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Sin Guilty
Illustration
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The Boy Who Ruled the Monsters


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The Boy Who Ruled the Monsters


Victory banquet at the guild tavern surrounded by beauties!
Sol Rock
Reen Faukner
Frederica tul la Emelia
Luna


Aina'noa la Avalil
A sleeping, seemingly delicate elven girl who is actually one of the great monsters from legend. According to myth, she fought the Evil Dragon alongside the Hero, but she then betrayed the Hero and was therefore bound.
And so, he would now reach for the Captive Elven Queen just as he had the Bound Evil Dragon. He would make the being who had ruled over the World Tree and controlled the outer mana that filled the world a thousand years ago become a member of his party.
"I have to get Aina'noa to join me just as I did Luna and set everything up so that I can devote my full attention to going dungeon delving and unsealing territories."


Number Nine:
Type Kuzuryuu
“It’s incredible...”
The easy swap between normal adventurer gear and special weaponry so advanced as to be anachronistic would surely make these suits the subject of legends portrayed in theatrical performances in the future.

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Chapter 1: The Peerless All Dragon

A thousand years had passed since humanity had lost its hold over the majority of the continent. The Kuzuifabra, which the Holy Church upheld, supposedly detailed what had happened throughout that period, but anyone could see there were discrepancies in the account if they thought a little harder about it. The most glaring flaw was that human society had never recovered even after the Hero had defeated and bound the Evil Dragon. For some inexplicable reason, humankind had continued regressing over the next thousand years.

Humanity was still alive simply because the most powerful monsters never left their dungeons and territories. If they did, humans in the current age would have no way of resisting. Country Eater, the boss of the first territory to be designated taboo and perpetrator of the Great Catastrophe two hundred years ago, attested to that.

Instinctually, humans assumed that today would be the same as yesterday and that tomorrow would be the same as today. It was only by holding on to this baseless belief that they could remain sane. However, there was no doubt that their race had declined—it had gotten to the point where those who thought themselves sovereigns of the world could only self-deprecatingly call themselves the “Old Rulers.”

Blatant proof of this decline were the numerous monster territories in the vicinity of the fortified city of Garlaige. Some of these had been further designated as taboo territories, which meant anyone identified as having stepped foot inside was given the death penalty without question. There were nine taboo territories surrounding Garlaige, earning the city the nickname Gio Nest and a terrifying reputation.

That said, although the bosses of taboo territories had the strength to obliterate human society, the other monsters living in said territories were not necessarily as far off the charts. On average, they were indeed superior to those in common territories, but they weren’t all beyond what humans could handle.

In other words, present-day adventurers and soldiers had a

rather reasonable chance of staying alive for some time in a taboo territory. At least, until they got unlucky enough to encounter the boss or some other high-tier monster from the heart of the territory who just happened to be wandering near the border.

This was how reconnaissance teams officially deployed by the Church and countries sometimes managed to bring back updates regarding the situation inside taboo territories. A large portion of the team would be wiped out, but information could be carried by a single man.

After fighting monsters for five years—three as students attending the Royal Academy and two as active adventurers—Reen's party, Black Tiger, naturally knew all this. It was also common sense to the two royal guards with the rare talents Blade Conjurer and Steel Wire Master who were protecting Princess Frederica. Even Frederica had all crucial information related to fighting monsters drilled into her head, though she had lacked the strength to make use of it until practically moments ago. In short, everyone present understood that bumping into a monster in taboo territory was not an immediate death sentence.

And yet, no one here understood the fights that they were witnessing. This was true not only of the two royal guards, but also those who had been with Sol for a long time.

I've never seen fights like this, thought Reen.

Can you even call these fights? Julia mused.

Do you guys do this all the time? wondered the Blade Conjurer.

That's just...wow, thought the Steel Wire Master.

I'm pretty sure that if I grew to accept this as normal, I'd die an early death, Frederica told herself.

No one said anything out loud, but they followed Sol's instructions while racked by a strange mixture of awe, confusion, and the uncomfortable sense that they were falling for a very elaborate scam. In particular, Frederica's group couldn't voice any objections to Sol, not because they wanted to show deference to him but because they had been made to sign a contract before heading out on this trip, which obligated them to follow his instructions to a T in all matters related to combat. Consequently, they had remained silent since entering this taboo territory, staring dumbly at all the fighting—if it could be called that—that had taken place.

After a long period of awkward silence, it finally fell on Reen to assume the role of addressing Sol. “Um…Sol?”

Just as Sol was about to answer, however, his display picked up on approaching monsters, and he gleefully prioritized taking care of them. “Hm? Ah, hold that thought for a second, Reen. Front left, minotaur. Count: three. Let’s wipe them out first. Everyone, ready your long-distance attacks.”

Even veteran adventurers could easily lose their lives in a territory, and this was one of the most dangerous ones, a *taboo* territory. His decision was the right call.

“Oh, of course.”

Knowing this, Reen promptly switched gears. Julia, the royal guards, and even Frederica prepared for battle. Sol had spoken with total confidence even though the targets were three hundred meters away. And yet, the group closed the distance within seconds.

Before the minotaurs had time to react, a barrage tore into them. Reen used Flying Slice. Julia used Holy Hammer, a divine magic spell. The Blade Conjurer had Flying Slice, like Reen. The Steel Wire Master went with the invisible Severing Wire. Frederica punched upward, then redirected the force of the punches where she wanted using Distant Target. These were the most basic long-distance attacks available to each person and cheapest in terms of mana cost.

As an aside, the Blade Conjurer had been quite proud of possessing such a rare talent. Seeing Reen, whose skills should have been specialized for defense, using her basic special attack Flying Slice had been a shock. A significant shock, to be sure, but it paled in comparison to the strange proceedings that had been passing for fighting this day.

Half thinking that she had heard wrong but still throwing out attacks with unpracticed motions as instructed, Frederica asked doubtfully, “Um, are those…actual minotaurs?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Reen replied in a respectful tone. “You might have heard of them, as they appear quite often as bosses in the middle floors of dungeons.”

“It’d have taken Black Tiger about half an hour to kill one if we played it safe,” Julia added. “And only if we were facing just one.”

“Fighting in a taboo territory complicates things a lot,” Reen agreed. “Against three at once, we would have had to fight with all the stops pulled out.”

Indeed, for normal adventurers, minotaurs were not trash mobs that could merely be waved away. Furthermore, while an encounter with one in a dungeon would likely take place in an exclusive boss room, fighting aboveground—and against three at the same time—meant there was a very real chance of more monsters showing up. What would normally be an already difficult and protracted fight could easily turn ugly fast. Additional monsters joining a fight—a phenomenon commonly called linking—was the cause of more than half of all mid-rank party deaths. In light of this, Sol's group was, by common standards, in a very precarious situation.

"Um…what about you two?"

"Princess, we cannot handle even one with only the two of us. It would take a whole squad of us royal guards, and casualties would be almost guaranteed. If we encountered three at once, we would have to pull back immediately, making sacrifices where necessary."

With pale faces, Frederica's bodyguards confirmed that Reen's and Julia's evaluations were not wrong. In this situation, they would be the sacrifices. If the three of them suddenly found themselves in similar circumstances, the two would, without hesitation, give their lives to ensure that Frederica got away. There was no room for joking when discussing such hypotheticals.

Sure enough, the attacks that everyone threw at the minotaurs on Sol's instructions did almost no damage. They weren't entirely ineffective, but they served as little more than a signal for the start of the fight. The enemy was ready to reciprocate and put the insolent humans who thought they were clever for springing such an attack back in their places.

However, today was special. Today, fights were over the instant everyone's first attacks landed.

"Luna."

"Yes, my lord."

Upon confirming that everyone had gotten a hit in, Sol called Luna's name. The next instant, all three minotaurs were smashed into paste. Everyone in this group still lacked the ability to see what Luna had done, but just like all other encounters so far, the fight was over in seconds.

"Hold on a… Hold on a moment, Sol," Reen called, purposely using a louder voice. "Stop for a second."

Sol, who was already zooming out his map and searching for the next target, the interrupted conversation from earlier gone from his mind, started and blushed with embarrassment. “Oh, sorry. I was having too much fun and just—”

“I know. I could tell from your face.”

“Say, Sol, have we been holding you back that much this whole time?” Julia asked.

“Of course not,” he replied, his pounding heart slowing down. “This is entirely thanks to Luna.”

There was a pause as everyone realized how much that answer made sense.

“Right. Of course,” said Julia.

Luna puffed out her chest proudly upon receiving credit from Sol, cutting an adorable figure. Yesterday, everyone had found her creepy and terrifying to some degree, but after witnessing just how extraordinary she was, they were starting to accept her for what she was. There was no doubt that she was loyal to Sol, so it was easier on everyone’s mental health to take the path of least resistance.

Frederica, who was experiencing battle with monsters for the first time today, asked haltingly, “Um…is this what it’s usually like for people who have talents useful for fighting monsters?”

Sol turned toward her with a delighted expression on his face, but behind him, Reen, Julia, and the two royal guards shook their heads so vigorously that Frederica thought she could audibly hear them cry, “Of course not!”

“Basically, yes!” Sol said, his eyes alight. “But it’s more correct to say that what you’re experiencing is the boost from leveling up thanks to all the monsters you helped kill today using your new skills. It’s the same for me; that’s how I’m able to move so fast now!”

“Um, uh…I see.” Frederica smiled awkwardly. She was still getting used to a slew of new skills, and Sol’s rapid-fire talking as a dungeon maniac was going completely over her head.

“Sol, slow down,” Reen interrupted, giving him the side-eye. “You’re overwhelming her.”

“Right. Um, let me think…” Taking this as an opportunity to explain everything from the beginning, Sol’s eyes glowed with even greater intensity. At times, asking for a more detailed explanation was akin to putting a noose around one’s own neck. This was especially the case here, as Sol was in the middle of

carrying out all the experiments that he had had no choice but to deny himself for years *and* getting back results that were confirming his hypotheses in quick succession. To put it mildly, he was very amped-up at the moment.

"Ah."

Just as Sol was about to launch into a full lecture about talents, skills, leveling up, and the effects of the subsequent increase in stats right there in the middle of the taboo territory, however, his display indicated something that made him calm down in a flash: There were three dots in front heading their way, halfway to being surrounded by eight more dots that were catching up. This was way too many in a place where he had expected to meet a grand total of zero other people. It was an incredible coincidence.

The elves who had rescued Aina'noa la Avalil the Elven Queen despite knowing it was a trap had, as a last-ditch effort, fled into this very taboo territory. This choice had led to the miracle of their coming encounter with Sol's group. At the same time, this was an incredibly terrible stroke of luck for the elite magic special forces from Istekario who had decided to stay in pursuit to fulfill their mission.

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"Dammit!" spat the captain of Circulus—meaning Eight-Leaf Lotus—as he and his special forces squad approached the border to Taboo Novem. It just so happened that this was the same thing said by the elves he was chasing, but his ire was not directed at them. Instead, it was directed at the Special Operations Command back home that was pretty much only composed of nobles who hadn't seen a single battle their entire lives.

"That's unbecoming language, Captain."

"Can you blame me for wanting to swear, though? Drafting a plan to finish off the cursed Elven Queen in accordance with His Imperial Majesty's will is fine. It's great. It's their duty. And it's our duty to carry out the plans they draft. I know that." The leader's shoulders slumped as he sighed. "But why couldn't they have come up with a better way of doing this?"

The plan was to incite the elves into rising up before the Holy Church could stop Istekario's unauthorized execution of the

Elven Queen, which would give the country grounds for wiping out the entire race. The Church and other countries wouldn't be able to censure them severely, as they had justification. It wasn't like anyone cared what happened to the elves anyway, and this was the same for the disgruntled special forces leader.

"The Darkening might have weakened them, but it didn't make them stupid. They can still think for themselves and have their own pride. In the face of impending doom, they aren't going to do nothing and simply beg for their lives. Like cornered mice, they will bare their teeth against us. Purposely backing them into a corner is a bad idea. The big shots are underestimating them when they should be treating them as sages who've lived over a thousand years. Is it too much to ask that they opt for a strategy that gets the most results with the least amount of casualties?"

The scale of this uprising was practically nothing when framed against the empire as a whole, but as a part of the team tasked with actually dealing with the problem, the captain had at least a few choice words. The vice-captain merely shrugged, but his opinion was largely the same.

"As I feared, they caught on and reacted in the worst possible way for us."

Did the big shots back home not foresee the elves escaping into the dense forests around Garlaige? Did they not consider the possibility that the elves, when push came to shove, would flee into a taboo territory? They didn't actually expect that the race that had resolved to fight to the last man, woman, and child was going to politely respect the taboos designated by the Church and the humans who denigrated and suppressed them…right?

If the answer to those questions was yes, then all of them were fools. Now, this easily predictable outcome was plunging the captain into a pit of despair. Rather than finishing off the elves, Istekario's most pressing issue was soon going to be the Church and every other country on the continent pounding on its doors. Just thinking about the fact that the same idiots who had come up with the current addlebrained strategy would be the ones tasked with finding a solution for that crisis gave the captain a headache.

The elves were not worth losing even one member of Circulus, the backbone of Istekario's reputation as a military

superpower. And yet, not only did that seem likely to happen, it seemed inevitable if they were to carry out the full extent of their orders. There wasn't a chance in a million that they would lose against mere elves, but in a taboo territory, there were a million other things that could annihilate them in the blink of an eye.

"This really is shit."

"As I said, Captain, that's unbecoming. You are our leader, the captain of Circulus. Please conduct yourself accordingly."

"Shit is shit, my dear vice-captain. Would you be happy if I called it 'O holy shit'?"

"What are you, five?"

