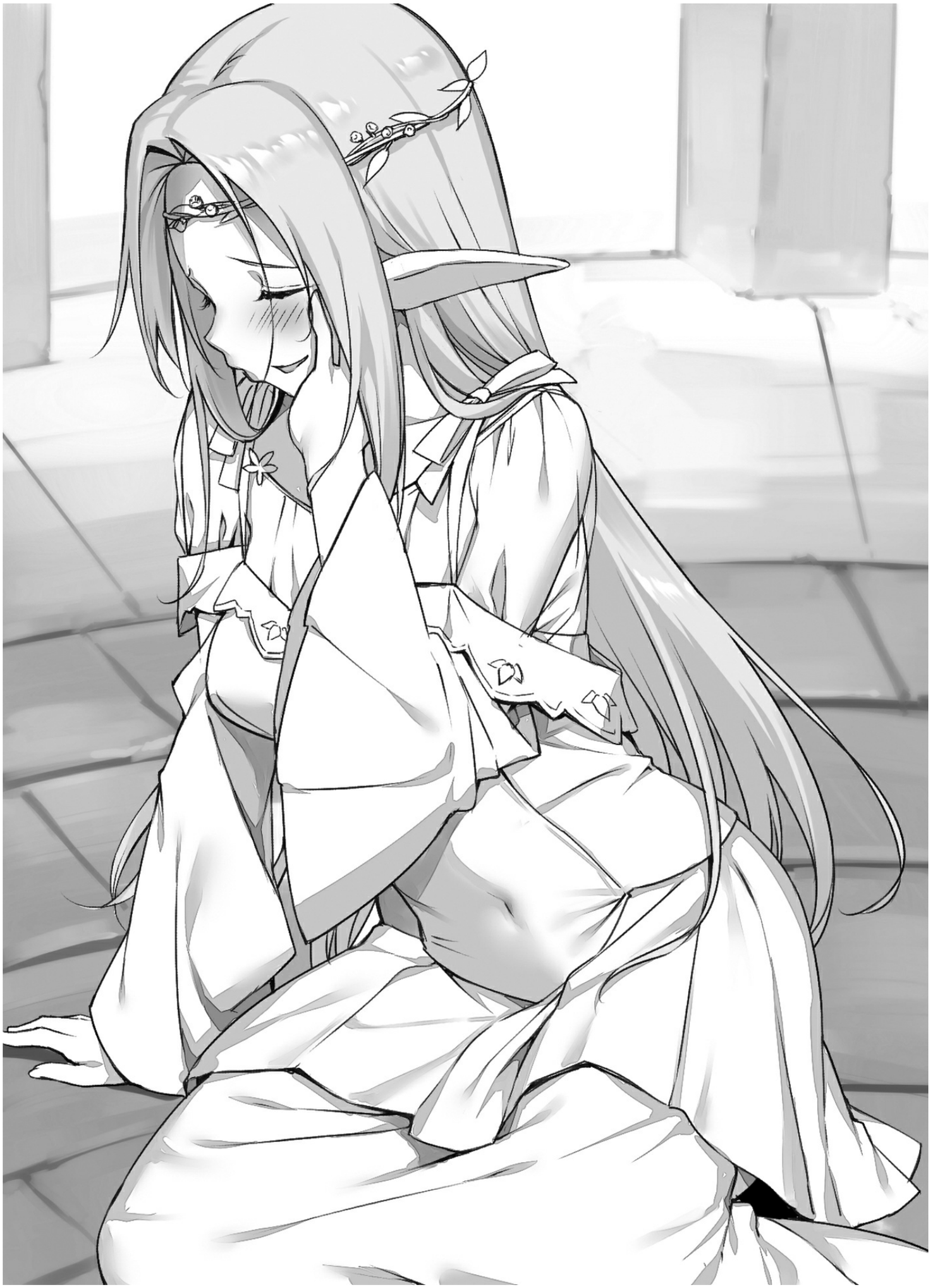
“Haaah... Haaah... Oh, Parsha. I know no one else is here, but insulting me so splendidly in front of people we just met today is so... amazing!”

Lyutillis was panting heavily. She had none of the majestic dignity she’d possessed when they first met her and looked like nothing more than a masochistic pervert. Her transformation was so stark that Miledi would have believed it if you told her she had a split personality. The perverted monarch looked up at Meiru with pleading eyes. Her cheeks were red, and her heavy breathing tickled Meiru’s ears.

“G-Get away from me, you freak!”

“Oooooh!”

Meiru slapped Lyutillis with all her might. The republic’s queen sailed through the air and landed in a heap near the center of the trunk. She brought a hand to her swollen cheek, her expression ecstatic. Writhing in pleasure she said, “Y-You hit me. Even though I’m a queen, you hit me! No one’s ever done that to me before!”



That was hardly surprising, considering she was a queen. Still panting, Lyutillis turned to Meiru and said passionately, “I knew I was right about you! You really are my soulmate, Meiru-oneesama!”

“Disgusting,” Meiru replied.

When she’d seen Meiru’s sadistic side during the duel, Lyutillis’ masochistic side had rejoiced. And though Meiru wanted nothing to do with Lyutillis, Lyutillis’ desire was unstoppable. The young queen crawled over to where Meiru was standing.

“I’ve been looking for someone who would play with me for so, so long! But when I was five, I discovered I could use evolution magic and everyone gave me special treatment! They all worshiped me, but no one would play with me!”

“What does that have to do with me!? Let go of my legs!” Meiru roared, lashing Lyutillis with her water whip in an attempt to get the elf off of her.

The usual composure Meiru had was nowhere to be seen. Had her old pirate crew seen her now, they would have been shocked. There had been quite a few people in the past who’d enjoyed Meiru’s sadistic punishments, so seeing someone who liked being whipped was nothing new. But the difference there was that those pirates had been reformed, and come to respect their new captain. Lyutillis, though, just wanted to use Meiru to fulfill her sexual fetishes. Moreover, her masochism was on a whole different level compared to the other people Meiru had seen. Chills ran down her spine as she watched Lyutillis.

“I-I’ve always dreamed of a whipping like this! I’ll follow you for the rest of my life, Oneesama! Actually, let me call you Master!”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then how about Queen!?”

“You’re the one who’s actually a queen!”

Meiru whipped Lyutillis harder, but that just made the elf moan in ecstasy. She looked like she’d finally been freed from some painful burden she’d been carrying for decades. And honestly, that wasn’t far off the mark.

Tears pooling in her eyes, Meiru turned to Miledi for help. Miledi sucked in a

deep breath, then closed her eyes to burn this rare sight into her memory. She then put her left hand on her hip, her right hand on her cheek, and winked at Meiru with a mischievous grin.

“You two are *perfect* together!”

Meiru’s eyes glazed over as she realized Miledi was just going to be her usual annoying self.

“Miledi-dono, thank you so much for approving of my relationship with Oneesama. You’re so kind. Feel free to call me Lyu as well. You don’t have to worry about what the others might think, I’ll tell them we’ve all come to trust each other as fellow ancient magic users.”

“You got it, Lyu-chan! If you want, you can call me Miledi-tan too!”

“Lyu-chan... That’s the first time anyone’s called me that... I’m so happy, Miledi-tan.”

Oddly enough, even though Miledi was being nice, Lyutillis still seemed glad. Miledi had expected Lyutillis to respond positively only to sadistic people, but it appeared that wasn’t the case.

“Oh, and this is Nacchan!”

“H-Hey, I can introduce my—”

“Understood, Nacchan-san.”

“My name isn’t Nacchan. That’s a nickname, so you don’t need to add an honorific after it...”

“This is the first time I’ve addressed a man by his nickname... Does this mean I finally have a boyfriend? Ufufufu.”

“She’s not listening to a thing I’m saying, is she...?”

It turned out Lyutillis’ refined, dignified persona was just a facade. In truth, she was a hopeless masochist. Honestly, it was a miracle her retainers hadn’t discovered the truth yet.

Why do all ancient magic users have such problematic personalities? Naiz thought sadly to himself. Unfortunately, the worst was yet to come.

Rustle, rustle.

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

A familiar noise filled the Liberators' ears.

"Oneesama, Miledi-tan, Nacchan-san, let me introduce you to my friends."

"H-Hang on, Lyu-chan, doesn't that noise belong to..."

"O-Oh? I'm suddenly getting goosebumps. Granted that happened when Lyu tried to touch me too, but this is worse."

"Oh no... don't tell me—"

Only Naiz, the one person who remembered their previous ordeal, predicted what was coming. Paling, he turned to Parsha. The prime minister looked surprisingly serene. She'd finally been able to divulge the secret she'd been protecting for so long, and the people she'd revealed it to had been willing to accept Lyutillis despite her quirks. It was like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. This was no longer her problem, and if the Liberators hadn't balked at Luytillis' masochism, she was confident they'd be able to accept the rest of her too.

"There's one other type of magic aside from evolution magic that I have an affinity for."

Lyutillis smiled, still lying underneath the heel of Meiru's boot.

"No, really, Lyu-chan. I don't think we—"

"We're friends, so I don't mind telling you guys about it."

"I get the feeling I really don't want to ask, though."

"Come now, no need to be shy, Oneesama! You see, my job is insectomancer. It's a very rare job that allows me to understand the hearts of insects. And combined with my evolution magic, well... Hehe, I can make millions of friends."

The ominous whirring noise grew louder. Miledi could feel her repressed memories resurfacing, and she struggled to keep them sealed away. But even if she didn't let herself remember, her body instinctively knew that what was coming would be hell. Panic overwhelmed her, and all she could do was stand

there.

“You see, because everyone gave me special treatment...”

No one treated Lyutillis like an equal. As a result, she’d had no idea how to make friends. Whenever she tried, the people she talked to would all look uncomfortable and leave. Lyutillis explained her sad past to Miledi and the others with a smile on her face.

I see, so she’s been a loner this whole time, Miledi thought absently. In order to fill the void in her heart, Lyutillis had turned to insects for friendship.

“Let me introduce you to the very first friends I made! My best friends!”

Lyutillis crawled out from under Meiru’s boot, got to her feet, and spread her arms wide. A second later, black fog erupted from the tree trunk. That black fog was comprised of millions upon millions of tiny, disgusting creatures. Smiling, Lyutillis held out a hand to Miledi and Meiru as a whirlwind of cockroaches swirled behind her. A few cockroaches leaped onto her outstretched hands.

“These are the wise, enlightened rulers of the deep forest, my good friends Uroboros! You can call them U-chan for short!”

The cockroaches bobbed their feelers as if bowing to Miledi and Meiru. It was clear these were the same cockroaches who had rescued Miledi and the others from that misunderstanding with the beastmen a while back.

Why did you give them such a fancy name?

Are they even happy with a name like that?

Isn’t it sad that your only friends are cockroaches?

Is this how you keep track of everything going on in the forest?

Wait, doesn’t that mean you sent those cockroaches to us back there?

Numerous thoughts swirled around inside the Liberators’ heads, but they couldn’t give voice to any of them.

“Blaaaargh!” Miledi and Meiru opened their mouths and instantly vomited.

“Mileddiiiiiiiiiii! Meiruuuuuuuuuuuu!” Naiz shouted.

The two of them fell unconscious, their brains unable to cope with the

memories that had just resurfaced. Naiz ran over to them and tried to slap the two girls awake. He didn't want to be left alone in this nightmare world. As he did his best to ignore the reality unfolding around him he thought, *So she's an airhead, a masochist, a loner whose only friends are bugs, and has the cringiest naming sense of all time. Isn't this a bit much, even for an ancient magic user?*

"Nnngh. Not yet, Belle, I can't join you just yet..."

"Diene! You're always here to cheer me up!"

"O-Oh no, they're hallucinating now. Oscar, Van, get over here already! I can't take this anymore!" Naiz shouted desperately as millions of cockroaches buzzed around him.

Lyutillis cocked her head to one side, wondering why her new friends were fainting left and right, while Parsha just sighed in resignation.

Chapter III: Shared Destiny

High up in the sky above the White Scarred Plains, where wind and white flames had thinned out the mist, two overwhelmingly powerful forces clashed. One was wreathed in sky-blue mana while the other was cocooned in a shell of pitch-black mana.

“Uryaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Haaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The air creaked and groaned as a swirling, black sphere of gravity, Miledi’s Onyx Blast, shot toward her opponent, Laus Barn. He countered with an equally powerful shockwave of spirit magic. As the two spells collided, shockwaves of mana rippled outward, causing the Holy Templar Knights surrounding the two combatants to stagger back. The Paragon of Light’s dragon knights were also pushed backward, and they had to struggle to regain control of their mounts.

“Shit, I know she’s been graced by the child of god’s powers, but this is ridiculous,” Mulm muttered as he fought to keep control of Adra, his dragon. For the past few minutes, he’d been trying to hit Miledi with Adra’s aurora breath, but she moved around so fast he couldn’t aim at her. To make matters worse, if he wasn’t careful he’d end up hitting his allies. He had fired a few homing arrows from his enchanted bow, but...

“You’re wasting your time!”

Two gravity spheres were constantly circling around Miledi, and they either sucked up all of his arrows or sent them careening in a wildly different direction. Not only that, she constantly fired off accurate counterattacks any time someone targeted her.

“Crimson Javelin — Thousand Blossoms!”

A storm of flaming spears hurtled toward Mulm and his men. Each one was far stronger than normal too, and a direct hit would be enough to gravely injure even the church’s strongest knights. The fact that Miledi was firing these off

without even pausing for an incantation, while *also* keeping Laus Barn, the church's strongest fighter, at bay was unbelievable. Still, the Holy Templar Knights and the Paragon of Light's encirclement wasn't pointless.

"Uwooooooooh! Limit Break tier eight!"

"Ah!"

Fending off the other knights forced Miledi to leave a tiny opening, and Laus took full advantage of that opening. He launched himself forward, and in a second he was close enough to Miledi to swing his massive warhammer at her.

"Ngh! Aaaaaaaaah!" Miledi screamed as the blow shattered her right arm and a few of her ribs. Laus' blow had been powerful enough to break through the barrier Miledi had erected in a split second and to overcome the shock absorption of the Angel's Raiment artifact Oscar had given her. Miledi shot through the air like a cannonball, right into the waiting arms of the knights. They raised their swords, preparing to chop her to pieces.

"Oh no you don't! Everyone, provide cover fire!"

Thousands of arrows and wind blasts shot out of the mist. Nirke's squad, which had been hiding nearby, had come out to support Miledi. The hail of missiles only slowed the Holy Templar Knights down for a second. But that second was all Miledi needed to recover. She flipped around in midair and turned to the aurora breath the Paragons of Light had shot at her.

"Asura!"

Her wall of gravity struck down the beams of light. But a second later, she sensed someone behind her. Miledi's eyes went wide as she realized Laus had caught up to her in less than a second.

"Onyx Blast — Overdrive!"

"Strike it down! Heavencrusher!"

Miledi unleashed another gravity blast as she turned around. Laus smacked the gravity sphere with his hammer, causing another massive shockwave to ripple out across the battlefield. This time, Miledi and Laus were sent flying along with all the other combatants. Miledi regained her balance using gravity

magic while Laus created multiple, layered footholds to stop himself. The footholds shattered, but he managed to kill his speed. Panting, the two ancient magic users glared at each other.

“Haaah... Haaah... Just give up already...”

“Haaah... Haaah... I could say the same to you.”

As they caught their breath, light poured down over the two of them. Laus was suffused in white mana, while Miledi was covered in sunset orange. Laus was being healed by a combination of Mulm and Adra’s powerful healing magic, while Miledi was naturally being restored by Meiru.

“How’re you so strong? I’m even being buffed by evolution magic here. Were you not going all out back in Andika?”

“I was. But I realized I lacked strength, so I trained myself. That’s all there is to it. Once you learn your limits, it’s only natural to surpass them.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. What kinda crazy training did you do to get this much stronger in just a few months?” Miledi asked with a frown. A second later, worry started to color her frown.

“But there’s more to it, isn’t there? You’ve definitely gotten stronger, but removing your limiters with ancient magic like that is going to recoil really badly once the effect wears out, right?”

Multiplying one’s stats always came with a price. It was true that part of the reason why Laus was able to keep up with evolution-magic-buffed Miledi was because he’d trained tirelessly since his defeat at Andika, but the biggest factor was that he was using spirit magic to strengthen himself beyond what his body could endure.

“So what? If I’m the only person with the strength to rival you, then I’ll do whatever it takes to stop you. Even if it kills me, I’ll keep surpassing my limits.”

A spiral of jet-black mana shot out from Laus’ body. It rose up to the heavens and extended all the way down to the ground, glimmering with all the ferocity of Laus’ spirit. He was willing to throw even his life away to protect the beliefs he’d stood for. However—

“Idiot...”

To Miledi, that glimmer just looked sad. And so, she narrowed her eyes and began unleashing her own sky-blue mana. Just as these two titans were about to clash again—

“Laus, we have to retreat! The federation’s been routed! At this rate, Lilith’s squad is going to be surrounded!” Mulm shouted with a grimace. He’d gotten a report from one of his knights on the ground telling him they’d been bested.

“...Roger,” Laus said tonelessly.

His mana petered out, and he glared at Miledi, who’d also calmed her surging mana. They stared at each other for only a moment before Laus turned on his heel and gave the order to retreat. Miledi ignored the glares of the knights, who were wary of being struck as they retreated, and watched Laus go. The moment they vanished beyond the fog, the evolution magic that had been bolstering Miledi faded away, and a wave of exhaustion washed over her.

Unlike Laus’ Limit Break, evolution magic didn’t cause its user to end up drained after it wore off. Miledi’s exhaustion wasn’t physical, but mental. She’d been forced to weather Laus’ ferocious assault while also keeping an eye on Mulm and Adra, whose attacks were quite powerful. Little wonder her brain was spent. Both Adra’s aurora breath and Mulm’s homing arrows were powerful enough that they’d kill Miledi on a direct hit. During the whole fight, she felt like she’d been forced to tap dance on thin ice.

Naiz had been guarding Lyutillis the whole time, so he hadn’t been able to help her. Their main concern was God’s Apostle, which was why Naiz, the most mobile member of the team, had been assigned to guard duty. Meanwhile, Meiru had been at a field hospital near the front lines, healing as many wounded beastmen as she could. She’s also been keeping an eye on the overall battlefield and remotely healing warriors who couldn’t retreat by using window-sized portals Naiz created for her, and by infusing the mist’s rain with her restoration magic.

“Are you alright, Miledi-dono?” Nirke asked as he flew over to Miledi. His narrow eyes were full of genuine worry. The suspicion he’d initially shown was nowhere to be seen.

About a month had passed since Miledi and the others had come to the Pale Forest. Since then, Miledi had crossed blades with Laus numerous times. Every time she went out on the battlefield, the knights were forced to focus their forces around her. Against just the federation soldiers and the weaker knights, Meiru's restoration magic was enough to keep the beastmen safe, so Lyutillis wasn't forced to overexert herself by expanding the mist everywhere. Since she wasn't being taxed too hard anymore, the church was no longer able to exploit the moments where she was exhausted and the mist weakened.

Because Miledi's battles always happened in the air, it was Nirke and his squad who ended up supporting her the most. After seeing how resolutely she fought against the church's knights, Nirke and the others had come to respect Miledi.

Smiling, Miledi turned to the harpies and gave them a thumbs-up.

"Totes fine! More importantly, are you okay, Ni-chan? You really saved me back there, but it must have been hard to face so many Paragons of Light and Holy Templar Knights at once, right?"

"Don't worry, all my men are safe thanks to Meiru-dono's restoration magic."

"I see. That's great."

"Yes, it is. That aside, could you please stop calling me Ni-chan?"

"No way! Nicknames are how I show my love!"

"O-Oh... Thank you?"

Nirke's men snickered, and he shot them a withering glare. Though, over this past month, he'd gotten used to exchanges like these. His annoyance dissipated quickly and he turned back to Miledi with newfound respect.

"We'll take over from here, Miledi-dono. You go back and rest. Her Majesty's power isn't strengthening you anymore, right?"

"Yeah, it's not. The church's knights tired themselves out pretty bad too, so I don't think they'll come back anytime soon... You know, without Lyu-chan's power, I'd have a much harder time fighting off a serious Laus Barn and his best knights."

“The fact that you could do it at all impresses me. I see you really are of the same caliber as Her Majesty. I’m impressed.”

Until now, Nirke hadn’t realized just how insane ancient magic users were. His subordinates all nodded in agreement, remembering the earth-shattering battle that had taken place minutes before. At the same time, they still weren’t quite sure what to make of the fact that Miledi called their beloved and respected queen “Lyu-chan.” In the beginning, plenty of beastmen had gotten mad, saying Miledi was being disrespectful, but Lyutillis herself had told them she preferred it, so they were at a loss for what to do. Especially since Lyutillis herself was calling Miledi Miledi-tan and Naiz Nacchan-san. It was hardly surprising that the residents of the republic were confused. Moreover, Lyutillis, who was twenty-six, was calling Meiru, who was just twenty-one, onee-sama. The other beastmen couldn’t make heads or tails of that. The first time the army’s commanders had heard Lyutillis say that, most of them, including Sim, had fainted. Many of them had thought they’d been hallucinating afterward and went home to rest.

Incidentally, Meiru had tried to use restoration magic to fix Parsha’s heartburn, but it kept coming back as Lyutillis started doing more and more ridiculous things, so she was stuck fighting a losing battle. Still, Lyutillis’ ultimate secret was kept safe thanks to her efforts. A young messenger flew over to Nirke while he was reminiscing over the rather stimulating month he’d had since Miledi’s arrival.

“I bring news! The enemy army has retreated, and Her Majesty has requested that we return as well.”

“Gotcha. How did things go on the ground? Were there any casualties?”

“Fear not, sir, our casualties were exceedingly light. Thanks to Meiru-sama’s restoration magic, even those beastmen who were on the verge of death are healthy now... Her magic truly is amazing.”

“I see. That’s a relief,” Miledi said with a smile.

“Y-Yes, it is!”

The messenger blushed slightly as he replied to her.

“A-Also, Meiru-sama has a message for you. ‘I want to take a little walk before I go back to the capital. Don’t look for me, okay?’”

Ahhh, she’s worried Lyu-chan’ll get her hands on her again, so she’s trying to stay away... Miledi thought with a wry smile.

“Alright, let’s go look for her!”

She decided to completely ignore Meiru’s request and shot down toward the forest. Nirke watched her go with a bemused expression.

The council room was deathly silent, as if all of the people present were holding a wake. The reason for the silence was simple. A month had passed since the church had decided to wear the republic down in a war of attrition. In that time, it had been the church whose losses had mounted, not the republic’s.

“Report,” Baran ordered curtly, breaking the silence. He had a smile on his face, but that smile didn’t reach his eyes. The bishop he was staring at gulped. The church’s crusade had made no progress at all, and Baran was livid that they hadn’t yet succeeded in their divine mission. Worse, the news the bishop had wouldn’t improve Baran’s mood at all.

“Y-Yes, Your Eminence. The supplies from Uldia will... how do I put this... arrive later than usual. It’s not actually a problem and—”

“Calm yourself. Just state the facts, as concisely as possible.”

“M-My apologies. We will be receiving 30% less food than expected.”

Everyone in the room started muttering to each other. The atmosphere grew chillier by the second and the bishop quickly stammered out the rest of his report.

“Our investigation has discovered that an organized group is obstructing our supply lines.”

The muttering got louder. Interfering with the supply lines of a holy crusade was blasphemy of the highest order, especially when the opponent was a nation of godless beastmen. No country would dare to do such a thing.

“You mean to tell me those half-human brutes snuck a contingent out of the

forest?”

“Not quite, Your Eminence. The group opposing us is... human. Their skills are top-notch as well.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because while the assailants are burning or stealing our supplies, they aren’t harming our troops. We have plenty of eyewitness testimony confirming that they’re human.”

Silence returned to the council room, but this time it was a painful silence. Most everyone could guess who the attackers were. In this day and age, there was only one group who didn’t fear god. Besides, it was because of this group’s leader that the church hadn’t been able to make any progress.

“The Liberators, huh?” Baran muttered, putting his hands on the table and lacing his fingers together. His entire body shook with barely suppressed rage. Afraid of facing the cardinal’s wrath, the bishop quickly tried to shift the blame onto someone else.

“L-Lord Barn! Why haven’t you been able to eliminate that disgusting heretic yet!? Explain yourself!”

“What will people think of the church if the commander of the Holy Templar Knights can’t even kill one measly heretic!? Have you no shame!?”

“You... aren’t holding back, are you?”

The other bishops took this opportunity to pile on him as well. Until now, they’d led privileged lives, never once having to fear the consequences of their actions. They were so attached to their authority that they didn’t care who they threw under the bus to keep it. Normally, this would be when Laus’ vice commander, Araym, would get mad at them, but this time he held his tongue. He observed Laus with a neutral expression, waiting to see how his commander would react. Instead, it was Mulm who spoke out, his usually cheerful expression replaced by an irritated frown.

“I will not brook any more slander against Laus. Say another word and you’ll have to deal with me.”

The bishops instantly fell silent when they heard the ice in Mulm's voice. Sighing, Mulm added, "I can vouch for Laus. Having seen him fight, I know he isn't holding back. His opponent just happens to be someone who's inherited Ehit's powers, even if only a fraction of them. The Reisen heir is a formidable foe."

"How can you be certain of that, Commander Allridge?" Zebal, the commander of the Templar Knights' third division asked in a scathing voice. Like many others in the room, his patience was running thin. He was tapping his finger on the table in a staccato rhythm.

"Because she's so strong that Adra and I wouldn't stand a chance against her."

"You, the man chosen by the Divine Bow, can't hope to match her?"

"Indeed. At best, I can support Laus. True, her fighting style is the type I have the most trouble with... but even if that weren't the case, I'd never be able to beat her. Humiliating though it is to admit, that's the truth."

Over the course of this past month, Mulm had been forced to accept this unpalatable fact. The bishops fell silent, and Mulm's voice echoed through the council room.

"Honestly, I'm ashamed of myself. I'd thought I was someone who could fight on equal footing with Laus, but I was conceited. His strength is miles above my own. We just hadn't seen him get serious until now."

"You're exaggerating, Mulm," Laus said as he furrowed his brow unhappily. But Mulm, who'd been awed by Laus' true power, had no intention of stopping his praise.

Mulm turned to Araym and asked, "Hey, Araym. You saw Laus' full power back at Andika, didn't you? How are his skills now, compared to back then? Does it look like he's holding back to you?"

Araym narrowed his eyes slightly, considering his response. After a second, he shook his head.

"Not at all, Mulm-sama. If anything, he seems to have grown even stronger than before. Moreover..."

“Moreover?” Lilith asked, hanging on to Araym’s every word. Because her post was on the ground, she hadn’t been able to see Laus’ battles in the air. However, she was dying to know what they were like.

“One look at how exhausted Laus-sama is should tell you just how hard he’s been fighting.”

“He looks exhausted?”

That came as a surprise not just to Lilith, but to everyone else in the room as well, except Mulm. Considering how composed Laus looked, their surprise was understandable.

“I’m fine. Araym, you don’t have to worry about me.”

“Yes, I do. Your power is the only thing that can defeat that heretic. Making sure you don’t overexert yourself is a matter of utmost importance.”

“I agree completely with Araym. Do you really think you’ve managed to hide your exhaustion from us?”

The divine beasts Mulm created had a perfect affinity for light magic. And Adra, his greatest creation of all, could even heal someone back from the brink of death, though it couldn’t restore missing limbs.

“It’s common knowledge that using your Limit Break leaves you drained afterward, which is why I and the other dragon knights have been supporting you with our healing spells... However, we don’t have any reserves left.”

“Commander Allridge. Does that mean...?”

“Yes. This is how exhausted Laus is *after* my entire dragon knight unit spent all their mana healing him. If he keeps using his Limit Break, we’re going to need another hundred knights as strong as my own to keep him on his feet. The negative effects of Limit Break can’t easily be healed.”

Before Andika, the highest level of Laus’ Limit Break let him double his stats. But thanks to the hellish training he’d undergone, he could now multiply them by five. Of course, the recoil of strengthening himself that much was far worse, and if he kept on going past triple his base stats he was liable to kill himself before long. Yet during this last battle, Laus had been constantly using tier six to

tier eight Limit Breaks, multiplying his stats by four to five each time. He'd literally been shaving away at his soul to keep fighting. And as a result, even a hundred of the church's strongest knights constantly using their best healing spells hadn't been enough to fully heal his exhaustion.

"I see... Quite impressive, Lord Barn. You truly are worthy of being called a child of god."

No one contested Baran's statement. Still, the fact remained that despite Laus' best efforts, the church was making no progress in their crusade.

"Do you believe you can defeat her, Lord Barn?"

That was the important question. It didn't matter how hard Laus tried if the results weren't in their favor.

"If we can get rid of Meiru Melusine, then perhaps."

"The wielder of restoration magic, huh? It's because of her that we can't push the battle lines further in."

It was truly vexing. While Miledi's presence forced the church to send Laus to keep her at bay, the same could be said for the republic. They needed Miledi to fight Laus, or he'd wreak havoc on their armies. Their situation was deadlocked, meaning the biggest threat to the church's armies was the ancient magic user most suited for battles of attrition. Meiru's restoration magic could single-handedly hold the church at bay indefinitely. Now the beastmen were not only supernaturally strong, but they were also practically immortal.

"Allridge-dono, I hear you've been searching for her while supporting Commander Barn?"

"She's aiding the republic's strongest warriors with the help of someone who can use spatial magic, and she's infused the mist's rain with her restoration magic. Since she's not moving around herself, I'm certain she must have a base of operations somewhere where she treats the wounded, but... the mist is too thick. I know she must be near the front lines somewhere, but I can't pinpoint the location."

Mulm doubted she was using her magic from afar, like the republic's queen. Or rather, he desperately wanted to believe that wasn't possible. Regardless,

the biggest problem was the fog barrier that protected the forest.

Another heavy silence fell over the council room. And again, it was Baran who eventually broke it.

“So long as Meiru Melusine is alive, we cannot wear the republic’s numbers down. And so long as Miledi Reisen is here, we cannot search for Meiru.”

Suppressing his anger as best he could, Baran asked, “What of the others? Where are the creation magic user and the spatial magic user hiding?”

Most of the bishops and knights exchanged glances. Honestly, they had no idea.

“I imagine... they’re protecting the queen,” Laus said.

“Indeed. I cannot fathom why they refuse to join the front lines and focus only on guarding the queen, but that seems the most likely answer. However, doesn’t that mean we can start bombing the forest without worry?”

Everyone present sucked in a breath. The reason the church had avoided carpet-bombing the forest or blasting it with large-scale magic was because they’d wanted to avoid accidentally killing the child of god they’d come to “rescue.” But if she was being protected by two ancient magic users, attacks of that scale wouldn’t be able to harm her, meaning the church could just destroy the forest, massacre the beastmen, and break their spirits.

“Lord Distark, wouldn’t that be... disrespectful?” Laus asked, struggling to contain the emotion in his voice. Baran’s head swiveled with unnatural speed and rested his gaze on Laus.

“Let me tell you what’s disrespectful. What that queen is doing to our beloved Ehit is what’s disrespectful!”

“Well...”

“Why is it that we were refused entrance into the Pale Forest, but the Liberators were not? Well? Because the Knight Hunter guided them there? Yes, I suppose he did. That proves that he’s with the Liberators. But that doesn’t explain everything. Those filthy half-beast mongrels would never allow beings as powerful as the Liberators near their queen. They wouldn’t trust humans.

And yet, the Liberators and the republic have joined forces. They've forged an *alliance.* The fact that this child of god has allied herself with the Liberators is a betrayal of the highest order!"

Baran's words were suffused with fanaticism. But despite the insanity in his voice, what he was saying was logical. This situation was only possible if the queen had accepted the Liberators into her home, which made the queen Ehit's enemy.

Until now, the plan had been to capture the queen, take her back to the main cathedral, and teach her about the glorious wonder of Ehit. However, now the knights and bishops were convinced the evil Liberators had brainwashed her. If they wanted to bring her back to the light, they'd have to be somewhat forceful.

"I will take full responsibility for this. Once we have rescued the child of god, the pope can decide whether my actions were justified or not. But even if he decides to execute me, my decision won't change. My life is a small price to pay for the success of a mission ordained by Ehit."

The madness in Baran's voice ebbed away, and his peaceful smile returned. Laus felt goosebumps rise up his skin, but he was the only one.

"Wonderful... Absolutely wonderful! Your faith is a shining example to us all, Lord Distark!" Lilith said, then started clapping. The sparkle in her eyes made it clear she respected Baran's resolve from the bottom of her heart. The other knights started praising Baran as well, and the applause began to grow.

After a few seconds, Baran raised his hand for silence and said, "We can no longer afford a war of attrition. It's time we make a decisive strike. Commit your entire forces to an all-out assault to prevent the enemy from stopping our aerial raid, Detref-dono."

"...As you wish."

"When I say your entire forces, I mean *all* of them. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Your Eminence. I will call up my reserves as well."

Detref's expression was dark, but Baran looked positively jubilant.

“Fear not. I have a scheme that will help this plan succeed.”

“You do?”

“Yes, I actually received a message this morning. I have good news, everyone.”

Baran’s “good news” instantly livened up the council room. For their chances of success had just gone up greatly. Still, it didn’t change the fact that an aerial raid supplemented by an all-out assault was a risky move. They were up against a group of ancient magic users, and an army that had been strengthened by ancient magic. Everyone would have to fight as hard as Laus was if they were to succeed.

In the beginning, no one had expected this mission to become so difficult. Most of the knights had figured they’d easily be able to crush a group of half-breed mongrels who couldn’t even use magic and rescue their child of god. But now they were prepared to sacrifice dozens of knights, maybe even more, just for a chance at success.

“Martyrdom is one of the highest honors. If it is our fate to die here, then so be it!” Baran shouted, and everyone nodded in agreement. None of them were afraid, or even reluctant to lose their lives. If anything, they were eager.

“Uwoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!”

The thought of dying for Ehit brought them nothing but joy. Truly, they were mad. Everyone in the room except Laus and Detref was utterly insane.

A clear, beautiful voice cut through the cheers.

“Splendid.”

Surprised, everyone turned to the doorway. When they saw who was standing there, their expressions turned ecstatic. It was the oracle who had told them of this holy mission, the beautiful Ainz Arsalk. Only Laus looked terrified, but everyone was too focused on the oracle to pay attention to him.

Choked by emotion, Baran nevertheless managed to say, “O-Oracle? Why are you here?”

She smiled faintly, her white dress and unearthly beauty making her look

ethereal. As she strode into the room, her shimmering silver hair fanned out behind her. Her beauty alone was enough to take one's breath away. The bishops who were laying eyes on her for the first time, and even Detref, gulped as her gaze passed over them. Her presence commanded attention, and even the most hardened warriors couldn't resist. But when her eyes and Laus' met, Laus broke out in a cold sweat. Though everyone else found her silver eyes captivating, he was terrified by them. He couldn't understand why everyone found those soulless eyes so beautiful, or her mechanical expressions so charming. Personally, Laus just felt like a rabbit trying to hide from a tiger. Ainz walked over to Baran, and the cardinal offered his seat to her like it was the most natural thing in the world to do. As she sat down he stood behind her, like he was her advisor.

"Your resolve to die for Ehit is truly admirable. You all are shining examples of what every believer should be."

"We... We are not worthy of such praise..." Baran sobbed, tears welling up in his eyes. All the others, except Laus, of course, looked similarly moved. Ehit's medium had just told them they were exemplary followers. Even Detref was overcome with emotion.

"My master is always watching over you, his faithful, pious believers. Know that he would never abandon you."

"What... do you mean?" Baran asked, confused. The oracle closed her eyes, and everyone waited for her next words with bated breath.

"I can destroy the fog barrier protecting the Pale Forest."

It took a moment for everyone to register the import of what she'd just said, but once they did, they started cheering.

"H-How exactly will you do that, Oracle?" Baran whispered, doing his best to contain his excitement.

For centuries, the mist had guarded the beastmen without fail. Mulm and the other knights got to their feet, their chairs clattering to the floor. Even Laus' jaw dropped open.

Ainz smiled at the awestruck knights. She went on to explain her plan, then

gave them a demonstration of her power to show that it was possible. By the time she was done, the knights were overjoyed. They knew now that Ehit was watching over them. That he wanted them to live.

The oracle swept her gaze over the room one last time and said, “We shall purify the tainted soil of the beastmen and build a new holy land in its place. Bring the divine hammer of justice down on these heretics!”

Her voice rang with divine majesty. Everyone, even Laus, dropped to one knee and swore that they would do Ehit’s will. But unlike the others, Laus wasn’t thinking of victory.

Miledi Reisen, despair has come for you. Will you be able to overcome it like you said you would? Either way, I won’t hold back. Bringing the most happiness to the most amount of people is the correct decision. If you believe I’m wrong, then— Laus paused his thoughts for a moment and closed his eyes solemnly.

Prove it by climbing over my corpse and taking down this inhuman angel. Though he himself didn’t realize it, there was a glimmer of hope within the despair Laus was feeling.