The vice-captain was only chastising the captain because it was his job to do so and it had become a habit over the long time they had spent with each other. In truth, they shared the same feelings at that moment, as did the rest of Circulus.

"Regardless, we cannot let them get away. We'll be burning all their villages to the ground, sure, but letting the culprits who stole their queen reach one so soon is going to make Istekario a laughingstock. We must capture them and force them to give up the location of the Elven Forest immediately."

Unfortunately for the soldiers, orders were absolute. What was more, with Circulus being well-known in other countries, if word got out that they had lost a target they were pursuing, Istekario's reputation would take a significant hit.

"Since we let them steal her on purpose, we can't claim to have let them get away on purpose too," the vice-captain sighed.

Even if people believed that it had been on purpose the first time, they would definitely start commenting the second time. And when they did, those on the ground would be the ones getting blamed, not those in command who called the shots. In other words, people would start making light of Circulus, which had a real chance of affecting the perceived balance of power between the continent's superpowers.

"So, our situation is absolute dog shit, but we have no choice but to enter Taboo Novem. Men, you have permission to use all spells available to you. Spread out and find those elves. When you encounter a monster, do your damned best to run away. I don't mind if you kill the elves when you find them. That includes the Elven Queen. Don't let the fact that we're in taboo territory bother you; the Church can't censure what it doesn't know. If your luck is so shit that you bump into Kuzuryuu...well, you have

permission to die while cursing the bigwigs back home!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

If simply repeating “shit” could solve problems, the men would be more than happy to do so. Unfortunately, reality was not so kind. After spitting out their pent-up resentment in the form of profanity, they had to get to work. As the vice-captain pointed out, this was somewhat unbecoming of soldiers of the empire, but no one else was there to hear it. They prided themselves on being able to carry out any mission assigned to them, no matter how unreasonable it was.

Without a moment’s hesitation, the members of Circulus buffed themselves up and charged into Taboo Novem, believing in their captain and their fellow brothers. Their ability to promptly dive headfirst into danger on a single command was a testament to their role as the empire’s elite special force.

“Now then…if we do actually provoke Kuzuryuu, we can kiss the covert nature of this mission goodbye. Let’s finish things and get out of here fast.”

The captain boosted his physical abilities to superhuman levels with magic, then followed his men in. Even though this territory was a forest, they were still far stronger than “darkened” elves. All eight men sped on, their minds fully immersed in the hunt.

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“Surrender. If you do, I promise you an honorable death.”

The elves had no chance of getting away, not when they had to abandon their wagon and carry the Elven Queen’s immobile body themselves. It took longer than the captain had expected even though the members of Circulus had magic that greatly boosted their mobility, but they managed to catch up without encountering a single monster and even did so before the elves reached Kuzuryuu. This was pretty much the best outcome they could have hoped for. At the captain’s signal, all eight members of Circulus had gathered.

The elves’ resistance was over, having come to nothing. However, although Circulus was confident it could wrap up the situation quickly, not getting into a fight with monsters from the taboo territory—or Kuzuryuu, God forbid—was also a high priority. This was why the captain started by demanding the

elves' surrender even though he was sure they wouldn't acquiesce.

"You must be out of your mind. You expect us to find honor in being wiped out as a race? Oh no, we're going to at least bring you to hell with us, no matter how shameful it makes us look. We may be Darkened, but we are still former rulers of the forest. Come join us in death as you regret having taken us lightly!"

The response that the captain received was practically dripping in madness. Instantly discerning that it wasn't an empty threat, he shouted, "Kill them!"

In terms of numbers, Circulus had the advantage, being eight against three—effectively eight against two. They were absolutely confident that they would win in mere minutes, no matter what the elves had up their sleeves. But they couldn't have been more wrong, and it was too late for them to do anything about it.

"Ha ha ha! Oh, I'm sure that the famous Circulus can squash us in our current state like we are bugs. But I wonder how you would fare against the boss of Taboo Novem, the great Kuzuryuu!"

One elf slapped a palm on the ground, instantly creating a gigantic magic circle. It wasn't an attack or defense spell. Of course, it wasn't some ingenious way to escape either. All he did was transmit his hostility through the trees and vegetation to every last inch of Taboo Novem.

This was an ancient barrier spell that the elves had used back when they were still rulers of the forests to ward off malicious monsters. It was a double-edged sword in that while it did repel those who were weaker than the caster, it also irked those stronger than the caster and drew their attacks. Now that the elves had been weakened by the Darkening, this spell was practically useless to them. However, it was also the perfect method to bring someone with them to the grave. Especially here, where the strongest monster was the Nine-Headed Dragon.

Immediately, nine heads burst up, throwing trees and dirt everywhere. A total of twenty-seven eyes peered down at the gathering of two elves, one coffin, and eight humans from high above the tree canopy. The boss was still a distance away, but it was approaching fast, eager to obliterate the weaklings that had so rudely invaded its turf and insolently broadcasted their

hostility.

This development suddenly made the Circulus members' mana a lot more precious, and they could no longer afford to spend it on fighting the elves. Their spells made them faster, but nowhere near fast enough to outrun Kuzuryuu. Their only option was to stand and fight, even though they knew their chances of victory were slim to none. However...

"Huh?"

"Wha—"

Neither the elves who had set off the trap nor the humans who had fallen into it could process what their eyes were seeing. Namely, a mass of mana in the form of a dragon much bigger than Kuzuryuu had appeared out of thin air and sent the boss flying with a single swipe of its front leg.

The massive body leveled trees like mere stalks of grass, coincidentally flopping to a stop right before the elves and humans. By then, Kuzuryuu was no longer moving. This monster had been an opponent that the members of Circulus, the spearhead of the military arm of an empire known for its military dominance, were sure they would die facing, and yet it had died with a single blow like the punch line to a joke.

As the elves' and humans' minds struggled to start up again, they saw a party of seven individuals abruptly appearing in the sky above. By this point, all they could do was stare blankly with their jaws hanging slack.

"Three elves, eight humans. Since we don't know the situation, Luna, please incapacitate them all," said the black-haired, black-eyed man in the middle wearing an expensive long coat.

"Sure thing," replied the adorable therianthrope girl floating in front of him.

With that, special forces and former rulers of the forest alike instantly lost consciousness without the slightest clue what had happened.

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"Um...may I ask what is going on here?" Frederica asked.

Right after Luna had carried out Sol's instruction to knock out the ten people they'd encountered in the forest, a strange phenomenon had started happening to Sol's group. Frederica,

who was aware that she had the least experience fighting monsters, was posing her question to the others with the assumption that they were used to what was going on. She was doing her best to keep her tone steady, but she looked shaken. Unfortunately for her, the two who had made a living out of killing monsters, Reen and Julia, and even the two royal guards were equally bewildered. Her question had been directed to the wrong people.

Why had their bodies been repeatedly emitting an intense magical light for a while? No one knew the answer. It didn't hurt, though. Rather, it felt like there was an infinite well of power gushing out from deep within.

"This feels like leveling up...but it's not, is it?" Julia murmured.

Everyone who fought enough monsters eventually experienced a similar phenomenon known as "leveling up." After the sensation, they would find themselves markedly stronger than before. The more times it happened, the longer it took to happen again. It had not happened even after Black Tiger had killed a basilisk.

Frederica nodded with understanding. "Ah, the thing that Luna and I have experienced several times today."

After entering Taboo Novem, Frederica had indeed leveled up several times while taking part in the strange form of battle directed by Sol. Specifically, she had gone through it three times, which was normally an unthinkable number.

"But leveling up only lasts a few seconds," Reen pointed out.

Even when obtaining new skills, the emission of light and the unique sensation that accompanied leveling up was prolonged to a few dozen seconds at most. The royal guards were also familiar with this fact and were therefore looking at each other's continuously glowing forms with unease.

Because Sol looked largely unfazed, the girls were practically biting their lips to match his composure. Every time the light flared, a wave of faint pleasure washed through their bodies, feeling like a rough tongue running over recesses deep within that were out of reach. Understandably, it was a great struggle for Luna, who was using a new body, and Frederica, who was new to combat altogether. Reen, Julia, and the two royal guards were already familiar with the sensation, but feeling it for a short moment after leveling up once was very different from bearing it in unending waves. And yet, all of them hung in there, clinging

on to their pride as dragon, princess, and veteran adventurers.

Being a man, Sol was fine but therefore clueless about the girls' dire state. He said nonchalantly, "No, you're right, this is leveling up. It's just happening repeatedly."

In contrast to his tone, his eyes were shining with a fevered light. They darted between the windows appearing in front of him in quick succession, consuming the information displayed. However, because these windows were visible only to him, his behavior came across as a little terrifying to the girls.

"What... What does that mean?" Reen asked.

"Hmm, how can I explain it?" Sol replied slowly, his eyes still chasing windows. "The numbers probably don't mean much by themselves, but I can see the number of times someone levels up as 'levels.' At the start of the day, Reen, Julia, and I were Level 7. Luna and Frederica were Level 1. The two royal guards were Level 4."

This was the first time even Reen and Julia had heard Sol use the word "level" in this context, and they were having trouble wrapping their minds around it right away.

"Um...ookay?" Reen tilted her head cutely, prompting Luna to copy her. Julia and Frederica found themselves realizing that one of Reen's strengths was how such gestures came naturally to her.

"Right before engaging Kuzuryuu, we were still at 7, Luna and Frederica had reached 4, and the royal guards had reached 5. Does this help put things into perspective?"

"I...see."

Surprisingly, the one who seemed to grasp the concept first was the Steel Wire Master, who had remained largely silent this whole time. She was probably feeling happy about getting it, based on the faint smile on her face. Sol may or may not have thought that she'd been cuter if she showed that expression more often, but regardless, Frederica's and the Blade Conjurer's surprise indicated that this was a rare reaction.

Luna and Frederica had started at Level 1 and, after leveling up three times, made it to Level 4. The royal guards had started at Level 4, had leveled up once, and had become Level 5. The former Black Tiger members had started at Level 7, had not leveled up, and therefore stayed Level 7. Put simply, as "levels" were the number of times that someone had experienced leveling up, it served as a quantification of strength. And every time someone leveled up, it came with a unique sensation and a

burst of magical light.

The fact that said sensation and light had been continuing for a prolonged period meant…

“So, yeah, we’ve been leveling up nonstop since Luna sent Kuzuryuu flying.”



Frederica still looked confused. “I’m sorry, what?”

Reen, Julia, and the royal guards knew from experience how drastic a difference one level made. And yet, ever since entering Taboo Novem, by engaging monsters at breakneck speed, they had witnessed several level ups in one day. Then, as if to put that to shame, they were now experiencing it nonstop for what was feeling like an eternity. Their minds were temporarily incapable of forming any coherent sentences.

Sol laughed dryly. “Honestly, I can’t really grasp what’s going on either.”

“Really?” Reen looked at him blankly, wondering how she was supposed to comprehend the situation when even Sol couldn’t.

“All our levels have reached triple digits, and it’s still going on, ha ha. I guess the strength of a hydra that’s lived for over a century isn’t something to sneeze at after all.”

After three years of training at the Royal Academy and two years of adventuring, the former Black Tiger members’ levels still had remained in the single digits. Being told all of a sudden that they were now over Level 100 meant nothing to them. Not that they doubted Sol, of course; even though he was the only one who could visibly see everyone’s levels as hard numbers, he had no reason to lie.

In a world where even members of a Rank A party and the elites of a country’s army couldn’t break into the double digits, reaching the triple digits made Sol’s group practically monsters. Besides them, only one person had ever broken through the effective upper limit of Level 7 in the past millennium. Of course, no one here except Sol knew that.

“But Lu only needed one blow to kill Kuzuryuu,” Reen said slowly. “Like with all the other monsters.”

“Mm-hm.” Sol nodded. “Her level is also shooting up like ours.”

There was no doubt that Kuzuryuu was the reason for everyone’s drastic level ups. That meant that when it died, it had released a torrent of inner mana that surpassed the total amount from all the other monsters killed today by unimaginable magnitudes. And yet, Luna had killed that very Kuzuryuu with a single attack while at Level 1. She looked adorable the way she was puffing out her chest proudly for having been of use to Sol, but at the same time, it terrified the others to think that her level was now over 100. They couldn’t

even begin to comprehend the numbers that Sol was seeing on her status screen.

"So, to put it simply, we're all growing really, really strong. Is that right?" Julia asked.

Sol nodded again. "That's right. What I can do with Player is also expanding as we speak. For starters, the number of skills and the stats that I can give all of you has risen by...well, *a lot*."

"Can you give an example?"

"Okay, well, Kuzuryuu is still beyond you, but you can easily knock out the, uh, special forces from Istekario that Luna handled just now. All by yourself, in the blink of an eye. Conversely, if you just stood in place and let them fire their spells at you, they'd come nowhere close to surpassing the rate at which your HP naturally recovers. So they'd stand no chance at all against you."

Frederica and her bodyguards had identified Circulus by their military uniforms and the way they carried themselves. They knew the reputation these men held, but they had been taken out of commission with a mere tap from Luna, and now they were no match for Sol's group. It wouldn't even be a fair fight, as Player's companions could literally ignore them and not get even a scratch.

"In fact, I think even *I* could take them down."

Player did not allow Sol to bolster his own stats or give himself skills, but the increase in stats purely from leveling up enabled him to beat talent holders just by punching them. He was the living, breathing exemplification of the saying "Just level up and punch it."

"Does this mean that now we *can* keep up with you and Lu in fights?" Reen asked with tears in her eyes, her heart racing from the hope that her true wish of staying by Sol's side on his adventures just might be coming true.

"Yep. Looks like we'll be hitting the dungeons together after all, Reen!"

"I'd love that!"

Overwhelmed with joy, Reen unthinkingly grabbed Sol's hand and hugged it to her chest. The look of surprise on his face brought her back to her senses, however, and she quickly realized how forward she was being and released his hand. Both of them blushed, which was cute and all, but Julia honestly wished they had gone a bit further with the exchange. The fact

that Reen said “we”—as if Julia coming was a given—made her happy, though.

Sol, too, was happy that even though they could no longer fulfill their dream as a group of five, he still had at least Reen and Julia with him. At the same time, he was just itching to try out all the new things that his display windows were telling him he was now capable of.

He was going to brandish this power that had made short work of a taboo territory boss to reach the depths of the Four Great Labyrinths and the top of the Tower that had fallen from the sky to land in the northern part of the continent, the latter of which the Evil Dragon was said to have smashed the lower floors of. To do so, he first had to resolve all political issues that could get in the way. In light of this, he was wholeheartedly thankful that Frederica, a member of Emelia’s royal family, had chosen to join him.

Frederica herself was currently struggling to process everything that had happened. Just last night, she had watched Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon battling in the skies. Today, after entering a taboo territory and experiencing the bizarre “fights,” she had transformed from a frail princess who couldn’t fight for her life to someone who could supposedly take on all of Circulus.

I was just a sheltered princess, but now I have the power to kill monsters as easily as breathing. Me…kill monsters.

The transformation process had been more thrilling and exciting than any other luxury that had been available to her as the princess of a major nation.

And this miracle is something that Lord Sol can bestow onto anyone he fancies. Turning that around, it means he can also take that power back anytime someone falls out of favor with him. How many in this world can stand the potent mixture of the thrill of becoming a superhuman with the fear of having that taken away at any given moment? Not many, I’d say.

The moment Frederica realized this, the pleasure from the leveling up that was still going on was overwhelmed by a powerful, throbbing emotion welling up from deep within that felt very close to fear. Her knees nearly buckled as she fully understood with rapture that the young man with shining eyes before her possessed power on par with God materialized on earth.

When the leveling up finally abated, the entire group had risen way past Level 100, with some even breaking Level 150. The remarkable increase came with such a boost to everyone's inner mana that light burst from their bodies the moment they entered battle readiness, leaving no room for doubt that they were truly no longer mere humans.

"Wow, this makes me feel superhuman," Sol commented.

"It feels somewhat similar to when I fight for real in my Augoeides," Luna replied.

The pair who had started out already beyond human limits were simply having fun by activating and deactivating the phenomenon, but a cold sweat was running down everyone else's backs. Frederica, for example, was sincerely worried that if she accidentally entered this state in the middle of a ball, she'd become saddled with the same worries that had plagued Fist Princess Angelica. The story had been fun when it had been just a story. She very much did not want to be called "Gorilla Princess" in real life.

That said, I'm way beyond trying to draw a man's attention at parties now. As long as Lord Sol is stronger than me, it wouldn't be a problem...right? Right?

In this way, Frederica found herself busy trying to convince herself. As a last resort, she could always return the power that Sol had granted her. And come to think of it, this would be extremely useful for negotiating with other royals when she was back home. If she dangled the possibility of becoming as strong as she was before some people's faces, it would be easier to take some paths that had been closed to her all this time. Above all, it was a huge boon that she no longer had to fear being kidnapped or assassinated, even if she was to take action alone.

As long as Luna remained with Sol, there was now a very clear line between those who were Sol's companions and those who were not. On one side were those who possessed the power to squash their opponents any time they wanted as long as they remained in his good graces. On the other, weaklings who didn't have the slightest hope of resistance no matter what they did. And Sol possessed the authority to switch which side anyone was on at any time.

I finally understand why Lord Sol asked where my guards' loyalties lie before coming here.

In short, he was asking for confirmation, knowing how much

power those who were a part of today's excursion would obtain. It had clearly ended up being much more than even he had expected, though.

"Now...Julia, can you wake the elves for me, please?"

"Sure thing."

Now that the situation had settled down—though it had taken longer than expected—Sol wanted to move on to making contact with those that they had captured. He had always planned on talking with each side in turn from the start but simply decided to knock them all out as a way to calm them down. It wasn't exactly the wrong way to use his strength, but even he had to admit it was a bit heavy-handed.

"She can do that?" Luna asked.

"You know how Remedy removes status effects?" Sol replied. "That includes unconsciousness."

"That's handy."

"Sure is."

The nonchalant conversation between the pair both warmed Julia's heart and unsettled her. It just didn't seem to square with the image of a dragon that had killed Kuzuryuu in one blow and said dragon's master. Then again, it was Sol who had given Julia the entire repertory of skills that made her the Saint of Healing.

I've got to check myself and make sure I don't ever take it for granted or slip into thinking that it's the norm.

Julia understood that if she got complacent as one of Sol's childhood friends, she could end up like Mark or Alan. If she didn't constantly remind herself that Sol was someone whom the princess of a large nation saw fit to ingratiate herself with, she risked slipping into the habit of treating him like a rambunctious younger brother whom she had to look out for. That was why she had never fallen for him like Reen had and settled on the current distance that she maintained with him.

At the same time, Julia also knew that Sol preferred that she and Reen continued being casual with him as long as they didn't get too cocky about it. Simply put, moderation was key. Be friends but remain respectful. That would avoid most problems.

"Do you indeed plan on championing the cause of the demihumans, Lord Sol?" Frederica asked, trying to read into the intentions behind Sol's decision to wake the elves first.

"Do you, Sol?" Reen joined in out of pure curiosity.

That one of Sol's childhood friends was on board with her

query made Frederica happy. Of course, she had no intention of rehashing the consequences of how Sol planned on treating the demihumans, as she had already impertinently done so back at the Adventurer's Guild. By now, Sol's power was so great that every move he made would affect the world as a whole, not simply his country of residence. Frederica was merely asking for confirmation so that she would be the first to truly understand his opinion in this matter. She would then make the necessary changes in Emelia to ensure that nothing happened to earn his ire.

The Kingdom of Emelia was by no means a paradise of justice and equality. The treatment of demihumans, whom the Holy Church branded as weaklings to be scorned by mankind, was not significantly better here compared to its neighbors either. Frederica herself considered discrimination senseless but had never taken action against it, as the majority of the ruling class saw it as a useful tool for maintaining power. If Sol was against it, however, then it needed to be corrected right away.

"It'd depend on how things unfold, but if possible, I'd like to befriend these two and the one they're bringing along." Sol's answer indicated that he wasn't passionate about the issue either way. That meant he had a specific reason for wanting to connect with the three elves.

Frederica didn't know how he knew the person inside the coffin was an elf to begin with. "May I ask why?" she inquired.

"Probably because it's Aina'noa inside," Luna replied matter-of-factly.

Sol smiled. "Exactly."

"Aina'noa... As in Aina'noa la Avalil?! The Captive Elven Queen?!"

Given how casually the two were speaking, Frederica felt completely blindsided by the name that was suddenly brought up. Aina'noa la Avalil was both one of the champions who had helped the Hero take down and bind Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon and the great leader of the elves who had gone on to betray the Hero and then been herself stricken and incarcerated. The divine curses used to secure her had affected the entire elven race through the Darkening, turning their fair skin dark and weakening them drastically.

Basically, Aina'noa was a character from myth. Suddenly being told that she was right there within the coffin before their eyes

left everyone present staring in shock. Of course, they did already have the Evil Dragon herself in their midst, but those who remembered that immediately found themselves worrying about the consequences of letting these two supposed enemies meet. If Luna wanted to take revenge for what had happened a thousand years ago, no one would be able to stop her.

And yet, Luna seemed unbothered, even though according to the Kuzuifabra, Aina'noa was partly responsible for her millennium-long imprisonment. Rather, her furiously wagging tail indicated that she was happy about being praised by Sol for having guessed right.

If Frederica was to be honest with herself, she was just as curious about where the future would take her and her newfound companions as she was about what had happened a thousand years ago. Her interest in the past in particular had been bolstered by her sudden acquaintance with one of the characters from what she had previously thought of as mere myths and legends. However, she understood that this was something for only Sol to ask and was therefore restraining herself.

"Based on the situation, I'd venture to say that these two elves rescued the Elven Queen from the Tower of Lament in Istekario and somehow managed to flee all the way here."

"I see..."

Frederica was here not as a girl who loved history but as the first princess of the Emelia Kingdom. What occupied her mind, therefore, was what it meant to encounter the Elven Queen, who should have been under heavy lock and key in Istekario, here in Taboo Novem, and how to use the situation to best carry out Sol's will.

The elves, weakened as they were, should not have had the ability to pull off the operation on their own. Something must have been happening in Istekario, then, that had influenced the country to allow this to happen. Whatever it was, there had to be some way to take advantage of it to further Frederica and Sol's plan to found a new nation.

"They're coming to," Julia called out. As she had no experience talking with elves, she was hoping that Sol and Luna, or perhaps even Frederica, would take over from here. She was aware that during her time in Black Tiger, she had rather fancied herself a negotiator by using her reputation as the Saint of Healing and

her oft-mentioned sexual allure, but she knew she was out of her depth here. She now understood that back then, the high-ranking adventurers and guild staff had merely been doing the adult thing and playing along.

Of course, they had done so because Black Tiger's and her personal achievements had been real and indeed worthy of respect, but such things naturally wouldn't mean anything to elves. For the conversation to go as smoothly as possible, the ones to participate should be the ones who had knocked the elves out. After all, having the ability to knock them out in the blink of an eye meant having the ability to kill them at will. Having the bigger stick always made negotiating so much easier.

Chapter 2: Vassalage and Subjugation

“You! Are you…a dragon?”

With Julia’s spell taking immediate effect, the elves quickly returned to their senses. Even though they had been knocked out faster than their eyes could perceive and therefore should have had no idea who the culprit was, they could tell at a glance that Luna was the most powerful person in the group they were facing. Her characteristic horn and tail were clues, but the main reason they could identify her as a dragon was that they still vividly remembered seeing the gigantic dragon, with a single swipe, killing the boss that they had resolved to sacrifice their lives to summon. The corpse lying close by assured them that they had not dreamed it. Although they had just woken up, they immediately understood that resistance and escape were not in the cards.

“As expected of the elven race,” Luna replied, the full dignity of the All Dragon emanating from her small form. “I see you still retain some insight in spite of how the Darkening has clouded your eyes.”

“Wh-Why are you, a dragon, serving humans?”

Normal humans would be misled by Luna’s appearance, but not elves, who could perceive the massive torrent of mana she controlled even with their senses dulled by the Darkening.

“Do not expand the subject of your observation, *elf*. I do not serve humans; it is only my lord whom I serve. The lines that mortal races draw between each other mean naught to me. If you wish to speak, then do so as yourself.”

The elves were surprised to see a descendant of the dragons alive in this age, yet also perplexed, wondering why said descendant would be in the service of humans, of all races. However, Luna laughed away their indignation with a scoff, calling them “elves” disdainfully. From the perspective of a dragon, enemies and allies alike should only speak as individuals. A large part of why there was so much strife among the humanoids was because there were too many who spoke of their race, their organization, their country, or other groupings as if they represented the will of the many.

If someone truly wanted to speak for their entire race, Luna believed, then they should devour all their kin as she did and become the One and All of said race. Even if, unlike her, they could not obtain the powers of those they ate, their will would still be the will of all simply by merit of being the last one standing. Someone who could not do this, therefore, should hold important the “I” and not the “we,” and hate not the “they” but the “he.” Sadly, this way of thinking was quite hard for other races to grasp.

“In the first place, what are the grounds for your indignation? Don’t tell me you expect me to join hands with you to ‘destroy the humans together’ just because we both fell at their hands.” It seemed Luna took issue with being lumped together with everyone else who had lost to a human. As one such loser herself, she had her own view on how a loser ought to be.

“Gnngh.”

“Don’t groan at me, fool. Know that one of those responsible for my defeat is the queen lying there beside you. You have no right to condemn my way of life.”

“You are the accursed All Dragon, Lunvemt Nachtfelia?!”

“What if I am? I would have already sought retribution for the karma of a thousand years ago if not for my master’s command.”

The elves could not hide their surprise at the facts being uncovered in this conversation. However, it explained how Kuzuryuu had been defeated in one blow and how there was still a dragon in a world where the All Dragon had killed off all others.

But I still don’t get it. The All Dra— No, the Evil Dragon lost to the Hero’s party and was bound with the power of God. How? Why? What?

The deluge of hostility flowing from the being who held their lives in her hands made it very hard for the elves to collect their thoughts and to accept her reassurance that she would not seek revenge. If the girl before them truly was Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon freed from her divine bonds, the entire race of elves was in true danger of being annihilated, queen and all. The dragon could hardly be expected to know what had happened regarding the Elven Queen after having been locked up in darkness.

Just as the elves were on the verge of a mental breakdown—even though nothing physical had been done to them yet—Sol

sighed and spoke up.

"Luna, don't intimidate them too much."

"Yes, my lord!"

The tension in the air dissipated right away. With a single line from the man who, based on his inner mana, seemed the weakest of the seven, the oppressive cloud of hostility that had sent all nearby birds and wild animals fleeing disappeared without a trace. Furthermore, Luna's large tail drooped to the ground and she deflated, her adorable features scrunched up in remorse. Even in the eyes of the elves, she now looked like nothing more than a daughter being scolded by her beloved father. Or, in Luna's own words, a servant being chastised by their master.

"Oh, this human—I mean, this esteemed individual must be the one who freed you!" one of the elves exclaimed.

"Yes..." Luna replied in a barely audible voice, clearly afraid of being scolded further.

Sol wasn't particularly angry, but Luna was afraid of him getting tired of her as much as him being angry. The elves, however, were too busy to notice her behavior. Their minds raced as they processed the fact that there was someone who had managed to free the All Dragon from God's own yoke and that the All Dragon now called this person "master" and served him with absolute loyalty. This could only mean one thing.