Meanwhile in the Pale Forest—

“Umm, Meiru-neesan. How long do you want me to stay like this?” Sui asked timidly.

“Forever,” Meiru replied.

The two of them were in a small clearing far from both the front lines and the republic’s capital. Meiru was sitting on a small stump with Sui resting on her lap.

“F-Forever?”

“What, do you not like spending time with me?”

“Th-That’s not what I...” Sui trailed off hesitantly. Her bunny ears were twitching rapidly back and forth. She seemed afraid that someone might try to assassinate her any second now. Even though she was an assassin herself.

“Boss, I really think you should go back. Miledi and the queen are surely looking for you by now,” Valf, who was standing beside Meiru, muttered

awkwardly. Meiru turned to him with a grin and asked, “Oh, you’re still here?”

“Gah!”

Valf’s ears drooped as Meiru dismissively waved him away. He’d never been so humiliated in his life.

“Whoa! A grown man like you shouldn’t be looking so depressed. It’s kinda creepy.”

“The hell’d you just say, Sui!?”

“Hyaah!? N-Nothing!”

As always, Sui didn’t know when to shut her mouth. But while people normally gave her shit for it, now Sui had a guardian angel, of sorts.

“Valf-kun, I don’t recall granting you permission to glare at Sui-chan. Do you want to die?” Meiru said with a terrifying smile. Valf whined like a beaten puppy and prostrated himself before Meiru.

“Damn, you really just made him into your slave... or your dog, I guess. I really don’t wanna end up like that.”

“Fear not, Sui-chan. I’m kind to women.”

“R-Really? Then, uh, can we return home? I kinda wanna just roll around in bed all day instead of work.”

“Fufu. I love lazy girls like you,” Meiru said, tightening her hold on Sui to prevent her from escaping.

Despite claiming she’d be nice to her, it seemed Meiru had no intention of setting Sui free. Of course, there was a reason she’d kidnapped this bunny girl. Meiru knew that if she went back to the palace, she’d have to deal with Lyutillis. The queen would stick to her like glue. She needed the help of Sui’s stealth skills to stay out of Lyutillis’ sight. Sui’s special magic allowed her to turn things other than herself invisible too, and her perception manipulation abilities extended to anything she was touching. Only when Meiru was hugging Sui could she escape from the surveillance network of bugs the queen had scattered throughout the forest. The moment Meiru had discovered Sui could help her escape Lyutillis, the two beastmen had become joined at the hip. Of course after seeing Meiru

tyrannize Valf in that mockery of a duel Sui had been deathly afraid of the dagon. Especially since Meiru could see through her stealth skills. Even now, Sui was trembling in fear. But as far as Meiru was concerned, Sui was her new best friend.

Incidentally, Valf hadn't been invited; he'd just tagged along. Ever since his crushing defeat, he'd been oddly attached to Meiru. He also acted subservient around her, begging for Meiru's attention like a loyal pet. When she was cruel to him, he got depressed, and when she was nice to him, he started wagging his tail back and forth. Like Sui had said, he'd basically become Meiru's dog. The pirate queen's domestication skills were truly something to be feared.

"By the way, Valf-kun? Would you mind going back? You're not being protected by Sui-chan's stealth abilities, so if you stay here they'll find me."

"N-Ngh...but I'm pretty good at manipulating my presence too..."

The thirty-year-old wolfman warrior gave Meiru a pleading look.

"Oh god, you're really creeping me out now," Sui said in a shrill voice. Before Valf could reply Meiru suddenly turned to look behind her. The queen of the republic was peeking out from behind the shade of a distant tree.

"Eeeek!?"

"Huh, what's the—!? Eek! Your Majesty!?"

Meiru and Sui both screamed. But the oblivious Valf just bowed his head. He was already prostrating, so it was a needless gesture. However, it went to show just how little pride he had left.

Lyutillis strode over to Meiru, her pure white dress billowing around her. Her two guards, Naiz and the leopardman captain of the imperial guard, Craid, followed behind her.

"Gah, how'd you find me? I thought I managed to escape your bugs *and* Miledi-chan's gravity net!"

Meiru slowly backed away, holding Sui in front of her like a hostage. Sui tried her best to wriggle free, shouting, "I have nothing to do with this! It's all Meiru-neesan's fault!"

She was only concerned with saving herself. But her desperation was understandable.

“Onee-sama... Why are you with that girl when you have me!? Do you really like her that much more!?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Bwagh! Sui, how dare you steal Onee-sama away from me!”

“This isn’t my fault, Your Majesty! Please, believe me! I’m not a cat burglar, I mean rabbit burglar!”

Lyutillis blushed slightly at Meiru’s blunt insult, but she managed to keep her fetish in check in front of her subordinates. It would be a national issue if they saw her panting in ecstasy after being derided. And Lyutillis knew that if she spilled her secret, Parsha would torture her by being extremely nice to her. So all she could do was glare at her best spy.

“Ugh. Please don’t glare at me, Your Majesty. I didn’t do anything wrong! I just wanna slack at my job, kill a few people, and be loved by everyone. Is that too much to ask!?”

“I love how shameless you are about your worthlessness, Sui-chan.”

“How dare you let yourself be praised by Onee-sama, Sui!”

Curses! I won’t be outdone by some worthless rabbit who only knows how to poison people! Lyutillis thought to herself, her eyes burning with jealousy. Meanwhile, Sui was almost on the verge of tears. The queen every beastman loved and respected was glaring at her like she was an insect. She would have offered to get on her knees and lick Lyutillis’ boots, but Sui had already learned from past experience that such pleas didn’t work. However, she couldn’t be too forceful with Meiru either.

Not only was Meiru healing every warrior on the battlefield, she’d also cured every beastman in the forest of chronic illnesses. Her achievements were so great that the queen referred to her as Onee-sama... Or, at least, that was why everyone thought Lyutillis called Meiru that. And to most people, Meiru seemed like a kind, gentle saint, even if she was really a sadistic pirate. Naturally, her popularity had grown rapidly within the republic, and the

beastmen had taken to calling her the Saint of the Sea.

Sadly what that meant for Sui was that she was loved by a saint and hated by her queen. Those who adored Lyutillis were mad at her for fouling the queen's mood, and those who loved Meiru were mad that she was monopolizing Meiru's attention. Had Sui been a more sincere individual, things might have turned out alright still, but unfortunately she wasn't. Even before all of this started happening her comrades had thought of her as an annoying troublemaker. Sui had spent the past few weeks living in fear that anyone might attack her at any time. As Lyutillis and Sui's argument got more heated, another actor arrived on the stage.

"Hold it right there! Lyu-chan, Sui-chan, aren't you forgetting someone!? Meru-nee belongs to me, Miledi!"

Thanks to the commotion Lyutillis' arrival had caused, Miledi had been able to find Meiru too. She floated down and hugged Meiru from behind.

"Miledi-chan! I'm amazed by how you always manage to come at the worst time!" Meiru exclaimed.

"Oh great, things are going to get even more chaotic now. I hate free-spirited people like these guys. They always look so happy it pisses me off," Sui muttered under her breath.

"My, Miledi-tan. It's not good to monopolize Onee-sama. If you don't behave I'll call U-chan over."

The girls started panicking at the mention of Lyutillis' cockroach friend. Meanwhile, Valf remained on the ground, still bowing to his queen. This was the scene that greeted the soldiers who'd gone searching for Lyutillis when she suddenly left. Of course, their addition to the scene only threw everything further into chaos. Craid, who was watching everything from a short distance away, muttered, "Her Majesty... certainly has changed."

"In a good way? Or a bad way?" Naiz asked casually.

Craid averted his gaze, thinking back to how graceful and majestic the queen used to be. In those days, it had been an honor to serve her. Though she'd spoken rarely and kept her expression neutral, that had only added to her aura

of mystique. Just standing close to her had been enough to make Craid feel nervous. *But now...well I guess I should be happy that she's happy. Her expressions change at the drop of a hat, and now she's become cute as well as beautiful. But still, the queen we respected was more...*

"I'm not sure."

"I see..."

Craid was having a hard time sorting out his feelings. If meeting friends who could stand on equal footing with her had helped his beloved queen be more honest with her feelings, that was definitely a good thing. Still, he missed the image of a perfect and wise ruler that Lyutillis had once projected. While he wasn't able to put his internal dilemma into words, his tone told Naiz everything he needed to know. Craid wasn't alone in feeling like this, either. Sim and the others were of similar minds.

After gauging Craid's reaction, Naiz renewed his resolve to keep Lyutillis' secret. *If these guys ever find out she's actually a raging masochist, the republic might just fall apart.* Naiz gave Craid a reassuring pat on the shoulder and said, "I have some aged wine I've been saving for a special occasion. It's from a famous oasis in the Crimson Desert. Would you like to share a cup with me later tonight?"

"Alcohol from the other side of the continent... That sounds quite interesting. I'd love to, thank you."

The best medicine for an uneasy heart was companionship and booze. Naiz understood this well, and he'd already become fast friends with Craid and the other warriors. Afterwards, Miledi and Lyutillis succeeded in capturing Meiru—while Sui escaped in the ensuing confusion—and returned to the palace. There Miledi and Meiru gave their report on the previous battle to Parsha, Sim, and the other important members of the republic. Unfortunately, most of them were too nonplussed by the sudden change in their queen's behavior to pay too much attention.

"I knew you'd live up to my expectations, Onee-sama. You really are worthy of the title everyone's given you. Saint of the Sea indeed."

"You know, I never expected to hear that title all the way on the other side of

the world.”

During her pirate days, Meiru had created the legend of the “Saint of the Western Seas” to protect her little sister, Diene. Whether coincidence or fate, the beastmen of the republic had picked an almost identical name for her.

“It’s a fitting title. Thanks to you, my soldiers have nothing to fear on the battlefield. So long as they aren’t killed instantly, they know no injury can stop them. You have my deepest gratitude,” Sim said, bowing deeply to Meiru. The other warriors followed suit. All of them had a deep-seated respect for Meiru. Smiling gently, Meiru replied, “Good, you should be grateful. Incidentally, I accept both physical goods and favors as thanks.”

Despite her title, she wasn’t the least bit humble. In fact, it sounded more like she was blackmailing those she healed. But Sim and the others were used to dealing with her by now and they simply nodded, smiling. Their forbearance was far more saintly than Meiru’s demeanor. If anything, she should be taking a leaf out of their book.

“Come on now, Meiru. If you’re going to ask for a reward, at least ask for something that might help the Liberators out...”

Badd started to admonish Meiru, but she turned back to him and shook her head with a pitiful look in her eyes.

“You just don’t get it, Badd-kun. I’m disappointed in you.”

“Huh? What’re you—?”

“Miledi-chan said the Liberators wouldn’t ask for anything in return for their services. We can’t go back on our word now. This is why you’ll never find a girlfriend.”

“What does me being single have to do with anything!? Though I admit you have a point about not asking for a reward.”

“Your lack of insight is why you have such poor taste in women.”

“Again, that’s not the point! Besides, I have perfectly good taste in women!”

Badd shot Lyutillis a covert glance as he said that. Miledi, Naiz, and Parsha exchanged silent glances, then nodded to each other. He definitely had bad

taste in women. Unlike the other Liberators, Badd still wasn't aware of Lyu-chan's true personality—primarily because Miledi and the others had made completely sure he had no chance to find out. After all, Badd was so desperate for a wife that he'd been willing to abandon his post to look for one. He firmly believed that his meeting with the graceful, ephemeral queen of the forest was fated. If he found out the truth about Lyutillis, Miledi was worried he might lose himself in despair and launch a suicide attack on the church.

"Ngh, don't get ahead of yourself just because Lyu likes you."

Even now Badd was jealous that Meiru was taking up so much of Lyutillis' time. Though of course, it was Lyutillis who'd insisted everyone call her by a nickname and Lyutillis who was always chasing after Meiru. She'd actually wanted to call Badd Ba-chan but that had been what Miledi had called him years ago when she was a kid, so he'd vetoed it. As a result, she'd settled on just using his name without honorifics.

"I'm grateful to you too, Badd. It's because you're keeping the Templar Knights at bay that..."

"O-Oh, don't mention it. If anything, I should apologize for not taking their captain down."

"That woman's thunder skills are insane, Badd. Honestly, we're glad you can just stop her from rampaging across the battlefield. Besides while you're keeping her pinned down Sui's free to go around assassinating other knights, so it's a plus for us," Valf said. He'd been fighting with Badd on the front lines this past month, and the two had become good friends. Badd had also bonded with Sim and the other strong fighters who were in charge of keeping the church's best knights in check. Though humans and beastmen were naturally wary of each other, the joint struggle to survive had nurtured a deep bond of trust between the Liberators and the republic. And that, more than anything, was what brought Miledi joy.

"Heheheheheheheh."

Miledi smiled happily, not caring about how sappy she looked. Noticing her smile, Lyutillis turned to Miledi and said, "Miledi-tan. I'm sorry for placing the heaviest burden on you. Fighting two of the three pillars' commanders as well

as their best knights all at once must be so hard. Are you sure you aren't pushing yourself past your limits? I know Nirke's squad is supporting you, but that's not nearly enough."

"Don't worry, Lyu-chan! I'm perfectly fine! Your evolution magic's made me super strong, and I've got Meru-nee backing me up too."

Miledi flashed Lyutillis a confident grin and made a peace sign with her hands. But then a second later her expression grew serious and she said, "Besides, I'm the only one who can fight Laus Barn. He's using all of his strength now, without any regard to his own safety."

If Miledi took her eyes off him for even a second he'd tear through the beastmen's ranks.

"Plus, I'm the best person to deal with the Paragons of Light. Normally their dragons would be a huge threat, but my gravity magic is their biggest weakness."

"True, your compatibility with airborne enemies is exceptionally high."

"And now's not the time to be taking risks anyway."

"Because you're still waiting for reinforcements?"

"Yep, O-kun, Van-chan, and a few other fighters still need to get here. Keeping things in a stalemate is good for us. The enemy's forces are getting weaker, while we'll only grow stronger. All that's left is to make sure we can handle that *thing* if she shows up..."

Miledi's eyes glimmered with resolve.

"We can win this war," Miledi declared confidently. The beastmen raised their fists in the air, Miledi's resolve rubbing off on them. Everyone was hopeful about their chances now. The other beastmen gave their reports as well, then Lyutillis called the meeting to a close. However, she asked that Miledi, Naiz, and Meiru stay behind. It had become tradition for Lyutillis to have a tea party with her fellow ancient magic users after meetings. By now everyone trusted Miledi and the others so it wasn't that big of a deal. Sim and the others gave Miledi friendly smiles as they exited the throne room. Parsha would have stayed, but she was too busy with administrative work to relax. She hurried out of the

room, begging Miledi to keep Lyutillis in check while she was gone.

“Hey, Lyu, can I—?”

“Is something the matter, Badd? Surely you must be exhausted after that fierce battle. Please, go rest.”

“Ah, actually I’m not that tired, so...”

Badd gave Lyutillis a suggestive glance. He clearly wanted to be invited to their tea party.

“Come now, Badd-kun. It’s obvious we’re not welcome. Let’s go relax in your room,” Meiru said, seizing on an opportunity to flee.

“You’re the last person I’d ever want to relax with.”

Badd protested as Meiru grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and started to drag him out. Naturally, the one person Lyutillis wanted to have tea with was Meiru. With a wave of her hand, she sent her beloved Uroboros after Meiru to bring her back. The writhing mass of cockroaches surrounded her, beckoning her to return. Meiru’s smile froze and she hurriedly thrust Badd away and went back to her original spot.

“Badd-kun. What are you waiting for? Hurry up and get out of here.”

“Damn you, Meiru. Stop getting in my way all the time!”

“Come on Badd, you know it’s rude to intrude on a girls’ tea party,” Miledi said with a grin.

“Oh shut up! Naiz is still here, isn’t he!? What part of this is a girls’ party!?”

Naiz averted his gaze, doing his best to stay out of this argument. But while Badd was determined to stay and have tea with the woman he’d fallen for, it was that very woman who shot him down.

“Badd. I want to spend more time with Onee-sama.”

“Huh? Can’t you do that with me around sti—”

“If you’re here, Onee-sama won’t be able to enjoy herself.”

“Fine...”

Badd slumped, losing all of his vigor. As his head began to droop, Lyutillis gave him an affectionate look and said, “Don’t worry, Badd. I’ll let Sim and Valf know you’re craving a tea party. I’m sure you’ll have more fun with them than you would with us.”

“Okay...”

Badd slunk out of the room, looking like a whipped dog.

“Hey Nacchan, is it just me or can kindness be a weapon?”

“The scariest part is she doesn’t even realize what she’s doing. I guess this is what happens when you grow up a loner. Lyu’s words can cut pretty deep.”

“You two, don’t you think it’s about time we told Badd-kun the truth? Even if he does launch a suicide rush against the church, I can always bring him back to life with restoration magic.”

While the three Liberators were discussing the plight of their poor vice-leader, Lyutillis got off the throne and glided toward them.

“Come, Onee-sama, Miledi-tan, Nacchan-san! It’s time for tea!”

Smiling happily, she led them to a secluded location. Specifically, she took them to a small spring which had become their standard tea party location. Lyutillis went to the edge of the faintly phosphorescent spring and closed her eyes. Raising her staff, she summoned a veil of mist to surround the group and afford them privacy. No matter how many times they watched, Miledi and the others couldn’t help but be awed by how regal she looked when she did that. The curtain of mist she’d summoned was so thick that not even beastmen would be able to navigate through it. It was a security measure to keep Lyutillis’ secret from getting out.

“You know, she actually looks quite pretty when she’s like this.”

“Why couldn’t those guys have been her first friends instead of cockroaches?” Naiz grumbled. Miledi and Meiru nodded vigorously in agreement. While she’d been casting, a group of multicolored butterflies had gathered around Lyutillis. They fluttered happily around her, dancing to some rhythm. Like the cockroaches, these butterflies were also Lyutillis’ friends. They were, in fact, the second group of friends she’d made. These she’d christened “the deadly

rainbow, Dietrichs.” Each of the butterfly species carried a different deadly toxin in their scales. While they were more dangerous than the cockroaches, they were also a lot cuter.

“Fufu. Now no one will disturb us. Onee-sama...”

“Please get away from me.”

“Mmmph. Thank you so much for that wonderfully biting comment! Haah haah!”

Now that she didn’t need to maintain a public persona, Lyutillis was free to indulge in her masochism all she wanted. She ran over to Meiru, her eyes filled with desire.

“Seriously, get away from me if you’re gonna pant like that.”

Meiru slapped Lyutillis, but that just made the queen pant harder. As she fell to the ground, Meiru smiled and started stomping on her with her heel.

“How many times do I have to tell you before you understand? Are those ears of yours just decoration? Or is your brain made of mush?”

“B-But... I just want to get closer to you, Onee-sama...”

“Who said you were allowed to speak? Know your place, swine. The next time you speak I’ll tie you up in chains and dump you into the bottom of the sea.”

Though she was being ridiculed and stepped on, Lyutillis looked ecstatic. Her beautiful features, which rivaled those of God’s Apostle, were absolutely wasted on this woman who was laughing giddily as she was abused.

“Onee-sama, I’ve been a bad girl. Please punish me.”

“Absolutely not. That would just make you happy.”

“Please don’t be so cruel! Oh, but being ignored is nice in its own way...”

“Damnit, no matter what I do it makes you happy. What kind of weird creature are you?”

“I’m your personal Lyutillis, Onee-sama.”

“Are you saying Lyutillis is some new species of creature? In that case you should go extinct.”

“Thank you so much!”

“Tch... Keep this up and I’ll start being nice to you.”

“Those brief moments of kindness you show make me so happy!”

“Gah! Miledi-chan, save me! She’s invincible! Nothing I do works!”



Meiru fled from Lyutillis' grasp, her hair already disheveled. But before she could go more than a few steps, a wall of poisonous butterflies blocked her path. Lyutillis crawled over to her and waited patiently for more punishment, her cheeks flushed. She arched her back a little and gave Meiru a suggestive look, as if asking Meiru to sit on her.

"You know, despite how annoyed Meru-nee looks, everything she does is exactly what Lyu-chan wants."

"Lyu's fetishes and Meiru's personality are a perfect match."

Meiru reluctantly sat down on Lyutillis, and Lyutillis' eyes lit up with excitement. Miledi and Naiz watched the two of them with an oddly gentle look in their eyes. Despite how much Meiru said she hated being around Lyutillis, in the end she always ended up giving the queen the sadistic beatdown she wanted. This past month, Meiru had really grown into a good master. Miledi and Naiz took their tea set out from their Treasure Troves as they discussed the evolution of Meiru and Lyutillis' relationship. Meanwhile, Meiru seemed utterly shocked that her beloved little sister Miledi wasn't coming to her aid. Lyutillis took advantage of Meiru's shock to escalate her antics even further.

From the looks of it, the ancient magic users were enjoying their brief respite between battles to the fullest. As the group sipped their tea, Miledi unconsciously glanced southwards. She was unaware of the action herself, and looked somewhat spaced out. Her actions didn't escape Meiru's notice.

"Fufu. Oh Miledi-chan," Meiru chuckled, still sitting on Lyutillis' back. A playful grin spread across her face as a sudden urge to tease Miledi welled up within her.

"Huh? What's up?"

Miledi turned to Meiru, looking genuinely confused.

"Don't worry, I'm sure Oscar-kun will arrive soon."

Miledi's cup rattled as her hand started to shake, and she hurriedly averted her gaze.

"Huh? Where'd that come from, Meru-nee? I wasn't even thinking about O-

kun. Why'd you bring him up?"

"You're not convincing anyone when you look that flustered, Miledi."

"Shut up, Nacchan!"

Naiz obediently shut up. However, Meiru wasn't done teasing Miledi yet. She was still holding a grudge over the fact that Miledi had abandoned her minutes ago.

"You know, you've been looking south more frequently lately."

"N-No I haven't."

"Yes you have. Who're you hoping to see there, I wonder?"

"W-Well even if I have, it's only natural. After all, once *the others* join up with us we'll be able to put an end to this war. What's wrong with looking forward to their arrival? There's nothing weird about me unconsciously looking south more often than usual! Man, I can't wait until Van-chan and the others get here!"

Miledi's composure was back. She really did look like she meant what she said. Of course, Meiru and Naiz were still grinning at her.

"Are Miledi-tan and Oscar-san lovers?" Lyutillis asked, genuinely curious.

"No way. Also, Lyu-chan. Isn't it about time you sat down like a normal person?"

"But then Onee-sama won't have anywhere to sit..."

"We've got more chairs, you know!"

"I see you all came prepared."

"Why do you sound so depressed about that!? Actually, don't answer; I know why!"

Lyutillis glared angrily at the extra chairs Miledi pulled out of her Treasure Trove. But then Meiru ordered her to sit in one and her ears wriggled happily as she complied. Eyes sparkling, she turned once more to Miledi.

"One of my greatest dreams was to talk about love with my friends. But I couldn't talk to U-chan or Di-chan since they're guys."

“Ah, I see. I’d say there’s a bigger problem than the fact that they’re guys, but I’ll ignore that for now.”

“But you already said it, Miledi.”

It would definitely be a problem if the queen of a nation was discussing love with bugs.

“I’ve heard that Nacchan-san is into little girls and has already made two young sisters fall for him, but...”

“Excuse me a moment, Lyu. There’s something I need to take care of. Sorry, but you’ll never see Miledi or Meiru again.”

Naiz’s words were dripping with bloodlust. His eyes had a murderous gleam. Miledi and Meiru hurriedly bowed their heads in apology and changed the topic.

“O-Oh yeah, Miledi-chan. Come to think of it, this is the first time you’ve been away from Oscar-kun since you met him, isn’t it?”

“Huh? Yeah... I guess it is.”

Now that she mentions it... this really is the first time we’ve been apart for more than a day. Even when Miledi and Oscar split up, they’d never been apart for more than a few hours. This was definitely the first time he hadn’t been with her for a whole month. As she thought that, Miledi absentmindedly touched something on her face. Meiru and Naiz narrowed their eyes at her. Noticing their gaze, Miledi turned back to them.

“What?” she asked, cocking her head.

“Oh, just thinking that they really suit you, Miledi-chan. Isn’t that right, Naiz-kun?”

“Yeah, you’ve been wearing them constantly the past few weeks.”

“Yeah, because they’re convenient. Got a problem with that?”

Not at all Meiru and Naiz thought silently, smiling. Miledi’s glare grew sharper, and the lenses of the red-rimmed glasses she was wearing flashed in the light. They were the pair Oscar had made specifically for her, and as Naiz had said, she’d been wearing them constantly recently. While it was true they

were extremely convenient, Meiru and Naiz knew the real reason she was wearing them was because she was lonely. Seeing the looks on everyone's faces, Lyutillis suppressed her masochistic urges for a bit and smiled gently at Miledi.

"Over this past month, I've heard many of your stories. As someone who's never stepped foot out of the forest, I'm honestly quite jealous of the vibrant lives you've lived. I know it hasn't always been easy, and that you've faced many hardships, but even so I envy your lifestyle."

"Do you dislike the burden of being queen?"

Realizing Lyutillis was being serious here, Miledi too became serious. During this past month, Miledi and the others had told Lyutillis how they'd all met, and what their lives had been like before that. But until now, Lyutillis hadn't said anything about her own life. Miledi and the others hadn't pried, waiting instead for Lyutillis to talk of her own accord. They knew that once she trusted them, once she was ready, she'd tell them. The reason Miledi had asked now was because she'd sensed that Lyutillis was finally ready to talk. *Is she ready to talk about herself? Does she finally trust us?* Lyutillis easily read those thoughts from Miledi's hesitant expression. She could see why Meiru doted on Miledi so.

"No. I've never once detested my responsibilities, nor have I ever felt the desire to abandon them. I'm proud of the abilities I was born with, and proud to serve the people who need me."

Her dignity as a queen was back. Miledi and the others could tell there was an unbreakable will behind that gentle smile of her. She was resolved to bear the fate of her country on her shoulders.

"I love the republic, this forest, and everyone living within it."

But even more than that—

"I would not regret even giving up my life if it would secure my people's safety." She was ready to die for it.

"Lyu-chan! I mean, Your Majesty! You can't—"

"Fufu. Don't worry, I know. Badd already scolded me once for saying that."

Miledi and the others breathed a sigh of relief. *They truly are all kind people...* Lyutillis thought to herself as she watched their reactions.

“Pride. Yes, it’s pride that drives me. Pride in my homeland, and pride in my duty to protect it.”

Lyutillis paused for a moment before continuing.

“But I’ve always wondered... if that’s enough. This is something I’ve been thinking about long before I took the throne.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“By picking my country, I turned my back to the world. And I’ve always wondered if spending my life in this closed-off paradise really is the right thing to do.”

“Are you saying you long for the outside world?”

“Not quite, Meiru. This isn’t about my desires. I’m speaking of the obligation that our race, the beastmen, has to the world.”

“Lyutillis... Were you planning on fighting with the church from the very start?” Naiz asked, his eyes wide. Smiling faintly, Lyutillis shook her head.

“I don’t mean anything quite so grand. Remember what I said before? If my surrender could stop this war, I’d gladly give myself up.”

“I see... You weren’t saying that out of self-sacrifice, but rather... Hahaha, I’m sorry. It seems I underestimated you, Lyu-chan.”

Miledi bowed her head in apology. Lyutillis reached out and gently patted her head.

“I see... You wanted to become a bridge between beastmen and humans, didn’t you? You were hoping that if you, the beastmen queen, went over to the church, you’d be able to convince both humans and beastmen to work together. You thought you could reform the church from the inside.”

“You were determined to fight too, just in a different way than us. Sorry... I misjudged you.”

“It’s fine. I realize now it was naive to cling to such a foolish dream. Please

don’t apologize. If anything, I’m at fault for being so ignorant.”

Lyutillis blushed in embarrassment, but no one derided her for having hope. They couldn’t. Her resolve to fight for her people’s future was nothing short of admirable. Miledi was especially moved. This was the first time she’d met anyone outside of the Liberators whose goal was to unite all the races of the world.

“I see. So that’s why you agreed to Badd’s proposal and guided us here.”

That also explained why Lyutillis had trusted Badd enough to let him visit the capital too. Of course she knew her subjects wouldn’t trust humans, so she’d treated Badd and the Liberators with caution on the surface, but in her heart she’d been ready to accept them all along.

“Why did you decide to tell us this?” Miledi asked, her emotions threatening to overflow. Still looking like a dignified queen, Lyutillis replied solemnly, “You said we could win this war, Miledi. But once we win, what should we do next? While you and the Liberators continue to oppose the church, what should we beastmen do?”

Lyutillis had finally come to an answer. Miledi had said the Liberators needed no reward for their assistance, but the beastmen of the republic weren’t so shameless as to let their benefactors leave empty-handed. So there was only one thing Lyutillis could do.

“Please, allow us to join you.”

The beastmen would join the Liberators’ struggle, both for the Liberators’ sake, and for the world’s. Tears welled up in Miledi’s eyes. This was the first time someone had offered to join her instead of her doggedly recruiting them. Meiru and Naiz smiled gently at Miledi. They knew how hard she’d worked to convince them, and what it meant to her to have someone offering to join of their own free will instead. Noticing their gazes, Miledi blushed. However, while Miledi was extremely moved by Lyutillis’ offer, she couldn’t ignore the practical problem it presented. Timidly, she asked, “Are you sure about this? Will the other beastmen really agree to—”

“They will. That was what this past month was for.”

“You mean...”

“There’s a reason I chose to use nicknames for all of you. Moreover, one of you is a hero who’s protected our forest from the church’s strongest foes, while another one of you is a saint who’s saved the lives of countless beastmen. Even you’ve made friends among my imperial guard, Naiz. Complaining about the recent changes in my behavior has helped you all bond, hasn’t it?”

“Y-You did that on purpose?”

Of course, Lyutillis knew it would be difficult to get the consent of all beastmen. But if she could get the most important people in the republic to trust humans, then she could at least stop them from refusing her request outright just because the Liberators was a group of humans. At the very least, Lyutillis was hoping that’s how things would go. After finishing her speech, Lyutillis elegantly sipped her black tea.

“Ahaha... I guess even if you’re scum, you’re still a queen,” Meiru muttered, impressed. Indeed, even after knowing all about Lyutillis’ quirks, she still looked regal to the Liberators.

“D-Did you just call me, a queen, scum...? Heh...”

Hang on, did our wise and resolute queen just blush? Panicking, Miledi hurriedly tried to think of a way to keep Lyutillis’ serious side around a few minutes longer.

“Umm, Queen Lyutillis Haltina. I am deeply grateful for your support. As the leader of the Liberators, I, Miledi Reisen, humbly accept your offer of aid. Truly, thank you.”

“No, thank you. You have brought a new wind to the stagnant republic.”

Smiling, Miledi and Lyutillis got to their feet and shook hands. Before their handshake ended, Lyutillis asked, “So now that we’ve gotten closer, there’s something I absolutely must ask you. What is your relationship with Oscar-san, Miledi-tan?”

“Are we really going back to that!? Look, we’re just friends! That’s all!”

“Is that really all?”

“Yes, there’s nothing between us!”

The serious atmosphere melted away, and Lyutillis went back to normal. Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she pressed Miledi for more details on her love life. Miledi turned to Meiru with tears in her eyes, begging the dagon woman to save her. Lyutillis’ grip was surprisingly tight, and Miledi couldn’t break free. Pervert though Lyutillis was, she was just as strong as any other ancient magic user.

“Lyu, Miledi-chan doesn’t want to talk about this... So make sure you grab her tight and don’t let her escape.”

“Meru-nee!?”

“As you wish, Onee-sama!”

“Wait, don’t listen to her, Lyu-chan! You dummy!”

“Fufu, no one’s called me a dummy to my face before.”

When she was like this, Lyutillis was invincible. Anything anyone did to try and stop her just made her happy. Everything from insults to kindness was converted into pleasure.

“Nacchaaaaaan!”

“Haaah... Fine. Hey Lyu, what about you? Is there anyone you’re interested in?”

Naiz did his best to throw Miledi a bone. Surprised by the sudden question, Lyutillis cocked her head.

“Since you’re the queen and all, haven’t your retainers tried to set up marriage interviews with other nobles or anything?”

“Oh yeah! Lyu-chan, are people bugging you about giving birth to an heir or anything? You’re old enough to have had a few suitors, right? Even that boring, straight-laced, fun-hating Laus Barn’s married, you know! And he even has a son!”

In an attempt to save herself, Miledi threw Laus’ reputation under the bus. Many miles away, Laus sneezed in the middle of the street. Meanwhile, Lyutillis smiled sadly and said, “Parsha did say she’d try and find someone willing to

accept the real me.”

“Oho! So, who’d she find!?”

When all was said and done, Miledi was a girl too. She was just as interested in love stories as Lyutillis.

“Did you forget what Parsha said about the number of people who know my secret?”

Parsha had said that only her and a few maids knew. Which naturally meant that despite searching the entire country, she hadn’t been able to find a single man willing to marry a masochist. Miledi and the others’ expressions stiffened. Lyutillis suddenly turned to Meiru. After a few seconds, her face went red.

“H-Hold on a second. Why are you blushing while looking at me?”

“Onee-sama. I’ve been thinking. Love transcends gender, doesn’t it?”

Meiru jumped to her feet and bolted away.

“Ah, where are you going, Onee-sama!? Wait for meeee!”

Lyutillis chased after Meiru with surprising agility. She also sent a cockroach swarm led by U-chan and a butterfly swarm led by Di-chan after Meiru, blocking off her avenues of escape. A gentle breeze wafted through the clearing.

“Hey Nacchan, you think Badd would be willing to marry Lyu-chan?”

“Is he secretly a sadist?”

“Nope.”

“Definitely not then.”

“Figures... Still, he’ll probably freak out anyway when he learns Lyu-chan’s into a girl.”

“Good luck keeping him in line, Leader.”

Miledi’s shoulders drooped, but then a second later her expression grew serious.

“The theocracy’s probably realized by now that they can’t push any further into the forest as long as we’re here.”

“Yeah, definitely.”

“Meaning she’ll definitely be showing up soon.”

“Agreed...”

The two of them were thinking about Hearst, the God’s Apostle that they’d fought in the desert.

“The mist barrier is practically impenetrable. But, knowing her...”

“Yeah, who knows what she’s capable of. Back in Andika she managed to disguise herself so well no one even noticed she was there... Well, that’s why I’m staying back here to guard Lyutillis.”

“Mhmm... I’m counting on you, Nacchan.”

Miledi thought back to the earth-shattering duel they’d had in the Crimson Desert, her expression solemn. Despite their best efforts, the three of them had lost. While Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz had succeeded in inflicting grave injuries on Hearst, it had cost them every last drop of their mana. On the other hand, Hearst had still been in fighting shape. It was obvious what the result would have been had their battle continued.

But for some reason, Hearst had retreated. She’d let them live. Technically the fact that they’d survived at all could be considered a victory, but Miledi and Naiz both knew they’d been defeated in terms of strength.

“We have to protect Lyu-chan, no matter what. We won’t let the church lay a finger on the republic.”

“Yeah.”

“Also—”

Miledi turned her gaze upward, giving the heavens a piercing glare. She gritted her teeth, her usual annoying attitude nowhere to be seen. Her eyes were burning with determination.

“This time, we’ll win. I’ll prove to the world that Miledi Reisen can stand up to god.”

She wouldn’t run. Nor would she let her foe escape. This time, Miledi Reisen

would prove once and for all that she could take down the symbol of Ehit's will, God's Apostle. It was time to send the whole world a message.

Naiz put a reassuring hand on Miledi's shoulder, indicating that he'd be there to fight with her. At the same time, he looked south, a hint of impatience in his expression. *Please hurry, Oscar, Van. The decisive battle is drawing near.* They would need everyone if they wanted to win against Hearst.

However, contrary to everyone's expectations, the battle the next day was not the finale they'd planned for. The church's knights and the Federation launched a very lukewarm assault and retreated at the slightest hint of danger.

Of course, the Liberators knew there was no way the theocracy's crazed zealots had lost their nerve. The concept of giving up didn't exist in their dictionary, meaning they had to be planning something.

Naiz couldn't leave Lyutillis' side, but he could still create portals to teleport people. And so after half a month of half-assed attacks by the church, Miledi decided to use one of those portals to infiltrate Agris and find out what was going on. However, it turned out there was no need for Miledi to go scouting. Because the day before she was planning on going, the Federation launched a full-scale assault using all 170,000 of their troops. They were clearly planning on ending things in one push, without any regard to what it might cost. Every one of the Federation's exhausted soldiers had a fanatic glint in their eyes that made it clear they would either emerge victorious or perish to the last man.

Chapter IV: Miledi Reisen’s True Mettle

That day, the battlefield was enveloped in a strange atmosphere. The earth trembled as 170,000 pairs of boots marched across the plains. Crazed shouts filled the air.

“Damn bastard!”

“Get off of me!”

The beastmen warriors faltered as they grappled with soldiers with bloodshot eyes. The federation’s troops charged the beastmen in groups of four, clinging to their targets with dogged resolve. They didn’t relent, even when they were stabbed through the heart or had their heads caved in. It was as if they didn’t feel any pain at all.

“No way, are they gonna sacrifice their allies aga—”

One of the beastmen said, panicking. While one soldier pinned him down, another group ran their spears through both of them, killing friend and foe alike. They let out a bestial howl as they thrust, seemingly not caring that they were killing an ally too.

“Gaaaah!?”

“Are you insa— Gwah!”

Spears lanced through the beastman from all sides.

“Ehit is with us!”

“There is no greater honor than martyrdom!”

Blood spilled from the skewered soldier’s mouth, but he smiled in satisfaction as he died. The other beastmen shivered in horror. In the last few fights, they’d seen a glimpse of how deep the Federation’s faith went. They’d been disgusted by the humans’ blind loyalty to Ehit, but they’d also felt pity for the deluded fools.

Before, even when their faith had taken precedence, the soldiers had still

retained some semblance of humanity. They'd feared death and gotten angry when their comrades were slain. But now—

What the hell... What's with these guys!? It's like they're not even human anymore! The human soldiers laughed as they died, even when it was their own comrades who were killing them.

"Outta my waaay!"

Just as the beastmen were about to break, Badd came leaping to their rescue. With one kick he scattered the Federation's soldiers, and as he landed he spun in a circle, swinging his scythe in a giant indigo arc. As a Liberator, Badd was honor-bound not to kill the soldiers. So his slice drained the mana of every soldier it passed through rather than cutting them in half. The Federation troops collapsed to the floor in an unconscious heap. They could ignore pain, but not the physiological exhaustion that came with having no mana. A second later a portal opened up above the nearly-dead beastman, and restorative orange light poured down on him, instantly curing his lethal injuries.

"Gah! Thanks for the save, Badd-dono!"

"Don't let your guard down! These guys are all even willing to blow themselves up to take you down. Be ready for anything!"

Cold sweat poured down Badd's forehead. His usual calm demeanor was nowhere to be seen.

"Meiru's burning through her mana fast! Even with Lyu's help, she won't last long, so try not to get hurt!"

"Gotcha! But these guys—"

Another wave of crazed soldiers charged recklessly toward the beastmen. The mist barrier was still active, but the federation simply had too many troops. Though they weren't employing any strategy at all, just by charging blindly into the fog and attacking anything they saw they were able to push the battle lines back. Worse, it wasn't just the Federation soldiers who'd thrown away all thoughts of self-preservation.

"Gaaaah!"

There was a loud thunderclap, and Valf suddenly hurtled into the clearing Badd was in. Blood spurted from numerous deep cuts, trailing in the air behind him. He made no move to soften his landing, and it looked like he was already unconscious.

“Goddamnit!”

Badd activated his body strengthening magic and jumped forward to catch Valf. There was a dry crackling noise, and a second later the beastman soldier Badd had saved from being skewered got decapitated. As did the dozen or so Federation soldiers that had been charging at them. Their heads sailed through the air like basketballs. Standing in the center of this carnage was Lilith. Lightning was covering every inch of her. She lowered her sword ominously at Badd.

“Plasma Thunder.”

Bolts of lightning shot out from her in every direction. The explosion of electricity was so bright it momentarily blinded Badd.

“Harvest it all— Egxess!”

Holding Valf in one hand, Badd spun his scythe to shield himself with the other. Egxess drained the mana from Lilith’s attack, neutralizing any bolts that came into contact with it. Lilith’s attack lasted only a few seconds. But those few seconds were more than enough to do some serious damage. By the time Badd could see again, there was nothing around him. The Federation soldiers and the beastmen had both been reduced to ash.

“Do your allies mean nothing to you? Guess I should have expected as much from the church.” Badd spat, his expression stiff. Lilith raised her head, looking up at him. There was a terrifying gleam in her eyes.

“I’m simply doing what needs to be done,” she muttered. If the fog made it impossible for her to aim her attacks, then the only solution was to obliterate everything in her vicinity. Her allies would receive the honor of martyrdom, while her enemies would receive the hammer of divine wrath.

“For the glory of God!”

This was Lilith Arkind’s true nature. However she was hardly unique, every

Templar Knight was like this. There was another flash of light, and Lilith appeared behind Badd. She'd used electromagnetism to accelerate herself to superhuman speeds. Fortunately, Badd was used to dealing with superhumans.

"Egxess!"

He whirled around, his scythe leaving an indigo trail as he swung it at Lilith. Before the mana-eating blade could reach her, though, she disappeared in another flash. She reappeared a good distance away and incinerated another group of beastmen and Federation soldiers who were locked in combat around her. She continued jumping around the battlefield, killing everything she approached, regardless of whether it was friend or foe. As Badd, who was immune to the mist's effects, chased her down, orange light poured down on the wolfman in his arms.

"Ngh, Badd! Sorry, I fucked up. Where'd that bitch go!?"

Badd held out a hand to silence Valf and activated the earring transmitter Artifact he'd received from Miledi.

"Lyu, get rid of the mist around Lilith!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah! She's started blasting away indiscriminately. I'd rather her aim straight for me than have her hopping around randomly!"

"Very well. But be careful."

A second later, the mist vanished in a 200-meter dome around Badd. Confused, the beastmen in the area all stopped moving for a second. While everyone was still getting their bearings, Badd sucked in a breath and shouted in a voice louder than Lilith's thunder, "Retreat! I'll take care of things here! Just don't let any of the other knights come here!"

That was enough for the beastmen to realize that Lyutillis had created a dueling arena for Badd and Lilith.

The beastmen quickly disengaged from the Federation soldiers and started mobbing the Templar Knights around Lilith.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?"

But before they could tackle the knights some invisible force sent them all flying backward.

“Fugyaa!?”

At the same time, Sui flew into the clearing, blood spraying from her wounds. Valf hurriedly grabbed her before she could fall, and a portal appeared to rain orange light down on her.

“Jeez! What’s wrong with you, Valf-san!? You can’t just get beaten up and leave me to fend for myself! If you’re going to get cut down anyway, you should have at least been my meat shield! I thought I was gonna die back there!”

“Well *sorry* for leaving you alone, you worthless rabbit.”

Sui was surprisingly energetic for someone who had a hole in her stomach, even if it was being healed. Valf gave her a sarcastic apology, but he didn’t push the issue. There were bigger problems at hand.

“You dispelled the mist protecting you? Fools.”

Another knight stepped into the arena, his body hazy and indistinct. As he cleared the mist, his silhouette grew more solid, until he finally regained physical form. The newcomer was Zebal, the commander of the Templar Knights’ third division.

“Zebal... Get the knights out of here! I’m going to continue my indiscriminate charge! Send only Federation soldiers into this arena!”

“Roger!”

Zebal nodded and stretched his arms out in front of him. A second later they transformed into a colorless liquid and started absorbing nearby moisture. He spread his water tentacle-arms around the edge of the arena, creating a ring. *Why are they only sacrificing Federation soldiers?* Before the beastmen had time to even ask that question, Lilith resumed her lightning barrage.

“Oh no you don’t!”

“You’ll have to get through us first!”

“I hate thiiiiis! I wanna go hooooooome!”

Badd blocked Lilith's lightning with his scythe while Valf ducked low and charged toward Zebal. Amidst the confusion, Sui vanished.

Valf swiped at Zebal with his gauntleted claws. At the same time, he activated his special magic, Float Field. Losing one's balance during a close-combat encounter was fatal, so Valf's ability was one of the most powerful ones out there. Unfortunately, Zebal's special magic was perfectly equipped to handle it. Right before Valf struck, he used Liquefaction to turn himself into water. As a liquid, he didn't have to worry about his balance being affected. However, Valf hadn't been expecting such a simple attack to work in the first place.

"Die, you fucker!"

"Tch. Not you again."

Sui suddenly appeared next to Zebal and threw a flask at him. The green liquid contained within would easily dissolve into his aqueous form. Naturally, that liquid was poison. It was a very special toxin Sui had created by mixing poisons harvested from plants with poisons harvested from monsters. The venom was deadly enough to bring down an elephant. Though liquifying himself protected Zebal from physical attacks, his true atomic composition was still that of a regular human—meaning poison could still kill him. He instantly canceled his Liquefaction and dodged out of the way of the flask. But as he dodged, Valf's claws came up to meet him. However, Zebal hadn't reached the rank of third division commander by virtue of his magic alone. He was highly skilled with his daggers, and by combining his abilities with body strengthening magic, he was able to weather Valf's onslaught. That being said, he had been pinned down by Valf and Sui's combo attacks. "Get out of here, you guys! And make sure the Federation soldiers can't get in here!" Valf shouted.

"R-Roger!"

As a result, Zebal was unable to fulfill his orders, and the beastmen were able to escape the duel arena.

"You're not getting awaaaaaay!"

Lilith tried to chase after the retreating beastmen, but Badd easily blocked her path.

“Hold your horses!”

“Ngh, damned Knight Hunter! Stop getting in my way!”

Just as Lilith tried to activate her lightning acceleration, Badd sliced at her feet, forcing her to dodge backward. In that brief span of time, the beastmen had successfully completed their retreat. However, Lilith was determined to massacre as many beastmen as possible, and tried to jump into the fog.

“Sorry, but you’re not getting past here.”

“Curse you!”

But like before, Badd predicted her trajectory and swiped down at where she’d end up. He was reading her movements perfectly.

“How many times do you think we’ve fought over this past month? Only an idiot wouldn’t have your tells figured out by now.”

Whenever Lilith activated her superspeed, she had a habit of sending a single spark in the direction she intended to go. With the mist gone, she followed that trajectory perfectly, making it simple for Badd to read her.

“You haven’t won yet!”

Lilith snarled. It galled her to no end that Badd was good enough to keep her in check. But at the same time, Badd was frustrated that he couldn’t land a decisive blow on Lilith. The commander of the Templar Knights was still skilled enough to defend against any fatal attacks Badd might attempt. Moreover, Badd had his hands full making sure Lilith didn’t kill his allies.

See, this is why I tell everyone the Knight Hunter title’s just an exaggeration. Badd thought, a rueful smile appearing on his face. He couldn’t use any special magic, and his affinity for regular magic was mediocre at best. In that respect, Badd Virtus was as average as they come. But after going through years of hellish training and making it through dozens of battlefields, Badd had finally built up enough skill to fight on the same level as natural-born geniuses. If there was one thing he had confidence in, it was his own grit and ingenuity. Which was why—

“Vaaaaaaalf! I could use some help here!”

“So could I, you moron!”

He opted to switch targets. Lilith and Zebal had been so focused on their respective opponents, that they hadn’t considered the possibility that they’d have to face anyone else. So Badd and Valf swapped places to grab the upper hand.

“Wha—!?”

“Damned Knight Hunter!”

Valf’s Float Field successfully threw Lilith off-balance, while Badd’s scythe cut right through the liquid Zebal, stealing his mana. Naturally, Sui didn’t let this opportunity slip past her either.

“I hate overtime!”

“Ngh!”

Despite her complaining, Sui still reappeared next to Lilith and drove a poisoned dagger into her flank. Lilith and Zebal staggered backward, gravely wounded. But just as Badd and the others moved in to deal the decisive blow—

“Don’t underestimate me— Volt Blast!”

“Pure Mist!”

Lilith raised her sword into the air, calling down a storm of thunder and lightning that blinded and deafened Badd and the others.

“Valf, Sui!”

Badd twirled his scythe over his head to defend himself from the barrage of lightning. Egxess glowed indigo as its whirling blade ate up every bolt of lightning it touched. Soon enough, Valf and Sui came to hide underneath his umbrella of protection.

“What the heck? That poison should have killed her! What’s that gorilla lady made of!?”

Sui couldn’t believe Lilith had enough strength left to call down an attack this powerful. Between blasts of lightning, Badd caught a glimpse of what was restoring her strength. Both her and Zebal were guzzling down a pale blue

liquid. Lilith's ashen complexion became full of vitality again while Zebal's numerous wounds vanished. Badd hadn't expected them to use the legendary medicine the church gave out only to those of commander rank or higher, Ambrosia. Of course, Lilith and Zebal were livid over the fact that they'd been forced to waste one of their biggest trump cards here, but Badd and the others were getting truly desperate now. Everything they'd worked for until now had just been undone. Sui's eyes were glazed over while Valf was grinding his teeth so hard they were cracking.

"Uwooooooooooooooh!"

"You've got this, Badd!"

"I'm sick of this! You better protect me with your life, Badd!"

Badd groaned as lightning rained down on him. Even with Egxess, he was having a hard time absorbing everything. *If I can't absorb it all, I'll send some of it back at you!*

"It's reaping time— Egxess!"

Countless blades shot out from Egxess, offsetting Lilith's lightning bolts. As he started pushing them back, Badd forced open a path toward Lilith.

"Valf!"

"Roger!"

Valf dashed through the narrow opening. But Zebal, who'd insulated himself by turning himself into pure water, moved to block his path.

"I won't let you harm the commander."

"Please just die already! You're making my job harder!"

Sui leaped up in front of Zebal and slashed at him with her poisoned daggers. Zebal blocked with his own daggers, and there was a loud metallic screech as their weapons clashed. Valf took advantage of the brief opening to close the gap between him and Lilith. He launched a barrage of slashes at her, using Float Field to disorient her. But while that successfully stopped Lilith's lightning storm, they weren't out of the woods yet.

"Rwooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!"

A litany of battle cries echoed through the arena. The Federation's soldiers had finally broken their way in. There were so many of them they looked like a writhing swarm.

"Sorry, Captain Valf! But we can't stop 'em!"

"They're using their dead comrades' corpses as battering rams to push through!"

"They won't stop even when we crush their bones! It's like they don't feel any pain!"

The beastmen chased after the swarm of soldiers, but they were all covered in wounds. Moreover, no matter how many soldiers they cut down from behind, there were just too many federation troops pouring in. Within seconds, the hordes of Federation soldiers had reached Valf and the others' battlefield.

"Get the Knight Hunter!" Lilith screamed.

"Damn bitch!" Valf shouted as he dodged the snake-like bolts of lightning Lilith shot at him. While Valf was occupied, the soldiers were all able to focus on Badd. Badd quickly reversed Egxess' rotation and started hitting the soldiers with the flat side of his blade. The force of his blows was enough to knock his enemies unconscious, and if their supernatural resistance to pain let them endure that, the mana drain that came after caused them to collapse anyway. But then Lilith grabbed one of the soldiers to use as a meat shield and started advancing on Badd.

"You can't kill these guys, can you!? You coward!"

"Shut up! What's cowardly is what you're doing!"

So this is why she only wanted to let Federation soldiers through. Knowing he couldn't kill the soldiers, Badd dodged out of Lilith's way. However, Lilith predicted his movements. She tossed her hostage aside and circled around him using her superhuman acceleration. Wreathing her blade in lightning, she slashed at Badd's back.

Shit! Honestly, her slash wasn't a huge threat. Badd could deflect it easily enough. But there was so much lightning shooting off her blade that some of the sparks ended up hitting Badd. Though they did no damage on their own,

they caused his muscles to spasm for a split second. And in that second, Lilith unleashed a follow-up slash that he had no hope of dodging.

“Shaaaaaaaaaaa!”

But before her swing could land, Valf slid in between the two of them and slashed at Lilith’s legs. He scored only a glancing blow, but it was enough to slow Lilith down for a moment. And a moment was all Badd needed. He twirled around, slamming Egxess into the ground, and using the recoil to push him out of harm’s way. As he pulled Egxess back out of the earth, he sent a barrage of dirt Lilith’s way. Luckily for him, the dirt actually got into Lilith’s eyes, distracting her for a moment. At that moment, he sent countless blades of mana out of his scythe to render the surrounding Federation soldiers unconscious. Earning himself a brief moment of reprieve, Badd quickly caught his breath. Valf disengaged as well and came to stand beside him. Sui, as always, had vanished. She was likely waiting for another opportunity to strike. Keeping his attention focused on Lilith and Zebal, Badd muttered apologetically, “Sorry... I know I’m holding you guys back because of my dumb hangups.”

This was a war zone. Even if Badd wasn’t forcing his ideals on the other beastmen, it didn’t change the fact that by all rights he deserved to be ridiculed for his choice to not kill the Federation soldiers. However, Valf harrumphed dismissively and said, “Don’t call it a ‘hangup.’ That’s one of your treasured ideals, isn’t it? Then stick to it. I wouldn’t wanna fight alongside some scumbag who’d easily give up on what they believe in anyway.”

“I see...”

Badd’s lips curled up into a fearless smile. Valf smiled back at him. These two had completely different creeds and upbringings. But they respected each other enough to entrust their lives to one another. Even though they were human and beastman. This was exactly the kind of future the Liberators were fighting for.

“Blasphemous!”

“Your very existence is a blight upon this world!”

Lilith and Zebal were disgusted by the trust they saw between Badd and Valf. But Badd and Valf didn’t seem perturbed by their insults.

“Hey, Badd. If you’re stuck fighting these fools you won’t be able to hunt down those knights, will you? What good’s the famous Knight Hunter if he’s not killing knights?”

“Yeah, it really is pathetic. Especially since I came here to help you fight the church and all.”

The two of them bantered playfully. As expected, their easygoing attitude infuriated Lilith and Zebal. The two knights were determined to force Badd to his knees and make him beg for forgiveness. Unfortunately, the heretics they were facing were strong. Overwhelmingly so. They despised Badd and Valf, but what they despised even more was their own inability to eradicate these heretics. But that was about to change.

“Huh? What’s going on?”

Badd was the first to notice. The white mist above the dome seemed to be growing brighter. It was almost as if some glowing entity was passing through the sky above the mist. A second later, there was a thunderous explosion. Shockwaves rippled across the earth and sky. They came from the east.

“What the hell was that!?”

“Wait, don’t tell me—”

Badd, Valf, and all the other beastmens’ jaws dropped open. Meanwhile, Lilith just smiled.

“Looks like your time’s finally up. For Ehit!”

Now that they no longer had to worry about the Child of God’s safety, the church could bomb the Pale Forest without reserve. And that bombing had finally begun.

On the other side of the plains, Sim’s personal soldiers were locked in a fierce battle with the main force of the federation’s soldiers, who were being led by Detref himself. Like the soldiers Badd had faced, these troops also cared nothing for their lives and threw themselves wholeheartedly into suicidal charges. Roars and screams filled the battlefield as the beastmen desperately tried to hold back the tide of federation soldiers. However, two particular battle

cries rang out louder than the rest.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Uwooooooooooh!”

One of those two was Sim; the other was Detref. Both men stood nearly three meters tall and were armored in a wall of muscle. Every time they clashed, it felt like elephants ramming into each other. Detref’s weapon was a claymore that was nearly as tall as he was. It was so heavy that normal humans couldn’t even lift it, much less swing it around. Detref needed a huge dose of body strengthening magic to use it himself. Shockwaves strong enough to bowl people over rippled outward every time his sword clashed with Sim’s halberd.

“Haaaaah!”

Detref slashed diagonally downward at Sim. Sim swung his halberd up in response. Even with Lyutillis’ evolution magic, Sim’s arms wouldn’t be able to handle the impact, so he bolstered his block with Shock Wall as well. He redirected the majority of Detref’s force downward, into the ground, blunting the blow.

“Graaaah!”

As the ground cracked underneath Sim’s feet, he went on the offensive, swinging his halberd sideways. Even if Detref blocked Sim’s blow, he could use Shock Wall to transfer the impact into the king’s internal organs. However, Detref was no fool. It wasn’t a fluke that he’d survived on the battlefield for so long. With superhuman agility, he cartwheeled away, dodging the halberd by a hair’s breadth. While he was still upside-down, he also launched a counterattack. Sim blocked it with the halberd’s handle, but Detref slid his blade up the long pole, trying to cut Sim’s fingers off.

“Tch.”

Clicking his tongue, Sim let go of his weapon. Without his halberd, he had no way of blocking Detref’s next swing. Which was why he wasn’t planning to give Detref time to attack again. He launched himself forward, manipulating the impact of his foot leaving the ground and transferring its energy into his arm.

“Nnnngh!”

He punched Detref in the solar plexus, his fist sinking in deep. However, Detref was more flexible than one might assume from his heavy frame. He leaned back with the force of the blow, allowing himself to be blown away. That blunted the force of Sim's punch, and he was able to land safely a short distance away.

"I'm surprised. You're pretty good, human," Sim said surprisingly softly as he picked up his halberd.

He wasn't trying to insult Detref. Sim honestly was impressed by the king's skills.

As this was the theater with the heaviest fighting, Lyutillis had already made sure the fog was as thick as possible here. Even in close combat, the human soldiers' sense of direction and distance was being warped. And yet, Detref was able to execute complex acrobatic maneuvers flawlessly in this fog. The only way that was possible was if he was completing them on reflex, since the fog could only interfere with willful actions.

That meant that Detref had accumulated a truly massive amount of experience on the battlefield, allowing him to fight entirely instinctively. He'd reached martial enlightenment and could fight without thought. As insane as it was, he was able to nullify the fog's disorienting effects as long as he was engaged in close combat.

"If you're this strong, why didn't you come to the front lines earlier?"

"Heh. Leaders of armies aren't meant to fight on the front lines, you know," Detref replied with a rueful smile. Unlike his crazed soldiers, he seemed in full command of his mental faculties.

"I knew it, you haven't gone insane. But you're having your insane soldiers kill themselves for victory..."

Sim couldn't believe it. *Are his men just pawns to him?* Of course, Sim wasn't foolish enough to show sympathy to the enemy soldiers. But as a warrior, he couldn't believe someone walking down the same path as him could be so heartless.

Detref's smile grew sad and he said, "The die has already been cast. This is...

what god wishes for."

At that moment, he just looked like a tired old man. Sim narrowed his eyes. The man in front of him was a pure-blooded warrior, just like him. Moreover, he was just like Badd. Despite possessing no special abilities of note, he'd trained himself up to the point where he could go toe to toe with talented geniuses. And yet, a man of his caliber had seemingly given up.

"You poor soul..."

"There's no need to pity me. It's surprisingly freeing, being released from my responsibilities."

Detref thought back to the beautiful oracle he'd met that day. Her words, her demeanor, had changed him to a surprising degree. He was no longer commander of the Odion Federation's army. He wasn't even a king. Right now, he was just a simple soldier. Which was why he was willing to risk his life in this battle. As a soldier, as a warrior, it was his greatest wish to fight a worthy foe.

"Now take your stance, beastman general. I will defeat you and carve open a path for my comrades."

"Very well. But first, at least tell me your name. Your strength deserves to be remembered."

For a moment Detref wavered. He'd never expected a beastman, someone who was supposed to despise and disparage humans, to ask him for his name. But while it came as a surprise, Detref wasn't offended by the question. In fact, he found he didn't even hate this beastman. He thought back to the bishops who'd always disparaged beastmen and called them mongrel heretics during council meetings. While he hadn't been as crass about it, his feelings for beastmen had been more or less the same. But now he was facing off against a beastman who sympathized with his plight and also respected his valor as a warrior. *What a joke. My whole life up until now has been one big farce! To think I discriminated against beastmen simply for being beastmen.* Strength, both of body and of mind, was what determined a true warrior. Paltry things like race didn't matter at all. For the first time in decades, Detref could feel his blood start to boil. Pouring his passion into his words, he said, "Detref. My name is Detref Ernst. I am but a humble warrior."

“Sim Gato. Commander of the republic’s armies.”

Detref and Sim smiled fearlessly at each other. The racial divide between the two of them no longer mattered. They fought not out of discrimination or hatred, but for their own ideals. Both men raised their treasured weapons high. Their bodies blazed with fighting spirit. But just as the two of them were about to clash—

“Purify everything— Divine Blaze.”

“Tear him to pieces, Vanadis!”

“Repent, sinners— Arrows of Atonement!”

A dome of fire spread out around the two combatants, clearing away the mist in a ten-meter radius around them. At the same time, a pure white wolf rushed at Sim from behind while a steel arrow came at him from the side. By the time he turned around, the wolf’s jaws were close enough to blot out everything else. He quickly raised his halberd to defend, but he was too late. The wolf’s jaws ripped through his flank, while the steel arrow pierced his left thigh. The arrow ripped right through his leg and shot through his right thigh as well, leaving a trail of blood as it flew past.

“Ngghh!”

While his halberd was keeping the wolf’s jaws from ripping out his flank entirely, the arrow’s damage caused his legs to give out. Unable to push the wolf back, he was sent flying as the wolf tossed its head. As he sailed through the air, Sim spotted his new enemies. A female knight wielding a magnificent bow—one of the Holy Templar Knights brigade commanders, Lelaie Argeson—and a man who was panting heavily—the vice commander of the Holy Templar Knights, Araym Orcman. Aside from those two, there was also the knight riding the giant white wolf. He had short, blue hair, narrow, slit-like eyes, and a scar on his cheek, and he looked to be in his mid-thirties. He was obviously one of the Paragons of Light, and he had a sturdy steel spear in his hands.

“Pay for your sins— Holy Lance!”

He thrust his spear forward with blistering speed. As he did, motes of light began to gather around the spear’s tip. This man, Godel Goth, was the vice-

commander of the Paragons of Light. His affinity for light magic was exceptionally high, and his skills as a spearman were top-class. There was nothing his Holy Lance couldn't pierce. Time seemed to slow for Sim as he watched the spear's tip grow closer. He knew instinctively that Godel's attack would kill him. He shivered as he watched his death draw closer.

"General!"

A lone arrow came out of the blue. It traveled just as fast as Lelaie's had, and it pierced Sim's shoulder, tearing through both flesh and bone. Though it dealt Sim a grievous wound, it forcibly moved him out of the lance's trajectory, saving his life.

"Thanks, Nascis! You saved my life!" Sim shouted as he landed on his knees. Nascis Fluke, the elven 1000-man infantry captain, slowly lowered his bow, cold sweat pouring down his forehead.

"All units, support the general! Squads one through three, focus your fire on the flame user, the bow user, and the spear user!"

Nascis swiftly barked out orders and started shooting his bow as fast as he could. With each shot, he fired a total of nine arrows. Each of those arrows were aimed perfectly at either Araym, Lelaie, or Godel's vitals. Nascis' skill was so godlike it might as well have been magic. The rest of his archers followed their captain's example and started firing volley after volley. The other knights who weren't being targeted by Nascis' squad rushed the beastmen.

"Alright you louts, it's time to show what you're made of! Protect Nascis' men with your lives!" an old dwarf shouted, his voice bellowing across the battlefield. Despite his age, he didn't look the least bit frail. Though he was quite short, his muscles were a match for Detref and Sim. He was the commander of the beastmen's heavy infantry, Gou Bacchus. Among his peers, he was known as the iron fortress for his sturdy defensive fighting style, and he, along with his men, quickly raised their tower shields to form a shield wall in front of Nascis' archers. Most of the Celestial Flashes unleashed by the Templar Knights missed their mark entirely, but those that didn't were stopped cold by Gou's wall of steel. Meanwhile, other beastmen took care of the federation soldiers who were rushing in.

Seeing that Nascis' squad couldn't be dealt with right away, Araym was forced to focus his fire on shooting down arrows, while Lelaie fought back with her own archery. Godel used his wolf's agility to dance out of the way of the barrage, using his spear to block any arrows that got too close. Even though all three of them were being pelted with hundreds of arrows a second, their superhuman skills allowed them to prevent even one from hitting. That being said, they were forced to remain entirely on the defensive, and so couldn't focus on Sim.

Annoyed, Godel shouted, "Detref, what're you doing!? Hurry up and kill that brute!"

At long last, Detref had found a worthy opponent. But just as he'd been preparing for the duel of his life, he'd been blindsided by the appearance of Araym and the others. Though their arrival hadn't caught him totally by surprise, he'd been at a loss for what to do. Sighing, he watched as a deluge of orange light poured down on Sim, healing his wounds. The former king hefted his massive claymore onto his shoulder.

"Sorry, but that's just how war is," he said somewhat apologetically.

"Don't sweat it. I know," Sim replied casually, and Detref gave him a sad smile.

Yeah... This beastman's definitely more human than any of the humans I've been around lately. He couldn't even say that aloud to Sim, for fear of being branded a heretic. So he clamped down on his feelings and dashed forward. But before he could reach Sim, a flash of light illuminated the fog overhead.

Sim and Detref looked up in surprise, while Godel and the others jubilantly shouted, "Finally!"

A second later, an explosion loud enough to rupture eardrums resounded throughout the battlefield. Nascis and the other archers stopped shooting momentarily, utterly shocked.

In a pained voice, Sim shouted, "Wait, are they bombing the forest!?"

As he spoke, successive explosions rippled out from the forest. Thanks to their enhanced hearing, the beastmen were more or less able to pinpoint the

location of the explosions. They knew the church was bombing the area around the Grand Tree.

“Impossible...are they attacking from outside the barrier’s range!? But that means they’re kilometers away...”

Judging by the flashes of light shooting overhead, Sim had deduced that the Paragons of Light were having their dragons fire at the Grand Tree from a distance, rather than dropping bombs from directly overhead. However, they wouldn’t be able to aim within the fog. A concentrated barrage would be impossible. If they were firing from within the fog, most of their attacks would land near the edge of the forest. Meaning they had to be firing from outside the fog’s effective radius. While the church had plenty of powerful knights, the only people capable of causing such destruction at such range should be Mulm and his dragon Adra’s breath. And the two of them were supposed to be fighting Miledi. There was no way Miledi would let them out of her sight long enough to allow them to start bombing.

Let us rewind time to a few minutes before the bombing began. While the beastmen were struggling on the ground, Miledi was locked in a fierce duel in the air. As always, she was facing Laus, who was being supported by Mulm and Adra, as well as a number of Holy Templar Knights and Paragons of Light.

Their lineup’s a bit different today... They brought out less of their strong captains, but there’s twice as many of them now. Despite being in the middle of a life-and-death struggle with Laus, Miledi was still able to calmly analyze her situation. Like Badd, she’d asked Lyutillis to remove the fog around her to prevent the knights’ attacks from accidentally hitting other people. As a result, Laus didn’t need Araym’s Divine Blaze to keep the area clear, and Lelaie’s arrows weren’t as powerful as Mulm’s anyway, so she wouldn’t be missed. However, their absence only made Miledi more worried. As Laus and Miledi knocked each other away, Mulm fired a blisteringly fast barrage of arrows at her, forcing her to use gravity magic to strike them down.

“Oh my, it’s hard being this popular! Boys, boys, I know you’re all smitten with me, but you shouldn’t spend all your time pining after me!” Miledi taunted, provocatively raising her skirt. Naturally, she didn’t forget her ultra-

annoying smile.

As expected, her taunts got a rise out of the knights, and they started shouting things like “Don’t get so full of yourself!” and “Laugh while you still can!” *While I still can? What’s that supposed to mean? Do they have some plan to deal with me?*

“You’re wide open,” Laus said flatly. Indeed, Miledi had let herself get distracted for a second too long. For the second time this month, Laus slipped around to her side and smashed her ribs with a well-placed hammerblow. As she flew through the air, a barrage of arrows chased after her. They rained down from above in a torrent so thick, it covered the sun. Mulm was probably thinking it’d be harder for Miledi to knock them all down with gravity if gravity was bringing them towards her. At the same time, two hundred dragons unleashed their breath attacks from below, cutting off her avenue of retreat. At the center was a ten-meter wide aurora of light— Adra’s breath.

“Don’t underestimate the power of a genius mage— Spatial Severance!”

The two orbs circling around Miledi wouldn’t be able to deflect everything. So she created another swirling vortex of gravity to absorb Adra’s aurora. It contained so much energy that it nearly ruptured her Spatial Severance, but it held. With the aurora gone, Miledi was free to fall toward the ground. As she did so, she used her remaining gravity spheres to either redirect or absorb any breath attacks or arrows that got too close. She then quickly reoriented herself as she spotted Laus chasing after her out of the corner of her eye. Using her transmitter earring, she contacted Meiru and shouted, “Meru-nee!”

“I’m already on it, Miledi-chan!”

Another volley of arrows, breath attacks, and a lone aurora beam shot toward her. Laus continued closing in on her, weaving through the barrage. The 300 Holy Templar Knights formed up in a ring around the edge of the arena, ensuring Miledi couldn’t try and escape into the fog. Miledi continued dodging the endless assault, trying to buy herself time until Meiru was ready. Seconds later, a gentle orange rain fell upon her, healing her battered body. As always, Meiru had Miledi’s back. However this time, Meiru’s healing came with a warning.

“Miledi-chan, try not to get more hurt! I kind of have my hands full right now!”

“What’s happening on the ground!?”

It was Lyutillis who answered. She’d been keeping an eye on the overall situation from Naiz’s portals, so she had a better grasp of things than Meiru.

“We’re being pushed back. Moreover, the battle lines are getting stretched to the north and the south. The enemy’s sending even their most wounded to attack us.”

“What...? Why would they...?”

“Our casualties are mounting. Most of our men aren’t able to retreat to Onee-sama’s field hospital in time.”

“No wonder Meru-nee’s having a hard time— Whoa!”

Miledi just barely avoided Laus’ next swing, then struck down his follow-up Soul Shock with a gravity wave. Much like Miledi, Laus was constantly being showered with healing magic from his allies to keep him in perfect shape. As Miledi attempted to re-establish her telepathic link with Meiru and the others, she launched a barrage of Celestial Flashes in all directions.

Though each of her thousand light shockwaves were small, they had as much power as a Celestial Flash unleashed by a Holy Templar Knight. The knights were both nonplussed and enraged. Their anger harmed their coordination, allowing Miledi to slip through the gaps in their attacks.

“Miledi-tan, I’m going to pull the battle lines back.”

“But won’t that mean the forest will take damage? Didn’t you say regenerating parts of the forest takes a ton of mana?”

“We have Onee-sama so that shouldn’t be as much of a problem. Though it irks me to grant them a foothold into the forest, I fear we have little choice right now.”

“Gotcha... Well, my job hasn’t changed at least! I just have to distract as many _”

“You’re far too careless,” Laus muttered, interrupting Miledi.

“Wha—!?”

Miledi hadn’t actually let her guard down. She’d been keeping an eye on Laus this whole time. In fact, she could still see him glaring at her a short distance away. And yet, that voice had come from behind her. Feeling goosebumps rising on her arms, Miledi turned around. As she did so, she felt an impact on her chest. A translucent Laus had just buried his palm into her ribs.

“Soul Purge!”

“Ah!?”

Miledi could hear Naiz and Lyutillis screaming something into her ear, but she couldn’t make the words out. All of her five senses felt like they’d been dampened. It was like she’d lost control of her own body. There was one thing she was sure of though. *I-Is that me!?* And that was that she was looking at her own body. Somehow, she was standing behind *herself.* She had no idea what was going on. However, she couldn’t move her body at all, meaning she was utterly defenseless. Panic spread through her and she desperately tried to move, but not only was she paralyzed, her magic had also been canceled too. Without her gravity magic, Miledi started falling.

“I finally caught you.”

The translucent Laus vanished while the real one came forward and bound Miledi’s limp body with chains of light. At the same time, chains of pure black mana bound Miledi’s other body, the one looking at the real her. This was the one that currently housed her consciousness, and it was translucent.

“Huh? What? How?”

Looking down, Miledi noticed her hands, feet, and body were all glowing a pale, sky-blue, and were partially see-through.

“Wh-What did you—!?”

“I separated your soul from your body,” Laus said gruffly, panting as he held the light chains in one hand and the dark chains in the other. The spirit magic Laus had used, Soul Purge, allowed him to force a person’s soul out of their body. He’d used Solid Specter to project his own soul behind Miledi, then used his real body as bait while his spirit closed in on her.

“But you never used a skill like this be—”

“I only just perfected it last night. Did you think I was just playing around for this past half month?”

Miledi gritted her teeth at that. She couldn’t believe how careless she’d been. But what hurt even more was the look in Laus’ eyes. He was disappointed in her. She’d told him she’d show him hope, that she’d prove he could live his life the way he wanted to, but then she’d gone and lost spectacularly. Of course she’d been one against many, and she’d started getting complacent because she was starting to get used to their movements, and she’d been a little distracted because the assault today had been out of the ordinary. There were plenty of factors that had contributed to her defeat, but in the end, they were all excuses. The fact of the matter was that Laus had taken advantage of those little openings she’d shown and thoroughly trounced her. Miledi desperately tried to return to her own body, but the black chains, which were likely another manner of spirit magic, held her fast. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Mulm and the other knights cheering as they approached Laus.

“What are you...”

...planning on doing to me? Before she could finish her thought, Laus looked south and said in a monotone voice, “It’s over. Your dream of a free world... only led to needless sacrifices.”

Miledi opened her mouth to argue, but when she saw what was coming from the south, her words died in her throat. A storm of meteors blew past Miledi and Laus, blasting a hole through the mist barrier protecting the forest. Upon closer inspection, Miledi realized the meteors were actually balls of glowing blue fire. Each one was easily ten meters in diameter, and Miledi suddenly understood that they were all Azure Blazes, the strongest fire spell.

But they weren’t ordinary Azure Blazes. An expert like Miledi could tell at a glance that each Azure Blaze had the mana of ten packed into one, and was wrapped in wind magic that helped guide the missiles over a long-range. There was only one place that raised mages strong enough to craft such spells.

“This is... the Grandort Empire’s doing!”