"Please forgive our brazen disrespect, O great one who rules over the All Dragon! We are fully aware of our impudence in asking, but would it please you to wield your great power to free our queen as well? If you would do so, all of us—no, at the very least, *I* will offer you all that I am."

"I will too!"

Indeed, the elves saw hope that this person might be able to free their queen, Aina'noa la Avalil, from her curse as well. From merely being trampled underfoot and wiped out, they had gone to having a tiny chance at getting a bit of revenge, and from there to the miracle of seeing possible salvation for their race.

As they said, they were aware that their request was presumptuous in the extreme. In fact, as master of the All Dragon, it would make sense for Sol to view the elves as an enemy. However, they were desperate to seize this thread of hope, willing to cast aside all pride and dignity. As elves, it would make them prouder than anything to debase themselves and

lick this man's shoes if doing so meant obtaining his aid.

"I was actually hoping you'd say that. I am aiming to gather all the major characters from the Kuzuifabra to form the most powerful party that the world has ever known." Sol's smile was meant to be reassuring, but his words were a bombshell.

I see. He's someone who was born in this era.

A thousand years ago, the Holy Church had penned the apocryphal Kuzuifabra, featuring the monsters who had helped the Hero defeat Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon but then had gone on to turn their fangs on humanity and were successively captured, killed, or unsouled. The Captive Elven Queen. The Lifeless Divine Beast. The Vacant Demon Lord. With two others whom no one remembered any longer, the Cursed Hero, who was herself ultimately abandoned by God, and the Bound Evil Dragon, these seven were collectively known as the Purgatonia.

If, using the seven keys, all the Sins of God could be gathered, the Purgatonia's fangs just might reach their true enemy this time. And apparently, the elves had the opportunity to be a part of this endeavor. They hadn't lived for a thousand years for nothing. What had actually happened a thousand years ago? What had happened in the thousand years since the disappearance of the All Dragon, the Elven Queen, the Divine Beast, the Demon Lord, the Hero herself, and the remaining two no one remembered? At this point, the elves were the only ones left who could provide a true account—at least, an account of what they had seen firsthand—that wasn't marred by falsehoods and deceit.

Prompting the groveling elves to get up, Sol assumed a joking tone. "To create my ideal party, I need the Captive Elven Queen, Aina'noa la Avalil. Based on what happened with Luna, I imagine that freeing her will help me earn a lot of favor with her. So would helping you two, I imagine. So that's what I want to do."

For some reason that Sol couldn't figure out, Luna blushed. There was no way to say for sure whether Aina'noa would agree to join him. However, freeing her from whatever God did to her would indebt her to him to some degree. If she had been fully unconscious, she probably hadn't gone mad like Luna had. A thousand years was an unimaginably long time for a human, but for the queen, it would have been but the blink of an eye. That said, Sol hoped that she would be amenable to helping him at

least a little as the prince who woke her from eternal sleep. After all, the best way to get someone to help you was to help them out first. There was no need to consider the possibility that Aina'noa didn't actually want to be woken up, as there was no way to tell without asking.

If Sol succeeded in waking her up, these elves would know right away. That was one reason he sincerely wanted them to cooperate with him. That, and he wanted to experiment with whether Player worked on other races.

"But do you have a way to free her?" The elves sounded unsure, though their faces were filled with hope. Understandably so, as Sol had already freed the Evil Dragon, who should have been bound with God's power just as Aina'noa was.

"That depends on what measures were used. From what I see, I should be able to take care of the cursed tools covering her eyes and ears and the bloodlike cursed threads tying her up. However, I'm still not quite sure how to lift the Darkening that was applied to her skin, hair, and probably eyes too."

"How about Uncurse?" Reen suggested.

"That might work," Julia agreed.

The elves and Frederica's group didn't know this, but Sol had the ability to dispel curses on cursed items. Very rarely, treasure chests containing weapons, gear, or items that were practically ooparts could be found deep inside dungeons. These were treasures in the true meaning of the word, with some containing the possibility of drastically increasing an adventurer's combat capability, every last one fetching eye-popping prices on the market. Though few, there were people with talents geared toward wielding dungeon artifacts, with Funnel and Aegis being well-known examples.

Unfortunately, these dungeon-sourced items were sometimes cursed. The moment someone put them on, the curse would activate, and there would be nothing that they could do about it. There weren't many accounts of curses that were fatal, but some applied very serious effects. There was no way to know what would happen until actually putting the item on, but there was no shortage of adventurers willing to take that risk. Rumor had it that a few Funnels and Aegises were indeed suffering from various curses.

Player, however, had Uncurse, a skill that trivialized this problem. Reen and Julia were blushing a little because the

weapons that they were now using also used to be cursed, and the particular curses had been rather...well, inappropriate. They couldn't help shuddering when imagining what would have happened had Sol not been with them at the time.

In any case, the point was that Sol had something that was effective against curses. And according to the card that he'd seen in the summoning space, almost all of the Captive Elven Queen's bindings were cursed.

"How do you know so much about the state of our queen?"

In real life, the Elven Queen was still hidden in a coffin. Sol should have had no chance to see inside it, which made it strange that he was so well-informed.

"Oh, um..." He was hesitant to explain Summon again from the very start, especially because this audience seemed likely to ask why he hadn't chosen their queen. Having to answer that question in front of Luna was going to be extremely awkward.

"On second thought, I'm sorry. It is not my intention to ask you to explain everything. I apologize for overstepping."

"Well, um...yeah." Sol approached the coffin. "May I have a look first?"

"Of course." One of the elves formed a few hand signs and the lid opened, revealing the Elven Queen deep in sleep, wreathed in a bed of colorful flowers.

"Yep, I think I can take care of the cursed tools and threads."

The cursed items on her body were exactly as depicted on the card that Sol had seen. There was no reason to draw out the process, so he promptly used Uncurse and retrieved the tools and threads with no resistance whatsoever. The items that Reen and Julia were using had remained powerful artifacts after being cleansed, but the two used on the Elven Queen hadn't been cursed as a trap. Instead, the whole point of them was to curse the wearer, which meant they weren't very useful for anything else. That said, Sol had already come up with an idea for them.

"Ohhh!" the elves exclaimed in surprise at how easily Sol had disabled the curses.

Reen, Julia, and the two royal guards were also surprised, but for a different reason.

"Whoa..."

"As expected of the queen of a race known for their beauty."

"Now this is just..."

The only person who seemed unfazed was Luna. Even Sol,

who was somewhat used to seeing beautiful girls, was blushing a little. Now that the cursed tool that hid the majority of her face was gone, Queen Aina'noa la Avalil's face was revealed in its full breathtaking perfection.

Her hair, which was longer than she was tall, was tied in two pigtails that covered her like a protective barrier. She was clad in spiky, ominous armor, her hair and limbs infused with a darkness that deepened to pitch-black at their extremities. In spite of that, her beauty seemed undimmed in the slightest. The girls in Sol's group were themselves so enchanted that it slipped their minds to judge Sol for being similarly entranced.

"Unfortunately, I can't use Uncurse on the, uh, Darkening, was it? Whatever is causing it isn't a cursed item."

The fact that Sol couldn't simply Uncurse the Darkening made the phenomenon that much more sinister. In clear contrast to Luna's healthy tan and Sol's luscious black hair and eyes, the queen's coloring looked tainted and corrupt. It was fundamentally at odds with the beauty of life and vitality. This was a cursed darkness, and it stained both the glowing turquoise hair and skin as pale as virgin snow that Aina'noa was famous for. Her eyes, which remained closed, were surely the same. Since she had yet to wake up, it was clear that this Darkening was the crux of what was holding her captive.

"The only option is to ask Istekario or the Church to undo this. Her being 'captive' means there must be a way to free her. I can't entirely rule out the possibility that Player might offer another solution if I level up more, but that's..." Sol shook his head, changing gears. If the cards currently in his hand couldn't get the job done, he simply had to go and obtain the cards that could. Thankfully, the location of the relevant cards in this case was obvious. There was no need to ask. "Well, no matter what happens, I, as leader of Libertadores, promise that no further harm will come to the Elven Queen."

The elves heaved an audible sigh of relief at the declaration. With that, their entire race had, by proxy, entered the protection of a man with absolute strength. They swore in their hearts that if anyone in their village raised even a peep of protest, they would straightaway knock them to the ground, be they a youngster or an elder. And there was no doubt that they had the strength to do so; they were the ones who had been chosen to rescue the Elven Queen when it was clear that the opportunity

was a trap from Istekario. As strong as they were, everyone else would hopefully pick up on how eager they were to please Sol and read between the lines, and no one would be stupid enough to ask why a dragon was serving a human like they had.

"Since that is your will, Lord Sol, I, as first princess of Emelia, promise to aid you in any way I can," Frederica declared. "First, please bring my two attendants to the elven village. Their very presence will make it impossible for Istekario to attack."

Of course, she couldn't speak on behalf of her country, but as someone who had been born as royalty, she practically considered it her duty to do everything she could in her position. The royal guards understood this, which was why their reaction was entirely different from how they had reacted at the Adventurer's Guild.

Because Sol willed it, the elven village now had to be protected at all costs. Sol and Luna couldn't permanently remain there, so the duty logically fell to Emelia, which did have the ability to go toe to toe with Istekario. Emelia only knew that the elven village was inside the Elven Forest, but they had no idea of its exact location. However, it would be dangerous to assume that the same was true of Istekario and the Church. In light of all that, sending the two royal guards, who had obtained superhuman battle abilities thanks to Sol, wasn't all that bad an idea.

Frederica was thankful from the bottom of her heart that she had been born with the authority to handle this situation herself. At the same time, she was very proud of her own country. Despite Istekario being a major military power and the Church being the world religion, she had full confidence that they would not insist on attacking the elven village if it meant involving Emelia.

Fully understanding the political considerations behind the arrangement, the elves sincerely thanked her. Of course, they were most thankful to Sol, as they could tell who was actually calling the shots here. Frederica noticed and approved. Her two guards were now practically invincible against other humans, but that was only thanks to Sol. His name was still obscure, so Frederica thought it important to let the elves know that Emelia was submitting to him. Since he was set on making the Captive Elven Queen a member of his party, drastic changes would have to be made in how the elves were treated.

“Thank you, Frederica.”

“Please think nothing of it.” She flushed a little at being given honest praise from Sol for her blackhearted scheming.

Sol looked at the elves. “The safest course of action would be to entrust us with your queen, but…”

“Of that, I have no doubt. Even so, may we bring her back to our village? For a thousand years, it has been the dearest wish of our entire race to return our queen to the World Tree.”

It was clear that the elves were loath to object to Sol’s suggestion. That they did so regardless spoke volumes about how much this meant to them. Featured in the Kuzuifabra as well as numerous myths and legends, the World Tree had once stood proud and tall on this continent as a symbol of the world. Just like the Tower, it soared so high that it pierced the clouds. As the nexus of all nature, it controlled phenomena produced by the elements—earth, water, fire, wind, dark, and light—and bestowed peace and bountiful harvest to the land.

The Elven Queen existed to control the World Tree. This translated to being able to control all battlefields, as she could help her allies or hinder her enemies in drastic ways by manipulating the environment. Unfortunately, the Kuzuifabra described the Hero burning down the World Tree a thousand years ago while suppressing the Elven Queen’s uprising. In the present day, many doubted that it had ever existed. The truth, however, was that the burnt remains of the World Tree did exist, and it had a hollow that sheltered the sapling of a new World Tree. This was where the elves wanted to take their queen. Their hope was that the World Tree could do something about the Darkening. If there was even the slightest possibility that it could free her, they had no choice but to give it a try.

Sol shared their enthusiasm for the idea, as he was hardly one to protest simply because he couldn’t do it himself. “I see. In that case, go for it. We’ll do our best to rejoin you as soon as we’re able.” He then turned to the royal guards. “Until then, please protect their village.”

They bowed their heads. “Yes, my lord.”

Based on what Player told him, Sol was certain that the protection the royal guards could offer the elven village was not merely political in nature. If Istekario forces actually attacked, the two of them would be more than enough to physically repel the assault.

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Sol's group escorted the elves back to the wagon they had abandoned. After loading the coffin back on and seeing the elves off with the two royal guards, they doubled back to where the eight Istekarian soldiers were still unconscious.

Turning to Frederica, who probably knew the most about other countries, Sol asked, "These people are famous, right?"

"Yes, they are. You are looking at Circulus, Istekario's elite magic special force. They are the counterpart to our nation's Hexagram, the Amnesphia Sovereignty's Apocalypse, and the Poseinia Eastern Seaboard Federation's Five-Pointed Star. You might have heard Hexagram being called the Six Heavenly Mages and Apocalypse called the Seven Envoys. The leader of Circulus is Walter 'Multicast' Froitzheim, and the vice leader is Kurt 'Shadow Diver' Sachsen. Both of them are so renowned that I've memorized their faces."

"So basically, they are *the* strongest soldiers that Istekario can send."

It meant a lot that Frederica, the first princess of a major nation, had taken the time to learn not only the name of the squad but even the leader's and vice leader's names, aliases, and faces. In Emelia, the name "Hexa" was looked up to with just as much reverence, so much so that Mark had dreamed of joining Hexagon just like Alan had dreamed of joining Hexagram.

It made sense that the other superpowers had special forces powerful enough to have a name and to represent their country as well. Normally, such groups wouldn't be anywhere near a border, much less foolish enough to intrude upon a taboo territory. Clearly, the plan to let the Elven Queen be stolen and subsequently destroy her was such a high priority that Circulus had been dispatched to ensure that it went perfectly. It was just their luck that not only was the mission a complete failure, but they had crossed paths with bad news that now threatened the future of their country.