Miledi’s former homeland. As she’d once been a Grandort noble, she

naturally knew what kind of siege magic its best mages were capable of.

“The other Liberators are protecting the queen, aren’t they? Meaning even if we burn the forest down, they’ll keep her safe.”

“Ngh... I see. Nacchan, you have to protect Lyu-chan!” Miledi’s ghostly body shouted. But as her earring was on her real body, naturally her pleas went unheard.

A second later, shockwaves rippled across the battlefield as the fireballs made impact. The explosions blew away the mist around the forest.

“Ngh! Gah! Miledi! Are you okay!? Say something! The enemy’s to the south! Can you hear me!?” Naiz shouted. He’d opened a portal next to Miledi to let his voice reach her directly. It seemed he’d blocked the first volley with his spatial barriers. The fog had been removed voluntarily by Lyutillis too, to help Miledi see where her foes were. Miledi directed her gaze far to the south and saw over a hundred airships arrayed in three vertical rows heading toward the forest. All of the airships were flying the Grandort Empire’s flags from their mainmasts. Their sails were engraved with massive magic circles, and those sails were all radiating light. These were the empire’s famous siege warships.

“Miledi!? Did he beat you!? What happened!?”

It was only after looking through the portal that Naiz realized what kind of state Miledi was in.

“Nacchan! Don’t worry about me, just keep the capital safe!”

Unfortunately, her words were much quieter in her spirit form, and Naiz couldn’t hear her. It was a struggle to even maintain her form, much less affect the physical world. *If a person’s true power lies in their soul, then I should be able to do something, right!? Now’s the time to unlock your hidden potential, Miledi Reisen!* But no matter how hard she struggled, no hidden wellspring of power gushed forth. While she did feel like there was some untapped well of power inside her, she didn’t seem able to access it. Fortunately, her expression conveyed what she wanted to say well enough, and Naiz momentarily gritted his teeth, unsure of what to do.

“So that’s where she is?” Laus muttered, sensing Lyutillis’ presence through

the portal Naiz had opened. Realizing he was leaking info to the enemy, he quickly closed the gate.

“Good work, Laus. I knew you’d capture that heretic eventually! Allow me to bear witness as you pass divine judgment onto her!” Mulm said excitedly as he flew over to Laus.

He and the other knights looked at Miledi with a fanatical gleam in their eyes. One of the knights started chanting “Punish the heretic!” and the others soon picked it up. Laus manipulated the chains, raising Miledi’s spirit body and her real body until they were resting in front of him. She was being lifted up like a prisoner being brought to the gallows. Or in her case, a martyr being brought to the cross.

Laus and Miledi faced each other. From her peripheral vision, Miledi could see the airships readying a second volley.

“Do you have any last words?” Laus asked, his eyes devoid of emotion.

Miledi’s real body was slumped over, but her spirit resolutely met his gaze. Laus narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing her expression. Even though she was about to be killed, she seemed oddly composed. And though she was just a translucent ghost now, her sky-blue eyes were shimmering with more light than ever. She made her trademark annoying grin and said, “Nope, no last words.”

“Do you think I won’t kill you?”

“Oh I know you will,” Miledi said, shaking her head. Her grin settled into a composed smile.

The other knights watched on in indignation, incensed that this heretic wasn’t despairing.

“I’ve been prepared for death since the moment I started down this path.”

A shimmering earth-brown three-kilometer wide dome appeared around the Grand Tree, protecting that section of forest. Naiz had deployed his spatial barrier. Thanks to Lyutillis’ evolution magic, his barrier was large enough to protect not just the capital, but the surrounding villages as well. Miledi was confident he’d be able to block the next attack. And the next one, and the next one. She had absolute faith in her comrade.

“But I won’t die here. I’m sure of it.”

Taken aback, Laus gave her a questioning look. *How can she be so sure?*

“Why, you ask? Well, that’s obvious!”

Miledi’s annoying grin returned.

“Because I have the best friends in the world!”

A second later, there was a thunderous explosion, and about 40% of the empire’s airships got blown apart. Most of those that got hit looked like they were part of the flagship fleet too. The explosion shattered their masts, which were what cast the mage’s siege spells, as well as the magic engines located on the ships’ sterns. The damaged ships began to tilt as they fell to the ground. The explosion was followed up by a downburst of ice, snow, and moonlight-colored mana, which froze the remaining ships’ masts, disabling their weapons. Then, just to make completely sure the empire’s fleet was neutralized, a hailstorm of enchanted swords rained down on the ships. The frozen masts shattered to pieces, and the few ships who’d managed to escape the onslaught had their engines and sails petrified by a follow-up of homing blades. Once the dust had settled, only a scant twenty ships remained in the air. They managed to get off another volley, but there was no way such a small barrage would even crack Naiz’s barrier. As expected, the twenty or so fireballs fizzled out upon hitting the glimmering dome. While Laus, Mulm, and the other knights were still recovering from the shock of what they’d just seen, a portal opened up next to Miledi and Meiru hopped out of it.

“I’ll be taking my precious Miledi-chan back, thank you very much!”

“Ah!?”

A torrent of water appeared out of nowhere, sweeping the nearby knights away. At the same time, the current surrounded Laus and Miledi, trapping them inside. Water was Meiru’s element, and she reigned supreme wherever it could be found. Being underwater forced Laus to hold his breath and slowed his movements down, which prevented him from dodging Meiru’s whip attacks.

“Gah!”

Laus screamed in pain, releasing a few precious bubbles of air. With his

breathing and concentration disrupted, his magic crumbled, and the chains binding Miledi's body and soul disappeared.

"Miledi-chan, are you okay!?"

"I'm fine, I can move! Wait, I'm being sucked back!"

It appeared souls and bodies were attracted to each other like magnets. Though she wasn't doing anything, Miledi's soul was being pulled back to her body. Once the two overlapped, Meiru dispelled her water prison. She rode her current over to Miledi and scooped her up in her arms. Once she was out of the water Miledi coughed and opened her eyes.

"I'm baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaack! Thank you Meru-nee, I love you!"

"Yes yes, I love you too, Miledi-chan."

Miledi floated up into the air, then put one hand on her hip and raised the other above her head, making her trademark pose. She then turned south and saw that the remaining few airships had been shot down by a storm of ice breath and enchanted weapons. Before all the airships could crash onto the ground, a giant golem appeared out of nowhere to gently lower them down. Many of the ones it couldn't reach with its hands it caught with the numerous chains that shot out of its body. A hundred or so wyverns also came out of nowhere to catch the few remaining ships and slow their fall. Of course, the mages on the ships tried to fire at the wyverns and the golem, but the sudden change in the situation had left them disoriented. Their half-baked counterattacks didn't even register to the two people who'd shot them down.

Flying in the air a short distance above the burning airships was a massive ice dragon, and standing atop that dragon's back was a bespectacled youth in black clothes.



“Ahahhahahahaha! You guys are so late! I was getting sick of waiting!”

A flood of relief washed over Miledi. Her voice filled with emotion, she called out to her two comrades.

“O-kun! Van-chan!”

Despite the distance, her voice reached Oscar and Vandre. The two of them turned to her for a brief moment, then returned to cleaning up the empire’s aerial unit. Vandre’s breath was so powerful even the demon lord had been forced to evade it, so there was no chance the remaining airship squads could withstand it.

A few people tried to launch anti-air attacks against Vandre, but Oscar deployed his umbrella’s barrier, as well as the six Onyx Shield Artifacts he’d created by incorporating Naiz’s spatial magic and Miledi’s gravity magic. On top of that, he also rained down enchanted swords on anyone trying to attack them.

“Oscar Orcus and... a new ancient magic user? I see. So they weren’t here this whole time...”

The knights, which had finally escaped from Meiru’s current, surrounded Miledi and Meiru. Laus was to the girls’ right, while Mulm was to their left. Though most of the knights looked indignant, Laus’ tone was surprisingly calm as he glanced at the havoc Oscar and Vandre were wreaking.

“So what now? You wanna keep going? Just so you know, I’m in top shape now!” Miledi said with a wide grin. She shook her hips a little to taunt them. Technically, her job was to keep as many knights as possible bogged down here while Lyutillis retreated the battle lines, which was why she was being so provocative.

“Oh, Miledi-chan. You’ve gotten so much more confident after Oscar-kun came back. It’s amazing how much you’re like a third-rate thug who gets ahead of themselves once their boss shows up to help!”

“Bwahahahahaha! Praise me mo— Hang on, who’re you calling a thug?”

Miledi turned to glare at Meiru. The knights grew even more furious as their

opponents joked around in front of them. They looked like they were about to lose it. Meiru looked for an opportunity to return to her post and help with the retreat while Miledi smiled fearlessly at the knights, waiting for round two to begin. However, it appeared there would be no round two.

“Ah...! Did you hear that, Mulm?”

“Bah, I despise being forced to wait, but I suppose we have no choice.”

Laus and Mulm exchanged glances, seemingly responding to some order they received.

“Retreat!” Laus boomed.

The other knights, all of whom had expected this to be the final battle where they used up everything they had, looked nonplussed. Normally, this would be where Miledi taunted them as she had back in Andika.

“Wait, you’re leaving?”

But even she was surprised by their sudden decision. Laus, who was bringing up the rearguard, said, “Got a problem with that?”

“Not really, but... what’re you scheming?”

Before Laus could reply, Naiz’s voice echoed in Miledi’s ear. According to him, even the crazed federation troops were retreating.

“Were the empire’s airships your trump card? Are you leaving because we beat them?”

“Who knows.”

“Grr... Damn baldy!”

Mulm and Adra stuck close to Laus, ready to defend against any attacks Miledi might throw at them while they retreated. Likewise, Meiru stood next to Miledi to guard her, her water whip at the ready. Miledi and Laus exchanged glances.

“I won’t disappoint you again,” Miledi said in a determined voice.

“...Next time, I’ll just kill you,” Laus replied coolly.

Both of them spoke in voices low enough that only the other could hear. After a few seconds, Laus turned on his heel and strode away. He wasn’t the least bit

worried that Miledi might try to strike him from behind. For her part, Miledi observed Laus until he was finally obscured by the mist.

“Are you okay, Miledi-chan? You got all tingly and strange when that old man touched you, right?”

“Meru-nee, please don’t phrase it like that.”

Meiru’s choice of words made it sound like Laus was some kind of pervert. Miledi gave Meiru a pointed look, but the serious atmosphere Meiru had dispelled returned soon enough when she started thinking about today’s attack. Everything about it had been strange, but then the church had just retreated without putting so much as a dent into the forest. Sighing, Miledi looked southward. The few airships still airworthy were also retreating. The soldiers who’d been aboard the downed ships scurried out of the wreckages and beat a hasty retreat toward Agris. Vandre and Oscar watched silently as the soldiers left. Seeing as the empire’s mages had no intention to attack, Oscar stowed his Shadow Emperor and looked back at Miledi. But before he could say anything, Vandre swiped his tail at Oscar, swatting him off his back.

“Ah.”

“Oh my.”

The tail slap produced a very meaty thwack. At the same time Miledi and Meiru heard Vandre shout, “How long are you planning on staying on my back, you damned four-eyes!” in the distance. Miledi’s eyes glazed over while Meiru put her hands on her cheeks and watched with an entertained smile. Oscar naturally didn’t take the hit lying down, and he quickly used his Onyx Boots to jump up to Vandre’s eye level. Once he was there he flashed a beam of light from his glasses, momentarily blinding the dragon. While Vandre covered his eyes with his forelimbs and screamed “My eyeeeees!” Oscar took his umbrella and smacked Vandre over the head with it, sending Vandre flying. Oscar’s personal philosophy was to give back twice as much as he received, in all things. Of course from there things devolved into a slapfest.

“Die, you damned four-eyes!”

“Only if you die first, you oversized lizard!”

Miledi had expected ice breath and enchanted swords to be flying in every direction, but Vandre canceled his transformation and fought Oscar in close combat. The sounds of their weapons clashing could be heard all the way from where Miledi and Meiru were.

“Jeez, why are those two always like this! Stop fighting and pay attention to me already!”

Miledi rushed over to Oscar and Vandre so fast she left sonic booms in her wake. She’d been looking forward to their reunion for so long, and it had all been ruined because Oscar and Vandre kept fighting instead of talking to her. And so, to attract the two men’s attention, she hit them both with a Heavensfall. Meiru, on the other hand, stayed behind and put on the glasses Oscar had made for her to zoom in on the action. She watched as Miledi sent the two men careening to the ground, then hurtled after them and swept them both up in hugs with a smile on her face.

“Uwoooooh!? Badd!? What the heck are you doing!? Seriously, stop swinging that at me!”

“Shut up, you traitooooooor!”

“Traitor!? What’re you talking about!?”

“Don’t play dumb! Or is that just how you get your kicks, huh!? You better at least invite me to the wedding ceremony when you marry Mikaela, you lucky son of a bitch!”

“U-Umm, Mikaela and I aren’t—”

“A grown-ass man like you shouldn’t be blushing like thaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!”

“Whoa!? What the hell, man! I just saved your hide from that crazy Templar Knight lady! Someone, stop Badd! This guy’s going on a jealous rampage!”

Miledi and the others suddenly heard that exchange through their earrings. It seemed Mikaela had guided Marshal to Badd’s aid during the fighting, and after Marshal saved Badd’s life, Badd attacked him in a jealous frenzy. As unfathomable as that situation was, apparently that was reality.

“Men just never grow up, do they,” Meiru muttered.

“Please don’t include me in that assessment,” Naiz said with an exasperated sigh.

“Onee-sama, this is exactly why women should marry women,” Lyutillis said excitedly.

Meiru ignored both of them and returned to the ground so she could punish Badd and start healing the wounded. Since everyone had switched their earrings to auto-transmit, Meiru could hear Miledi’s laughter as she exulted in her reunion with Oscar and Vandre. She smiled to herself as she set about healing everyone.

“You finally made it, Oscar, Van! I missed you guys!” Naiz shouted.

Now that Meiru had healed the wounded and the battle lines had been reorganized, the Liberators had all gathered in Lyutillis’ throne room. Tears welled up in his eyes as Naiz ran up to his two comrades. He completely ignored Lyutillis, who looked like she’d been about to give a speech, and hugged Oscar and Vandre as though he hadn’t seen them in decades.

“N-Naiz? What happened to you, man?”

“Oi. Since when were you such a sappy guy, Naiz?”

Oscar seemed confused, while Vandre looked at Naiz like he was a pervert. Naiz took a step back and said with a smile, “You have no idea how hard it was to look after Miledi and Meiru by myself.”

“.....”

Oscar and Vandre exchanged glances. After a brief moment of silence, they nodded to each other and gently placed a hand on Naiz’s shoulders. They were both smiling kindly at him, their previous arguments forgotten.

“You did good, Naiz.”

“Be proud of yourself, Naiz. You’re a true hero.”

“Thank you, guys... Now that you’re here, maybe my heartburn will finally go away.”

The three men hugged in solidarity. Friendship between men was a truly beautiful thing.

“Did you hear that, Miledi-chan? That’s quite rude, wouldn’t you say?”

“Totally! You know, I had to take on all of the church’s best knights all by myself! Everyone should be praising me and calling me their angel! No, their goddess! What did I do to deserve this slander!?”

“I understand completely! Do you know how hard I worked healing all those people!? I even got a headache from using too much mana! Everyone should be licking my feet right now!”

It seemed the girls were not happy with Naiz’s portrayal of their actions. Oscar and the others turned toward Miledi and Meiru. After a few seconds of staring, they clapped each other on the shoulders again. The bonds between the guys had just grown even stronger.

“Man, that looks so nice. So that’s what true friendship between men is like. You know, I used to have someone I was that close with. But in the end, he picked hos over bros.”

“Oh shut up already! You’ve been whining for hours now! Act your age, you old geezer!”

“Say that to my face, you dick! Don’t think you’re better than me just cause you’ve got a wife now, Marshal!”

However, the bonds between these two men were... not growing stronger at least. If anything, it was Marshal and Mikaela’s bonds that were growing. While Badd was going off on his jealous rant, the two of them glanced surreptitiously at each other, blushed, then looked away.

“L-Like I said, she’s not my wife yet...”

“E-Exactly! Badd-san, I’m just Marshal-san’s...”

“Mikaela...”

“Marshal-san...”

“Gaaaaaah! Fuck this! Quit flirting in public, you horndogs! What are you, teenagers!?”

Miledi and the others all simultaneously thought, *I can't believe you're willing to show this side of you in front of Lyutillis. You know, the girl you've fallen for. This is why you can never score.*

"Ahem... Have you finished celebrating your reunion?" Parsha asked coldly. They were all technically in the presence of the queen right now.

At this point, most of the important members of the republic knew how close Lyutillis was to Miledi and the others, so they just smiled awkwardly. While they respected Lyutillis, they knew she didn't want to interrupt the Liberators' reunion, and honestly even they felt bad about breaking them apart. As a result, Parsha was the only one willing to move things along. Oscar was the first to notice her glare and he quickly straightened up.

"My apologies. It's an honor to meet you, Your Majesty. I am Oscar Orcus, a member of the Liberators. The ancient magic I can use is creation magic. I am deeply grateful that you allowed us into this hallowed sanctuary."

Oscar dropped to one knee and placed a hand over his breast as he introduced himself. But like Miledi, he didn't lower his head and instead met Lyutillis' gaze. Vandre also placed a hand over his chest, but he didn't kneel. Instead, he just bowed and said, "Likewise. I am Vandre Schnee, another Liberator. My magic is metamorphosis magic. And while I have since abandoned my title, I am the half brother of the current demon lord, Rasul Alva Igdol. As the demon lord's younger brother, I'm afraid I cannot bend the knee to you."

Vandre knew he was probably overthinking things, but still, it would feel like tarnishing his brother's reputation if he, a representative of the demon empire, knelt to the queen of the beastmen republic. Miledi and the others understood that, which was why they didn't admonish him and just smiled.

However, while they doubted Lyutillis would be offended, they still shot a worried glance in her direction.

"My... The demon lord's younger brother, you say? That explains a great deal. I was wondering why in your dragon form your scales were the color of a demon's skin, but now I understand."

Lyutillis smiled with all the grace and magnanimity of a wise queen and nodded to Vandre.

“Worry not. You two have both shown me the utmost courtesy.”

Oscar breathed a sigh of relief, while Vandre bowed silently.

“I am the republic’s queen, Lyutillis Haltina. The ancient magic I wield is evolution magic. It is an honor to meet both of you. And thank you so very much for eliminating the empire’s airships.”

“We’re Liberators.”

“Helping people is our job; we don’t need any thanks. I’m sure that’s what our leader would say too.”

Oscar and Vandre turned to Miledi. She puffed her chest out and smiled proudly. Seeing that, Lyutillis brought a hand to her mouth and chuckled elegantly. From that interaction alone, Oscar and Vandre surmised that Miledi and the queen had probably grown quite close already, which was both a relief and, in retrospect, par for the course for Miledi.

“Incidentally, how would you two prefer to be addressed?”

“Err, I’m sure just using our names like normal will be—”

“Should I call you O-kun-san, and Van-chan-san?”

“Where did that come from!?” Oscar and Vandre shouted simultaneously.

They were so in sync that the other beastmen started to wonder if Oscar and Vandre weren’t actually really close. Considering the regal and elegant Queen Lyutillis had suddenly transformed into a friendly airhead, their reaction was understandable. However, this was just the tip of the iceberg. Recently, Sim and the others had begun to learn just how much of an airhead Lyutillis actually was, and they knew what was coming next.

“Miledi-tan, it’s fine if I call them that, right?”

“Miledi...tan!?”

So you were behind this! I can’t believe you told a queen *to call us that!* Oscar and Vandre thought, rounding on their leader. They’d been expecting her to be wearing her usual smug grin, but to their surprise, Miledi looked a little hesitant. As if she truly wasn’t sure if she wanted to allow Lyutillis to use those nicknames. But then she grinned, making Oscar wonder if that earlier

expression had just been his imagination.

“Hmm, well, since you’re using Nacchan-san for Nacchan, you might as well standardize it and call them Occhan-san and Van-chan-san.”

For some reason, Meiru smiled and muttered, “Oh my...” when she heard that, but Oscar and Vandre were too distracted by the bombshell Miledi had dropped to notice.

“Naiz...kun. Does the queen really call you Nacchan-san?”

“She does.”

“That’s fucked up, Naiz.”

“It is.”

Naiz looked off into the distance. He was trying his best to ignore the reality in front of him.

“Now now, Miledi-chan. Don’t you think making everyone’s nicknames the same is a little too plain?”

“Hey, Meiru. Don’t decide our nicknames based on how entertaining they are to you!”

Vandre tried to head Meiru off before she could make the situation any more convoluted, but if Meiru was that easy to stop then Naiz wouldn’t have had so much trouble.

“Hmm, yeah you’re right! In that case, how about you call O-kun the Fake Gentleman with Evil Glasses and Van-chan the Tsundere Prince? I think— Aaah!” Miledi screamed as Oscar shined a beam of light directly into her eyes while Vandre grabbed her face in an iron grip.

“Your Majesty. Please just call me Oscar, and this guy Van.”

Oscar’s glasses sparkled dangerously as he said that.

“But that’s so plain...” Lyutillis muttered, dejected. She’d been hoping to use nicknames to get closer to Oscar and Vandre, but they’d turned her down. However, Lyutillis wasn’t going to let this keep her down. As a former loner, her desire for new friends was greater than anything. Spotting a new opportunity,

Lyutillis quickly changed targets. She looked behind Oscar and Vandre to Marshal and Mikaela, both of whom were kneeling silently.

"I'd like to hear more about you two. Specifically, about your love lives!"

Marshal and Mikaela both looked floored. They hadn't expected the queen to even address them directly, much less ask about their relationship. It was even more unnerving because they weren't actually going out yet. Incidentally, Badd's eyes filled with jealousy the moment he heard Lyutillis address them. And while Lyutillis was very dense when it came to most things, she was surprisingly sharp at noticing Badd's expressions.

"Oh my," she murmured, blushing and bringing a hand to her mouth. "Badd-dono, that is quite an intense glare... Is this what a love triangle is like!?"

"Huh? Wait, hang on! I'm not—"

"I see Mikaela-dono is quite popular among the Liberators. To think there would be two men so desperate for her affections."

"What!?"

"She certainly is a wonderful lady. I hope we can be friends, Mikaela-dono. Incidentally, would it be alright if I called you Mika-chan?"

"What!?"

Mikaela looked incredibly flustered. She'd never dealt with a queen before. Someone of her stature would normally never even be in the presence of a queen, much less talk to one. She'd expected to just stand quietly in the back while Miledi and the others did all the talking, but now she was the center of attention. Even the other beastmen were looking at her. Mikaela looked over at Miledi, silently pleading for her Leader to help her. Miledi gave Mikaela a confident nod that said, "Don't worry, I've got this!"

"Hey, Mika-nee. Is it cool if I start calling you Mika-chan too then?"

That's not the kind of help I was looking for! Mikaela thought, panicking.

"Oh, I suppose that would make Marshal Ma-chan wouldn't it?" Meiru suggested innocently.

"Huh?" Marshal asked.

“What a splendid suggestion, Onee-sama!”

“WHAT!?”

Now Marshal was panicking too. Meanwhile, Oscar and Vandre were freaking out over the fact that the queen was calling Meiru onee-sama, and Badd was ready to kill Marshal over the fact that Lyutillis had given him a nickname before Badd. He seemed to have forgotten that it was he himself who’d told Lyutillis she couldn’t call him Ba-chan. In short, the throne room had fallen into chaos. Though Lyutillis was quite happy, since it seemed she could make quite a few new friends. Her facade of an elegant and regal queen had all but crumbled at this point. But while everyone knew she was a bit of an airhead, her masochistic side was still a secret from the other beastmen. Now even that truth threatened to reveal itself, and Parsha knew she had to take action.

“On second thought, I really do think you two need nicknames, Oscar-san, Van-san—”

“Your Majesty. We don’t have much time. You can deepen your bonds with everyone later, but for now please just use their names. I’m sure they’re fine with that too. Understood?” Parsha said, glowering.

Parsha could be surprisingly forceful when she wanted to. In fact, she was more queenly than Lyutillis—which was probably why the actual queen shrunk back in the face of her wrath. Parsha also glared at Miledi and Meiru, quieting them with a single cat-eyed look. She then went on to cow every other unruly child in the throne room until order had been restored. Finally, everyone began discussing casualty reports, the church’s movements, and the republic’s plan moving forward. It was during this meeting that Lyutillis explained her powers over the forest and the mist barrier to Oscar and Vandre. Once everyone had been caught up to speed, Miledi turned to Oscar and said, “So that’s the situation right now, O-kun. You said earlier that Shushu and the others didn’t come, but...”

“Yeah, it was just Marshal and Mikaela who could make it. The others are staying in the empire.”

The reason it had taken Oscar and Vandre a month and a half to make it to the Pale Forest was because along the way, they’d discovered that the Grandort

Empire had been acting suspiciously. So they'd infiltrated the country and investigated. The reason half of the empire's flagship fleet had just exploded when Oscar arrived was because they'd sabotaged those ships beforehand.

In truth, they'd planned on destroying the empire's fleet before it even got a single volley off, but they'd been intercepted by the monsters the Paragons of Light kept on standby, and had needed to annihilate them before they could catch up to the airships.

Oscar's investigation had unearthed that the airships were just the empire's first wave, too, and that they would be sending an army by land for the second wave. Shushu, Tony, Abe, Margaretta, and the other Schnee clan members had all stayed behind to work together with the other Liberators in the region to sabotage that second wave. Moreover, Vandre had already successfully spread his familiars throughout the forest. Most of Batlam was also patrolling the forest, though Vandre was keeping his faithful butler's core in his pocket.

"I see... Do you think Shushu and the others will be able to delay the empire's army for long?"

Marshal stepped forward to answer.

"If they can't, I'm sure they'll at least send a messenger to let us know. We met Howzer along the way, so we've got a communication chain set up."

"You met Howzer!? Does that mean he got everyone out of Agris safely?"

"Yep. We told him what was going on with us, and he said he'd link up with Shushu's squad."

Miledi smiled at the good news. After the information exchange between Liberators ended, Lyutillis took charge of the conversation once more.

"If the point of the federation's reckless charge was to secure air superiority and allow the empire's fleet to bombard us, then we can safely say their plan has failed... However, Miledi-tan..."

Though she was being serious now, it seemed she was going to keep using Miledi's nickname. The contrast was kind of surreal. In truth when things were truly serious Lyutillis dropped the silly honorifics, but Oscar and the others weren't aware of that yet. Lyutillis powered on, her expression and tone still

serious.

“We now have all the pieces you said we’d need to succeed. So can you tell me what your plans are now, Miledi-tan?”

“Well...” Miledi said thoughtfully, though it was clear she’d already decided their next course of action ahead of time. She stepped forward and said, “Lyu-chan, I think we—”

“Lyu-chan!?”

“Shut up for a second, O-kun!”

This was a serious discussion, the time for jokes could come later. Miledi loudly cleared her throat and said, “Nacchan should keep guarding you, while we still need Meru-nee to take care of the wounded. But now O-kun and the others can join the front lines.”

There was no doubt that Laus Barn was slowly getting more fatigued. While it was worrying that he was developing new techniques even as he was being pushed back, now that Oscar was here, Miledi was sure they could beat him.

Meanwhile, Vandre would be able to take care of the Paragons of Light. In his dragon form, he was more than a match for Adra, and the monsters he’d created could easily overwhelm the Paragons of Light’s beasts. Plus, Marshal and Mikaela would be able to back up Badd in his battle against Lilith and the other Templar Knights.

“The faster we put an end to this war, the better. I think we should be the ones to strike this time. At the very least—”

Miledi sucked in a deep breath, imbuing her voice with as much vigor as possible.

“The Liberators will take the fight to them. It’s time we showed the world that the church’s power isn’t absolute.”

As silence fell over the throne room, Miledi turned back to Oscar and Vandre. Oscar casually adjusted his glasses while Vandre loosened his muffler.

“As you command, Leader.”

“We’ll follow you anywhere.”

Both of them smiled fearlessly at her. Badd and the others all nodded confidently at their leader as well.

Warmed by her comrades' resolve, Miledi turned proudly back to Lyutillis. The elven queen smiled down at her and said, "Then we shall join you. The republic stands with the Liberators, now and forever. Let us crush the theocracy, smash their ideals, and bring the federation back to their senses."

Lyutillis' words reverberated throughout the room. None of the other beastmen objected. They were as committed as their queen.

"Tomorrow, this war ends. Leader of the Liberators, Miledi Reisen. We bind our fate to yours."

"Thank you, queen of the republic, Lyutillis Haltina. We likewise bind our fate to yours."

Lyutillis rose from her throne and stepped down from the dais it sat on. She held her hand out to Miledi, who rose to her feet and grabbed it. All of the beastmen clapped and cheered as elf and human publicly joined.

Once the audience was over, Miledi and the others decided to rest until the decisive battle. First, they all went back to their respective rooms to clean themselves up. Lyutillis wanted to hold another tea party with just the ancient magic users so she could let her true self out one last time before the fighting began. The plan was for everyone to gather at the usual spring after everyone had freshened up.

Oscar followed a catgirl maid to the spring, his glasses flashing with excitement as he took in the scenery. The maid was a bit put off by the light constantly reflecting off his glasses, but he ignored her and walked through the fog veil separating the spring from the rest of the forest.

"Hm? You got here fast, Miledi. Are you the only one?"

Oscar had expected the girls to take their time, but it seemed Miledi had been the first to arrive. Naiz and Vandre weren't even ready yet.

"Mrrr, you're late. I thought everyone was avoiding me or something! What if I'd gotten so sad I drowned myself!?"

As he drew closer, Oscar saw that Miledi had removed her socks and shoes, and was dipping her feet into the spring. It was obvious she'd just been enjoying the cool water, but it seemed she wanted to spin her actions as an attempted suicide. Seeing that—

"Haha, good one," Oscar said with a laugh.

"Oi, Oscar. You think this is funny!?"

Please, it's not like you're sensitive enough to actually commit suicide over something like that... Oscar thought as Miledi glared at him. Annoyed, Miledi patted the ground next to her.

Oscar couldn't ignore an order from his beloved leader, so he shrugged his shoulders and sat down beside her. He'd just taken a shower and didn't want to get wet again, so he sat cross-legged instead of dipping his feet in the spring.

For a while, the two just sat there in companionable silence. Though they exchanged no words, the two found comfort in each other's presence.

After some time, Miledi suddenly opened her mouth.

"Laus Barn really is the guy who saved Belle."

"I see... Were you able to thank him?"

"Yep. I made him a promise, too."

"Then I guess you better prove that Miledi Reisen won't lose to anyone."

"Yep."

"And that nothing will stop her."

"Yep."

Oscar didn't even need to ask to know what the promise had been. Nor did he have any intention of bringing up the fact that Laus was their enemy and that sympathizing with the enemy was dangerous. He had Miledi's back no matter what.

Miledi happily bobbed her head from side to side, her ponytail swaying back and forth. She kicked at the water too, sending droplets flying through the air.

"Hey, stop that, Miledi. You're getting water on my glasses."

“Deal with it.”

“Now that’s just unfair.”

“Sorry, but that’s how it goes. I’m a pretty girl, and pretty girls are allowed to do whatever they want.”

“Apologize to all the pretty girls across the world for bringing down their reputation.”

Miledi was in surprisingly high spirits, considering she’d looked depressed a few minutes ago. Though Oscar had been with her enough that he was used to her moods switching at the drop of a hat.

This was nothing new. But at the same time, it felt oddly novel. This was his first time seeing her in a month-and-a-half, which was the longest time they’d been apart since they’d first met. Oscar had been worried that taking part in her first real war would have weighed down on Miledi, but fortunately, she seemed to be as chipper as ever. That came as a huge relief to Oscar.

Water splashed him in the face as he was lost in thought. There was enough of it that he knew this was no accident. Miledi had been aiming for him.

“What was that for, Miledi?” Oscar asked, his voice dangerously low. But for once, Miledi had a good reason for her pranks.

“I-It’s your fault for looking at me like that! You’re acting weird, O-kun!”

“Did you just call me a pervert? You’re gonna regret that.”

Oscar had interpreted “weird” to mean “perverted,” which from his perspective was a natural interpretation. And so, he didn’t realize that Miledi was actually flustered because she’d been captivated by the gentle look in his eyes.

“What, you wanna go? You’re just a wimpy O-kun!”

Pouting, Miledi twisted her body and kicked Oscar with her bare legs.

“Hey, stop that! You’re getting my clothes wet now!”

“This is your punishment, so just accept it!”

“Huh? Punishment for what?”

As they argued, Miledi continued kicking Oscar, occasionally dipping her feet back in the water to keep them wet. Since they were both sitting down, if Miledi raised her legs too high, Oscar would be able to see under her skirt. Though it looked like she either wasn't aware of that or didn't care. Oscar grabbed her leg mid-kick to make sure she didn't raise it any higher.

"For coming too late," Miledi replied. Oscar could tell she was referring to his arrival to the forest, not here to this spring.

"I already explained why I had to do that!"

"I don't care."

Now you're just acting like a spoiled kid... Oscar frowned to himself, putting some force into his arms to keep Miledi from pulling her leg free. In general, a person's leg strength was much greater than their arm strength, but Oscar was a grown man who'd trained his muscles, while Miledi was a teenage girl who fought exclusively with magic. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't escape Oscar's grip.

"Dammit, O-kun, don't think you've won just yet!"

"Fine, fine, my bad. Now go put your shoes on. The others'll be here soon."

As he said that, Oscar pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket. Before Miledi could ask what it was for, he started wiping down her feet with it.

"Hey, wait, stop! I can dry myself off!"

"Really?" Oscar asked, not bothering to stop. If she really wanted to do it herself, he knew she'd just snatch the handkerchief from her. Since she didn't, he kept going.

"F-Fine. If you wanna wipe my feet that badly, you can."

"Mhm..."

"Man, beauties like me sure have it tough. Even when I tell people they don't have to do anything for me, they just can't help themselves. Ahhh, my beauty is a sin."

"Yeah, it must be so hard for you."

“I’m sorry, O-kun. I’m sorry I’m so charming!”

“Yep, you’re super charming alright.”

“.....”



Miledi trailed off, unsure of what else to say. She looked away, a faint blush spreading up her cheeks.

“There, all done.”

“Mrrr...”

Oscar gave Miledi’s foot a friendly slap, and she let out a strange noise. Glaring at Oscar, she got to her feet so she could put her socks on. As she reached down to grab them, she noticed a small, black insect crawl out of one of her socks. A cockroach.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Screaming in pure terror, she backpedaled as fast as she could, running right into Oscar.

“O-kuuuuuuuuuuun!”

“What? Hang on, calm—”

As a reminder, Oscar was sitting near the edge of the spring. There was only one place he could fall if someone bumped into him from behind. And due to that, Miledi and Oscar both tumbled into the water, causing a huge splash as they fell. Though this was the very edge of the spring, the water was still deep enough to come up to Miledi’s chest. So naturally, the two of them got soaked from head to toe when they fell in. Both of them got to their feet, coughing up water.

“Gah. Did I really make you that mad Miledi? Even then, this is still overkill!” Oscar shouted angrily. Still spluttering, Miledi pointed desperately toward her shoes. Her face was dripping water so it was hard to tell, but it looked like there were tears in her eyes.

“Th-That’s not it! I saw U-chan over there! You know, Uroboros, the writhing darkness!”

“Who the hell is that?”

“A cockroach!”

“You’ve started naming cockroaches!? Miledi, I think you’re more tired than

you realize. Maybe you should go to sleep."

"No, no, you've got it all wrong! U-chan's not just any cockroach, he's Lyu-chan's best friend!"

"Now that's just disrespectful! There's no way a cockroach would be the queen's best friend! The only way that would make sense was if she was some kind of weirdo!"

Someone moaned quietly on the other side of the fog, but Miledi and Oscar were too preoccupied to hear it.

"Oh yeah, I guess you won't believe it until you see it."

"What are you talking about?"

"A shocking truth you'll learn about soon enough."

"I have no idea what that's supposed to mean."

Lyutillis wasn't just a weirdo. She was a raging pervert. But with the way she acted in public, Miledi knew Oscar wouldn't believe that until he saw it for himself. After all, even she thought it was ridiculous that the regal queen of a nation was actually a hopeless masochist.

"Anyway, stop spouting nonsense. Let's get out of here and dry off. It looks like the cockroach is gone, so you're safe."

"Huh? Oh, you're right. Maybe it wasn't U-chan... I can't really tell cockroaches apart."

It was probably just a normal cockroach, actually... If it had been U-chan, it would have waved its feelers to apologize for surprising her. As traumatic as her first experience with cockroaches had been, Miledi knew she had to get used to them if she was going to be hanging out with Lyutillis. Sighing, she followed Oscar to the spring's edge. As he raised his arms to pull himself out, she noticed a small accessory dangling out of his pocket.

"O-kun, that thing in your pocket is about to fall out."

"Hm? Oh, whoops. That was close."

Oscar delicately grabbed the accessory and took it out of his pocket. It was a

necklace with a blue, diamond-shaped jewel hanging from it. It looked far too crude to be something Oscar himself had crafted.

Meaning... it has to be something he got from someone! Miledi thought.

“I figured it out. You got that from a girl, didn’t you? What poor girl did you swindle with your fake gentleman act?”

“Please stop assuming the worst of people.”

Grinning to herself, Miledi tried to push past Oscar and get out first. But before she could, Oscar grabbed her arm.

“Here, it’s for you.”

“Huh?”

Miledi blankly looked down at the necklace Oscar held out to her.

“I was gonna wait until everyone was here, but since you’ve already seen it, I might as well give it to you.”

“Ummm...”

Miledi gave Oscar a confused look and he smiled gently at her.

“It’s from Corrin and Ruth.”

“What?”

“It’s a good luck charm they made for you. They were worried, since you’re going to war and all. Corrin found the materials and Ruth transmuted them.”

The new village they’d moved to was in the mountains. There was plenty of ore to dig up there, and Corrin had stumbled across that blue stone when she’d been out exploring. Its hue had reminded her of Miledi’s eyes, so she’d asked for Ruth’s help to turn it into a charm for Miledi.

“I see... Those two... really...”

Miledi giggled happily to herself. Unlike the artifacts Oscar had made for her, this necklace had no special powers. But she was certain that the strong feelings packed into this diamond-shaped jewel would protect her.

“I’m really proud of those two. It turned out great, right?”

“Ahahaha, yep! This necklace is perfect! It’s even better than the stuff you make, O-kun!”

“I better step up my game, or they’ll leave me in the dust.”

The two of them smiled, thinking back on the kids waiting for them at home.

“Hey, O-kun. Can you put this on me?”

“Gladly.”

Miledi’s eyes sparkled with joy. Oscar turned so he was facing Miledi and took a step toward her. In order to fasten the necklace, he wrapped his arms around her neck, making it look like he was hugging her. Once he finished, he brought his arms back, but he didn’t step away.

“How do I look?” Miledi asked.

“You look great. It suits you perfectly.”

“Hehehe.”

The two of them stared into each other’s eyes, bathed in the faint light of the spring. Water dripped from their smiling faces, which were close enough that they were practically touching. The scene was so picturesque that were a famous artist here, they would no doubt want to capture this moment for all eternity with their brushes. Fortunately, there was someone around to capture this moment for all eternity, though not with a brush.

Snap!

“Hmmmmmm!?”

“What was that!?”

The two of them turned toward the direction of the sound and saw Meiru. She was wearing the glasses Oscar had made for her, which flashed and made a clicking noise every time she pressed a certain button on their frame. She was using the camera function to take a bunch of pictures of Oscar and Miledi. Standing next to her was a blushing Lyutillis. U-chan and Di-chan were resting on the elf’s shoulders. It seemed the cockroach Miledi had seen earlier was U-chan after all. Vandre was standing a short distance away, giving Lyutillis a look of utter disbelief. After a few seconds, he peeled his eyes away from her and

turned to Oscar.

“Sorry, I couldn’t stop them,” he mouthed apologetically.

“That was so romantic, Miledi-chan! I’m so happy for you!”

“I’m happy for them too, Onee-sama! I knew they were in a relationship!”

From the sound of it, they’d been peeking on Oscar and Miledi from the very beginning. In fact, they’d probably purposely come late to give Oscar and Miledi some time alone.

Normally, Miledi or Oscar would have noticed them if they were this close, but Lyutillis had manipulated the fog to hide everyone’s presence. Naturally, the one who had come up with this devious scheme was Meiru. Miledi stared blankly at Meiru and the others for a good minute before she finally returned to her senses.

“I-It’s not what it looks like!” she shouted, using gravity magic to shoot toward Meiru and Lyutillis. She stretched her legs out, hitting them both in the stomach with her patented Double Miledi Kick.

The two women groaned in pain as they were sent flying across the clearing. They clutched their stomachs as they struggled to their feet.

“M-Miledi-chan... that really hurt. I feel like I’m going to throw up.”

“Haaah... Haaah... I-I’ve never felt such wonderful pain before... I love you, Miledi-tan...”

As she landed, Miledi looked over her shoulder at Oscar and pointed at him. Completely ignoring the two women groaning in pain and/or pleasure, she smiled triumphantly and swept her hair back as she said, “O-kun, just because I’m the most beautiful girl on the planet, doesn’t mean you can make a move on me when everyone’s watching! Well, we all know you’re madly in love with me, so I guess it’s no big deal!”

“Oh, don’t worry. After seeing that annoying face of yours, there’s not a man in the world who’d make a move on you. That aside, did you break the queen or something?”

Oscar’s confusion was understandable. After all, she was panting excitedly

after being kicked in the stomach. She was acting totally different from the majestic ruler Oscar had seen in the throne room.

“Oscar, listen up and listen well. Van, you too. This is extremely important.”

In a voice tinged with despair, Naiz explained, “Lyutillis, the queen of the republic... is a perverted masochist!”

“Thank you very much!” Lyutillis shouted.

“Worse, she’s a loner who’s only had bugs for friends most of her life, and a natural airhead. Also, her naming sense is as bad as yours, Oscar, but in a different way. Basically, she’s a failure of a queen.”

“What a glorious string of insults. Oh, no... I can’t hold the pleasure back anymore! Aaaaaaaaah!”

Twitching, Lyutillis arched her back as she climaxed.

I see what you mean, Naiz... Oscar thought to himself.

“I... wish I’d never learned the truth,” Vandre muttered. He couldn’t believe royalty like that existed.

Thank you for being a king I can respect, Brother. You’re the best ruler in the world... Vandre escaped into his memories to avoid looking at reality. Meanwhile, Oscar...

“Naiz, this is a present from Susha-chan and Yunfa-chan. They made a good luck charm for you.”

“Hm? O-Oh, thanks.”

...pretended as though he hadn’t heard anything. Seeing as they’d be traveling together from now on, he knew he’d have to face reality eventually, but this was too shocking a truth for Oscar to accept all at once. Naiz took the small box Oscar held out to him, holding it close to his heart.

“Ruth was the one who made the box, but the present inside is theirs. That being said, I have a message from Ruth about the contents.”

“What is it?”

“‘If you know what’s good for you, Naiz, you won’t look inside.’ That’s the

message.”

Naiz looked gingerly down at the box. *What the heck is inside...*

“Also, maybe I was just seeing things, but it felt like Susha-chan and Yunfa-chan’s hair looked shorter after they—”

“Say no more!”

If Naiz learned any more about his present, he’d be too terrified to keep it. All he needed to know was that a token of the sisters’ feelings for him was contained within this box, nothing more.

Oscar and Naiz nodded to each other. At the same time, they lamented the fact that all the women in their life were crazy in one way or another. Just then, Oscar realized something. Miledi’s necklace was a perfectly normal gift. Corrin had naturally been thoughtful enough to make one for Meiru as well. On top of that, she was always looking after everyone in the village, and she kept smiling, even when things got tough. She was a kind girl, and though she was usually shy, she put her foot down when it mattered.

“Hold on a second. Is my sister actually an angel?”

“I would say so, at least.”

Of all the girls in the Liberators, only Corrin was normal. Oscar and Naiz nodded to each other, bonding over this realization. They felt as though they could hear Corrin’s voice cheering them on in the distance, saying, “Onii-chan, Naiz-oniisan! Don’t give up!”

After everyone settled down, the ancient magic user tea party officially began. Lyutillis tried to come up with nicknames for Oscar and Vandre as well, and the two of them refused with such vehemence that Lyutillis started panting again, grossing everyone out. It was a very boisterous, enjoyable tea party. Moments like these were what gave Miledi and the others the strength to keep fighting in this long, grueling war. Sadly, their respite was cut short all too soon.

“Ah!”

The six ancient magic users shouted simultaneously, stiffening up. An astronomically large pulse of mana rippled through the forest. The air crackled,

the earth creaked, and all living creatures in the forest held their breath as the wave passed over them.

Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz all exchanged knowing looks, Meiru and Vandre broke out in a cold sweat, and Lyutillis shouted in a hysterical voice, “This can’t be real!”

She was looking toward the center of the capital, where the Grand Tree was. A second later, everyone’s vision cleared up. The barrier of fog, which had protected the beastmen and the Pale Forest for centuries, vanished in an instant. The Grand Tree worshiped by the beastmen was visible from even miles away. It was radiating a strange color of mana that looked to be every shade of the rainbow condensed into one. Though it couldn’t speak, it looked to Lyutillis like it was desperately trying to resist intrusion by some alien force. In her eyes, Uralt was screaming in pain.

Miledi, Oscar, and Naiz were the first to recover from their shock.

“O-kun, Nacchan! It’s her!”

“Yeah, no doubt about it.”

“But why did she go after the Grand Tree? Isn’t Lyu her target!?”

Their strained conversation snapped Meiru and the others out of their reverie. Clicking his tongue, Vandre looked westward. Batlam’s tiny core was sitting on his shoulder.

“According to Batlam, the mist’s been taken out everywhere. And it looks like the church just launched an all-out assault.”

The church had timed their attack perfectly. Miledi and the others were still freaking out. Fearing for the Grand Tree’s safety, Lyutillis started running toward it. But before she took more than a few steps, Meiru shouted, “Get a hold of yourselves, everyone! We’ve dealt with worse than this!”

Her sharp rebuke helped Miledi and the others regain their composure. Miledi gave Meiru a brief nod of gratitude, then turned to Lyutillis.

“Lyu-chan. When you said, ‘this can’t be real,’ what did you mean?”

Taking a deep breath to calm herself down, Lyutillis replied, “The Grand Tree

is extremely sturdy. Even if you cut it in half, the mist barrier it maintains wouldn't disappear."

It would take a lot more than that to truly harm the tree. Given time, the destroyed parts would grow back too. And yet, something had done enough damage to the tree to destroy the mist barrier instantly.

"The only way to affect the mist barrier is to damage the Grand Tree's core. But that core is hidden deep underground, protected by hundreds of layers of roots mixed with the hardest ore found in nature. It's nigh impervious to both physical and magical attacks, and only the wielder of the staff is allowed to approach it."

That could mean only one thing.

"So that's where the apostle went, then?"

That Hearst was there. Miledi had no idea how she'd reached the center of the Grand Tree without either the tree or Lyutillis noticing, but no other explanation made sense. Just then, Craid came running over, his expression pale.

"Your Majesty!"

"I know. Where are Sim and the others?"

"They've gone to engage the enemy. Badd and his comrades are with them."

"Very good. Tell Sim he's in command of everyone while I'm gone. Craid, I want you and the rest of the royal guard to join his battalion as well."

"Wha—!? But our job is to protect you, Your—!"

"The time for fighting defensively is over. Without the Grand Tree's protection, we need to commit all of our forces if we wish to survive. As soon as I've resolved the issues with the tree, I will join the battlefield as well. Craid, I know you don't like this, but I don't have time for your arguments. This is a royal decree. Go, join Sim!"

"A-As you wish, Your Highness!"

Craid bowed low, resolved to carry out his master's will.

“I leave the queen in your hands,” he said solemnly to Naiz, then ran off toward the west. Once he was gone, Lyutillis turned to Miledi. Miledi understood what she wanted to say immediately and nodded.

“O-kun, Van-chan, can you go help the beastmen?”

“You want to take on the apostle without us?”

“Without the fog barrier, they can’t stall the church on their own. Besides, I’m not planning on fighting her here. It’s too close to the Grand Tree. We’ll find some way to lure her outside, where you guys are.”

In order to do that, Miledi needed Naiz.

“Meru-nee, you come with me too.”

“Roger.”

“Lyu-chan, guide us there!”

“Understood. First, we need to go to the throne room.”

“Nacchan, time is of the essence. Teleport us there.”

“You got it.”

Everyone grabbed onto Naiz. Right before he teleported them away, Miledi turned to Oscar and Vandre.

“I’m counting on you two.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got this.”

“We’ll be fine, worry about yourself.”

They smiled fearlessly at her, and the three of them bumped their fists together.

A second later, Miledi, Naiz, Meiru, and Lyutillis vanished. The moment they were gone, Vandre transformed. Oscar jumped onto his back, and the majestic ice dragon shot into the air. In the distance, the two of them could see the enemy army advancing like a turgid stream. Hundreds of black specks filled the sky above the advancing army. That was the Holy Templar Knights and the Paragons of Light.

On the other side, every one of the beastmen soldiers living in the forest ran out to meet them. Without the fog to protect them, they'd just be worn down by waves of magic if they stayed in the forest. And so, they instead opted to take the fight to the humans. Once the battle devolved into a melee, it'd be hard for the federation or the church to launch concentrated barrages of magic. But even if they succeeded in doing that, it would still be impossibly difficult to grasp victory. Simple strategies like that wouldn't be very effective against the overwhelming might of the Holy Templar Knights or the Paragons of Light.

"Alright, Van. You're up against some of the best beast tamers in the world. Think you can handle them?"

"Who do you think you're talking to? I'm the strongest monster tamer in the world. What about you, think you can take the church's strongest knights?"

"Please. They're just the warm-up. The real fight's going to be way tougher than anything you've ever faced."

"Then we better get our warm-up done as fast as possible!"

"Don't fuck up, you sham artist."

"That's my line, shitty four-eyes."

The two men smiled at each other. Even in the face of the strongest army in the world, they didn't stop bickering.

Vandre turned back to the opposing army and howled. In response, Uruluk and the other wyverns that he'd brought to the forest rose into the air. At the same time, a pack of giant silver wolves, led by Kuou, darted through the trees toward the oncoming human army.

Uruluk flew up until he was level with Vandre. The giant mass of slime resting on the wyvern's back hopped over to Vandre's back. Batlam's core wriggled its way inside the slime mass, causing it to jiggle.

As they charged, the beastmen let out a resounding war cry. Despite the crisis they were in, their morale was higher than ever.

Oscar zoomed in on Laus Barn using his glasses' magnification feature, then said in a voice as hard as steel, "We'll show you the hope that Miledi promised."

For Miledi’s sake, he wasn’t going to hold back.

The path to the Grand Tree’s core began in the throne room. But despite the rush they were in, Miledi and the others weren’t even able to reach it in one jump.

“Nnngh!?”

“Nacchan!?”

Looking up, Miledi saw the trunk of the Grand Tree rather than the throne she was expecting. They’d ended up at the base of the tree. Around her, beastmen were panicking because of what was happening to the tree.

Thinking he’d just slipped up, Naiz tried to teleport them again. However—

“I’m being blocked!”

“Ah... It’s probably the Grand Tree’s defense mechanism. I assume it’s repelling all external interference to protect itself.”

If the tree could repel even ancient magic, Miledi could see why Lyutillis had been so surprised that the apostle had made it past its defenses.

“This isn’t good... My powers are being severely restricted as well,” Lyutillis muttered.

She could influence the tree to some extent, but not deactivate its barriers. That showed just how critical a condition the Grand Tree was in. It was still radiating mana, and vibrating vigorously enough to shake the nearby earth. However, as the group watched, something even worse started to happen.

“Oh no... The Grand Tree’s leaves...”

The once vibrant leaves of the Grand Tree started falling from its branches. It was as if the entire tree was being drained of vitality. Its roots started to writhe, creating a localized earthquake. Everyone in the area screamed as they lost their balance and fell to the ground. This earthquake was far more severe than the mild rumblings that the tree had caused thus far. As the shaking grew worse, the tree began sinking into the ground. It sank slowly, but it was big enough to create cracks.

“Lyu-chan. Can you use the Guardian Rod to go directly to the core!?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Even the one chosen by the rod needed to follow the prescribed route to reach the core. For the rod was nothing more than the key to open the seal guarding the sole path.

“Gotcha. Let’s go, everyone!”

There was no time to lament their misfortune. After learning there was no other path, Miledi used her gravity magic to send everyone into the sky. She was careful to keep everyone a safe distance from the tree and avoid the bundles of falling leaves as she moved them toward the throne room.

“Your Majesty! Are you alright!?” Parsha shouted from the balcony on the throne room’s floor when she saw Lyutillis and the others flying up. The moment Miledi let them down on the balcony, Lyutillis started running toward the throne room. As she ran, she gave out orders as fast as possible.

“I’m fine, don’t worry. The Grand Tree’s core is being attacked. I won’t be able to deploy the fog barrier until the tree’s secure again. Parsha, I want you to evacuate the citizens while I’m dealing with the intruder!”

“I’ve already begun the evacuation. I was hoping you would be able to give a speech to calm the people, but it seems there’s no time for that. Should we abandon the capital?”

“You have full authority over how to handle the evacuation. I’ll be too busy fighting to lead. You serve as acting regent in my place.”

“Understood. Good luck out there, Lyu. Stay safe.”

“I will. You be careful too, Parsha.”

Parsha looked gently up at Lyutillis. It wasn’t the look a retainer would give her queen, but the one a grandmother would give her granddaughter. Then the moment passed, and Parsha turned on her heel and ran back outside. As she passed by the other Liberators, she gave them all a stern look. *Protect Lyu for me.*

Miledi and the others all nodded resolutely. As soon as they reached the

throne room, Lyutillis brandished the Guardian Rod. The throne, which was made of the Grand Tree's branches, started to unravel, transforming into a crest shaped like an upside-down tree. A second later, a hole appeared in the floor, with a spiral staircase leading downward. The hollow shaft supporting the staircase was so deep it was impossible to tell how far down it went.

"We're running out of time. As long as you don't do anything that affects the Grand Tree, you all can come. Miledi, if you'd be so kind."

"You got it! Let's go!"

Instead of using the staircase, Miledi and the others hopped into the shaft. As they neared the bottom, Miledi used gravity magic to slow everyone down, but Lyutillis didn't want to waste time on a landing. While they were still in the air, she swung her rod again, and the floor opened up to reveal another hole. This process repeated itself five times. By the time they finally landed, the party was around 300 meters underground. They were in a small room whose walls, ceiling, and floor were made of black metal. The Grand Tree's roots coiled all around the metal, creating an odd contrast of organic wood and cold ore.

"I recognize this metal... O-kun uses it all the time. This is azantium, isn't it?"

"That's the most durable ore in the world, right?"

"Yep. But there's something off about the color... I think it's got sealstone mixed in. I used to see it all the time when I lived in the Reisen manor. I'd recognize it anywhere."

That explained how the wall protecting the Grand Tree's core was resistant to both physical and magical means. The tree's roots also seemed to hold a special power, and they were likely as tough as the metal they were wrapped around.

"Miledi-chan, Naiz-kun. She's here," Meiru whispered, cold sweat pouring down her forehead.

"I know," Miledi replied. The wall directly in front of the party had the same upside-down tree crest carved into it. Waiting beyond that wall was a being so powerful her presence could be sensed through the numerous layers of sealstone separating them.

"Prepare yourselves, friends! It's time!" Lyutillis shouted. Though it sounded

more like she was trying to steel her resolve than bolster her friends. She hesitantly swung her rod down to unlock the seal protecting the core, and the azantium doors swung open with a deep rumble.

Silver light so bright it was blinding assailed the four ancient magic users. Though it was just light, it was dense enough to be palpable. A normal person would have been knocked out just from being exposed to that much power. Miledi and the others raised their arms to shield their eyes and walked into the storm of light. As they drew closer, Miledi once more laid eyes on her arch-nemesis.

“So you’ve come,” the silver-haired valkyrie said.

This was the church’s ultimate trump card, God’s Apostle. As always, her unparalleled beauty was marred by the lifelessness in her eyes. It made her look inhuman. She flapped her silver wings, causing her silver dress to flutter, and sliced her hand through the air. The light filling the room dispersed. With the light gone, everyone could get a clearer look at their surroundings.

They were in a smallish, dome-shaped room. The walls were made of the same azantium-sealstone alloy as the previous room, but the roots coiling around them were far thicker. They were also as black as the metal around them. It appeared those roots had absorbed the azantium-sealstone alloy, becoming even more durable. However, many of those roots had been scorched, severed, or otherwise damaged. Normally, they only parted for the wielder of the Guardian Rod, so the apostle had needed to force her way through.

At the center of the room was the Grand Tree’s core. It was cocooned by a conflux of roots, and a faint light was leaking out from it. From the gaps in the roots, Miledi and the others could see the core itself was a small sapling. Based on how weakly it was glowing, it was obviously severely injured. By blocking out all magic it had managed to erect a final fortress and protect itself from death, but only just.

Miledi looked behind the person responsible for this state of affairs and saw a small hole on the far wall.

“I see... So you snuck in here from underground. It’s an old trick, but no one

ever pays attention to what's beneath their feet. Still, I'm surprised no one noticed you, since you'd have to burrow for a dozen kilometers to reach this place from the plains... Oh, I see now. That's why you had the army launch such a reckless assault."

The valkyrie's expression didn't change, but her inhuman eyes seemed to be saying "indeed." Miledi and the others had been too distracted by the fighting to notice her using her magic hundreds of meters underground. However, there was one thing that still didn't make sense.

Lyutillis made a pained face as she looked at the debilitated sapling and muttered, "But the Grand Tree's roots form an underground barrier around the capital. If any of those roots were damaged, I would have noticed right away."

"Correct. Circumventing your alarm system was hardly an impossible task, but it did require a fair amount of effort."

"Excuse me?"

The only way she could have evaded the Grand Tree's detection was by weaving her way between the tree's hundred thousand roots and using only the bare minimum amount of mana to dig. Such a feat was nigh impossible for even Lyutillis and her comrades, yet for the apostle, it had just been "a fair amount of effort."

"How can anyone... possess this much power..."

Lyutillis shuddered involuntarily. No existing magic that she knew of, including ancient magic, was capable of what the apostle had done. Even Miledi and Naiz, who'd dueled the apostle before and knew just how strong she was, were speechless.

"This was my lord's will. And so long as he wills it, nothing is impossible."

The apostle raised her arm.

"There was one other thing my lord willed."

Silver light began to gather in her palm.

"Miledi Reisen. He wishes to see if people will retain the will to resist after your death."

Goosebumps rose on Naiz and Meiru's arms. They thought back what they'd seen in the sealed room underneath Andika. The silver flash that had pierced the floor and ceiling. Back then, they'd thought that this apostle had just opened some secret passage leading to the sea to escape after awakening the Leviathan. But now, they weren't so sure. What if instead, she'd just blasted through the entire island to *create* her own passage? If so, there was no surviving an attack like that. Just as they thought that, the apostle unleashed a silver bolt at Miledi.

"I won't let you lay another finger on the Grand Tree! Spatial Severance!"

If Miledi dodged, the tree's roots would suffer more damage. And so, Miledi opted to block the attack instead.

"No, Miledi-chan! You have to dodge!"

"Shit!"

There was an almost comedic popping noise as Miledi's all-powerful gravity sphere burst apart like a bubble. A second later, the wall behind Miledi vanished. Naiz appeared out of thin air a short distance away, with Miledi tucked under one arm. He'd teleported in at the last second to save Miledi from total annihilation.

"Huh? What?"

"Miledi!"

However, he hadn't succeeded completely. Looking down, Naiz realized Miledi's entire left half was missing, with blood spurting out in great gouts from her torso. The apostle had used the new special magic she'd received from her god, Disintegration. The spell annihilated anything it came into contact with, whether that something was physical or magical. A single blast of it had been enough to nearly kill Miledi. As she looked down at what had happened to her, Miledi's eyes rolled back into her head. Her body went limp as she lost consciousness, and her heartbeat began to slow. At that rate, she was dead in seconds.

"Meiru!" Naiz shouted desperately.

"I know!"

Naiz lowered Miledi into Meiru's arms, and the dagon instantly started pouring restoration magic into her. While that was happening, Naiz teleported behind the apostle. He unsheathed his blade and wreathed it in spatial magic. Fueled by rage, he swung at the apostle's neck. But just before his dimension-cutting scimitar reached its target—

"Ngh!?"

The apostle brought her wings up to protect herself. She suffused them with disintegration magic, offsetting the spatial barrier Naiz had applied to his sword. That caused Naiz to falter for a moment, which was a fatal mistake.

There was a soft whoosh as the apostle summoned her sword and swung it behind her. The sword sliced through both of Naiz's arms, and the pain was so great that he nearly blacked out. However—

"I'm not done yet!" Naiz grit his teeth through the pain and lunged forward. If he could just touch her, he'd be able to teleport the apostle out of here. Of course, she knew that as well, and she swiftly tried to step out of the way.



“You’re not going anywhere,” Lyutillis hissed.

As this was her first time directly participating in battle, it had taken her a while to overcome her initial shock. But now she was finally back in action. She swung her staff down at the apostle, and a combination of magical glowing chains and brown tree roots coiled around her. Of course, the apostle’s disintegration magic destroyed both the physical roots and the magical chains of light, but they stopped her long enough for Naiz to reach her.

“Take care of Miledi,” he said to Meiru as he tackled the apostle. A second later, both of them were gone.

“Onee-sama! How’s Miledi!?”

“Quiet! I’m concentrating!”

Miledi’s missing left half was slowly beginning to regrow. Lyutillis could only watch, speechless, as Meiru concentrated harder than she ever had before. Though they’d only known each other for a month and a half, Lyutillis understood just how much Miledi meant to Meiru.

Meiru’s restoration magic could heal anyone, so long as they weren’t dead. But only if they weren’t dead. Had Naiz been even a second late, or if the shot had been aimed toward Miledi’s head instead of her torso, even Meiru wouldn’t have been able to heal her.

“Please, open your eyes Miledi-chan!”

It was obvious Meiru’s desperation and fear was affecting her focus. It pained Lyutillis to see Meiru so distraught. Fortunately, the two of them didn’t have to worry for very long.

“Haaah! Meru-nee? Lyu-chan? Are you guys okay?” Miledi gasped, opening her eyes.

“Oh, Miledi-chan! Good grief, I’m the one who should be asking you that!”

“Haha... You really are something else, Miledi-tan.”

Meiru hugged Miledi with tears in her eyes, while Lyutillis breathed a sigh of relief and smiled softly. Miledi gently patted Meiru’s head as she struggled to get her head out of her cleavage. Once she was free, she gasped and shouted,

“Wait, Meru-nee! What happened to the apostle!? And where’s Nacchan!?”

She hurriedly glanced around the room. When she spotted Naiz’s arms lying on the ground, her face paled.

“He’s... Well, he’s not alright, but Naiz-kun did manage to teleport the apostle out of here.”

“But with those wounds, he—”

“Don’t worry, Oscar-kun and Van-kun should be over there too. I’m sure they’ll be able to hold out until we arrive.”

Having finally regained her composure, Meiru calmly explained the situation to Miledi. Right now, they had to focus on repairing the Grand Tree’s core. Until the fog barrier reappeared, the beastmen would be sitting ducks for the church’s mages. Casualties would continue to mount unless they could nurse the three back to health. Unfortunately, while Meiru’s analysis was logical, she’d missed one vital point.

“I’m afraid we cannot do that, Onee-sama,” Lyutillis interjected. Meiru and Miledi shot her questioning looks. With a resolute expression, she added, “Think about it. How much mana will you have to expend to restore the Grand Tree?”

“Well...”

The Grand Tree was continuing to sink, and its branches were still withering. Both of which meant its magic-repelling barrier was still in effect. Now that the apostle wasn’t actively attacking it, the tree had weakened its barrier somewhat, but Meiru would still need to use up almost all of her mana to break through its defenses and restore it to full strength.

“Now that I’ve seen it with my own eyes, I can say with confidence that a being like that apostle cannot be allowed to exist. We *must* destroy her. We have to prove to the world that we have the strength to overcome adversity of that level.”

Otherwise, the people would lose all will to resist god. They would despair, believing that they’d never win their freedom, no matter how much they struggled.

“If we are defeated here, then the Liberators will have no future. Onee-sama, you have to save your strength for the battle to come.”

“But Lyu-chan, at this rate, the tree will...” Miledi trailed off.

“Miledi-tan. The Grand Tree isn’t that weak. It can survive this. Which is why —”

“We should just focus on beating that creepy bitch to a pulp?” Meiru said with a smirk on her face.

Lyutillis nodded resolutely. As someone who was intimately linked to Uralt, it pained her to leave the sacred tree in such a wounded state. But in order to secure a future for her beastmen, she needed to fight. Seeing the determination in Lyutillis’ eyes, Miledi nodded.

“Gotcha. Let’s go, then. This time, we’re gonna beat that apostle,” she declared confidently.

The three girls nodded to each other and left the damaged core behind. The battle awaiting them would be the turning point of not just their lives, but the world as a whole.

Meanwhile, on the battlefield above ground—

“Gaaah!”

“Bwuh!?”

Oscar and Vandre somersaulted through the air, blood trailing behind them. Oscar used his Onyx Boots to reorient himself, while Vandre spread his wings and regained his balance. The two of them were covered from head to toe in wounds and panting heavily.

Without the fog, the scenery was clear for miles. There wasn’t even a stray cloud to hamper visibility. And so, the two of them could see quite clearly the barrage of silver feathers that was bearing down on them.

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me!” Vandre roared.

“I don’t believe it! She’s even stronger than the last time we fought her!” Oscar screamed hysterically.

The two of them dove to either side, narrowly avoiding the feathers. As they dodged, Oscar pointed his umbrella upward and shot a Thunderlord's Judgment at the apostle while Vandre unleashed his breath on her. The apostle just stood there, her wings spread wide.

A few minutes ago, Naiz had teleported onto the battlefield with her, which had led to both armies momentarily stopping in their tracks. The knights of the theocracy, the soldiers of the federation, and the mages of the empire had all been so awed by the appearance of the apostle in her combat dress that they'd just looked up to stare at her, their jaws hanging open. Meanwhile, Oscar and Vandre had been so shocked to see Naiz show up without his arms that they'd been unable to react right away, either. But now Naiz was on the ground, receiving emergency treatment from Batlam, and Oscar and Vandre were fighting for their lives.

"How futile."

The apostle covered herself with her wings, imbuing them with her disintegration magic. Oscar and Vandre's full-strength attacks dissipated harmlessly before the overwhelming might of the apostle's special magic. The apostle then unfurled her wings and shot straight down toward them like a meteor.

"Van, cancel your transformation! In your dragon form, you're just an easy target for her!"

"Tch, it pisses me off to hear that from you, but you've got a point."

There was a brief flash of light, and Vandre returned to his human form. However, he kept his dragon wings, allowing him to maneuver in the sky. The two of them turned on the apostle, pincering her with perfect coordination. Oscar shot metal wires out from his gloves, while Vandre created a halberd out of ice that he thrust toward her. However, she simply used her dual swords to strike down both of their attacks. Then, with superhuman speed, she circled around behind Vandre.

"She's so fast!" Vandre exclaimed, turning his head.

"You're just slow," the apostle replied flatly.

Vandre brought up the remnants of his ice halberd to block, but it wasn't nearly enough to stop her swords. However, he did manage to deflect them just enough that they cut through his wings instead of cutting him in half. Screaming in pain, Vandre hurtled toward the ground. As the apostle looked disdainfully down at him, a barrage of enchanted daggers rained down on her. But with a single flap of her wings, she summoned a hundred silver feathers to shoot them down.

"Shi—!"

Before Oscar could launch another barrage, she flew up to him and swung her sword down. He hurriedly brought his umbrella up to block. His ultimate creation, made from multiple layers of the strongest metal in the world, was sturdy enough to avoid being bisected instantly by the apostle's disintegration magic. However, it couldn't absorb the entire impact of the blow. The umbrella's canopy sunk inward, and Oscar felt his shoulder get dislocated.

Like Vandre, Oscar was sent hurtling toward the ground. This time, neither of them had the strength left to stop themselves in midair. They braced for impact, doing their best to mitigate the damage of the fall.

"Keep it together, Van, Oscar!" Naiz shouted, teleporting below them to catch them in midair. He was using Batlam's tentacles as makeshift hands. The three of them still fell to the ground, but Naiz managed to dampen the impact enough that no one was hurt.

The apostle switched her grip on one of her swords and drew it back, like a throwing spear.

"W-We've gotta block it!" Oscar shouted, hurriedly deploying his umbrella's Hallowed Ground. At the same time, Naiz created a spatial barrier while Vandre summoned a wall of ice. Silver sparks ran down the apostle's sword as she poured an ungodly amount of disintegration magic into it. There was a thunderous boom as she threw it, and a second later, the sword crashed into the trifold barrier, raising a cloud of dust.

After a few seconds, the dust cleared, revealing a massive crater in the ground. It looked as though a meteor had landed.

Oscar, Naiz, and Vandre were facedown at the edge of the crater, trembling.

They'd suffered enough damage that they couldn't get to their feet right away. The soldiers on the battlefield, both human and beastmen, were still watching in awe. The overwhelming might of the apostle had made them forget all about fighting each other.

Oscar and Vandre had destroyed the empire's entire fleet by themselves and had even been strong enough to overpower Laus and Mulm, as well as their knights. But now the two of them were lying on the ground, helpless.

She's way too strong... the beastmen of the republic thought, trembling in despair.

How divine... the humans of the theocracy, federation, and empire thought, their devotion to god growing ever stronger.

"Oscar, Van, Naiz!" Badd shouted, running over to the three of them. Marshal and Sim followed after him. It was then that the soldiers on the church's side finally began to move again. Assured of their victory, they charged toward the nonplussed beastmen.

"D-Don't get any closer!" Oscar shouted. Sadly, it was too late. The apostle had already turned her attention to Badd and the others.

"My lord ordered me to eliminate Miledi Reisen, but spare the other ancient magic users. However..."

The apostle thought back to what her god had said to her just before sending her on this mission.

Will the other ancient magic users continue fighting for the future after losing their leader? Will the bonds Miledi Reisen has forged remain even after her death? It's truly such an intriguing prospect. Let us see where this game takes us.

Cocking her head, she continued, "I have been given no orders regarding your survival."

Miledi was still alive. The apostle had failed to kill her back under the tree. If she killed a few of Miledi's close friends here, it might shake Miledi enough to make her easier to kill.

“Even if that isn’t the case, I have no reason to let you live.”

Honestly, the apostle couldn’t care less about Badd and the others. But she figured she might as well cull some of the fools who opposed her lord. That was the callous reasoning that led her to start gathering silver light above her.

When he saw her focusing her mana, Oscar started to panic. Meanwhile, Badd and the others stopped in their tracks, terrified. They could tell they were being targeted.

Seeing that light of death, Laus muttered, “I see you couldn’t resist the will of god after all, Miledi Reisen.”

There was a faint but unmistakable tinge of disappointment in his voice. He closed his eyes, unwilling to witness the moment Miledi’s dream died. But before the apostle could fire—

“Supeeeeeeer Miledi**iiiiiiiii** Ki**iiiiiiiiiiiick**!”

A flash of sky-blue light shot down from the heavens. Miledi was moving so fast there was an opaque wall of air spreading out in front of her. She used gravity magic enhanced by Lyutillis’ evolution magic to speed herself up well past the speed of sound. Meiru was also casting restoration magic on her to keep her mana topped off. And there was also a highly compressed, full power Onyx Blast situated below her feet.

The apostle barely had time to get her sword up to block before Miledi hit her. There was a thunderous boom, and a massive shockwave rippled outward as the two collided. The light that was gathering above the apostle dispersed as she was sent flying. She slammed into the ground with such force that it created a second dust cloud, obscuring everyone’s vision.

The beastmen and the human soldiers were all stunned, but Oscar and the others just grinned. After all, that was how Miledi always made her entrance. Miledi hovered in midair and struck her usual pose, with one hand on her hip, one leg slightly raised, and the other hand making a peace sign.

“Everyone’s favorite beautiful genius mage, Miledi Reisen, is here!”

For the second time that day, the soldiers on both sides stopped what they were doing to stare. Miledi ignored the shock on everyone’s faces and winked

playfully before pointing down at the dust cloud on the ground.

“Don’t act so high and mighty, you emotionless puppet! You’ve got nothing on us humans!” Miledi shouted, her haughty voice echoing across the plains.

It was then that the knights finally regained their wits. Cardinal Baran, who’d joined the battle to provide magical support from the rear, shouted “Lady Oracleeeeeee!”

A blast of silver light erupted from the dust cloud, clearing the debris. The apostle stood on the ground, completely unhurt. Even her clothes were unscathed. She calmly raised one hand, recalling the sword she’d thrown earlier. She then swung both her swords experimentally, sending a blast of wind shooting across the plains.

Miledi touched down on the ground across from her and said, “Hmph, look at you, trying to act all cool. Even if you show off how strong you are, it doesn’t change the fact that I knocked you out of the sky, you know? Hey, how does it feel? How does it feel being smacked to the ground even though you’re supposed to be an all-powerful apostle? You mad? You’re totally mad, aren’t you?”

She’d been on death’s door just a few minutes ago, but now she was taunting the apostle right before their decisive showdown. The apostle looked as emotionless as always, but the knights of the church were absolutely furious. Their oracle was Ehit’s representative, his avatar. No one was allowed to even suggest she could do any wrong, much less insult her like that.

“Chirp all you want. I will be shutting your mouth for good soon enough.”

“You say that, but how many times have you failed to kill me now, Hearst?”

The first time Miledi had escaped from her was four years ago, when she’d infiltrated the church. Then she’d survived their confrontation in the desert. Finally, she’d survived the apostle’s surprise attack back in the center of the Grand Tree. The third time was supposed to be the charm, but the apostle was already on attempt four.