"We'll first ask for the humans' perspective on the account given by the elves, then ask how to dispel the Darkening," Sol said. "There's a chance they might know something."

Frederica nodded. "I fully agree. Given their status, I'm sure they hear quite a lot of secrets."

Similarly, members of Hexagon and Hexagram had very high

clearances regarding Emelia's military secrets. Knowing that, Sol and Frederica agreed that they should take this opportunity to learn as much as they could from Circulus, even if they had to employ less than savory methods.

Sol valued the lives of elves, as there weren't many of them left, but the same was definitely not true of humans, whose sprawling countries covered the land. He actually half believed that as long as Emelia was alive and well, its population was more than enough to maintain life with all the trappings of modern civilization for him and his companions. That didn't mean he was going to actively start killing people, but he wouldn't blink at erasing a country or two—or at least their central governments—if they got in his way.

"Do you want me to make it easier for them to talk?" Luna asked nonchalantly.

"No, we'll start off by being courteous," Sol said. "If they cooperate, I might consider rewarding them based on what they share. If they don't cooperate…there's something I've been wanting to try."

Thanks to my level shooting up, I've gotten a very interesting skill. I'm just itching to test it on someone.

At the moment, the eight members of Circulus, the elite magic special force from Istekario, were still unconscious. Their leader, Walter, naturally still had no idea that his own fate and the fate of the country he loved were hanging on what he and his men were going to say or do in the next few minutes. His current coma was going to be the last time he slept soundly in his life.

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"Um, can you at least let us talk?" Sol asked, sounding troubled.

Right after Julia woke them up with Remedy, all eight members of Circulus had assumed a battle formation and started blasting spells with as much power and speed as they could at Sol's group.

"We have no intention of listening to drivel spewed by traitors who were born human and yet have chosen to side with the elves!" the leader roared, having completely lost his cool.

However, all of their attacks were being shot down by Luna,

without a single one getting anywhere near Sol. Before the drastic level up, Sol wouldn't have had the faintest idea what Luna was doing, but now, he could just barely tell that she was shooting little pellets of pure mana at the incoming spells. To a dragon, this probably felt as trivial as a human blowing away specks of dust. The level up had only served to widen the difference in strength between Sol and Luna, but at least his eyes could now register what she was doing when she used the least amount of effort.

"Even so...this is much worse than I had expected."

The calmness and presence of mind possessed by the two elves earlier stood in stark contrast to how the members of Circulus were acting. Right after treating the elves with such contempt, they had turned around and immediately started berating their own kind just for taking the elves' side. Moreover, they were not pulling their punches. They had already launched quite a few attacks that would have killed Sol's group if they hadn't had Luna and been so over-leveled.

At this point, Sol fully recognized them as enemies. He merely had to call Luna's name with intention and all eight elite mages would be immediately erased from this world without a trace. Since they were dead men walking, he felt like he was free to use them however he wanted for his experiments. Considering their agitated state, they were more suitable than the calm elves to test his new ability on.

"There are times when we must fight even knowing we stand no chance of victory! This is one such moment! My life shall stand as testimony that there are things more precious than living on!"

This is most definitely not *one of those moments.*

It would be if their loved ones or the liege that they had sworn to serve would be killed if they were to lose to Sol right now. They would not win, but at least they would not die after the ones they had promised to protect. That was a resolve that Sol could understand. However, they were challenging someone they couldn't beat just because the other side had helped some elves. There was no honor or meaning in dying for such a reason.

"Hmm..." Sol had never really thought about it before, but he was starting to realize that he was pretty lucky to have been born in Emelia. Although they were all humans, the members of

Circulus had no doubt enjoyed livelihoods and education far better than what Sol had access to as a high-ranking adventurer. The only difference was the country they had been born in and what they had been taught since childhood, and they had ended up with such vastly different worldviews.

Upon meeting a traitor working with the elves, the members of Circulus absolutely could not just walk away and pretend they hadn't seen anything. For them, to do so was probably a disgrace so great that it did not bear thinking about. In fact, it was so important that it was worth giving up their lives for. That was what Istekario, as a country, had drilled into all its citizens.

What someone considered moral and immoral was strongly influenced by what they had been taught growing up. If they lived long enough among others who held such views, anyone who said otherwise would be a heretic in their eyes. If he was being honest, methods that could indoctrinate people so thoroughly scared Sol. Naturally, that included what he himself was about to use.

Abruptly, magical light burst from his body, and he disappeared from the view of all the members of Circulus, who had been circling his group as fast as they could with their magical buff active. The leader was so astonished that he was struck speechless except for a disbelieving "What?!"

The burst of magical light was something that happened now that Sol's level was over 100. Whenever his mind shifted into battle mode, the massive amount of mana created inside him turned into a torrent, not only lighting him up but also greatly enhancing his physical abilities. He had yet to receive any proper hand-to-hand combat training, but he now had such high mobility that the eight elite soldiers appeared to be standing still in his eyes. Needless to say, his attack power and endurance had also greatly surpassed human limits.

Being much, much higher in level enabled Sol to handily defeat even those with incredible talents. With that overwhelming power, he now landed a single strike on all eight Istekarians, hurting them just enough to incapacitate them without rendering them unconscious.

Just like when they had been attacked by Luna, none of them knew what had happened. Never in their wildest dreams would they have imagined that the magical barriers they constantly kept up had been shattered as easily as soap bubbles by a

simple fist to the top of their heads.

“Argh! Kill them!” the leader howled, desperate to show that his will was not broken even though he was lying face down on the ground and his body no longer obeyed him. The fact that he refused to beg for his life even under these circumstances proved beyond a doubt that he held his beliefs as the core of his being, Sol’s opinion be damned. The defiant light in the eyes of the other members made it clear that the same was true for them too.

Unfortunately, Player had the ability to shatter those cores without effort.

“Let’s see how this goes.” Sol cleared his throat, then adopted what he thought was an authoritative voice. “I, Sol Rock, order you as your master: calm down and listen to me.”

“As you wish, Master,” said all eight members of Circulus as they knelt like vassals before their king, an overwhelming sense of duty coercing bodies that pride and will had failed to reach earlier.

“Ooooh, so this is what it’s like.”

What Sol had expected was that they would be unable to disobey him but still remain in full control of themselves. This went way beyond that.

“Sol…what is this?” Reen asked.

“It’s a new skill that I gained thanks to the crazy number of times I leveled up. It’s called Subordinate.”

In addition to the designation of “companion” that Sol had had from the start, he now had a new one called “subordinate.” He could register those he defeated as subordinates, who would thereafter have no choice but to carry out all orders that he gave after using the trigger phrase “I, Sol Rock, order you as your master.”

It could be inferred that the being who had created the talent Player, the Wayside God, generally trusted humans yet was skeptical of them at the same time. That was the only way to explain there being a skill rooted on the assumption that there were people who had to be made subordinates, not companions.

Take two people who believed in their strength and fought with their lives on the line, with the loser refusing to submit to the will of the victor. Yet the loser ultimately refused to choose death, taking advantage of the victor’s merciful decision to spare

his life while resolutely shouting, “Until I give up, I haven’t lost yet!”

Only someone who understood that, in such situations, the victor needed a way to force the loser to submit could have come up with the Subordinate skill.

“Now, please answer my question truthfully. Do any of you know how to free the Captive Elven Queen?”

Sol was pretty sure that his new skill was creeping out his companions—it made his own skin crawl—but he wasn’t someone who would hesitate to use a convenient ability. Since the members of Circulus had made a serious effort to take his life but failed, he now had every right to use or treat them however he wanted.

“Yes, Master. It is said that the Organa-Sealing Visor and Inner Mana-Sealing Blighted Thread can be dispelled using talismans stored in our country’s treasury. As for the Darkening…”

Those who had lost to Sol would remain his subordinates until he dismissed them with the appropriate phrase. He wasn’t surprised to get an answer, but he was surprised that it didn’t come from the leader, who he had expected to know the most confidential information. Instead, it was the vice leader, Kurt Sachsen, who spoke up. Then again, it didn’t really matter who the answer came from. Even if Kurt actually came from a very influential family, even if he had been using his talent to learn things that he shouldn’t know, it made no difference to Sol.

“From what I have heard, the Darkening will be dispelled if the Imperial Seal embedded into our emperor’s forehead is destroyed. To elaborate, the Imperial Seal is a man-made organa—more commonly called a nier organa—that has been passed down through the line of Istekarian emperors.”

On second thought, Kurt knowing what was surely a very closely guarded secret was a strong indicator that he was indeed from an influential family, even if he was hiding it, and such pawns were best used in other ways.

“Which means…”

“There is no other way than to end the life of Istekario’s sitting emperor, Fritz Leifelden Istekario, otherwise known as the Young Emperor.”

Somehow, Sol had seen this coming. This sounded very much like something that the person who had sealed away all five monsters would do. That said, he couldn’t help blurting out,

“Okay, *that’s* going over the line.”

Sol didn’t consider the emperor an enemy, as all the boy had done was inherit what he was meant to. Sol had yet to lose his humanity to the point where he would murder a child without hesitation for the sake of furthering his own goals.

The “Huh?” voiced not only by Luna, who lived by the slogan “kill all enemies right away,” but also Reen and Julia, made Sol feel a little indignant. He wished they would take it back.

Young Emperor Fritz had succeeded the throne of the military superpower Istekario a few years ago at only thirteen years of age. Due to the combination of the lightning magic he wielded thanks to his talent and the Imperial Seal he had inherited, which stored an enormous amount of mana, the alias “Lightning Emperor” was starting to catch on. He had extremely attractive features, with the most striking characteristics being his luscious silver hair and deep green eyes. The imperial household had infused its line with stunning beauties for generations, and Fritz’s mother had been renowned across the land.

Since Fritz had assumed the throne, Istekario’s reputation as a military superpower had grown stronger. It was increasingly being seen by its neighbors as a spark that could very well destroy the balance of power that had remained stable for the past few decades. Fritz himself was both capable and sagacious. He was making an effort to appear as a confident and assertive emperor, but everyone knew that he was little more than a puppet. Istekario was actually controlled by a group of high-ranking nobles who were steadily fanning the flames of war.

There were any number of moves that Sol could make in these circumstances. Many options would go much easier with help from Kurt, the Circulus member who was almost certainly highborn. The man’s value was rising by the minute.

“So, to put it simply, the nier organa is passed down the line of Istekarian emperors and also serves as a cursed item.”

Making it so that the only way to free the Captive Elven Queen was to kill the incumbent emperor of Istekario, one of the four superpowers of the continent, was a vicious setup indeed.

“But honestly, if that’s all there is to it, I can manage…”

Since the Imperial Seal was a magic tool, there were any number of things that Sol could do to it. For example, there was a good chance that Uncurse might work. And as a last resort, he could always fall back on Gawain’s talent.

“You can?!” Frederica exclaimed.

“Mm-hm. I think so. Even if it’s really nasty…yeah, I’m confident I can get the better of it.”

The ultimate worst-case scenario was if Fritz’s life really had to be stopped to secure the Imperial Seal, but somewhere along the way to his current level, Revive had been added to the list of spells that Sol could give his companions. It was a spell so great that there was no mention of it at all in any myth or legend, so there was no way that Frederica knew about it, much less suspected it was now a card that he could play. Little wonder she was so surprised by how unperturbed Sol seemed.

Part of her surprise was also due to her realizing, based on Sol’s demeanor, that he planned to go the extra mile to win Emperor Fritz to his cause. She was not one to protest a peaceful resolution, but depending on how the situation developed, her and Emelia’s importance to Sol could be affected.

I should probably be glad that the Young Emperor isn’t a girl.

Fritz was younger than Frederica, extremely attractive, and in an environment where he was being taken advantage of by very bad adults. He would have been a formidable opponent indeed if he had been a girl and gotten attached to Sol when Sol inevitably showed up like a prince on a white horse. In such a case, Frederica would have to accept that, despite being called Lilium dei Regnum, she would be at a severe disadvantage. Thankfully, Fritz was *not* a girl, so all this deliberation was for nothing. It was probably more useful to worry that when Fritz learned what Sol could do, he would get ideas as a royal, like Frederica had.

Unbeknownst to her, whereas Fritz usually did his best to maintain a stern look, he was normally one of those angelic boys who looked as cute as a girl. And throughout history, those in power showed favor to whomever they liked, regardless of gender.

“All right, we’re done here. You eight, retreat to a safe place. Once you confirm that the area is indeed safe, lose consciousness. When you do, forget about me and everyone here. We’ll prepare the reason for why you let the Elven Queen slip through your fingers. You were in hot pursuit of her when you suddenly lost consciousness. When you came to, the elves carrying her were long gone.”

“As you wish, Master.”

Now that he was done working out his plan, it was clear that

Sol was going to let the members of Circulus go. Instead of killing them, his intention was to continue using them as pawns. He got a little flustered when he realized that there would be no opportunity to free them from Subordinate if they were to carry out his orders but ended up adding the order to “act like yourselves after you regain consciousness” and settled on simply not freeing them. It would serve just as well, as this was merely an experiment.

Once Circulus had disappeared from sight, Frederica broke the silence and asked, “May I have an explanation for what just happened?”

The entire chain of events that she had witnessed was impossible. Emelia and Istekario were superpowers sharing a border, which meant they had hated each other’s guts for as long as anyone could remember. Frederica, being a princess, understood Istekario’s worldview the best out of everyone there. It wasn’t a simple matter of who was in the right; what mattered most was that each side thought they were right and the other side dead wrong. As such, the vehemence with which they saw the other side’s “justice” bordered on fanaticism. The prejudice against demihumans hammered into the members of Circulus over their entire lives was not something they could abandon so easily just because they had lost a fight or were about to be killed.