Laus and the others looked confused by the name Miledi had brought out. For them, this was the first time hearing it. After all, the oracle had introduced

herself to them as Ainz. As expected, the oracle corrected Miledi. But she didn't give the name the knights were used to hearing.

"The servant who has come here today to kill Miledi Reisen is Ahat."

"Ahat?"

Did she change her name or something? Miledi thought to herself. That was as far as the conversation got though. Because all of the church's knights had started lining up behind Ahat.

First was the commander of the Holy Templar Knights, Laus Barn. With him were Araym and the other high-ranking members of the order. Then came the commander of the Paragons of Light, Mulm Allridge. With him were Godel and his strongest sacred beasts. Third to line up behind Ahat was the commander of the Templar Knights, Lilith Arkind. With her were Zebal and a few of her best Templar Knights. Next came Baran Distark, the theocracy's most influential cardinal. With him were all the bishops under his command. And last, but not least, was the leader of the Odion Federation, Detref Ernst. With him were the federation's strongest generals.

The empire's mages and the federation's remaining soldiers were also moving to surround Miledi and the others. But Miledi simply smiled and puffed her chest out. She was proud of the bonds she'd forged. Together with her comrades, she'd prove to everyone that they could defeat the world's strongest army. That was how she'd show the world that there was still hope. That there was no need to give in to despair or resign oneself to a fate of servitude. While the church assembled behind Ahat, Miledi's friends assembled next to her.

Oscar walked up next to Miledi, adjusting his glasses. Meiru came up on Miledi's other side, grinning wickedly. Naiz followed after her, his arms now fully restored. Vandre came to stand on Oscar's other side, his muffler flowing in the wind. Then came Badd, casually twirling his scythe as he smiled fearlessly at the knights. Next to him stood Marshal, his massive claymore resting on his shoulder. Finally, Lyutillis walked forward, glaring coolly at the invaders who'd dared to encroach upon her forest. Sim and the other beastmen generals trailed behind her.

Both sides had marshaled their strongest forces for this decisive showdown.

An unnatural silence fell across the plains as the two sides stared each other down. That was the calm before the storm. After a few seconds, Miledi floated up into the air. Ahat beat her wings and followed suit.

“For freedom—”

“For my lord—”

The two of them finally broke the silence. Miledi’s voice was burned with determination, while Ahat’s voice was a frozen, emotionless declaration. Warriors on both sides readied their weapons.

“God’s Apostle, Ahat... you’re going down.”

“Heretic Miledi Reisen... I will annihilate you.”

Ahat unleashed a barrage of silver feathers, and Miledi created a floating gravity sphere to redirect them. The battle had begun. Ahat’s redirected feathers flew up to the heavens, dyeing the sky silver. Miledi reversed her own gravity and shot up after them.

Naturally, Oscar and the others prepared to go after her, but before they could— “Ahat-sama has spoken! Do not let anyone interfere with her mission!” Baran shouted.

The apostle had claimed destroying Miledi Reisen was her mission. That meant this was a new oracle. Ehit’s wish was to remove Miledi from this world. In which case it was the church’s job to support her in fulfilling that wish. The war, and even their previous mission, was no longer relevant. At Baran’s command, the knights and soldiers all rushed at Oscar and the others to prevent them from assisting Miledi.

“Adra! Burn them to ash!”

Adra opened its maw and unleashed an aurora-colored blast of light at the Liberators. Naturally, Naiz deployed a spatial barrier to protect everyone, but Adra’s attack managed to slow the Liberators down. As the breath pounded futilely against Naiz’s barrier, Oscar glanced up at the sky. Just then, Miledi’s voice came through everyone’s earrings.

“Guys, I’ll be fine! Just don’t let any of those guys get in my way!”

“Wha—!? You want to duel the apostle alone!? That’s way too reckless!”

Ahat was far stronger than when they’d fought her in the desert. She’d been able to overpower Oscar and Vandre when they’d been fighting together.

Meiru and the others nodded in agreement with Oscar’s outburst, but Miledi just replied, “Don’t worry!”

Looking up, the Liberators could see countless blue and silver flashes shooting across the sky. Miledi was facing the strongest servant god possessed, but she was undaunted.

“I’ve gotta show everyone. I’ve gotta show the world!”

No one needed to ask *what* she was trying to show the world.

“I have to show them they *do* have the power to fight god!”

Of course that wasn’t all.

“And that they can live freely!”

Miledi would defeat Ahat, the living symbol of god’s power. And in doing so, she’d give people the hope to believe in a better future.

“I’m the leader of the Liberators. Which is why—”

“Which is why you have to fight alone?” Oscar interjected, sounding unconvinced. Naiz, Meiru, Vandre, and Lyutillis all seemed to be thinking the same thing.

However, before they could give her a piece of their mind, Miledi replied happily, “Which is why I want you to lend me your strength! Even if I have to fight alone, I won’t really be alone! Isn’t that right?”

Adra’s breath began to wane. Mulm seemed to have realized he’d never be able to break Naiz’s barrier. As the aurora faded, Oscar and the others could see Miledi and Ahat clashing high above them. Miledi was smiling fearlessly, her confidence unshaken.

Even when she was fighting alone, she wasn’t truly alone. Her comrades were still there by her side. But it sounded like she was saying that more to Ahat than to her friends, who already knew that. After all, it was Ahat who was alone.

Smiles spread across Oscar and the others' faces. A second later, Adra's breath vanished, and Laus and his knights charged toward the Liberators. With a smile to match Miledi's, Naiz dispelled his barrier.

It was Lyutillis who struck the first blow.

"If this is the decisive battle, then there's no need to hold back. Here I go. This is everything I can offer— Unlimited Overdrive!"

The evolution magic Lyutillis usually cast on her army wasn't very powerful, since she had to spread it out over so many people. However, the spell she'd cast just now was her ultimate evolution spell, focused to empower only a single person.

"I can't allow myself to be outdone here— Transient Infinity-Tenfold!"

Meiru cast her ultimate spell, which kept restoring something into the state it was in a second before indefinitely, but layered it ten times. That way, it wouldn't disappear even if Ahat used disintegration magic on Miledi.

"Hmph, as if we'll let our story end here. Batlam, lend her your strength!"

The slime butler saluted Vandre and began gathering its essence. This was the strongest monster Vandre had ever created, the one he'd spent over ten years perfecting.

"Naiz, help me out here. I'll have Batlam deliver my presents to her."

"Roger."

With Naiz's help, Oscar swiftly crafted any artifacts he believed might help Miledi and handed them to Batlam to deliver. The moment he was done, Naiz opened a portal to send Batlam to Miledi's side. The moment the slime butler left, Laus and Lilith slammed into the Liberators' formation. Oscar and the others scattered to avoid being hit by their attacks.

Battle cries from both sides shook the plains as the two sides clashed. Everyone realized this would be the last battle of the war, and they gave it their all without holding anything back. There were no fancy tactics or crafty stratagems involved. One side fought wholeheartedly for their god, while the other fought wholeheartedly for their right to freedom. As the battle grew

chaotic, Lilith shot toward Lyutillis, sparks flying in her wake.

“Aaah, child of god! How I’ve longed to meet you!” she shouted in ecstasy. But despite her elation, she didn’t hesitate to swing her blade down on Lyutillis. Lyutillis wasn’t a frontline fighter by any means, and she stiffened up as Lilith’s sword bore down on her.

“Not on my watch!” Badd shouted, inserting himself between Lyutillis and Lilith. He swung his scythe, deflecting Lilith’s sword, then spun around and sent her flying with a roundhouse kick.

“Stop getting in my way, Knight Hunteeeeeeeeer!”

“Damnit, I thought you guys were trying to capture Lyu!? Why’re you attacking her now!?”

“Now that she’s been brainwashed by you heretics, the only way we can take her back is by chopping her limbs off! Besides, it’s only Ehit who can judge my actions! But even if it costs my life, I’ll do as he commanded!”

“Damn lunatic fanatics!”

Just then, a hail of arrows rained down on Badd from the side.

“Badd, now’s not the time to be complaining! Focus!”

Marshal suddenly appeared at Badd’s side to block the arrow storm. His body began to glow as he activated his special magic, Diamond Skin. True to his nickname “The Unbreakable Shield,” Marshal’s defenses were perfect.

“Grr, he’s tough,” Lelaie growled as she watched Marshal block her Arrows of Atonement.

“Rip them apart, Vanadis! Paragons of Light, charge! The child of god lacks the power to fight on her own. We can secure her with ease!”

Godel urged his sacred wolf, Vanadis, forward, leading his unit of knights on a headlong rush toward Lyutillis. His men scattered the beastmen warriors protecting her.

“My, it seems you’ve all quite underestimated me...” Lyutillis said as she glared coldly at the advancing Godel and his knights. A second later, her mana flared up, a huge, verdant green spiral that reached up to the heavens. Within

that spiral danced numerous flowers and seeds of all kinds. Lyutillis waved her Guardian Rod like a conductor's baton, looking as vibrant and ethereal as a fairy of the forest. For a moment, everyone watching her was captivated, regardless of whether they were friend or foe.

"Forest Revival."

Lyutillis' mana spread out in waves, and the plants fluttering within her mana stream spread out with it, dyeing the air and earth green. Suddenly, trees and ferns burst out of the ground, transforming the battlefield into a forest. This was one of the special spells granted to the guardian of the Grand Tree, Forest Revival. It allowed her to create a small replica of the Pale Forest wherever she was.

"Wha—!?"

"Vice-commander, we're being split up!"

Though he was shocked, Godel kept enough presence of mind to dodge the tree that sprang up directly underneath him. Unfortunately, the knights behind him weren't as nimble, so they got trapped in the undergrowth Lyutillis had created.

"Tch, I guess you're not a child of god for nothing. That's quite the spell—"

"Sorry, spearboy, but you don't got time to chat."

Godel's begrudging praise was cut short as a shadow dropped from the trees toward him. The knight swiftly brought his spear up to block the gauntleted claws heading straight for his throat. Sparks flew as metal and metal clashed.

"Tch, one of the beastmen generals, huh?"

"The name's Valf. No need to remember it, though, since you'll be dying in a few minutes."

"Big talk, for a filthy mongrel!"

As white mist began to spring up around the tiny woods Lyutillis had created, Valf and Godel pushed back and forth. Just as Godel was about to order Vanadis to strike, Valf used his Float Field. Rider and wolf both lost their balance as they tilted over to one side. While they struggled to regain their balance, a new

threat appeared from the mist.

“Have a taste of the royal guards’ might.”

Craid leaped out of hiding and slashed at Vanadis. He easily cut through the wolf’s barrier of light and sliced its front paw off, causing Vanadis to howl in pain. Out of all the beastmen’s commanders, Craid was the only one who didn’t possess any special magic. However, his sword skills were so godlike that he was the one who’d been entrusted with the queen’s safety. Out of all the beastmen, he was the best swordsman. And that was why he was the commander of the royal guard. A standard barrier like the one protecting Vanadis was little more than paper to the fierce leopardman.

“Damn you!”

Godel whirled around, swinging his spear in a wide arc. His spear moved with blistering speed, but by the time he swung, Valf and Craid had already backed off. They leaped between the trees, their silhouettes barely visible in the thick fog. They struck at random intervals, from any and all directions, forcing Godel to stay on the defensive. Moreover, the trees and vines were also Godel’s foe, tripping up his wolf or lashing out at him from his blind spots. It was as if nature itself was baring its fangs at him.

Naturally, that was all Lyutillis’ doing. The other Paragons of Light were stuck in similar situations. They were learning just how dangerous beastmen could be when fighting on their home turf. Unfortunately, Lyutillis was only able to create a small patch of forest for them to fight in. It only spread three hundred meters out on all sides. People outside its radius, like Araym, were completely unaffected.

“I can burn a tiny grove like this in seconds,” he growled, shooting a burning sphere at the tiny forest. But obviously, there was someone there to stop him.

“Long time no see. Did you miss me?” Meiru smirked, sending a torrent of water at the flaming ball. There was a loud hiss as the flames were extinguished and the water turned to steam. Meiru then controlled the superheated steam and sent it into the gaps between the knights’ armor, scalding them.

“I still haven’t forgiven you for burning my ship. I hope you’re prepared to suffer.”

“That’s my line, bitch. I’ll make you pay for humiliating me back then!”

Araym and the other knights loosed battle cries, the pain from their burns forgotten. They charged at Meiru, who was sitting atop her arch of water.

Behind her, another fountain of water shot up from the forest. But this water wasn’t being controlled by Meiru. Zebal’s face appeared at the head of the fountain, his eyes full of hatred. Meiru’s restoration magic had caused him no end of grief this past month. Grinning wickedly, he rushed at Meiru’s unguarded back.

“Don’t go forgetting about me now,” Naiz taunted, popping out of nowhere.

“Wha—!? Gaaah!”

Zebal might have been safe from physical attacks in his liquid form, but nothing could protect him from spatial destruction. Naiz hit the knight with a Void Fissure, sending him flying. Thanks to his Liquefaction, the damage was amplified, and Zebal felt like his entire body was being ripped apart. As he slammed into the ground behind Araym, Zebal canceled his Liquefaction, coughing up blood.

“Oh my, Naiz-kun. You could have just left him to me, you know? Water is my element, remember?”

It seemed Meiru had been aware of Zebal from the start. Naiz just shrugged his shoulders in response. Just then, he heard a transmission from his earring.

“Naiz-san. The empire’s mages are attempting to cast a large-scale spell. Can you take care of them for us?”

It was Mikaela. She was keeping an eye on the entire battlefield with her Soul Sight, and since Naiz could be anywhere any time, he was the one she usually asked to take care of vital tasks. The two of them made for a frighteningly effective blitzkrieg combo.

“Roger. I’ll be right there.”

Naiz teleported over to the empire’s camp, throwing their mages into a panic. As Araym heard the mages in the rear start screaming in confusion, he gritted his teeth and turned to his subordinates.

“Tch, those empire fools are useless. What about the bishops, are they ready yet!?”

“I’m afraid they were discovered by an assassin unit and are trying to fend them off, sir.”

Naturally, that assassin unit belonged to Sui. Baran and his bishops had been planning to start their sacred chanting, which weakened their enemies and strengthened their allies, but Sui had sniffed them out once the battle had begun, and was currently taking out as many of the bishops as she could. The Holy Templar Knight who could use telepathy special magic was able to hear all of Sui’s ridiculous comments as she terrorized the bishops. “You fuckers better die quickly so I don’t have to work overtime!” “I’m sorry, that was a lie! I’ll betray my comrades, so please forgive meeeeee!” “That was just a lie, you moron, did you really believe that!?” It was almost impressive how easily she flip-flopped from gloating to groveling and back.

“What about the federation? What the hell is Detref doing!?”

“He’s currently locked in single combat with the beastmen’s leading general! His troops are stuck fighting the beastmen too!”

“The federation’s got way more troops, don’t they!? Have them send their reserves to us! If he can’t do that, then recall the platoon we sent to assist them!”

“We can’t! Their harpies are shooting down anyone who disengages from the melee! Unless we regain aerial superiority, we can’t call for reinforcements!”

“Fuck! What’s Mulm-sama doing!?”

Araym wanted to bring the federation soldiers over to use as shields, since he knew the Liberators couldn’t kill them. Right now, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get his Divine Blaze past Meiru’s aquatic defenses. Stamping his feet, he looked past the miniature forest, praying that Mulm would arrive to assist him.

Unfortunately for Araym, Mulm and Adra were locked in mortal combat with another dragon on the other side of the miniature forest. Adra’s aurora-colored

breath clashed with Vandre's icy silver breath.

"Tch! Knights, secure the space above him!"

"Uruluk! Don't let them have aerial superiority!"

Mulm and the other knights wanted to rise higher so they could help Ahat, while Vandre and his wyverns were trying to keep the battle close to the ground. 200 dragons and 200 wyverns unleashed their breath attacks at each other as they vied for control of the skies. Both sides were evenly matched, and their attacks canceled each other out.

Mulm gritted his teeth in frustration as he watched Ahat and Miledi battle it out far above him. The sky was his territory, yet he couldn't even help the oracle. He poured his anger into his bow, then fired an arrow at Vandre.

A streak of light trailed behind it as it shot through the air, looking like a condensed version of the holy dragons' breath attacks. The arrow was aimed perfectly at Vandre's eye. But Vandre created an ice shield in one of his claws and brought it up to deflect the arrow just before it hit.

"Ngh, so your martial skills remain unhindered even in your dragon form?"

Mulm had experienced Vandre's skills firsthand during their brief battle before Naiz had teleported Ahat onto the scene. No matter what angle he'd fired from, Vandre had been able to deflect his arrows with ease. It seemed he was still capable of doing that while dueling with Adra in his dragon form. Mulm could fire as many arrows as he wanted, but Vandre would just deflect them with spears, swords, shields, and axes made of ice. Moreover—

"Kuou! Bring him down!"

Vandre's silver wolf bounded through the air, heading straight for Mulm's unguarded back. But Mulm dodged at the last second by sliding off of Adra's back. As he fell, he unleashed another arrow. Kuou dodged the bolt with one of his special magics, Foresight. While he was at it, he also sunk his claws into Adra, scoring deep gouges on the dragon's back. At the same time, he let out a fierce howl, activating another of his special magics, Frost Tempest. Pillars of ice shot out of his mouth, heading straight for Mulm.

"That thing has three special magics!?"

Kuou was one of Vandre's strongest familiars. As a fellow beast tamer, Mulm couldn't help but be awed by the difference in skill between him and Vandre.

Adra hurriedly cut off its breath attack and swooped down to grab Mulm before he hit the ground. The dragon then turned around and shot his breath at Kuou before he could go in for a follow-up attack. Kuou nimbly leaped out of the way, and the two sides put some distance between each other.

"I guess Laus is the only one who'll be able to help the apostle..." Mulm muttered bitterly. He had no choice but to accept that the heretic he faced was too strong to push past.

"Nah, that's not happening. Our shitty four-eyes is way stronger than he looks. Tch... Just talking about him pisses me off. One of these days, I'm gonna snap those dumb glasses of his in half!"

Kuou gave his master an exasperated look, while a short distance away a burst of golden mana illuminated the battlefield.

"Heh, is that his way of getting revenge? Figures a glasses-lover like him would do something so petty."

Vandre looked over at where Laus and Oscar were fighting. Laus was on his own, but Oscar was surrounded by over a hundred of his Shadow Knights. Just like how Miledi had been forced to fight Laus alone while he was being backed up by his men, now Laus would have to fight Oscar and his knights alone.

"Then I suppose I'll have to kill you and go to my oracle's aid."

"Try it if you can. I'll show you who the real monster tamer is!"

Mulm's sacred beasts and Vandre's monsters clashed once more, sending ripples of pressure through the air.

A short distance away, Oscar and Laus faced off against each other.

"Sucks to be outnumbered, doesn't it? Well if you want to just continue this staring contest, that's fine with me too," Oscar quipped, and Laus gave him a dubious look.

"You think dragging this out is to your advantage? Surely you understand the

situation you're in?"

"What, you think Miledi can't beat your apostle?"

"That thing isn't human. It's just a machine Ehit created. A machine designed to bend history to his will."

There's no way she can fight against the inexorable will of god. No miracles will be happening today.

"She said she'll win, so she'll win. Miledi never goes back on her word."

"You're a fool."

"Maybe. But you know, Laus Barn. I'd say you're quite the fool too."

"....."

After all, Laus had risked everything to save Belta's life. If that wasn't foolish, then Oscar didn't know what was.

However, he just smiled gently and said, "Humans are made up of bonds. We make connections with each other, entrust those connections to those who come after us and slowly but surely push forward. I'm sure you know this, but Miledi Reisen is made up of bonds *you* helped forge."

Just once, Laus had shown the tiniest bit of resistance when he'd helped Belta escape. That small act of resistance had connected with Miledi, and as a result she was now fighting for the fate of the world above them.

"She told you, didn't she?"

"Told me what?"

"That she'd prove humans could fight against god."

Laus frowned, his expression pained. But then he shook his head and glared at Oscar. The time for talk was over. It was too late to change his ways now. He'd committed to fighting for the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest amount of people. Up until now, he'd kept telling himself that was the right way to live. Oscar's words alone wouldn't be enough to change his mind. However—

As Laus raised his warhammer, Oscar shifted his center of gravity and adjusted his glasses. He raised his hand, and his hundred Shadow Knights drew

their swords. They brought their swords to their chests in perfect sync, looking like a real order of knights. Oscar no longer needed metal wires to move them. They possessed a small measure of autonomy, and he only needed to give them verbal orders, or hand gestures, to control them. With Vandre's help, Oscar had imbued his golems with both creation and metamorphosis magic, granting them a semblance of life.

The distant sounds of battle faded away as Oscar and Laus focused solely on the opponent before them.

"If you truly believe you can stop god's will, then show me you have the power to do it, Oscar Orcus!"

"Fine. I'll prove to you here and now that you should be standing on our side, Laus Barn!"

Though he no longer had a contingent of knights constantly healing him, Laus was still a formidable foe. He was willing to limit break to the max, while Oscar didn't have the benefit of Lyutillis' evolution magic, *and* he had to make sure to hold back and avoid killing Laus.

Guess I'll have to push myself to the limit here... Oscar mused. He smiled fearlessly at Laus and confidently stepped forward. After all, he believed in Miledi's victory more than anyone.

As for Miledi—

"Ngh! Gaaah! Aaaaaah!"

She was currently suffering from the effects of her own specialty, gravity. Normally, she just adjusted the direction gravity pulled her in to freefall freely through the sky, but against Ahat, that speed was too slow. And so, she'd opted to create multiple gravity spheres in the direction she wanted to fly, multiplying her speed tenfold.

However, even that wasn't enough to shake off the apostle. Ahat was firing a continuous barrage of disintegration feathers at Miledi. Naturally, they all had homing properties. Moreover, they rushed at Miledi from all directions and angles.

Of course Miledi had both Spatial Severance and Heavensfall active constantly to keep the feathers at bay, but it wasn't enough. The sheer number of feathers was enough to disintegrate her gravity magic. And as a result, she was forced to dodge by constantly braking, reversing her direction, and even rotating in place. The g-forces she was subjecting herself to were strong enough to crush her organs and cause her to black out. Such reckless movements would have normally killed her in just a few seconds, but thanks to the protection of Meiru and Lyutillis' spells, she was still alive. Lyutillis' evolution magic had strengthened her body to the limit, while Meiru's restoration magic kept reverting any damage she did to herself. However—

"Perish."

"Ah!"

Ahat was able to keep up with even those movements. That was how much of a monster she was. She flew behind Miledi, the light of the sun illuminating her outline. Miledi could tell from the shadow cast over her that the apostle had her swords raised. She spun like a top, barely avoiding the twin swords that sliced past either side of her. Before Miledi even had a chance to catch her breath, the swords came at her again, this time from either side.

"Don't underestimate meeeeee!"

Miledi's eyes were able to keep up with the inhuman speed of Ahat's slashes thanks to the red-rimmed glasses Oscar had made for her. They enhanced her perception, allowing her to react in time. She held up her Angel's Raiment to block the twin claymores. That artifact of Oscar's had saved her life numerous times and was looking quite tattered. But despite how damaged it was, it still protected Miledi once again. The threads' shock absorption prevented the swords from cleaving it in half, and the Diamond Skin enchantment on them protected the cloth from being disintegrated. Of course, in another few seconds, Ahat's swords would cut through, but those seconds were all Miledi needed.

"Onyx Blast... Convergence!"

Miledi compressed a full-power Onyx Blast into a single point and fired it directly at Ahat.

Like Miledi had done a moment before, Ahat spun in place, dodging the attack. As she spun around, she swung her second claymore diagonally down at Miledi.

“Batyam-chan!”

Batlam seemed to have grown quite fond of the nickname Miledi had given him, and he eagerly wrapped himself around Miledi, focusing his slime where the swords would impact. Right before they did, he used his special magic to turn his slime into steel, creating a shield to deflect the blow. While he couldn’t completely redirect Ahat’s sword, he nevertheless managed to protect Miledi.

As Batlam returned to his slime form, Miledi saw Ahat spread her wings out. Panicking, Miledi hurriedly used gravity magic to force herself backward. Batlam hurriedly fused himself back with Miledi’s clothing to not get blown off and a barrage of feathers so dense it looked like a wall shot toward Miledi.

Realizing Miledi wouldn’t be able to get away in time, Batlam activated one of the artifacts Oscar had delivered to her, the Teleporting Chakram. The tiny ring split into four pieces and expanded until it was large enough to fit a person. Then, it deployed a shimmering teleportation gate. Miledi fell through and reappeared from the paired chakram floating behind Ahat.

“Vortex Blaze!”

Miledi compressed the strongest fire spell, Azure Blaze, into a small sphere using her Obsidian Vortex, concentrating its might into a single point. She then shot the burning blue ball at Ahat’s back.

“You’re wasting your time.”

Ahat turned around and raised a hand. A barrage of silver feathers shot out of her wings, obliterating Miledi’s full-power attack.

“Ah!”

Miledi dropped down to dodge the feather storm. However, the feathers then coalesced into a shimmering sword and swung down at her. She once again activated the Teleport Chakram to warp to safety. Cold sweat poured down her back as she reappeared far above the sword. She knew that attack had destroyed the other chakram. Oscar had sent her ten pairs, or twenty chakrams,

and five of them had already been destroyed. It felt like she was slowly being backed into a corner.

“Haaah... Haaah... You were already crazy strong the last time we fought... It’s not fair that you get to grow even stronger.”

Miledi forced a smile, swallowing down the pain, impatience, and fear threatening to overwhelm her. Belta had taught her to smile, and so smile she would.

Grinning, Miledi taunted, “But you know, you’re still nowhere close to beating me! Don’t you think it’s about time you got serious? Oh, wait, don’t tell me this is the best you can do? Sorry! I know you’ve got a new power and all, but it’s not *that* big a deal, really. Plus, it feels like you’re relying on it way too much!”

Miledi did her best to sound as annoying as possible. Because that was what her savior, Belta, would have done.

“My lord was quite satisfied,” Ahat replied flatly. Still grinning, Miledi cocked her head.

“Eliminating his previous oracle led to quite an entertaining outcome.”

Miledi’s smile vanished.

“My lord loves people. They cower, betray each other, lose their way, go insane, suffer, cling to hope, and then fall into despair. Nothing brings him more joy than watching their struggles.”

Shut up. Don’t you dare say another word... Even if Ahat did read Miledi’s thoughts, she didn’t stop talking.

“I am God’s Apostle. An avatar of Ehit’s will. Thus, Miledi Reisen, it is my job to make you despair. Watching the hope the past oracle imparted unto you curdle into despair is what my lord wishes for. That is the pleasure he craves.”

No matter how much Miledi told herself to smile, she couldn’t help but glower.

That isn’t what Belta worked so hard for! She didn’t risk her life to teach me human emotion just to satisfy your sick fantasies!

As much as she wanted to shout that, she couldn’t. Because the spectacle

before her had left her speechless.

“As you wish, I will go all out. For that will bring you greater despair.”

The entire world shook. An immense wave of pressure bore down on Miledi. Silver light enveloped Ahat, and the space around her began to warp. The mana was in such abundance that it palpably poured out of the apostle in droves. It was as if she’d just activated Laus’ Limit Break or Lyutillis’ Unlimited Overdrive.

“Dance like the puppet you are, Miledi Reisen.”

Ahat’s voice was coming from right beside Miledi. The Ahat in front of Miledi vanished, a mere afterimage. Turning around, Miledi saw Ahat standing next to her. She didn’t even see the apostle’s swords hit her.

“Agh!”

It was a miracle that she wasn’t cut in half. Thanks to the fact that she’d instinctively leaned back, Ahat’s swords had only taken her right arm. That being said, the pain was still great enough to blur Miledi’s vision, and blood spurted from the wound in great gouts. However, Miledi had no time to wait for the pain to subside. As Meiru’s Transient Infinity began to regenerate the missing limb, Miledi shot upward to put some distance between her and Ahat.

“First, I’ll rip that monster off of you.”

Unfortunately, Ahat was easily able to keep up with Miledi. Batlam hurriedly hardened himself to protect Miledi, but Ahat cut at him dozens of times in the span of a single second, shaving off a great deal of his slime.

“Batyam-chan!?”

Miledi flew this way and that, trying to shake Ahat off her tail. But even maneuvers that left her vomiting blood couldn’t throw the apostle off. Ahat flew next to Miledi and swung her sword so fast it was a mere blur, leaving afterimages in her wake. Determined to protect Miledi with his life, Batlam once again hardened himself around her.

“That’s enough, Batyam-chan! Go back to Van-chan!” Miledi shouted as she watched the poor slime get flayed to within an inch of his life. But Batlam shook his head, his resolve unwavering.

“So... that’s where the core is.”

Goosebumps rose on Miledi’s arms. Ahat was looking right at Miledi’s right armpit, where Batlam was hiding his core.

“Don’t you dare— Asura!”

Miledi created a high-density gravity field around her in an attempt to knock Ahat down. But Ahat didn’t fall. The apostle’s disintegration magic and the velocity of her flight combined could beat Miledi’s strongest spell. Ignoring the gravity surrounding her, Ahat swung her claymore horizontally.

“Ah!”

Miledi twisted her body just enough to protect Batlam’s core, but that resulted in her side being cut open. As the blow sent Miledi flying, Batlam’s core fell off her shirt. Batlam instantly transformed into a wyvern, but before he could return to Miledi’s side, a barrage of disintegration feathers hit him. Unable to maintain his form, Batlam reverted to a slime and began to fall. Barely any of his mass remained.

“Next, I’ll destroy those pesky artifacts of yours.”

As Miledi attempted to activate one of her chakrams to teleport to Batlam’s aid, Ahat flew over to the one she was planning on emerging from and destroyed it. Then, she unleashed another barrage of feathers and destroyed all of the other chakrams deployed at various points on the battlefield. While she was doing that, she shot back toward Miledi, brandishing her claymores.

“Why youuuuuu!”

Miledi summoned a hundred small metal spheres from the Treasure Trove Oscar had made for her. She used gravity magic to pull them all together, creating a makeshift shield. Unsurprisingly, Oscar’s multilayered super-dense balls were tough enough to block the twin swords. However, Ahat’s disintegration magic started slowly eating into the shield, meaning it wouldn’t hold for long.

Miledi immediately created two opposing gravitational fields. The spheres shot toward Ahat, while Miledi flew straight up, right into a rather large cloud. She was praying the low visibility and the barrage she’d just sent at Ahat would

buy her a few seconds. Meanwhile, she gathered her mana for a large spell.

“Your petty tricks are meaningless.”

Ahat swung her sword with such force that the resulting gust blew the cloud away, then charged toward Miledi, bringing her swords down in a diagonal cross.

Miledi immediately brought up her Angel’s Raiment to block and started falling downward.

“Gaah!”

Unfortunately, the Angel’s Raiment had taken more abuse than it could handle, and it finally snapped. However, it did manage to redirect Ahat’s swords a little, so instead of cutting Miledi in three, they just left a deep, v-shaped cut on her torso.

Miledi desperately flew out of the way as blood spilled from the wound. Though she knew the wound would vanish a second later, the pain still brought tears to her eyes, blurring her vision. As a result, she noticed the feathers rushing toward her a second too late, and they slammed into her red-rimmed glasses before she could dodge. Thanks to their exceptional sturdiness, they didn’t break, but the feathers did knock them off her face. If they hadn’t been there she would have lost an eye, but fortunately, the feather just grazed past her temple instead.

While Meiru’s Transient Infinity healed that scratch as well, Ahat was being true to her word. With each attack, she destroyed one of the artifacts protecting Miledi.

“Onyx Blast... Meteor Shower!”

Miledi unleashed a hundred small gravity spheres at Ahat, but the apostle cut them all down.

She’s so strong! It’s not fair! But even so, I can’t afford to lose!

Spurred on by that one thought, Miledi continued to struggle. Again, she avoided the grim reaper’s scythe by a hair’s breadth, then launched a futile counterattack which failed to even scratch Ahat. The cycle repeated over and

over, and Miledi lost all sense of time. She had no idea how long she'd been fighting for, nor where she even was. In fact, she wasn't even sure which direction the ground was in anymore. Her breath came in pained gasps. Her whole body hurt, and her vision was dyed red. With each passing second, she lost more of her mana, bringing her closer to demise.

I'm scared...

A wave of negative emotions washed over her.

How... am I supposed to beat someone like that...

For the first time, Miledi's resolve began to waver. The old, emotionless side of Miledi that had been all of her personality when she'd been part of the Reisen family reared its ugly head. *This is what you get for trying to fight against an absolute being, you fool. Just give up and accept your death...* it muttered coldly.

Normally, Miledi would never have entertained such thoughts, but right now she was well and truly cornered.

Ahat's sword came down on Miledi again, slicing through her shoulder. This time, her wounds didn't heal. Ahat had finally sliced through all the layers of Meiru's spell. Fortunately, this wasn't a lethal wound. However, it was still deep.

You can't win... the cold, emotionless side of her whispered to her. But she instinctively backpedaled away from Ahat still. And as she did, a small, glowing blue stone floated up in front of her eyes.

"Ah—"

It was the charm Corrin and Ruth had poured their heart into making for her. The treasure Oscar had delivered to her. She quickly pulled her fractured consciousness together. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Ahat's swords heading toward her neck from either side, like a guillotine.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Hm!?"

Miledi deployed a gravity field with her at the center, forcing Ahat back.

Ahat's eyes widened in surprise for a moment, but then she recovered and responded with a volley of disintegration feathers.

Ahat knew Miledi was on the ropes. She was sure this would end it. But to Ahat's utter surprise, Miledi, who should have long since reached her limits, somehow dodged it. The feathers grazed her arms, creating a few small cuts, but that was all.

"Get it together, Miledi! Remember everything that's gotten you this far!"

The light returned to Miledi's eyes. Ahat shook her head in disbelief.

Why does she continue to fight when the battle is already decided? Her unsightly struggling only makes her look more pathetic. Fine. If she insists on fighting to the bitter end, then I shall simply have to show her the unsurmountable gap in our power. I have brought enough despair onto her. It's time my lord reveled in watching her comrades despair instead.

Ahat fired another barrage of disintegration feathers at Miledi, but this time she dodged them with even more ease than the last volley. Confused, Ahat tried again.

"Hm? Four? No, six?"

The number of gravity spheres protecting Miledi had suddenly multiplied to six. And the number kept growing. The spheres either diverted or absorbed the feathers Ahat fired, and if they absorbed so much that they were destroyed, Miledi instantly recreated them. Realizing she would have to go for a direct attack, Ahat shot forward, leaving afterimages in her wake. The moment she swung her sword down, Miledi slid to the side, dodging out of the way. Ahat followed up with her second claymore, but even that one only barely managed to scratch Miledi. Miledi used the same strange sliding movement to get out of the way, while also diverting the sword's trajectory with her gravity spheres.

It was then that Ahat noticed. Miledi was getting faster.

"Playtime's over," Ahat muttered. Though she wasn't sure whether she was saying that to intimidate Miledi, or to convince herself that she still had the upper hand. A coldness crept over her emotionless expression, and silver mana surged from her in waves. Ahat chased Miledi down, slashing at her over and

over and over. Within seconds, Miledi's entire body was covered in cuts, and her clothes were soaked with blood. However—

She keeps avoiding me by a hair's breadth!

Ahat was fighting with all her might. She was trying to end Miledi with each of her attacks, and yet Miledi kept escaping by the skin of her teeth. Moreover, despite the severity of her wounds, Miledi didn't look like she was in pain at all. In fact, her expression was completely blank.

But it wasn't emotionless, like Ahat's usual expression was. It was more as if Miledi was on the cusp of achieving some kind of enlightenment. There was a deep, sky-blue light in her eyes, but she didn't seem to be looking at Ahat. She didn't seem to be looking at reality at all. There was something else reflected in her eyes, something she was trying to grasp. Her gaze was focused inward, toward something hidden deep within her.

Ahat trembled. Though she wasn't supposed to possess any emotions, she couldn't help but shiver when she looked into Miledi's eyes.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

In an attempt to shake off the dread creeping up onto her, Ahat loosed a battle cry. She dashed forward, becoming a silver comet of death streaking toward Miledi. Despite Ahat's ferocity, Miledi remained in her strange trance. She felt as though she was straddling the border between fantasy and reality. Her exhaustion and the severity of her plight had forced her brain into overdrive, allowing her to reach a state of absolute focus.

Time itself seemed to slow, and to Miledi's ears, Ahat's battle cry dragged on for far longer than it should have. As she faced her opponent, memories of her travels flashed through her mind.

She recalled fighting together with Oscar for the first time. Thanks to the huge amount of mana he'd lent her, she'd created a massive hole in the greenway. After that, she'd battled with Hearst in the desert, with Oscar and Naiz at her side. Then, when she'd kept Andika from sinking, she'd felt some deep, vast power residing within the world. They'd gone to the demon empire next, where Miledi had felt something stirring within her when her lightning had clashed with Rasul's. Finally, when Laus had extracted her soul, she'd felt as though

she'd gotten a glimpse of her true self.