“Like I said, that was the effect of a new skill that I got from Player. It’s called Subordinate, and it makes it so that I can do what you just saw to those I fight and beat myself. Based on that, I gather that after I Subordinate someone using the phrase ‘I, Sol Rock, order you as your master,’ they’ll do practically anything I tell them to. I didn’t test whether I can make them harm themselves, so I can’t say for sure, but I have a feeling the answer is yes.”

Upon surpassing Level 100, Player had developed from merely being able to grant others the strength to fight monsters to also having the power to overwrite someone’s core beliefs. Any other day and the members of Circulus would have confirmed that they were ready to give their lives rather than expose top secret intel about Istekario. In fact, mere seconds before, they had been screaming that they would fight until their dying breath, and everyone present knew how serious they had been. But then they had gone ahead and shared every last detail

they knew. This demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that their minds had fallen entirely under Sol's control.

Writ large, anyone who fought Sol personally and lost would be divested of their mind, will, body, *everything*.

"*DAMN,* you're scary," Julia exclaimed, grimacing.

Sol shared her opinion, but he wished she hadn't been so blunt. He hung his head, resolved to hear more of the same from everyone else.

"That...sounds kind of nice."

To the surprise of Sol, Reen, and Julia—the latter pair's "What?!" were in sync—Frederica was blushing a little, and her voice even sounded a little shaky. However, whereas Reen and Julia now looked even more taken aback, Frederica's reaction elicited an impassioned sigh from the All Dragon incongruous with her appearance and a murmured "Oh, I don't disagree."

Reen and Julia couldn't understand what they were saying. Naturally, neither could Sol. As it turned out, these two, who were normally in positions of absolute power—one being at the pinnacle of all magical beasts and the last of her kind, the other being first princess and idolized as Lilium dei Regnum for her beauty—felt a certain depraved arousal at the idea of being forced to submit to someone with even greater power. Just imagining that person obsessing over them, treating them kindly, or even treating them harshly excited them beyond words. Of course, for them, "that person" could only ever be Sol.

Unfortunately, their tastes were far too sophisticated for the three country bumpkins from Ros Village to comprehend. Discerning that the current topic was something he definitely should not dig into, Sol changed the topic for self-preservation's sake.

"In any case, we now have a lead on how to free the Captive Elven Queen. We can't very well leave this taboo territory alone after unsealing it, so let's head back to Garlaige for a quick stop before going to the Elven Forest."

Reen and Julia internally applauded Sol for his quick thinking but also shuddered at how matter-of-fact he sounded about what he was saying. A magic tool embedded in the forehead of the emperor of a superpower had already become something that he could "manage." Put another way, he now had the power to kill the head of state of one of the four most powerful countries on this continent any time he wanted. That was no

longer a question given Luna's strength, the strength that they had all gained thanks to her, and the extraordinary abilities of Player that had made everything possible. What scared Reen and Julia most was that Sol would not hesitate to wield his overwhelming strength if he saw a need for it.

Frederica, too, burned into her mind the warning to never be deceived by Sol's good-natured demeanor and unintentionally take him lightly. Standing before her eyes was a god incarnate who could turn this world into a paradise or hell at a whim. She could not say for certain whether he was a good god or an evil one. In light of that, all she could do was play her cards so that he proved to be a good god to her, possibly the kingdom of Emelia, and maybe, just maybe, the entire world.

To make that happen, she was willing to do whatever it took.

Chapter 3: The Holy Church

A fevered uproar currently enveloped the fortified city of Garlaige the likes of which it had never seen. The main gate, which had never been opened before, now stood open as far as its hinges would allow. Even so, the gigantic body of Kuzuryuu barely fit as it was carried inside.

Kuzuryuu had been the boss of the expansive Taboo Novem since long before any of the citizens of Garlaige had been born. Not only had everyone given up on killing it, but they had realized all they could do was pray that it did not bring about a repeat of the tragedy caused by Country Eater two hundred years prior. And yet, this great enemy of humanity and symbol of terror would no longer bare its fangs at anyone again. It was now little more than a pile of valuable resources being carted into Garlaige.

Thanks to the publicity arranged by Steve, the general manager of the local branch of the Adventurer's Guild, the city's citizens were out in full force, each more eager than the next to catch a glimpse of the fallen monster. There was almost no one who laughed away Steve's claim as mere fantasy thanks to the "battle of the titans" that Sol and Luna had performed in the skies above the city. Countless beams of light had sliced through the night, only to be swept away by a massive beam. Right after that, divine punishment had descended in the form of a pillar of light that had blasted away all clouds in the sky but been thwarted by an invisible barrier before fizzling away. Countless people had watched the entire proceeding from start to finish with their jaws slack and eyes turned heavenward.

Everyone was convinced beyond the eloquence of a thousand words that what had happened last night was a clash between extraordinary beings on the level of what was described in myths and legends. Steve had then provided the explanation that a gigantic monster had suddenly attacked the city but was repelled by a clan that had accepted an emergency mission issued by the Adventurer's Guild.

When he next announced that the same clan had set off with the goal of unsealing Taboo Novem, the city was swept up in

excitement. Expectations rose even higher when word got out that the unsealing mission was by royal decree delivered by the first princess, who had entered the city incognito. Now people knew that the mission wasn't a reckless gamble but an attempt with sufficient prospects of success.

Part of the optimism was because people had no agency other than to be optimistic, but the fact that not a single person had died because of the engagement last night greatly amplified the hope in the air. The truth of what was happening didn't matter anymore. Steve, who spoke as a member of the Adventurer's Guild brass, had provided the masses with what was akin to the preface of one of those epic tales they loved so much. And then the clan in question had actually met everyone's expectations and was now returning in triumph.

"I don't see anyone protesting about this being the first time Garlaige has opened its main gate," Steve noted.

"Well, of course!" replied one of the younger members of the guild's staff enthusiastically. "If we're under the protection of someone capable of defeating Kuzuryuu, this city is the safest place on earth even without all our walls and gates! No foreign army or monster stampede could ever take us down!"

This conversation between a boss who finally had a moment to breathe and a subordinate who was making no effort to hide his excitement was a good representation of the thoughts of Garlaige's citizens at the moment.

The only thing we have to fear now is the champion who pulled off this incredible feat, but for some reason, the thought of their heroes turning against them never crosses people's minds even though they know humans kill one another in wars.

This was a very natural concern to raise, but Steve merely sighed instead of voicing it because he understood that it was a baseless fear. Even if he brought it up like a smart aleck, the city's walls and gates wouldn't be of any help whatsoever in such circumstances. In other words, those who weren't monsters had no choice but to blindly believe that their champions would stay on their side. Most importantly, Steve had a pretty good read on the personality of this particular champion. If not, he would certainly have moved much more cautiously.

Of course, everyone was busy being swept up in the excitement at the moment and had no time for such deliberations. Sol being able to defeat Kuzuryuu, the most

powerful of all the taboo territory bosses in Garlaige's vicinity, meant it was just a matter of time before he killed the others too. Even a child could understand that doing so would generate a staggering amount of wealth. Garlaige, which owed much of its prosperity to its position on the outer frontier of Emelia, was going to become the epicenter of a massive development boom. That alone would move astronomical sums of money, but if the entire massive and very fertile zone was to completely fall under human control, this city could easily become *the* economic center of the continent. Even if all other territories were to be unsealed later, Garlaige was guaranteed to remain a cynosure for a long time to come.

Everyone watching Kuzuryuu being carted into the city knew without a doubt that this vision of the future was no mere flight of fancy. This was why the city was enveloped in revelry. Steve and Frederica had arranged, through the Adventurer's Guild and the government-general respectively, for alcohol to be served free of charge. Eagle-eyed merchants who had sensed the approaching festivities had set up stalls in no time at all, making the celebration far more extravagant than any national holiday. Countless petals were scattered from the tall city walls, and bells filled the air with gentle yet unceasing sound.

Amid the commotion, Kuzuryuu's form was slowly carried to the central plaza on several enormous carts tied together, so massive and awe-inspiring that one had to see it in person to believe it. That it had been killed at all was already astonishing enough, but the people would have been even more astonished if they had known how its corpse had been carried all this way. The porters who had gathered outside the city gate and were currently doing their best to pull the carts had already been forced to live through the experience.

The original request from the Adventurer's Guild had been for them to go all the way to Taboo Novem to pick up the body. They had been doubtful that Kuzuryuu could actually be killed, but they knew that should it prove true, they would have to divide it up on the spot into transportable chunks. The process would normally have taken who knew how many days, but suddenly, they had been given updated orders to simply stand by in front of the main gate. Even Steve had thought he'd misunderstood. So when the corpse had suddenly appeared in front of him in its full glory, his knees had practically given way.

“Exactly what trick did our great champion use *this* time, I wonder?” Steve, who was on the city wall and watching Kuzuryuu being carted in, still had no idea how Sol had managed it. He had simply done as asked upon receiving word.

The “trick” was simple: Sol had used Storage, a new ability that he had obtained after passing Level 100. At the moment, only his companions knew about it. They, along with the porters who had seen Kuzuryuu’s unwounded yet very much dead body up close, had already forced themselves to accept the situation by reminding themselves that there was no point in being surprised by anything pulled off by someone who could kill Kuzuryuu.

The very person who was driving everyone crazy with his shenanigans, Sol, was currently sitting uncomfortably on the luxurious stage pulled by several white horses at the head of the procession. On his left stood Frederica while on his right stood Reen and Julia. Luna was hiding in his long coat, giving people an “Ah, there’s a child!” impression but otherwise not drawing much attention.

Many people knew Sol by face, and they were stunned to learn that the champion who had unsealed a taboo territory was “the deadweight of Black Tiger.” Much more surprising, however, were the beauties who were clearly being deferential to him. Reen and Julia were famous, but no one blinked an eye at them being with Sol anymore. In fact, a small minority even actively propagated the rumor that the reason he had never been expelled from Black Tiger despite being baggage to the party for so long was that his talent gave him the ability to make girls fall hopelessly in love with him. Reen actually wished that this was the case, but that was a secret only Julia knew.

The girl smiling gracefully on Sol’s left, however, was another story altogether. In terms of beauty alone, she was every bit Reen and Julia’s equal and perhaps only slightly inferior to the young therianthrope girl who was currently half hidden. She had also gone to the trouble of changing outfits, making it clear even to citizens who had never seen her before that she was the first princess. After all, in Emelia, the only people allowed to wear the golden tiara with a laurel design were the female members of the royal family.

“Long live Princess Frederica!”

This cheer was repeated again and again, as common citizens were normally forbidden to speak the names of royalty. This way

of calling out was an exception. The woman who was smiling and waving her hand in response simply had to be Princess Frederica. That was how citizens unfamiliar with her face knew who she was and therefore caused an even bigger commotion.

“Who the hell was it who called Sol ‘nothing more than deadweight’ to Black Tiger?!”

“You, idiot! And me.”

On the other hand, the adventurers who had seen Sol as a fox borrowing the authority of a tiger now realized how foolish they had been. They had said things out of jealousy, even in Reen’s and Julia’s presence, but they knew a real princess wasn’t someone who could be moved by mere romance. In fact, anything improper that they said about her could get them in very hot water.

Above all, they understood better than anyone how incredible the feat of defeating Kuzuryuu was. If the monster that could do such a thing was subservient to Sol, then he truly held absolute power, no matter what form it was in. The logic that Luna had laid out to Alan at the Adventurer’s Guild made a lot of sense to other adventurers.

Since the days of yore, people had always loved romance stories between a commoner who accomplished some great feat and a princess. When the guy was someone incredible enough to kill Kuzuryuu and unseal a taboo territory, there was no place for cheap jealousy or self-claimed patriots or “learned men” to take issue with the great class difference. Everyone instinctively understood that keeping an individual as powerful as Sol bound and making sure that he did not turn around and become an enemy was very much within the duties expected of their rulers.

As a result, everyone blessed the pair from the bottom of their hearts. They grabbed as many of the free petals as they could and fought to shower Sol and Frederica with them, earnestly wishing that the two would enter the kind of relationship such a scene implied. Frederica took on all those expectations with a bright smile, whereas Sol just looked confused about what was happening, Reen seemed about to blow a gasket from picking up on the mood, and Julia watched her with amusement. Luna was feeling a little anxious because of the crowds but at the same time excited about seeing the countless beautiful petals falling like rain.

Unfortunately, there was one person standing in the way of

this parade that seemed lifted from the last page of a fairy tale.

"Princess Frederica, this is unforgivable behavior. To involve yourself with this sacrilegious commotion is to imply that the Kingdom of Emelia supports the heretical act that has taken place. Do you not understand that?!" The speaker wore clerical vestments in red that denoted his station and held a crosier in his left hand. He was the cardinal at the head of the Holy Church archdiocese that Garlaige was a part of.

"Cardinal Ishli." This was someone even Frederica had to kneel and bow her head to. And he had come to make a display of his authority before the masses by condemning their feat of trespassing upon and unsealing a taboo territory without permission from the Holy Church.

Cardinal Ishli Duress was a middle-aged man with a face that suited a cold expression and a bloated body that befitted his station as a high-ranking cleric. The Church taught honor in poverty, but the only people who actually lived by it were those at the front lines of the faith who ran local churches in destitute villages and towns. Almost all high-ranking clerics in the Holy Capital and the cities where archdioceses were seated had gotten used to living in luxury as a matter of course. It had been a long, long time since someone called this out as scandalous.

Ishli was the perfect example. He looked down on Frederica, who was kneeling and bowing with an elegance that befit her identity as royalty of a major country, with satisfaction and an attitude like he was the one doing her a favor by giving her the opportunity to make an excuse for her country. In this world, high-ranking clerics held as much authority as kings. Because of this, Frederica had to show respect to cardinals and the pope despite being a princess herself.

Ishli was a very ambitious man, but ambition alone wasn't enough to propel him up the ladder. That said, he was the talented sort often found at the top of organizations, which meant that he was competent enough to be a cardinal overseeing a diocese.

I thought Garlaige would just be a stepping stone for me to become the pope, but...

Naturally, one couldn't reach the highest seat of the Church just by being more pious than anyone else. No, a certain amount of worldly effort was needed as well. While obtaining more and more power both openly and in the shadows, Ishli had been

hard at work making connections with influential people to increase the number of those who would benefit from his becoming pope.

Fortune smiles on me. I will draw out all the funds that I need to become pope from Emelia.

The current incident, in Ishli's eyes, was a prime opportunity to earn a massive amount of money. Like everyone else, he could tell that the unsealing of a taboo territory was going to bring in a colossal amount of profit. The more fertile land that humans controlled, the greater the population that they could sustain. More people meant more believers and more donations. If society truly recovered to the scale of Era Gran Magica as described in myths, the gains that stood to be reaped were unfathomable. There was no doubt that it would be something that could only be described as "vast."

If this was true, there wasn't a single reason it should be stopped. Ultimately, the Church's greatest challenge would be to ride this wave in such a way that it could maintain its authority while profiting from it as much as possible. In other words, starting off on the right foot was crucial.

In any case, there is no denying that these adventurers have broken the taboo as it is currently defined. Regardless of how much profit their actions might eventually bring about, they cannot hope to avoid being censured as apostates from the Church's point of view. And I highly doubt Emelia is willing to openly defy the Church at this point in time.

If Ishli could use his authority to waive the apostate charges and consequently assume the role of local spokesperson for the Holy Capital of Adrateio, he would gain the power to wring Emelia for money as much as he wanted. This was the right way to use religious authority.

As for these adventurers, I can just butter them up by calling them names like "champion" and "God's apostle." I'm sure if I mention that I will petition Adrateio to give them the title of Hero, they would wag their tails at me.

To make all this happen, Ishli's plan was to start by scaring the socks off of the adventurers in question by threatening to brand them as apostates. That way, they would be much more malleable. The key to disciplining animals was the very first step, and thankfully, Ishli possessed the authority to decide whether to subject them to an inquisition or let them off the hook.

He was honestly impressed by how the Emelian royal family had managed to get first dibs on an adventurer capable of such greatness. Even so, he considered it the luckiest break of his life that he happened to be the head of the Garlaige diocese at this time.

I know I should be thanking God, being a cardinal and all, but I've honestly never met Him.

Of course, the qualifier "yet" applied here. In other words, he had yet to be given permission to make direct contact with the Old Rulers, being *only* a cardinal overseeing an area in the boondocks. As such, he had no idea that the pope, who was in Adrateio, was already making moves.

"Dispense with the pleasantries and answer my question, Princess."

"Of course. As you wish, Cardinal Ishli."

Unfortunately for Ishli, he had completely misread the situation. With a brilliant smile, Frederica proceeded to tell him that this trespass and unsealing of a taboo territory was entirely under Emelia's initiative.

"What?"

Although his ears were picking up the words, they were not making sense in Ishli's brain. Frederica was showing no deference whatsoever toward the Church in what she was saying. In fact, it seemed she would speak with impunity and challenge the pope to brand her an apostate even if she were in Adrateio and standing directly before His Excellency.

At the moment, what Frederica considered the greatest taboo was showing not so much her country's weakness as her own personal weakness here, where Sol was watching. In comparison to that, being designated an enemy of God himself was not even worthy of concern.

It was to be noted that no matter how enraged Ishli became here, a mere cardinal would have nearly no say in how this whole matter played out. Given that, Frederica's top priority now was to convince the gathered masses that what the Libertadores had done was *not* against God's will rather than to butter Ishli up.

"The unsealing of Taboo Novem and the precondition of killing Kuzuryuu was a miracle requested by me, First Princess of the Kingdom of Emelia, Frederica tul la Emelia, and officially undertaken by the adventurer Lord Sol Rock."

Seeing that Ishli was at a loss for words, Frederica doubled

down while flashing her biggest smile—something she rarely employed even at evening balls and social events. She theatrically laced her fingers together and adopted the face of a maiden expressing her gratitude to God for a miracle.

Her choice to not stand at the forefront of this parade made it clear to all that she, the first princess of this country, acknowledged Sol as someone above her in status. The intentional use of the word “miracle” was a brilliant touch. Upon hearing it, the idea of her being an apostate was practically banished from the minds of the crowds listening to this exchange with bated breath.

“You dare invoke the word ‘miracle’ with abandon?”

Despite realizing what Frederica was doing, that was all Ishli could offer in protest. It was actually a fair point, because only the Prodigium—or, as it was sometimes called, the Miracle Commission—in Adrateio had the authority to determine whether an incident was a miracle or not. To claim the word in vain was a heavy transgression that could, in the worst case, get someone branded a heretic.

Of course, Frederica had purposely used the word while knowing all this. “God designated the territories as taboo because man could never defeat the bosses within. Now that one such boss has been defeated and the territory unsealed, what can it be but a miracle? If this feat is not a miracle, does that mean the designation of taboo was a falsehood?”

The way Frederica cutely tilted her head made her look like an innocent girl trying to work out something incomprehensible that she had heard. Regardless of the Prodigium’s ruling, something that every last man could only consider a miracle had occurred. To think otherwise was impossible when looking at the body behind the kneeling princess, so massive that one would be hard-pressed to think of it as a monster.

There was no answer Ishli could offer to the question of what this feat was to be called if not a miracle. He couldn’t rashly insist that there was no way it would be accepted as one in case the Prodigium did indeed designate it as such later. In fact, chances were high that it *would* be designated one, especially since the first princess of a major nation was involved.

Put simply, Ishli had started off with the wrong move. Instead of hitting hard and fast right off the bat to gain an advantageous footing, he should have offered to smooth things along to make

this feat acknowledged as a miracle so that he could then walk with Sol's group as a cooperator. Alas, it was too late.

"The sheer impudence..."

Frederica's incredible beauty only made Ishli feel all the more like he was being played with by a sly vixen. In spite of Frederica's status, his own status, the fact that they were in public and before a crowd, and the fact that he was the one who had started this conversation with words of condemnation, he was a hair's breadth away from erupting.

With his insults to the princess of Emelia, Ishli had stretched the relationship between the Holy Church and a major nation to the brink of irreparable damage. Sol gave Luna's back a soft pat, and she instantly understood what he wanted.

"Hah!" she scoffed. "What does a religion peddler whose only job is to make people believe in an absent God have left when he loses an argument?"

Ishli paused for a brief moment. "You are being disrespectful, therianthrope child. No one gave you permission to speak."

Luna's comment was disparaging, but there was almost no sting in it because it came from an adorable little girl. Because of that, regardless of Ishli's sharp words, his tone naturally assumed that of an adult chiding a cheeky child. A man would take offense at being insulted by a beautiful woman, but an adult would feel tickled instead of angry when getting lip from a cute child. Making Luna get involved had successfully helped to protect his public image.

Ishli was a calculating man who was also a little thoughtless, but based on the adult and child dynamic that he had assumed with Luna, it could be inferred that he was not unduly prejudiced against demihumans. What's more, he clearly had not been informed about the truth of last night's commotion. He was capable enough to climb to the status of cardinal, and he was suitably greedy, seeing as he had made an appearance anyway. Piety and fanaticism were most definitely one part of his character. He was basically a merchant selling God as a product —or, as Luna called him, a "religion peddler." In short, he could be won over with a sweet enough deal.

"Disrespectful? Permission?"

Unfortunately, Luna had a tendency to forget that she had the appearance of a young girl. She took being treated like a child by a mere human who had only lived a few decades as an affront

and was about to force Ishli to understand what it meant to stand in front of a millenia-old dragon when Sol cut in.

“Ah, I did, actually. I gave her permission. I told her to say whatever is on her mind.”

“And you are?”

“I’m Sol Rock. It was Luna here who actually killed Kuzuryuu, but I’m her master.”

Sol patted Luna’s head while wryly musing about how she was probably the most prejudiced against and most disdainful of other races of everyone present. Almost immediately, she calmed down and her tail started wagging. In fact, she was so happy hearing Sol declare himself her master that she puffed out her chest more than she ever had and proudly crossed her arms.

When Sol lived out his lifespan and died, Luna would continue living on for much, much longer—that was the natural order of things for a dragon. Sol chuckled a little as he realized that he needed to start thinking about how to keep her in check even after he was gone.

In any case, it was time for him to take over the negotiation. He had a pretty good read on Frederica’s position and intention based on the dialogue so far. Simply put, the people hated *God’s* enemies on an instinctual level, but that did not automatically translate to hating *the Church’s* enemies. The God that they wholeheartedly believed in was an absolute ally of humanity, but not a guardian for vested interest groups. If Sol exploited this distinction well, he could remain a devout believer in the people’s eyes while standing in opposition to the Holy Church. Instead of crushing the Church, he would be splitting it into two, carving out a new faction aligned with his interests. Put simply, it would be a New Holy Church. The side that he didn’t need could be wiped out later at his leisure. Doing so would only affect those who were selling God as a product and not the faithful laymen.

“So you are the ringleader of these apostates.”

Frederica was obviously paying constant attention to this man’s mood and propping him up, which made it clear to Ishli that this boy was the reason for the defiant attitude she had shown him. He could somehow even sense that she wasn’t doing it merely because she thought this boy a powerful player and wanted to curry favor with him. It was more accurate to say that she considered his power absolute and was afraid of losing his

trust.

Sol was also being attended to by “Saint of Healing” Julia, from whom the Church had requested help with healing on multiple occasions, and “Iron Wall” Reen, whose name Ishli himself recognized as that of a high-ranking adventurer.

Last but certainly not least, the strange therianthrope girl whom Sol introduced as the one who had killed Kuzuryuu was obviously so attached to him as to be entirely obedient. The way Sol was bringing around all these beauties made him seem like one of the harem protagonists often featured in fictional stories, but what he had achieved far outstripped anything attributed to any imagined character. Ishli now understood how big a mistake it had been hitting someone so powerful with scripture right off the bat.

Since he couldn’t immediately start groveling, he opted instead to switch from his natural attitude to that of a cleric while maintaining the harsh tone appropriate for speaking to an apostate. He hadn’t risen to the position of cardinal merely by happenstance. Due to his advance, he had gained a penchant for the high life and obtained a physical figure highly inappropriate for a man of the cloth, but that did not mean he had gone senile and lost his ability to act as his station demanded.

Despite appearances, Ishli had been a good-looking cleric with a stellar reputation when he was young. The attitude, gestures, and voice that had been best received by people had seeped into his very bones, almost like an occupational disease. That was extremely useful in a situation like this, where even if the person he was negotiating with saw through his act, it didn’t matter as long as he successfully convinced the spectators.

The fact that Sol had stepped out to speak directly, as opposed to letting Frederica carry the conversation to the very end, meant he definitely had something in mind. Ishli fervently prayed it wasn’t a sadistic urge to publicly stomp an arrogant clergyman who didn’t know his place into the ground.

“How strange. Are we apostates?” Thankfully, Sol’s tone was calm and amicable, even though Ishli had called him “no one” and condemned him. That indicated he wasn’t the kind of person who got drunk on his own power and instantly turned cruel and violent.

“You entered a land that the Holy Church—no, that God Himself designated taboo territory and killed the boss there, all

without permission. What else would that make you if not an apostate?” Ishli said in an equally calm tone and with a surprised expression while inwardly thanking God that he still had room to make a recovery.

“Why was it deemed taboo?”

“Well, that’s…”



Ishli made it seem like he had gotten tongue-tied but understood that Sol was helping to pull him out of the hole he had dug himself. The man who had been accused of apostasy by the pious cardinal wasn't trying to trample God's authority underfoot but earnestly trying to resolve what had surely been a misunderstanding. That being the case, Ishli could make it seem like his outburst at the outset was the righteous anger of a pious believer who had been too quick to jump to conclusions.

To make this happen, he and Sol needed to work together. Being in step was important for ballroom dancing, for acting, and of course, for farces too. Talking over Sol's lines was absolutely out of the question because Ishli needed to give the impression that while he was pious, he also was magnanimous and openhearted. At this point, the real Ishli's personality was no longer a factor.

"It is absolutely impossible to kill taboo territory bosses, and rash attempts to do so could easily bring about the end of the world. To prevent a repeat of the tragedy inflicted by Country Eater two hundred years ago, humans have to live holding their breath. This is why God designated certain territories as taboo and made it an inviolable law. Am I right so far?"

"You…are. So far."

What Ishli had to do now was let Sol say whatever he wanted and, short of anything too ridiculous, agree with everything.

"And yet, I killed one."

I see.

Picking up on where Sol wanted to direct the conversation and the flow of logic that he wanted the listening masses to hear, Ishli determined that this wasn't the time to talk and therefore held his tongue. At the same time, he allowed a hint of comprehension into his doubtful expression.

"Soon, we will unseal *all* territories in Garlaige's vicinity, including the eight remaining taboo ones. Then we will travel around the continent, unsealing territories that other countries want our help with."

This was what the crowd wanted to hear most. The good news that their princess had gone so far as to call a miracle would be spread to the rest of the continent where people still lived in fear of monsters. While they had first made a commotion upon hearing the sudden condemnation of Sol's group as apostates, then watched the proceedings unfold with bated

breath, they now exploded into cheering and celebration.

And who could fault them? The continent would be freed from the constant threat of monsters and all the fertile lands, including those filled with resources that had been denied them, would soon fall into their hands. All tragedies, from people dying of hunger and villages being wiped out in a night to countries being trampled by bosses, would be relegated to the past. Every human rejoiced.