No, not her true self, but rather the true nature of her powers. In a flash of inspiration, Miledi muttered, "Ah, I see... my magic..."

She was covered in cuts, had lost so much blood that it was a miracle she was still alive, and had almost no mana left. Yet Ahat could instinctively tell that she was stronger than ever. She knew she couldn't allow Miledi to live for another second. But at the same time, she had no way of ending Miledi. Her attacks weren't even grazing the Liberator anymore. Ahat could only watch helplessly as Miledi's gravity control continued to grow stronger.

Over a dozen spheres were circling Miledi, and Ahat's feathers could no longer disintegrate them. Miledi was darting around at supersonic speed, but her movements were as unpredictable and as smooth as a leaf in the wind. Moreover, Miledi was mitigating the g-forces acting upon her body by creating multiple gravity fields within her to absorb the force of her inertia. Her movements were flawless. This was something she could have achieved only by fully understanding the concept of gravity. Which meant she could now wield her power in new ways.

"This ends now!" Ahat shouted, her voice surprisingly shrill. She unleashed her most powerful disintegration blast yet, but Miledi was ready for it.

"Spatial Severance!"

Ahat's eyes widened in surprise as her strongest attack was swallowed up with ease.

"Heavensfall!"

"Ngh!?"

This Heavensfall was leagues above the last one Ahat had dealt with. She was able to stay in the air by combating it with all of her mana, but only just. She didn't have the strength to launch a counterattack in this state. Moreover, her altitude was slowly dropping. Ahat couldn't fathom what was going on. She turned her gaze upward to glare at Miledi, and that was when she saw it...

A sky-blue sun. Miledi was shining with such overwhelming radiance that it felt as though she was illuminating the entire world.

“You’ll lend me your strength, right?” Miledi muttered.

Extremely dense tendrils of power gathered around her, making her dazzling radiance multiply tenfold. She was drawing power from the sky, the clouds, the air, the earth, and even the trees. The mana enveloping her was the mana of nature. Just as how rivers all flowed into the sea, power was flowing into her from all of nature. The mana spiraled around her, forming a miniature galaxy of light. One look at her was enough to make it clear who Miledi had asked for strength...

The planet itself. The planet was lending Miledi its power. Miledi’s gravity was drawing in the power of all nature. For the third time that day, the battle below came to a halt as everyone stared at Miledi. They all stared in awe at the dazzling sky-blue sun expanding above them.

Once she’d gathered enough power, Miledi announced, “I, Miledi Reisen, hereby declare...”

She pointed directly at Ahat. Ahat was still struggling under Miledi’s Heavensfall, and her expression twisted into something truly monstrous as she looked up at Miledi. However, she no longer had the strength to do anything more than glare. Miledi’s gravitational field had her pinned in place. A second later, a whirling black sphere of gravity formed where Ahat was standing, sky-blue sparks running down its length.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Screaming, Ahat struggled to break free. The gravity sphere, Miledi’s Black Hole Nova, was crushing her from the inside out. The power contained in this spell was miles above the attack Miledi had used to open a hole in the greenway. God’s Apostle, Ahat, locked eyes with Miledi Reisen, the Liberator. There was a brief pause.

“...checkmate,” Miledi finished.

In her mind, both God’s Apostle and the twisted world ended that day. Miledi made a fist, as if to crush Ahat, and the god she embodied, in her grasp. At the same time, her fist seemed to hang on to everything important to her.

Ahat’s end was surprisingly quiet. Silently, Miledi’s Black Hole Nova dispersed

into nothingness.

“You damn monster...” Ahat whispered, as her body dispersed with it. The feathers she’d unleashed at the very end all fell slowly to the ground, sparkling brilliantly in the sun’s light.

“Belle... I did it. I won...”

I did good, didn’t I? Just as she thought that, Miledi’s strength finally gave out... and she started falling.

“Yeah, you did great, Miledi-chan.”

As her consciousness faded away, Miledi swore she heard Belta’s nostalgic voice.



Evening had arrived, and clouds darkened the skies of Elbard. A lone figure walked briskly through the alleys of the theocracy's capital. It was Laus. He wore a loose robe with a deep hood that covered his face, and the warhammer strapped to his back was wrapped in cloth to make it less conspicuous. On top of that, he used spirit magic to hide his presence as much as possible. Though the city was bustling, no one so much as glanced his way. Granted, considering the current state of the capital, he probably could have gone unnoticed even if he hadn't been trying.

After all, the nation's knights had returned just this afternoon. Everyone was excited, thinking that they'd given the filthy beastmen the divine punishment they deserved. Moreover, they were all dying to get a look at this new child of god the knights had no doubt brought back with them.

None of the citizens knew. They had no idea that the knights had failed. Or that the very symbol of Ehit's might, God's Apostle, had been utterly destroyed.

As the commander of the Holy Templar Knights, Laus should have been in the main cathedral right now. But upon his return, he'd abandoned both his responsibilities and the lies he'd kept telling himself. Instead of returning with the other knights, he'd slipped away and was now racing to his family.

I have to hurry... Just as he thought that, his house came into view. Unwilling to use the front gate, Laus slipped around to the back.

"Who goes there? What business do you have with the Barn family!?"

As Laus approached the back gate, a young guard with ash-brown hair called out to him. He placed his hand on his sword's hilt, his gaze stern.

"Reinheit, it's me."

"L-Laus-sama!? You've returned!? But why are you dressed like that?"

Laus removed his hood and the guard, one of the Barn family's knights, Reinheit Ashe, looked at him in surprise. His shock was understandable. After all, the lord of the house was trying to sneak in through the back gate. Reinheit's shout had alerted the other guards, and they were all running over now too. But Laus was in too much of a hurry to explain.

“Where are Sharm and the others? I don’t sense them inside the house.”

In fact, Laus couldn’t sense anyone inside the house. Not his son Sharm, not his wife Ricolis, not even his mother Debra. That was *not* a good omen. Laus began to worry that the others had caught onto his intentions, even though the knights had only just returned to the capital.

Unaware of Laus’ inner turmoil, Reinheit said lightly, “Oh, they all went to the cathedral.”

“The cathedral? What for?”

There were churches in the four corners of the city, but the northern one was the main cathedral and the headquarters of the church. It was also the closest church to Laus’ house.

“Ever since you departed for the front lines, they’ve been going every day to pray for your safety.”

“Sharm and the others have...I see...”

It made Laus happy that Sharm cared so much about him. That also helped Laus calm down somewhat. However, the bad feeling he’d had since returning home still remained. Guards would have gone with Sharm and the others, so he wasn’t worried they’d been attacked by muggers or anything like that. He was worried about something far more dangerous.

“Then I’ll go check up on them.”

“Huh? But they left quite a while ago. They’ll probably be back soon.”

Laus ignored Reinheit’s words and turned on his heel. But before he strode off, he looked back over his shoulder at the young knight.

“U-Umm, Laus-sama?”

Reinheit could tell something was going on with Laus. He didn’t know if it was because the commander had just returned from the front lines or what, but the hero he respected so much wasn’t acting normal.

After a brief moment of hesitation, Laus sucked in a huge breath and said, “Reinheit, come with me.”

“Huh? Oh, yes sir! Of course!”

Reinheit shot a worried glance back at the house’s other guards, unsure of whether he should leave the manor undefended. But they gestured for him to go with Laus, so he hurried after the lord of the house.

For a while, they walked in silence. But as time passed, Laus could tell Reinheit was finding it harder and harder to contain his curiosity. Smiling wryly, he led Reinheit into a deserted alleyway. This whole time they’d avoided crowded thoroughfares, and Reinheit was dying to know why Laus was sneaking around like this. For his part, Laus had no idea why he’d asked Reinheit to come with him. Getting the pure-hearted knight wrapped up in his affairs could ruin the poor boy’s life.

Curses... I need to calm down...

Laus couldn’t afford to make any more impulsive decisions. However, his instincts were telling him that sending Reinheit away would be a bad decision. So instead he said, “Reinheit, there’s something I need to ask you.”

“Anything, Laus-sama. What is it?”

“If... hypothetically speaking, Ehit asked you to offer your family up as a sacrifice, would you be able to do it?”

Laus could sense Reinheit’s gait faltering behind him. The knight’s soul was filled with confusion, unease, and hesitation. Laus smiled to himself. Any other knight would have answered instantly.

“I... well... I suppose if it would be... for the greater good?”

Reinheit’s faltering reply caused Laus’ smile to grow wider. Reinheit’s special magic, Pure Soul, allowed him to resist all unnatural influences on his psyche. The church’s brainwashing couldn’t affect him. But of course, he was too deep into the theocracy’s system to be willing to claim Ehit was wrong. His reply was something very fitting for a kind young man like him.

“Laus-sama. Did something good happen on this campaign?”

This time it was Laus’ turn to hesitate. He turned back to Reinheit, surprised.

“What makes you think that?”

“Well... I know this is presumptuous of me, but it feels like there’s more life in your eyes now.”

“More life in my eyes, you say? I see... So that’s how it looks to other people.”

Laus turned back to the road in front of him.

“Laus-sama?” Reinheit asked hesitantly, but there was no reply. His thoughts were already in the past. He was thinking back to the battle he’d witnessed a few days ago.

Shimmering silver feathers rained down from the heavens. Proof that the apostle, the symbol of Ehit’s might, had been defeated. All of the church’s soldiers looked up in abject disbelief. Laus was no exception. Defeating an apostle should have been impossible, yet Miledi had done just that.

She’d promised she’d show him hope, and she had delivered spectacularly. A surge of emotion welled up within Laus, and tears leaked from his eyes. He had no idea why he was crying, or that he was crying at all, for all of his attention was focused solely on the girl wreathed in a sky-blue aura. After a few seconds —

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

An ear-splitting scream of agony echoed through the battlefield. It was Mulm. He tore at his hair like a man possessed, his expression full of grief. The other bishops and knights of the church followed Mulm’s example, wailing in agony.

“Miledi Reiseeeeeeeeeeeeeeen!”

Mulm raised his bow and fired directly at Miledi. The vast amount of mana Miledi had been controlling before had dispersed, and she was currently falling helplessly to the ground.

“Oh no!” Laus shouted almost reflexively, but before he could lift a finger, Oscar acted.

“Naiz!” he shouted, running forward.

“On it!”

Naiz opened a portal directly below Miledi, and a second later, she was a few

feet above Oscar. He caught her before she fell, and Meiru immediately ran over to heal her. As orange light suffused Miledi's body, her numerous wounds began to vanish. But her eyes remained closed.

"Meiru, why won't she wake up!?" Oscar shouted, panicking.

"Calm down. There's nothing wrong with her body. She's probably just mentally exhausted after absorbing so much power."

Miledi's breathing was steady, which reassured Oscar somewhat.

"Kill her! Kill that blasted heretic! You must destroy her, even if it costs you your lives!"

This time, lightning shot toward Oscar and Miledi. Lilith had poured all of her rage and hate into one big attack.

Seeing their leaders continue to fight inspired the remaining bishops and knights, and they whipped themselves up into a zealous fervor, shouting battle cries as they charged. Their courage then passed down to the federation and empire soldiers, who followed after them. But their charge was stopped short by Lyutillis.

"My brethren, rouse yourselves! We must protect Miledi Reisen at all costs! She cannot die here!"

A large tree rose out of the miniature forest, with Lyutillis standing atop it. Her clear voice rang across the battlefield, and her beastmen answered with a series of thunderous roars. Their yells were loud enough to drown out the crazed battle cries of the oncoming soldiers. Most of the beastmen had suffered grievous wounds from fighting outside the mist's protection.

However, the knights of the theocracy were similarly injured. Meiru had already defeated Zebal, while Sui had successfully assassinated Baran, and Craid and Lyutillis had taken care of Godel and Vanadis. From that point on, it would be a battle of willpower and morale. The time had come to see whether bonds of friendship could overpower crazed religious devotion.

"Miledi needs rest. Let's finish this up quickly, guys," Oscar muttered, smiling gently at the girl in his arms. Meiru, Naiz, and Vandre all smiled as well, then turned to face the oncoming knights. But just before the decisive battle could

begin, a huge curtain of light appeared in the space between the two armies. There was a tremendous boom as the light gouged the earth, creating a ditch to separate the two sides.

Looking up, Oscar and the others saw a lone airship flying above them. The ship's sails adorned with the symbol of a shield surrounded by a shimmering halo. Mulm was so shocked to see that crest that he momentarily forgot his rage.

"Impossible... the Paladins are here? Was that light an attack from Longinus?" he muttered.

From the airship, a cold voice boomed, "This is an order from the commander of the Paladins, Darrion Kaus. Cease hostilities immediately."

The knights faltered, flabbergasted by this incomprehensible order. However —

"This is Ehit's will."

The moment Darrion added that, they knew they had no choice but to comply. No matter how fiercely their rage burned, they couldn't ignore an order from Ehit. Struggling to suppress his anger, Mulm turned to the Liberators and said, "Consider yourselves lucky... The next time we meet will be your last, Miledi Reisen! All units, retreat!"

Lilith and the other commanders followed Mulm's example and gave the order for all of their troops to retreat. Naturally, the federation and the empire did the same. The church had started this war on a whim, and now it was ending it on one. It was completely unreasonable. Oscar and the others were confused by the sudden turn of events, but they weren't just about to let the church escape like this. However, as Oscar and Lyutillis prepared to attack, Laus stepped forward.

"Don't," he said flatly, blocking the two Liberators' path.

"Darrion Kaus possesses both the divine spear Longinus and the Holy Sword. Moreover, his order, the Paladins, possess abilities even I don't know about."

"Laus Barn. Are you...?"

To Oscar, it looked more like Laus was trying to warn them than to get in their way. When he gazed into Laus' eyes, he was surprised by what he saw there. Laus was staring at Miledi. But his expression was unusually gentle. Normally, it looked like he was doing his best to kill his emotions, but now he was letting them rise to the surface. It felt as though he'd finally been freed from whatever shackles had bound him before. Oscar exchanged a quick glance with Meiru and the others, then turned back to Laus.

"Stay here with us, Laus Barn. I'm sure Miledi would—"

"Not another word!" Laus barked, his voice sharp. However, he wasn't trying to reject Oscar's invitation. He was just worried that Mulm and the others might overhear. They were still relatively close by. Before Oscar could say anything, Laus spoke directly to his soul.

"I have a family to protect. Which is why I have to return for now. Please tell Miledi that too."

For a moment, Oscar was overwhelmed by the resolve in Laus' gaze, but then he nodded.

"She upheld her end of the bargain, so of course, I plan to do the same. Once I've secured my family, I'll return to join you."

"I'll let her know. I'm sure she'll be overjoyed."

The knights were a good distance from Oscar and Laus now. After making sure no one was watching him, Laus gave the Oscar, Naiz, Meiru, and Lyutillis a brief smile, then turned on his heel.

"We'll meet again," he whispered to each of their souls.

Oscar and the other stared at his back as he retreated to Agris with the other soldiers. Chances were the army wouldn't stay in Agris long. There was always the chance that the republic would launch a counteroffensive in revenge, so they'd likely abandon the city. Especially since the empire and the theocracy would be pulling their soldiers out of the federation. This was the beastmen's only chance to get revenge against the federation, and there were a lot of warriors who were itching to go after the retreating army.

"We protected our home, and we protected our comrades," Lyutillis declared,

her voice grabbing everyone's attention. The forest faded around her, flower petals filling the air in her vicinity.

"We are no invaders, and we don't fight for revenge. Never forget, we are proud beastmen of the Pale Forest!"

The warriors exchanged glances. Sim and the other commanders nodded, satisfied.

"Our war is over!" Lyutillis paused for a moment, sucking in a huge breath. Then, smiling, she shouted, "We've won!"

With that, she officially brought the war to a close. Naturally, all of the beastmen cheered. They'd achieved what they set out to do, and that was enough.

"Umm... Laus-sama? I'm sorry, did I say something I shouldn't have?"

Reinheit's apologetic voice brought Laus back to the present. Realizing he'd been spacing out for a few seconds now, he hurriedly apologized.

"Sorry, Reinheit, I was just reminiscing. You're right, something good did happen during this campaign."

"Now that I think about it, though, that was a stupid question. You won, so of course it would have been a good campaign."

At that, Laus smiled wryly.

"Actually, we lost the war."

"Huh? What?"

"They really did a number on us. Sheesh, that girl really is just too strong."

Reinheit gave Laus a look of disbelief. He couldn't believe that Laus had lost, but what surprised him even more was that Laus seemed *happy* about it. This was the first time Reinheit had seen Laus smile.

Thinking that this had to be some kind of joke, Reinheit smiled as well and replied playfully, "Let me guess, you lost the battle but won the war?"

"Huh? What gives you that idea?"

“Well, it’s just that for someone who lost, you look awfully happy. So you must have gained something in defeat, right?”

“I see... Well, I certainly did gain something.”

I see. I guess if you look at it that way, I certainly did win. After all, I got what I wanted the most... Laus nodded to himself, his smile growing brighter.

After a few more minutes of walking, the pair arrived at the cathedral. Laus suddenly realized this might be the last time he’d ever talk to Reinheit. He planned to take his family and flee the theocracy. Of course, that included his sons studying in the main cathedral too, not just Sharm, Debra, and Ricolis. Considering how pious Ricolis and the others were, he suspected they wouldn’t want to go with him. However, he didn’t have time to argue with them. For now, he’d get them out of the country, and then they could discuss things. If, even after his attempts at persuasion, they wanted to return to the theocracy, he wouldn’t stop them.

“Reinheit. No matter what happens, be sure to follow your heart. If, after you see what I’m about to do, you think I’m in the wrong, that’s fine too.”

“Laus-sama? What are you—?”

Laus stepped into the cathedral without replying. He made a beeline for where his son, his wife, and his mother would be praying, but then suddenly stopped short.

“I see you’ve finally arrived, Laus Barn.”

His breath caught in his throat and chills ran down his spine.

No, that’s not possible. I saw you die! No one could have survived that!

“How can you be here, God’s Apostle!?”

The apostle Miledi had killed stood before Laus. She was wearing nun’s robes and looking out of the cathedral’s stained glass windows.

“What a strange query. I have been here this whole time.”

“Impossible! I thought Miledi Reisen killed you!”

Reinheit looked confused by this exchange, but Laus had no time to explain.

The apostle cocked her head, her movements as mechanical as a doll's, then muttered, "Oh. It was Ahat who died. I believe I introduced myself as Ainz."

"This can't be... No, wait. I understand now. You really are nothing more than a doll, aren't—?"

"Allow me to divulge my true name to you. I am Hearst, the first of God's Apostles."

This has to be some kind of nightmare. Are you telling me these things are mass-produced? Laus stumbled backward, cold sweat pouring down his forehead.

Seemingly unconcerned by his reaction, the apostle said, "Now then, Laus Barn. I realize you have only just returned from the battlefield, but there is something I would like you to do for me."

Does she know I'm planning on betraying Ehit? Laus hadn't done anything concrete to oppose the church yet. At best, he could be accused of putting off handing in his report to go visit home first. That was hardly a capital offense. But then, why was an apostle there, in a public location? If she was there to capture him, then he was in deep trouble.

Can I escape her and get my family out at the same time? Or should I pretend to act obedient for now? A thousand different plans whirled through Laus' head.

He curled his sweaty palms into fists, and asked as calmly as he could, "And what would that be?"

"There is a poor child here who seems to be having a hard time receiving Ehit's Blessing. Would you be so kind as to teach him the virtues of the church?"

Ehit's Blessing referred to the magical brainwashing the church performed on some of its believers. Most people were usually convinced by the priests' sermons, but a few still doubted the church's values. Those were the ones who were given Ehit's Blessing. Laus' spirit magic was more than capable of brainwashing others. In fact, it was far more suited to it than darkness magic, or the special magic the higher-ranking bishops possessed. However, Laus doubted the apostle had been waiting here for him just to ask him to brainwash someone. Suddenly, Laus shivered. He had a very bad feeling about where this

was going.

“Ehit wishes this from you,” the apostle added, her voice suddenly sounding very ominous. Laus didn’t want to hear what was coming next, but plugging his ears wasn’t an option.

“He wants to be sure of the allegiance of his pawns, so he can decide how next to manipulate the game board.”

Laus was too shaken to realize the significance of what the apostle had said.

“Get up and walk.”

“You’re a disgrace to the Barn family name!”

Two very familiar voices could be heard from the room beyond this one. And thanks to Laus’ magic, he recognized the souls they belonged to too.

The doors behind the cathedral altar opened with an ominous creaking noise. The first person to emerge from within was—

“Sharm!”

Laus’ beloved son. However, a pair of knights were dragging him in by the arms, and he was covered in bruises. His eyes were vacant, and his body was completely limp. Walking behind him were two boys Laus recognized very well.

“What...? What are you doing!?”

“What do you mean?”

“You sure ask some rather strange questions, Father.”

They were his two sons who had been taken by the church for training some years prior, Kaime and Selm. With them were Ricolis and Debra, as well as the commander of the Paladins, Darrion.

“Sharm’s finally been chosen to join the church’s ranks,” said twelve-year-old Kaime.

“He’s already eight. We were worried, since it was taking him much longer than everyone else, but then...” ten-year-old Selm trailed off. Though they weren’t much older than Sharm, neither of them sounded anything like children. Moreover, their features had changed drastically from what Laus

remembered. They were both looking at Sharm with unbridled scorn.

“To think a member of the Barn family would try and resist Ehit’s Blessing... He’s brought shame to us all,” Debra spat.

Being invited to serve in the main cathedral was a great honor for citizens of the theocracy. Yet Sharm was trying to refuse this honor. Debra was so disappointed in him she looked ready to disown him on the spot. She was looking at Sharm like he was a heretic, not her grandson. In fact, it was obvious she was thinking of how best to dispose of him quietly before he could disgrace the Barn family’s name any further.

“Dear, please! You have to teach Sharm about the glory of Lord Ehit! I cannot believe any son of mine would attempt to resist Ehit’s Blessing!” Ricolis pleaded.

The fact that she wasn’t thinking about getting rid of Sharm proved she had some motherly love left in her at least. That being said, when Sharm weakly looked up at her and muttered, “Mo...ther...” she looked at him like he was some abhorrent slug and started beating him. It was hard to believe she was really his mother.

“Stop! That’s enough!” Laus shouted, clenching his fists so hard they started bleeding. He was so angry his vision was blurring. That wasn’t how family was supposed to treat each other. For so long, Laus had tried to love his wife, respect his mother, and care for his older sons. But right now, they were torturing their own flesh and blood, his youngest child. This was a scene straight out of a nightmare.

But at the same time, Laus realized this was his own fault. He was the head of the Barn family. Ricolis’ husband, Debra’s son, and Kaime and Selm’s father. If he’d truly loved his family, he should have resisted. He should have fought against the insanity of the church before it swallowed everything he cherished. As a husband, as a son, as a father, he should have been more open with his family. But instead, he’d resigned himself to his fate without even trying to correct their erroneous beliefs. Laus was furious, but his rage was directed primarily toward himself.

He wanted to grab Sharm and flee this instant, but if he left now, the rest of

his family would be punished. Kaime and Selm were his heirs, so they'd probably be safe, but Ricolis and Debra had no value to the theocracy. What he really wanted to do was drag everyone out of there and start all over as a proper family. He was still clinging to the faint hope that if he showed Ricolis and the others the rest of the world, they'd be able to change their views. However, there was no way he could rescue everyone with Darrion and Hearst right there.

"If you would be so kind as to begin, Lord Barn," Hearst urged in a cold, emotionless voice.

Darrion leaned against a nearby pillar and folded his arms, his eyes closed. Laus realized he had no choice but to use his spirit magic to brainwash Sharm into loving Ehit. He had to feign obedience and wait for an opportunity. Sharm's brainwashing could be removed later, when he fled with his entire family. But while Laus understood that was the most logical course of action, his love for Sharm caused him to hesitate.

"I am afraid it has to be you. You see..."

Hearst walked over to Sharm, grabbed him by the hair, and lifted his head up. The moment her eyes locked with his—

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Sharm!"

"He resists even my magic."

Sharm screamed again, desperately shaking his head. An eight-year-old boy was resisting an apostle's brainwashing. Such a thing shouldn't have been possible. Sharm possessed no special magic. However, he possessed something far stronger.

"Stop it. I'm Laus Barn's son. Sharm... Barn. I don't... want to change. Don't lock me away. Don't... kill me!"

Hearst's brainwashing was trying to overwrite Sharm's memories, and make him forget that he was Laus' son. She was trying to bind Sharm with chains of faith, and destroy the part of his soul that made him who he was. To Sharm, allowing her magic to affect him would be the same as letting her kill him. As

unbelievable as it seemed, at the tender age of eight, Sharm had enough pride in his identity to resist the will of god.

“Fa...ther...”

Sharm had grown up with his father as a role model. To Sharm, Laus was an invincible hero who loved him unconditionally, which was why even though the rest of his family was insulting him, even though rejecting Hearst’s magic was causing him more pain than he could bear, he continued to resist.

“Help me!”

Because he believed with all his heart that Laus would come to save him. In that instant, Laus made up his mind.

“Tier eight—”

The knights restraining Sharm, as well as Laus’ own family, looked at him in shock.

“Limit Breaaaaaaaaaaak!”

There was an explosion of midnight-black mana, large enough to fill the entire room. A second later, a thunderous boom echoed as Hearst crashed through the stained-glass windows, her swords crossed defensively in front of her. Laus brought his hammer up for a follow-up attack, but Darrion stopped him with the butt of his divine spear. He blocked the blow with his hammer, then used Solid Specter to project his soul out of his body. Leaving his body behind, he sent his spirit after the two knights restraining Sharm. He hit both of them with Soul Purge, separating their souls from their bodies.

Darrion attempted to stab Laus’ body while it was still unoccupied, but Laus stalled him with a Soul Shock and reunited his flesh with his spirit. The moment he returned, Laus sent out chains of light to grab Sharm and pull him over, while keeping Darrion at bay with his hammer. Then, he leaped backward with enough force to crack the ground he’d been standing on. Once he’d put enough distance between him and Darrion, he cast Soul’s Repose on Sharm to heal his battered mind.

He’d accomplished all of that in the short span of three seconds.

“Ah... Fa...ther?”

“Yep, it’s me. I came here to save you.”

Sharm smiled weakly. Before he could say anything though, Hearst flew in through the shattered window, her habit replaced by the standard apostle battle garb. Ricolis and the others were completely captivated by the apostle’s appearance, seemingly forgetting what was going on around them. Darrion spared a single glance at the two knights lying unconscious on the ground, then shifted his spear to his off-hand and drew the Holy Sword belted to his waist. Laus sensed numerous powerful souls, likely other knights, rushing to the scene of the commotion.

“I’m sorry, Sharm.”

“Father?”

Sharm couldn’t understand why Laus was apologizing. He had no way of knowing that Laus was sorry he couldn’t save everyone and was going to have to abandon Sharm’s mother, grandmother, and brothers.

“Reinheit.”

Until that point, Reinheit had been too stunned to do anything more than watch blankly as events unfolded before him. But when Laus called his name, he regained his wits.

“I’m begging you. Please, keep my son safe.”

“Ah...”

Agreeing to Laus’ request would mean betraying the church. It would mean becoming a heretic. Laus knew his request was unreasonable. Reinheit was a Templar Knight. Normally, no Templar Knight would have accepted such a request.

For his part, Reinheit was still trying to piece together what was going on. He had no idea how things had ended up like this, or why Laus was doing what he was doing. But at that moment, Laus’ earlier words flashed through his mind.

“No matter what happens, be sure to follow your heart.”

“Celestial Flash!”

Reinheit drew his sword and swung it down. The flash of white light that shot out of it flew past Laus and headed straight for Darrion. At the same time, Laus flung his son backward and brought his hammer up to stop Hearst's twin blades.

"Sharm-sama, we have to leave!"

"Huh? Ah, but what about Father!?"

Reinheit scooped Sharm up in one arm and ran for the exit.

"Sorry... No, that's not right. Thank you, Reinheit," Laus muttered as Reinheit ran past.

"Don't die on me, Laus-sama!"

Laus started to apologize for making the entire world Reinheit's enemy, but then he realized Reinheit had done this of his own free will, so he decided to thank him instead. Tears sprang to Reinheit's eyes as he realized Laus was preparing to fight to the death, but he nevertheless continued running. Shockwaves of mana and explosions loud enough to rattle his eardrums assailed him from behind, but he didn't look back.

"Father! Faaather!"

"Quiet! If someone finds us before we leave the capital, we're dead!"

"But Father—"

"Your father is doing this to keep you safe! Please, Sharm-sama, stay quiet!"

Sharm fell quiet then, though he continued crying silently. Reinheit weaved through the capital's back alleys, heading for the city gates.

As the sun finished setting and the moon began to rise, Sharm asked, "Reinheit... Why are you...?"

Among the knights that served Laus, Reinheit was the most amicable, which was why Sharm was decently good friends with him. In fact, he trusted the knight quite a bit. However, Sharm was wise enough to know that Reinheit's decision to rescue him would have extreme repercussions for the young knight. Reinheit opened his mouth to respond, but he was interrupted before he could.

“Pierce him through— Longinus!”

“Gaaah!”

A spear of light pierced Reinheit’s stomach. The force of the impact sent him flying, and he crashed against the wall of a nearby building.

“Ngh... Commander Darrion...”

“You made a foolish choice, knight. No, not knight. Heretic.”

Unlike the other commanders of the Three Pillars of Radiance, Darrion Kaus wasn’t particularly tall or muscular. In fact, he looked quite unassuming. However, his looks belied his enormous strength.

Groaning in pain, Reinheit got to his feet and stepped protectively in front of Sharm, his sword drawn. It seemed Laus hadn’t been able to stall both Hearst and Darrion.

Looking bored, Darrion said, “That’s one of Barn’s heirs. He might prove useful in the future.”

“So what?”

“Hand him over. The special magic you possess is quite rare. If you’re willing to give the kid up, I’ll forgive this foolish act of rebellion.”

Darrion’s offer was surprisingly generous, considering how the church normally handled traitors. Darrion seemed to be hoping Reinheit’s actions stemmed from impulsive loyalty toward Laus, and that he was willing to reconsider. Trembling, Sharm looked worriedly up at Reinheit.

“I refuse.”

“Are you doing this out of loyalty to Laus Barn? He’s nothing more than a heretic now, so there’s no point in—”

“This has nothing to do with Laus-sama. I’m making this choice of my own free will.”

Sharm knew Reinheit was a good person, but he’d always thought the knight was a little unreliable. Even now, he could tell Reinheit was shivering in pain and fear. Yet—

“There’s a crying child begging for my help. What kind of knight would I be if I didn’t save him?”

For some strange reason—

“The god I believe in would never condone torturing a father and child like this! I don’t give a damn what your shitty beliefs are! Helping those in need is the creed that I, Reinheit Ashe, live by!”

In that moment, Reinheit looked just as dependable as Laus, the man Sharm idolized.

Unfortunately, resolve alone was worthless. And the gap in strength between Reinheit and Darrion was massive.

“How pathetic.”

With one stroke of his glowing spear, Darrion cut down Reinheit, ideals and all.

The young knight crumpled to the ground, blood spilling from the massive gash in his chest. A simple Templar Knight had no hope of matching the might of the commander of the Three Pillars of Radiance. Reinheit hadn’t even been able to buy time for Sharm to escape.

“Reinheit!?”

Sharm clung to the brave knight’s back, trying to will him back to his feet. But Darrion simply grabbed Sharm by the scruff of his neck and mercilessly yanked him away. Consciousness fading, Reinheit could only watch helplessly as Sharm was taken from him. With the amount of blood he was losing, he knew death was only moments away.

I have to... cast a healing spell and stop the bleeding. Then, I can sneak up on him from behind and... Move... Move, goddammit! Laus-sama entrusted me with Sharm-sama’s safety. This is my duty as a knight!

However, no matter how hard Reinheit wished for it, his body didn’t move. Even if he could have moved, he had no affinity for light magic and couldn’t cast healing spells. All he had was his special magic which allowed him to resist status effects.

Sharm struggled against Darrion's grip, reaching out to Reinheit with tears in his eyes. Seeing the boy's desperation, Reinheit began to cry as well. His own powerlessness sickened him. *If only I had strength, if only I had talent. Then, I could fulfill my duty as a knight, as a human being, and protect—*

"I want the power to save him!" he wailed.

I don't care if it costs me my life, I just want to save this one child! God, if you're watching me, please, lend me strength!

To Reinheit's utter surprise, his wish was granted.

"What?"

But not by god. It was a sword that granted his wish. There was a blinding flash of light from the Holy Sword at Darrion's waist. In an instant, the entire alleyway was illuminated with warm, white light. After a few seconds, the light subsided, and the glowing sword rose into the air of its own accord. It floated toward Reinheit, as though it was choosing a new master.

"Impossible... The Holy Sword can only be wielded by those who possess the traits of a hero..."

Emotion flitted across Darrion's face for the first time since he'd arrived. He had no idea what had caused the Holy Sword to react to Reinheit. That was hardly surprising, since not even Reinheit knew.

The truth was, Reinheit's Pure Soul did more than just prevent anything from influencing his psyche. It allowed him to become anything, so long as he willed it.

"Will you lend me your strength?" Reinheit asked hesitantly as he grasped the sword with a bloodstained hand. Another pulse of light rippled out from the Holy Sword, and Reinheit's bleeding stopped. It seemed the sword had granted him the ability to use healing magic. And that wasn't all. The moment he'd gripped the Holy Sword, he'd felt it. It was like the sword itself had told him he could do it now.

"Limit—"

"Impossible! Tch..."

Darrion callously tossed Sharm to the ground and raised his spear.

“Break!”

Reinheit’s strength multiplied exponentially. He shot toward Darrion, moving so fast he looked like nothing more than a streak of light. Darrion barely managed to get his spear up in time to block Reinheit’s first swing.

I can do this! the young knight though.

“Uwoooooooooooooooooooooooh!”

With a spirited shout, Reinheit slashed at Darrion over and over. Every time Longinus’ wielder and the new wielder of the Holy Sword clashed, shockwaves powerful enough to shake the nearby buildings rippled outward. However—

I can’t get past his guard! Even this newfound power wasn’t enough to overcome Darrion’s might. Moreover, Reinheit could feel the Holy Sword warning him that his Limit Break had a time limit. With how battered his body was, he wouldn’t even be able to keep his Limit Break up for another minute.

“It’s over,” Darrion declared.

The battle ended in an instant. Darrion slipped past Reinheit’s guard and stabbed him in the stomach.

“Oh, it’s over alright!” Reinheit howled.

He knew he couldn’t win, so Reinheit had been prepared to trade his life for Darrion’s from the very start. Before Darrion could pull his spear out, Reinheit grabbed his arm. Darrion’s eyes widened in surprise as realization washed over him... a second before Reinheit’s sword stabbed him in the heart.

The two warriors stared into each other’s eyes. Darrion’s face was twisted in pain, while Reinheit was smiling fearlessly. Then, the strength left both of their bodies and they fell backward at the same time. Longinus and the Holy Sword both clattered to the ground.

“Reinheit!” Sharm shouted, running over to his savior.

“Sharm-sama... You must run... Head east.”

“I-I can’t just leave you... Aaah, what do I do? The blood won’t stop!”

Reinheit reached out with a trembling hand and patted Sharm on the head.

“Listen to me. Your father... met someone... on the battlefield. That someone... changed him... which is why I’m sure that person will also... protect you...”

“B-But... how am I supposed to get there alone?”

“Pull yourself together! You’re Laus Barn’s, the strongest knight’s, son!”

“Ah...”

Sharm gulped, stunned by the intensity in Reinheit’s voice. But then, after a few seconds, he gritted his teeth and nodded. He silently wiped his tears, his eyes burning with resolve.

“I’m... going to leave you behind, Reinheit. I’ll go east by myself.”

Reinheit smiled, satisfied.

“Thank you, Reinheit. You’re as amazing a knight as Father.”

“I’m honored that... you think so, Sharm-sama.”

Sharm slowly rose to his feet.

“Huh?”

But when he turned around, he saw Darrion standing in his way. Even though he’d been pierced through the heart, the Paladins’ commander still had enough strength left to fight.

“Run, Sharm-sama!”

Reinheit crawled forward, reaching for his sword. Darrion glanced over at him, then grabbed his spear. He was going to finish Reinheit off before the young knight awakened any more new powers.

Sharm and Reinheit resolved themselves to their fate. That was all they could do. This was checkmate.

“This time, it really is the end.”

Darrion raised his spear high.

“Yeah, for you.”

A massive fist slammed into Darrion's face. His skull caved in from the force of the blow, and he hit the wall behind him so hard it cracked. He was dead for sure. When they saw who had arrived, Sharm and Reinheit's faces lit up in joy.

"Father!"

"Laus...sama..."

Panting, Laus lowered his fist and turned to look at the two of them. He was covered in blood, his left arm was missing, and he appeared to have lost his hammer. But he was alive. Sharm ran over to him and he hugged his son with one arm, then walked over to Reinheit and knelt next to him.

"Reinheit... Thank you. I owe you a huge debt."

"I just... did what my heart told me."

Laus cast a healing spell on Reinheit, bringing him back from the verge of death. Somehow or the other, he'd managed to shake the apostle. Sharm and Reinheit both looked like they wanted to say something to him, but before they could, Longinus floated into the air and flew off into the distance, distracting them.

"There's no time to explain. We need to find somewhere to hide."

The two of them nodded, knowing that wasn't the time for questions. Sharm bent down to grab the Holy Sword and handed it to Reinheit. Laus looked momentarily surprised to see Reinheit wielding the sacred weapon, but then he nodded in understanding and smiled at the young knight.

Together, Laus and Sharm helped Reinheit to his feet. Leaning heavily against each other, the three of them staggered off into the night. Their one hope remained far to the east.

"We have to... find a way to get to her," Laus muttered.



Afterword

Hello everyone, it's your resident chuuni lover, Ryo Shirakome, here.

Thank you so much for picking up Arifureta Zero Volume 4. How did you like it? This is the volume where the Liberators finally announce their existence to the world. It's also the volume where Miledi learns about the true nature of her ancient magic and takes down her first apostle. Oh, and we finally get to meet our final ancient magic user, the masochistic elf queen, while Laus makes up his mind to leave the church.

Personally, I feel like Lyutillis ended up exactly how everyone expected her to be. Seeing as the past and the present are connected, and that history inevitably repeats itself, of course we got a perverted masochist in Miledi's party. It was the only logical outcome!

At any rate, we've finally reached the climax of Zero's story. The upcoming volume's going to be even more chuuni than the last, but I hope you'll all stick with me to the very end!

And with that, I'd like to move on to the acknowledgments.

As always, I'd like to thank my illustrator, Takayaki-sensei, as well as the artist for the Arifureta Zero manga, Ataru Kamichi-sensei. A big thank you as well to RoGa-sensei, who draws the art for the main series manga, and to Misaki Mori-sensei who draws the Arifureta everyday life spin-off manga. And, of course, I'm eternally grateful to my editor, my proofreaders, and everyone else who makes these publications possible. Last but not least, thank you, dear readers, for supporting me every step of the way. I look forward to seeing you all again in the next volume!

Ryo Shirakome.

Bonus Short Stories

In Search of My Beloved Synergist: 3

“I give up,” a despairing voice wailed. It belonged to Aisha, a fifteen-year-old waitress who used to work at one of the restaurants in Velnika, the capital of the Velka Kingdom. She normally put her indigo blue hair up into a ponytail, but right now it was drooping limply around her face and shoulders. She staggered a few steps forward on the highway she was traveling on, looking almost like a zombie. Her eyes, which were mostly obscured by her hair, were cloudy and unfocused. Everything about her made it seem like she’d just walked out of a horror movie.

“Oscar-san... I don’t think I can make it...”

She had spent almost a year traveling the continent in search of Oscar, her one-sided crush. But now her ironclad resolve was beginning to crack. One could hardly blame her, though.

“Hmm, if they’re not in Esperado, we’re completely out of leads.”

“Well, it’s the biggest city in the world, so maybe they’re still there and we just missed them?”

The two adventurers Aisha had hired as her bodyguards exchanged smiles. Indeed, their current problem was they had no idea where Oscar might have gone. After drifting aimlessly through the western seas for ten days without food or water, they’d been picked up by the Melusine pirate crew. The crew had nursed them back from the brink of death, and it was there that Aisha had learned what Oscar and his companions had been up to. She’d lied to Chris, Baharl, Diene, and the others, by telling them she was Oscar’s wife and demanded that they tell her his whereabouts. In the end, Chris contacted the Liberator village Oscar had helped built in the northern reaches of the desert and discovered that he and his friends had since left for Esperado, the capital of the Entris Federation.

Of course, he wasn't about to tell Aisha and the others the location of the Liberator hideout in the city. So instead, he sailed north along the coast to the border between the theocracy and Dukedom of Uldia, and set them down in the mountain range separating the two nations. From there, Aisha crossed the mountains, passed through multiple countries, and traversed all sorts of rough terrain before finally arriving in Esperado. But there, she was unable to find any information about Oscar's current whereabouts. Now she was walking back down the same highway she'd come from. She planned to visit all the towns and cities within Entris that they'd skipped on their way and see if they couldn't find any other clues to where Oscar had gone. If that failed, they'd return to the coast.

"Come on, pull yourself together. We expected this, remember?" Kyaty Cougan, who'd decided to tag along with Aisha for this expedition, said. Part of the reason they were returning was so that she could get back to her crew. Aisha was planning on sticking with the Melusine pirates for the foreseeable future as well. Barring any other clues, staying with them would be the fastest way to see Oscar again. Since Kyaty knew they'd end up coming back from the very beginning, she'd opted to tag along to see what cities on the mainland were like.

"I can't believe you don't care about my problems! You're horrible!"

"I mean, they're not my problems, so yeah. Anyway, take a look at this book. It's got a really easy to understand summary of world history and economics! Thank god they had the latest edition at that bookstore. This even has an updated account of each country's political—"

"How can you be so insensitive, Kyaty-san!? This is why you've never had a boyfriend!"

"What was that!? H-How are you so sure I've never had a boyfriend before!?"

"Well, have you!?"

"N-No, but so what!? What's wrong with that!? So I've never dated anyone in my life, big deal!"

For the record, Kyaty was twenty-two.

“Hey, Kyaty, if you’re looking for a boyfriend, I’d be happy to—”

Scurdy, one of Aisha’s bodyguards, casually tried to ask Kyaty out. In truth, he’d had a crush on her since she’d saved them near Andika.

“I’m only interested in strong guys!”

However, Kyaty shot him down instantly. Scurdy’s eyes glazed over and he backed off with a mumbled, “Oh, okay.”

Thanks to her rather rugged upbringing, Kyaty’s type was smart guys who were stronger than her, but acted like gentlemen.

In other words, the only man you’re interested in is Oscar-san, Aisha said flatly.

“I never said that! B-Besides, who’d like a dumb four-eyes like him!?”

“Says the girl who tried to seduce him with a maid outfit.”

“Like I said, that was all a misunderstanding!” Kyaty retorted hotly.

However, Aisha wasn’t convinced, and she gave the catgirl a suspicious look. The two of them continued bickering for hours until the party finally reached a town in the evening. They strolled through the streets, searching for an inn to stay the night. After a few minutes, Aisha suddenly came to a halt.

“I can smell it! I can smell Oscar-san’s presence coming from that woman!” Aisha roared as she pointed to a young girl standing in front of them. How she could “smell” someone’s presence on other people was an absolute mystery, but Aisha dashed off toward the girl before anyone could ask her about it.

“Wow, she’s fast. Nowhere near as fast as my Acceleration, but still, what’s gotten into her?”

“It’s the power of love, I guess.”

“I feel like that’s how you’ve been explaining all her weird quirks. What is she, some kind of love-powered lifeform?”

Exasperated, Kyaty and the others walked over to the girl as well, who was currently looking extremely confused as Aisha sniffed at her clothes.

“Ugh, why are you sniffing me like that? Do I smell? I just took a bath, you

know!” the girl wailed.

Half in tears, she tried to escape from Aisha, but Aisha used her superhuman agility to keep up with the girl. After a few seconds, though, Aisha returned to her senses and realized she was being extremely rude.

“I-I’m terribly sorry! I just happened to smell Oscar-san’s presence from you, so I couldn’t help myself! Ah, my name’s Aisha! Do you know someone called Oscar?”

“Huh!? Actually, I run an inn, and I do believe we had a guest by that name some time back. May I ask what your relationship with him is?”

As she inched away from Aisha, the girl warily answered her question. Her expression completely serious, Aisha replied without hesitation, “I’m his wife.”

Sighing, Kyaty and the others prepared themselves to resolve the misunderstanding. But before they could even say a word, the girl shouted, “Liar! You’re lying!”

“Wh-Where’s your proof!?”

“I know you’re lying because Oscar and Miledi are in love!”

The girl’s words echoed through the street. She spread her legs wide and confidently put her hands on her hips.

“Th-They’ve already gone all the way! In fact, Miledi’s so energetic in bed that Oscar came down every morning looking completely drained!”

“Wh-What did you just say!?”

Aisha’s eyes rolled back into her head. However, this girl was a devout fan of Miledi, and she was determined to defend Miledi’s honor to the last.

“Sometimes, they even had a foursomes with Naiz and Meiru...”

Blood started dripping from the girl’s nose as she lost herself in her delusions. This time, it was Kyaty’s turn to swoon.

“N-No way! That super sadist, Meiru... managed to go all the way before me!?”

Kyaty staggered backward. Though she tried to act like she was above

romance, the knowledge that her fellow boyfriendless childhood friend had climbed the stairs to adulthood before her had come as a shock. Especially when she'd started off with something as hardcore as a foursome. She felt utterly defeated.

"I-I don't believe it! Aisha can't believe it!" Aisha shouted. It seemed she'd received such a huge blow that she'd mentally reverted to a five-year-old. Kyaty was in a similar state.

"Y-Yeah! You're the one who's lying!"

Kyaty advanced menacingly on the girl, her claws flashing in the sunset. But the girl just harrumphed and turned on her heel. She looked back over her shoulder at Kyaty and Aisha and said dismissively, "Follow me! I'll let you stay at my inn! But you better be ready to hear how no one can ever get in between Oscar and Miledi's love!"

"H-Hah, bring it on!"

"I am a little curious about Oscar's relationship, but more importantly, tell me what Meiru's been up to!"

The three girls walked off, leaving the two bodyguards in the dust. They were arguing loudly enough that the bodyguards could hear passerby muttering things like, "My, how nice it is to be young."

Feeling helpless, they followed after their charge. Naturally, the inn the girl led the party to was none other than Wanda's Inn.

The Very First Soul Sisters Society

"Haaah... I'm exhausted."

"Hahaha. Lyu-chan sure is attached to you, huh, Meru-nee?"

Miledi and Meiru made their way down one of the hallways of the giant tree that served as the beastmen capital's palace. Meiru looked worn out, while Miledi appeared quite chipper. The reason for Meiru's tiredness wasn't the war, which had been dragging on for a few weeks now, but rather Lyutillis' obsession with her. The masochistic elven queen was always begging Meiru to punish her.

“But you know, Meru-nee. You complain a lot, but I secretly think you’re enjoying this,” Miledi mused.

“Please never say that again!”

However, the fact of the matter was that whenever Lyutillis got on all fours, Meiru reflexively would use her as a chair. As a natural-born sadist, she was surprisingly compatible Lyutillis.

“Aww, but you two look so cute together!” Miledi said with a mischievous grin.

Meiru glared at Miledi, thinking of what prank she could pull to get back at her cheeky leader. Just then, though, a timid voice called out to her from behind.

“U-Umm, Meiru-sama!”

Turning around, Meiru saw one of the catgirl maids who worked in the palace fidgeting bashfully. Another four girls were hiding in the maid’s shadow and they all squealed when Meiru turned to them.

“Wow, you really called out to her!” one of them said to the maid.

“You’re so brave!” shouted another.

In general, Meiru was nicer to girls than she was to guys. Her tired expression transformed into a gentle smile and she kindly asked, “Did you need something?”

The cat-eared maid blushed and started fidgeting even more. She looked like a hardcore groupie meeting her favorite celebrity for the first time.

“U-Umm, umm, I-I-I-I-I...” she started tripping over her words, her ears flapping back and forth. From the looks of it, the starry-eyed maid was still in her teens. Her youth brought out Meiru’s doting side. She hugged the young maid and gently patted her cat ears.

“There, there, calm down. I won’t go anywhere, so take your time, okay?”

“O-Okaaaaaaaaay!”

The catgirl was so excited she looked like she was about to faint. Being

enveloped in Meiru's ample cleavage was one of the happiest moments of her life. The girls behind her started muttering jealously to each other.

"I can't believe she's trying to steal a march on us!"

"I'm so jealous!"

"Off with her head!"

The maid seemed to have heard her friends' grumblings, as she hurriedly extricated herself from Meiru's embrace. She took a deep breath to steady her resolve, brought a hand to her chest, looked up at Meiru with tears in her eyes, and shouted, "P-Please let me be your younger sister!"

Her words echoed down the hallway.

"Ummm, what? Sister?"

Confused, Meiru turned to Miledi for help. However, Miledi seemed just as confused.

"Y-Yes! After seeing how Her Majesty called you onee-sama, all of the maids in the palace... no, all of the women in the republic, have been dying to become your sister!"

To people who didn't know the full picture, it seemed as though Lyutillis was infatuated with Meiru, and Meiru acted like a kindly older sister toward her. Though if any of them had looked closer, they'd notice the smile Meiru had in Lyutillis' presence always looked oddly strained. Even her kind act in public was mostly to spare Parsha any more suffering. Moreover, Lyutillis always returned from their dates alone looking extremely happy.

"You've shown all of us a part of ourselves we never knew existed!"

"And what part would that be!?"

"The part that wants to cross the taboo boundary between sisters."

"Bury that part of yourselves somewhere deep and never let it see the light of day!"

"I'm sorry, but that's impossible."

Once opened, that door could never be closed again. Meiru and the maid

continued arguing back and forth for a few seconds, but soon the maid's friends joined in on her side. This was their one chance to get Meiru to accept them. They'd make her swear to make them her sisters by hook or by crook. Feeling a little overwhelmed, Meiru turned to Miledi for help. However, Miledi didn't look too happy right now.

"Hm... So you're going to make these random strangers your little sisters too, Meru-nee?"

"Miledi-chan?"

To Meiru's surprise, it looked like Miledi was sulking. Like a girl annoyed that her popular boyfriend had become friends with yet another girl. Miledi pursed her lips and shot Meiru an accusatory look.

"Meru-nee, you... you sisterizer!"

"What the heck is a sisterizer!?"

"I can't live with a sisterizer like this!"

Without even answering Meiru's question, Miledi turned around and ran off.

"Meiru-sama, may we call you onee-sama!?"

"Umm, sure. Do whatever you want."

Meiru had no idea what was going on anymore. Still confused, she ended up saying yes to all of the cat-eared maids' other demands without really listening to them. Sighing, she looked tiredly up at the ceiling while the maid and her friends cheered around her.

Ten days later, Miledi, Meiru, Lyutillis, and Naiz were heading to the usual spring for their daily tea party. Along the way, they were interrupted.

"Ngh, Meiru..." Valf groaned, jumping out of the nearby woods. He was covered in wounds, and his face was twisted in fear.

"Valf-kun!? What happened!?"

Meiru was certain she'd healed the injuries he'd incurred on the battlefield, which meant all of these cuts had to be new. In other words, an enemy strong enough to beat Valf was currently hiding nearby. Miledi and the others instantly

went on high alert. Meiru quickly began gathering her mana, but just as she was about to cast her restoration spell—

“There’s no need to show him any mercy, Onee-sama.”

The cat-eared maid Meiru had talked to ten days ago walked out of the woods. Her gaze was unnaturally sharp.

“Damn, she caught up to me already!?”

“Huh? Valf-kun, are you saying...?”

Judging by the current situation, it was obvious the maid was the one who’d attacked Valf. Or rather, she was one of the people who’d attacked him.

“The second-in-command was right. We have to dispose of any disgusting men who try to hang around Onee-sama.”

More beastmen started pouring out of the woods. In seconds, Meiru and the others found themselves surrounded by nearly a hundred of them. Panicking, Valf shouted, “Meiru, be careful. Their love for you has driven them crazy and now—”

“Who gave you permission to address Onee-sama?”

The women all moved in perfect sync. Their coordination was so great it was hard to believe they were civilians. Moreover, the bloodlust in their eyes was intense. It took only ten of them to overpower Valf and wrestle him to the ground.

“What are you girls doing!?” Meiru screamed.

While Miledi and the others watched on in utter confusion, the cat-eared maid the others had referred to as their second-in-command stepped forward and smiled warmly at Meiru.

“We’re simply doing our duty as your sisters.”

“That doesn’t explain anything!”

“Men will only sully your surroundings. All you need is us sisters, who’ve pledged a soul-binding oath to you.”

“Stay still, I’m going to cast restoration magic on your brain.”

Orange light rained down on the cat-eared maid's head. However, her rapt expression didn't change. If anything, it became even more fanatical.

"We were thinking, and we came to a realization. It's you who we must serve, Onee-sama, not Her Majesty. You are our ultimate goal, the paradise we must strive for."

"What do I do?! They're just getting worse!"

"And so, we've banded together!"

The hundred-odd women lined up behind the cat-eared maid. In perfect sync, they all sucked in a breath and shouted, "We have decided to offer our lives to you, Onee-sama! We are known as the Soul Sisters!"

"Lyu, I'm sorry, but I think your republic's doomed. It's too late to save it."

Even Lyutillis was a bit put off by their zeal. She opened her mouth to scold her maid, but before she could the maid said, "Incidentally, I'm the second-in-command, Paretta. Naturally, the head of our organization is you, Your Majesty!"

"My, what a wonderful organization you have here, Paretta! I expect you to do everything in your power to make it grow!" Lyutillis replied, doing a complete 180.

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Paretta and her subordinates knelt in front of their queen. Stupefied, Meiru muttered, "I had nothing to do with this... I didn't make these sisters appear..."

Once they were done kneeling, Paretta turned to Miledi and pointed at her. Miledi twitched, surprised that she was being singled out.

"Miledi-sama, don't think you'll always get to be Onee-sama's special little sister."

"Uhhh, okay?"

A little overwhelmed, Miledi nodded. Her expression suddenly stiffened though as a horrible realization hit her.

I don't even want to think about what these girls will do if they find out Meru-

nee has an actual, blood-related little sister.

Is This Bunny Girl Really Okay?

About a month had passed since Miledi and the others had arrived in the beastmen republic. If there was one thing they'd learned, it was that the forest paradise was more dangerous than it seemed.

"Ngh, that fucking rabbit!"

"Everything's numb... I'm gonna make her pay for this!"

"Aaah... My balls!"

"Someone, help! Rakin fell headfirst into the septic tank!"

The wails of suffering beastmen filled the forest. Some had been paralyzed, others had pissed themselves in fear, and some were laughing so hard they were rolling around on the floor. Yet others had been exposed to odors so odious that they'd fainted, and quite a few were hanging upside-down from vines. Many of the men had had their balls crushed. However, this tragic scene hadn't been caused by an invasion. The fog protecting the forest was still working its magic, and no invader had made it into the forest. No, this carnage had all been caused by a single girl.

"You're still nowhere close to beating me," Sui muttered, a mixture of pity and triumph on her face. She surveyed the tragedy around her and a sadistic grin spread across the scouting division captain's cute face. Her comrades often called the young bunny girl things like "the embodiment of laziness" or "a master at pissing people off."They also had choice words like "Just because they're not lethal doses doesn't mean you can make your comrades guinea pigs for your new poisons!" and "How come you're so evil when all the other rabbitmen are so nice, you shitty rabbit!?"

Sui casually brushed her ears and looked at all the beastmen lying around. They were all glaring daggers at her. While Sui normally always justified her own barbaric acts and felt no remorse, this time, she was surprisingly taken aback by the venom in her comrade's glares.

"Wh-What're you all so mad about!? You're the ones who attacked me this

time! It's not my fault you got beaten up instead! Besides, why were you all trying to kill me, anyway!?"

Sui insisted she wasn't in the wrong this time around. However, the defeated beastmen all shouted in unison, "Because you tried to poison Meiru-sama!"

There was, of course, a reason for that. In order to avoid Lyutillis' ever-expanding surveillance net, Meiru had taken to kidnapping Sui and forcing the bunny girl to help her hide. Tired of being dragged around by Meiru, Sui had attempted to slip the Liberator one of her newly developed poisons. But a number of beastmen had caught on to her plan and risked their lives to stop her. In other words, everything was still Sui's fault.

"How cruel! I can't believe you'd attack a comrade over something so small!" Sui exclaimed.

"You're the cruel one here! You're really starting to scare us, Sui!"

Everyone loved Meiru because she was the one healing all the warriors after every battle, and Sui had just tried to poison her. The sixteen-year-old girl was starting to seem like a psychopath to her fellow comrades. However, Sui did have a somewhat good reason for doing what she'd done.

"But ever since she started taking a liking to me, Her Majesty's been glaring at me every time we meet! I'm tired of being hated by our queen! Besides, it wasn't even a lethal poison! She's sturdy, so I'm sure she wouldn't mind helping me test my newest creation!"

I'm just having her pay me back for all the times I helped her escape! Sui's ears wagged back and forth as she vehemently asserted her innocence. She really was rotten to the core. Unfortunately for her, Meiru happened to be passing by at this very moment and heard everything Sui just said.

"Oh, you were trying to poison me?"

Sui's bunny ears froze. Cold sweat poured down her forehead and she awkwardly turned to look over her shoulder. Meiru was wearing an angelic smile on her face. Sui smiled apologetically back at her.

"I'm so sorryyyyyyyyy!"

She dropped to her knees and groveled at Meiru's feet. It was actually impressive how she debased herself without any hesitation. The remorseful look in her eyes was perfect too. She'd obviously spent a lot of time practicing it. However, it was a bit depressing that the genius assassin, who'd been made one of the republic's five generals at the tender age of sixteen, was like this.

Meiru looked down at Sui, a sadistic gleam in her eyes. But before she could say anything, a few rabbitman children ran over to where the two of them were.

"Meiru-sama, please forgive Sui-sama!"

"We'll say sorry too!"

About ten or so rabbitman children were standing protectively in front of Sui.

"Please, Meiru-neesan. Can't you forgive me for these kids' sake?" Sui pleaded.

You're not the one who should be saying that! the beastmen lying on the ground all thought simultaneously.

"Sheesh, you're such an unruly child. Very well, but don't think I'll be so lenient next time."

"Roger!"

The republic's strongest assassin gathered up the children and hustled them out of there like some small-time thug running from the police. Once she was gone, Meiru started casting restoration magic on the beastmen Sui had poisoned or otherwise incapacitated. While she was in the middle of healing people, Lyutillis showed up.

"I'm terribly sorry for what Sui's done, Onee-sama."

Meiru let out a very unladylike groan when she spotted Lyutillis, which caused the elven queen to blush slightly.

"But despite her incorrigible personality, she is still a hero to the rabbitmen. The kids especially adore her."

"What? Are you sure the rabbitmen are in their right mind? Should I cast restoration magic on them?"

Meiru's reaction was understandable, considering how Sui normally acted. Smiling wryly, Lyutillis replied, "By nature, rabbitmen are a gentle, peace-loving race."

"So I've noticed. The one other bunny girl I know is quite assertive, so I had a hard time believing that at first, but after coming here, I've come to see what people mean."

Most of the rabbitmen Meiru had seen in the republic were farmers, tailors, or palace attendants. All non-violent professions, in other words.

"They're serious and hardworking, so I feel confident entrusting important non-military tasks and duties to them. But the rabbitmen themselves seem to have a complex about their non-confrontational nature."

Naturally, their hatred for their own dispositions grew stronger in times of war like these, where they felt like they weren't contributing very much.

"So what you're saying is Sui's special?" Meiru asked.

"She is without a doubt... unique. Though it seems every few centuries, a rabbitman appears who's the antithesis of the stereotypical rabbitman. It's as if all their repressed distaste for their nature manifests in a single person."

Lyutillis looked wistfully in the direction that Sui had left and said gently, "I believe she acts the way she does partially out of consideration to the other rabbitmen, who she sees as family."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Many rabbitmen feel guilty that they can't do anything to help fight and are making Sui carry their burden. The adults especially feel that way."

"I see. So by acting unreliable and cowardly, she's trying to show the others that they don't need to feel guilty."

"Correct. Despite everything she says, she won't hesitate to put her life on the line for her country and her friends. She's a loyal general."

The injured beastmen lying on the ground silently absorbed that information as well, their expressions pensive. As they exchanged glances, they suddenly heard Sui, who should have left a while ago, talking to someone in the distance.

From the sound of their voice, it seemed to be Miledi. The conversation appeared to be about Kiara, the bunny girl who'd joined the Liberators.

"Nah, you don't need to introduce me. I don't get along with people like that, anyway. She's one of those naive, innocent types, right? People who're enjoying their life to the fullest without realizing what's going on in the world around them piss me off."

Sui's words instantly tanked any goodwill that might have been budding in Meiru or the other beastmen.

"Wait, people in the support branch don't have to go on assassination missions *or* infiltrate enemy bases!? They just get to chill in a city!? You even provide housing for them and send them assistance when they need help!? That's such a nice organization! Miledi... I mean, Boss. Please let me join the Liberators! I wanna work for you now!"

Everyone turned to Lyutillis.

What was all that about her being loyal to her country and her friends?

"Hey, Lyu, are you sure you want her to be one of your generals?" Meiru asked.

"I-I'm sure it's fine. She's a loyal general... Probably..."

From that day onward, Lyutillis had a different reason to be mad at Sui.

The Day He Bade Farewell

A lone man sat in the middle of a large, quiet workshop. His eyes were closed, and his breathing steady. He looked like a prisoner mentally preparing himself for his execution, or perhaps a hero steeling himself for the final battle. After a few minutes, he opened his eyes, revealing the determination hidden within his gaze.

He looked down at a sheet spread out before him. Resting on that sheet was a blade. The man solemnly picked up the blade and raised it until it was level with his eyes. Its edge was sharp enough to cut with ease, and the metal glinted dully in the light. The man turned the blade around in his hands, inspecting it from

every angle for dents or nicks.

“Acceptable,” the man muttered. He sucked in a deep breath, then said, “Now let us begin.”

He pointed the keen blade toward his own head.

This all happened on a day long before the theocracy declared war on the republic. After returning from their humiliating defeat on the western seas, Araym Orcman had thrown himself into his training. After another day of harsh drills, he staggered tiredly down the halls of the main cathedral. As he was walking, he sensed his commander, Laus’, presence beyond the next corner. He fixed his appearance as best as he could, and straightened his tired back. Though he was beginning to have doubts about his commander, discipline took precedence. He refused to appear disheveled before his commanding officer. But while Araym was still in the middle of straightening his hair, Laus turned the corner.

“Lau—!?”

“Araym? From the looks of it, you’ve been training quite hard.”

Normally, Araym would have quipped back with something like, “Very perceptive of you, sir,” but he was too shocked to reply.

“Hm? What’s the matter, Araym?”

“N-Nothing, sir! My apologies. I was simply musing about hair. And how divine it is.”

“I see...”

Araym was visibly shaken. Though he managed to croak out a reply, he was still staring intently at Laus. Specifically, at Laus’ eyes. He felt as though he’d be killed on the spot if he raised his gaze any higher. For a few seconds, the two men stared at each other. In truth, Laus was hoping Araym would comment on the state of his head. He wanted to hear other people’s impressions, but it seemed obvious Araym wouldn’t make the first move, so he decided to break the ice.

“I shaved my head,” he said simply.

“Ah! So you did, sir!”

“Mhm.”

The two men stared at each other again. Sweat started beading on Araym’s forehead.

“I feel a lot better now, honestly.”

“Th-That’s wonderful.”

“Mhm.”

Silence fell for a third time and the two men stared at each other yet again. But this time, Araym broke eye contact after a few seconds. Feeling a bit disappointed, Laus bid farewell to Araym and walked off. A wave of relief wash over him as Araym leaned against the wall.

“Wh-Why did he shave it off?”

He looked back at Laus and saw the sunlight reflecting off his commander’s bald head. Just before Laus could turn the corner, Mulm showed up.

“L-Laus, what did you do with your hair!?”

“Hello, Mulm.”

Mulm Allridge, the commander of the Paragons of Light, pointed at Laus’ head, aghast.

“I shaved it off,” Laus replied simply.

“But why!? Oh, is it because of what happened on the western seas?”

“No, absolutely not!”

“Huh!? It’s not!? Wait, why are you denying it so vehemently!?”

Mulm had been certain Laus had shaved as a way to show his remorse for losing at Andika, so he was surprised Laus was denying it.

“I’m not worried about what that little girl said at all...” he muttered to himself. He then turned to Mulm and said, “Mulm.”

“Wh-What is it, Laus?”

“Hair is unnecessary. It’s just that many people don’t understand that yet.”

“Well, I definitely don’t understand what you’re saying.”

Laus and Mulm looked into each other’s eyes for a few seconds. Finally, Laus muttered, “I see,” with a despondent look on his face and walked off.

Is he that depressed over his loss in the west? Mulm thought, genuinely worried about his fellow knight.

Some hours later, Laus started on the road home. His subordinates and comrades had been staring at his head all day. But at the same time, few actually voiced their opinions on his new look, as if it was some sort of taboo topic. He was tired of the negative attention and wanted to hurry home back to his beloved son, Sharm. But just as he left the cathedral, he ran into the person he was least interested in seeing.

“Lord Barn.”

“Oracle.”

Ainz Arsalk, Ehit’s divine oracle, stood before him. Her beauty did nothing to hide her emptiness. She was wearing her nun’s habit and a veil over her face, which was why no one else had taken notice of her yet. Laus broke out in a cold sweat and desperately tried to find a way to end the conversation as soon as possible.

“Are you on your way home?”

“Y-Yes.”

“I see. Be sure to treasure your family. You’ve had little opportunity to see them since you returned from the expedition on the western seas. I recommend spending the rest of the day with your loved ones.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

Normally, Laus would have been thinking something caustic like, *As if you mean a single word you say,* but he didn’t at that moment. It wasn’t because the oracle was being sincere for once, though. No, it was because she, too, was staring at his head.

“My lady, is there something on my head?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

Though she sounded confused, the oracle had been staring at Laus' head since the moment she'd seen him and hadn't looked away from it even once.

"At any rate, please excuse me, Lord Barn."

"Of course."

However, even as the oracle walked past Laus, she turned her head to keep staring at his hairless scalp. It scintillated in the evening light, reflecting the orange-red glow of the sunset. The oracle stared at it like a child captivated by a beautiful butterfly.

"D-Does it really look that bad?"

All I did was shave my head... Plenty of other priests and bishops do it... so why is it everyone's staring at me like I'm some strange creature?

Confused and a little depressed, Laus returned home.

"F-Father, you lost your hair! Sharm shouted as he walked through the front door."

"Y-Yeah. I decided to shave it off. Does it look weird?"

"Nope, it looks cool! You look way stronger now!"

Those words were all it took to clear away Laus' doubts. His wife, Ricolis, refused to meet his eyes for a few days, but as long as Sharm liked his new look, he didn't care.

Saint Corrin

Some time had passed since Miledi and the others had left the new village they'd made for the Liberators displaced by the demon king's invasion of the Reisen Gorge. The villagers were still unused to their new surroundings, and there was one among their number who seemed to be far busier than the others. Oscar's younger sister, Corrin. She ran to and fro across the village, carrying baskets of laundry from place to place. Oscar and Vandre, who'd stayed behind to finish getting things set up, watched her as they took a short break from their work. As she ran about on her errands, she accidentally bumped into Marshal.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Marshal-san.”

“Don’t worry about it. That’s an awful lot of laundry you’ve got there. You sure you can carry it all, Corrin?”

Marshal gave her a worried look, but Corrin just smiled cheerfully and nodded. It was obvious from her reaction that she wasn’t pushing herself too hard.

“Yep, I’ll be fine! Oh, but...”

“What do you need? If there’s anything I can help with, just let me know.”

“Okay then, umm... Marshal-san, please stop putting your laundry inside-out. It makes it harder for everyone to wash it.”

“Oh, uh, sure. Sorry, I’ll be more careful from now on.”

Marshal was well into his forties, but he still looked contrite as a seven-year-old girl scolded him. Suddenly, Corrin blinked in surprise as a realization hit her.

“Could you hold this for a second, Marshal-san?”

“Huh? Sure, I don’t mind, but...”

Confused, Marshal took the laundry basket from Corrin. Once her hands were free, she took her sewing kit out of her pocket and stepped closer to Marshal.

“Stay still for a second.”

She grabbed one of the loose buttons on Marshal’s cuff and sewed it back on properly. She worked quickly, and in seconds she was finished. After that, she clapped her hands together and declared, “Okay, all done!”

Smiling, she put away her sewing kit and took the laundry basket back from Marshal. He looked down at his sleeve, then at Corrin, then blushed. Just then, he spotted Mikaela, who happened to be passing by.

Wait, don’t tell me Marshal-san’s into girls as young as Corrin!? Mikaela thought, looking shocked. Corrin noticed Mikaela as well, then looked from her to Marshal and back again. Nodding to herself, she tottered over to Mikaela and started whispering something into her ear.

No one else could make out what she said, but once she finished, Mikaela’s

expression brightened up instantly. Corrin gave her an angelic smile that felt like it was coming from someone much older than seven, then ran off to deliver the dirty laundry to the washers.

“She’s a nice girl,” Vandre muttered.

“I know,” Oscar replied.

The two of them didn’t have anything to do for a while, so they decided to continue observing Corrin for a bit longer. They followed her as she went to the village entrance to greet Margaretta, who had just returned from patrol.

“Welcome back, Margaretta-oneesan!”

“Thank you, Corrin.”

“Dinner’s almost ready. The bath’s warm too, if you want to go wash up first.”

“In that case, I guess I’ll take a bath first.”

While they talked, Corrin took Margaretta’s coat and neatly folded it up. Once she’d put it away, she ran off to go make dinner. Humming, she put on the apron Jinglebell had made for her and started cooking. The whole time, she made sure to see off the Schnee warriors who were going on patrol next as well as greet the fighters who were in charge of protecting the village gates.

“Stay safe! It’s important to work hard, but don’t overdo it!” Corrin said to the warriors going on patrol as she handed them her handmade meals. Everyone smiled kindly at her as she ran back and forth. After that, she paid a visit to the patients in the village hospital.

“Sorry for making you do this every time, Corrin-chan.”

“You promised to stop apologizing, remember?”

Smiling cheerfully, Corrin went around helping the patients with their needs. Even when the other kids of the village, or even Katy and Dylan, did something bad, she didn’t get too angry.

“Jeez! If you don’t stop that, I won’t give you any dinner, okay!?”

Of course, she still scolded them, but when they helped, she also praised them.

“Hehehe, you did such a good job. I’m so proud of you!”

Time passed, and before long, it was the day before Oscar and Vandre were scheduled to depart. It was a cloudy day in the village, but there was a single ray of light that broke through the clouds and fell directly on Corrin, who was sitting in the center of the town’s main plaza. One of Vandre’s familiars, the silver wolf Kuou, was resting in her lap. It closed its eyes and growled in contentment. Vandre’s wyvern, Ururuk, was embracing both of them with its large wings. It nuzzled its head against Corrin’s back, looking as content as Kuou did. Sitting atop Corrin’s head was Batlam, who looked as pleased as the rest of Vandre’s familiars. Many of his weaker familiars were also lying down around Corrin.

Corrin gently patted Kuou and Ururuk’s heads, her expression full of love. The whole scene looked beautiful, and the artistry of it was enhanced by the fact that a lone ray of light was breaking through the clouds to reach them. Many of the villagers were watching her from the shadows and sighing in wonder. Oscar and Vandre were watching as well, and Oscar turned to his partner and said, “Hey, Van. You sure your familiars don’t belong to Corrin now?”

“Ngh... Honestly, I’m not sure. Even Batlam’s been prioritizing Corrin’s requests over my orders...”

“I see...”

Vandre looked forlornly off into the distance, and Oscar looked unsure of what to say to his friend. After a few seconds, it looked like Vandre suddenly remembered something and he said, “Did you know, people have started giving Corrin a nickname.”

“Huh? Really? First I’ve heard of that,” Oscar said, sounding surprised.

Everyone was hiding it from you because they know you have a huge sister complex, Vandre said, then took a deep breath before continuing with, “They’re calling her Mommy Corrin.”

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?”

Vandre nodded, not expecting Oscar to understand. He launched into a more detailed explanation.

“Mommy is a term people use for girls who are younger than them, but have really motherly instincts. They use mommy because it’s more childish than mother, but still has that same feeling. Anyway, people are saying Corrin’s momminess is so great it has to be some kind of special magic or something.”

“I still have no clue what you’re talking about.”

“There’s even a bunch of guys who’ve been saying things like, ‘I wish Corrin-chan would be my mommy’ and shit too.”

“Okay, it looks like I can’t afford to be ignorant here. Please enlighten me.”

“These guys want Corrin to spoil them rotten. Kind of like what she’s doing to Kuou and the others right now.”

“I see.”

Oscar adjusted his glasses and summoned his umbrella, his gloves, and his Shadow Knights.

“Looks like I’ve got some work to do before we leave. I need to teach the guys of this village that none of them are allowed to lay a hand on my dear sister!”

Afterward, a mini-war broke out between Oscar the siscon and the guys who wanted Corrin to be their mommy. Naturally, Corrin put a stop to it by scolding both parties. Shortly thereafter, she came to be known by the nickname Saint Corrin as well as Mommy Corrin.

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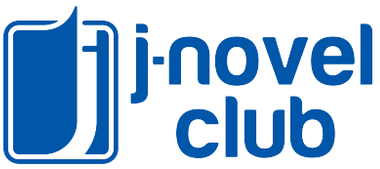
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Arifureta Zero: Volume 4

by Ryo Shirakome

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