At this moment, everyone present became staunch allies of Sol Rock and his party. Not because of their beliefs or because they were moved, but because of how filthy rich he was going to make them.

When the exuberant cheering finally settled a little, Sol continued, “And let me remind you, I accomplished what I did only thanks to the talent that God bestowed upon me on the first day of my twelfth year. I believe He was speaking to me. Not with words, but with power.”

In short, Sol was reassuring everyone who had chosen to stand with him for materialistic gain that drowning themselves in greed did not go against God’s will.

“He told me to use this power to return all land under the sky to our hands!”

Where did this youngster learn how to pull off a performance like this? As someone who was a schemer himself, Ishli couldn’t help but to be impressed. By purposely using theatrical language, Sol was brazenly impressing upon the people that he was an envoy of God, a beloved child sent to the world of man. This was a claim that would normally be laughed away as blind arrogance, but with Sol standing in front of the dead body of Kuzuryuu, it sounded like glad tidings proclaimed on high.

The way Sol shamelessly made it sound like he was doing everything for the people’s sake was insidious. It was hard to say that he didn’t have their welfare in mind at all, but his desire to unseal all territories and conquer all dungeons was primarily driven by his inquisitive mind and the heart that he had for adventure.

The stark difference from the Sol they knew first made Reen’s and Julia’s jaws drop, but they couldn’t help but give him the side-eye for the dramatic performance that made it seem like he really was someone beloved by God. Luna was genuinely impressed, whereas Frederica was simply noting that he knew

how to be guileful too.

“Will the Holy Church really stand in my way? Is what I’m doing truly apostasy?”

Sol was on a roll. Ishli’s continued silence made it clear that he understood what Sol was trying to do and was willing to play along to help him generate the greatest possible impact. Ishli’s failure to understand the unselfish and noble goals of the divine envoy shouldn’t be met with anger, but long-suffering patience.

“If it is, then what need does God have for Cardinal Ishli to speak for Him when He can simply strike me down with Divine Punishment?!”

By saying this, Sol now had his claim anchored to something real. The most famous of miracles under the Church’s purview was the Divine Punishment he had just mentioned. Everyone born on this continent knew of it, and not just as something from myths and legends. Although it had yet to obliterate Country Eater, countless people had personally witnessed it killing large monsters that had gotten out of hand. Once, it had even fallen smack-dab in the middle of the army of a foolish country that had declared war on another when it was time for humanity to stand together, thoroughly breaking the soldiers’ spirits. There was no way for Ishli to know this in light of his position, but Sol’s argument wasn’t all that far from the truth. The Church’s true duty was to maintain the world’s status quo, and it was more than willing to use its lost technology on anything and anyone who got in the way of that, human or otherwise.

“Last night, we slew a demon that had snuck into the city.” Many residents of Garlaige had seen Divine Punishment falling from the sky the night prior. “During the fight, God showed us His favor by using Divine Punishment for our sake. That is the biggest reason I decided to attempt unsealing Taboo Novem today.”

The truth was entirely different, of course. Divine Punishment had attempted to eliminate Sol and Luna last night, but Luna’s barrier had blocked it handily and she had retaliated by shooting down its precious source. Sol was nothing short of audacious to loudly proclaim that it had been fired for his own sake.

Even Luna was a bit surprised. However, for the masses who had no way of knowing the details of what had happened, his words were the only account they heard and therefore rang true.

Dead men tell no tales. The one who lived to stand here today was the one who decided the truth.

"If what I did really is against God's will, I am willing to be judged with Divine Punishment right here, right now!" To really sell the performance, Sol made sure to profess his willingness to accept God's will, with a dramatic gesture to boot. "Of course, it'll probably end the same way," he added in a voice soft enough only to be heard by Ishli.

If Divine Punishment really fell, it would be blocked by Luna just as easily as the first time. And all it would achieve was to end this farce and prompt him to squash the Church.

"Oh, I'm sure," Ishli replied just as softly.

Their little exchange let the two know that their opinions were largely aligned. Being a cardinal, Ishli at least knew how Divine Punishment worked even though he had never been directly involved with it. If he had known beforehand that it had been aimed at Sol last night to no avail, he would have initiated today's conversation in a more appropriate manner. Perhaps the Holy City had purposely not told him out of concern that he would be coaxed into joining Sol's side.

"As you all bore witness, I was not judged. Cardinal, is this not sufficient proof that I am not an apostate?"

"Hmm, I cannot deny it. The Holy Church is a friend to all who bear God's will and provides full support to those He works through. Lord Sol, I was wrong to hastily condemn you as an apostate. Princess Frederica, I treated you with disrespect out of ignorance, and I apologize for that too."

Sure enough, Ishli *was* coaxed into joining Sol's side. Since Sol saw enough value in him to use him, Ishli decided that he would cooperate fully. If the man with absolute strength who could unseal a taboo territory without blinking an eye wanted God's authority, then it was Ishli's duty to give it to him.

This path would benefit Ishli the most, and if things went well, chances were high that he had just gotten much closer to becoming pope. If it didn't suit him, he could simply get rid of the existing hierarchy and build one that met his needs from the ground up. Being allied with Sol should give him the power to do so with ease.

So it was practically predetermined that Cardinal Ishli bowed his head in apology in front of the crowds and, as they fervently hoped, granted the legitimacy of God to the champion who had

appeared like a clap of lightning.

“God is benevolent, and I am one who seeks to learn from Him,” said Sol.

“Since you say so, Lord Sol, I am also happy to let bygones be bygones.”

“I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Cardinal.”

With this, the farce was over. With the power that enabled Sol to unseal a taboo territory as a base, he had gained overwhelming support from the residents of Garlaige, then even been acknowledged as an emissary of God by the Holy Church, albeit from a minor diocese. The Church had never been a monolith, but this was the moment when it unequivocally split into old and new.

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“This makes no sense… Why is Sol there…and not me?!”

Close to the central square in Garlaige, which was currently enveloped in ardent cheering and rejoicing, Mark, former leader of Black Tiger and Sol’s childhood friend, was pacing restlessly with a pale face and muttering incoherently to himself.

“It has to be a lie. Sol can’t be… I… I’m…”

The crowds were making a commotion because the beautiful girl standing next to Sol—besides Reen and Julia, who had been in their original party, and Luna, the therianthrope who had thrust some of Hecatoncheires’s finest into hell—was none other than Frederica tul la Emelia.

The reason Mark had wanted so badly to join the royal army upon reaching Rank A was that he had thought, with his youth and extraordinary fighting ability, he would make it into the royal guard and eventually catch Frederica’s eye and be accepted into the royal family. He had laughed off his own dream as mere fantasy, but deep inside, he’d seriously thought he had a chance. That was why he’d wanted the rest of Black Tiger to join the royal guard too—to make him look good.

Alan was the only one who could have proved an obstacle, but he had always backed Mark up on everything since they were young, so Mark had thoughtlessly assumed Alan would do so again. When they had clashed over what to do with Black Tiger, however, everything had started falling apart. The party had broken up, Mark’s acceptance to the royal guard had been

rescinded, and he hadn't heard a peep from Alan the whole day.

In contrast, Sol, who had been discarded like trash and was meant to slink back to the sticks, was now being waited on hand and foot by their two beautiful childhood friends, an adorable girl with unbelievable fighting strength, and above all, the very princess Mark pined for. Not only that, but the Holy Church had even acknowledged Sol as a divine envoy. He had obtained everything that Mark had ever dreamed of and more, all in the span of a day, and was now smiling boastfully.

"It's a lie. It's all a lie. This is a bad dream. I need to wake up. Ha ha. Ha ha ha."

Still mumbling, Mark started lurching toward the outer wall. He turned his back on the central plaza bursting with light and joy and hope and, on his own two feet, headed farther and farther into the yawning abyss before him.

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Upon settling into seats at the tavern in the Adventurer's Guild lobby, Reen said, "I never knew you could do something like that, Sol."

"Talk about surprising," Julia agreed.

Naturally, the group didn't have the place to themselves. There were plenty of other adventurers in the seats nearby, busy eating and drinking with their own groups. Or at least, that was what they were pretending to do, right after a fierce scramble to get the tables closest to Sol's so they could eavesdrop on his party's conversation as much as possible.

Needless to say, Reen and Julia were referring to the farce carried out by Sol and Cardinal Ishli during their parade to the central square this afternoon.

Sol grinned proudly. "Hey, don't underestimate me. A performance like that is a piece of cake for me. Ever since childhood, I've been fantasizing about how I could gain access to all the world's territories and dungeons if I became super powerful."

Julia was sitting across from Sol, Reen was on his right, and Luna was on his lap. Frederica, who had shrewdly nabbed the seat on his left, giggled at how proud Sol was of his explanation. She was still decked out in her princess outfit and ornaments, but instead of summoning Sol to the VIP room prepared for her

by the local governor, she had followed him to the local guild tavern as if it was the natural thing to do.

The tavern normally had at least a few empty tables, but it was now packed beyond capacity. Most of the patrons were male adventurers trying to catch a glimpse of Frederica's renowned beauty from up close. The sight of a princess devotedly serving a man and keeping his cup topped up wasn't something that could be witnessed any day.

"Here you go, Lord Sol."

"I demand meat."

What Frederica was doing sounded like the job of a servant, but she was acting more like a woman doting on the man she loved. What's more, when the therianthrope girl sitting on Sol's lap asked for something, she immediately cut it up into bite-sized pieces and fed it to her. The onlookers were so astonished they were left dumbstruck.

One of Frederica's goals was to impress upon people how extraordinary Sol was by demonstrating how she, a princess of Emelia, was so subservient to him. That was much easier to achieve here at the guild tavern than inside a private room.

"I guess you have always been like that," Julia sighed. "Even since our Academy days."

"Do you remember the notebook he treated like his biggest treasure?" Reen chuckled. "The one where he wrote down all his strategies for conquering dungeons?"

The pair laughed as they reminisced. The shocked look of "How do you know about that?!" on Sol's face was so amusing that Luna and Frederica also started laughing.

Honestly, the blatant way in which Frederica was expressing her affection for Sol was making Reen jealous. She was at a complete disadvantage when it came to such wiles and therefore had no way to compete. The effort that Frederica was making to still include Reen and prioritize her was actually intensifying the impatience in Reen's chest.

Frederica had no intention of contending with Reen or Julia. It would be a different story if they had been royals from other countries, but she was happy enough being number four after Reen, Julia, and Luna. The only thing that mattered was that Sol saw her in *that* way. She had already resolved herself, both as a woman and as a princess. If Sol ever said "Come to my room tonight," she would comply without a moment's hesitation. In

light of this, the impatience that Reen was feeling was by no means unfounded.

Unfortunately for the both of them, the first person in Sol's heart right now was obviously Luna, who was entirely oblivious to all such considerations. In fact, she was just stuffing her face from her seat on his lap, chortling happily while surrounded by the beauties who were technically her rivals in love.

Julia looked at Luna. "Still, unmatched strength, huh?"

"She doesn't look it, I confess," said Frederica.

"Right?" Reen agreed.

The purported avatar of unparalleled strength was happily drinking fruit juice on Sol's lap. Her cup kept getting topped up from a large decanter, so much so that Sol was starting to worry a little that she might leak on him. Even so, he couldn't find it in himself to stop her from enjoying her food and drink—not when he knew that she had been denied them for the past thousand years.

In any case, as Reen, Julia, and Frederica said, in terms of appearance alone, Luna truly was but an adorable therianthrope girl with tanned skin. It was a tall order associating her with Lunvemt Nachtfelia, the Evil Dragon possessing the unparalleled strength that could realize Sol's fantasies. That said, it had been her and no other who had taken down Kuzuryuu and unsealed Taboo Novem, which had in turn persuaded the Holy Church to get on board with Sol's plans.

Steve was absent from this gathering because he was swamped, making arrangements with headquarters for Kuzuryuu's body and the newly unsealed territory. Similarly, Gawain had been practically chained to the central plaza after receiving the right to oversee the entire operation to dismantle Kuzuryuu from Sol. He was undoubtedly going to pull a few consecutive all-nighters working himself to the bone with the biggest smile ever on his face the whole time.

As if to correct a misconception, Luna spoke up. "I'm not unmatched. There are still opponents who can beat me. For example, in the depths of each labyrinth and at the very top of the Tower above the clouds. I still need my lord to train me more and more."

"Ugh, I'm dying to know, but I don't want to hear it!" Reen groaned.

"No spoilers!" Julia cried.

The details that the All Dragon had dropped so casually sounded like very big hints. However, Reen and Julia knew full well that there were things they were better off not knowing. Although there was a smidge of morbid curiosity in them, their knee-jerk reactions were to turtle up. They very much didn't want to know anything about enemies that Luna, who had killed Kuzuryuu with a single blow, couldn't defeat without getting even stronger. At least, not for now.

Sol, too, was afraid that hearing this information would sap him of his motivation as he was doing his best to equip himself to start chasing his dream. So he put a finger to his lips as if asking for silence.

Luna said, "Okaaay" in a drawl and copied his gesture in a cute way, but Sol had faith that when she determined he needed to know something, she would tell him and include the reason as well. At the end of the day, she still was the All Dragon. Living thousands of years had given her far more knowledge and insight than the greatest human sage.

"Lord Sol, may I ask what plan of action you have worked out in your mind?" Although Frederica had a general idea of what he was planning, she wanted to know the specifics, as the slightest discrepancy could be fatal. What he laughed away as mere wild fancy was oftentimes pragmatic enough to make her worry.

"Well, Luna's with me, and I also have Aina'noa secured, though her curses have yet to be fully lifted. It seems likely the elves will join my cause."

"Mm-hm."

Since Sol was willing to lay everything out clearly, her role was to simply listen. "Given that, I'm sure that I—or rather, Libertadores—can accrue enough strength to handily unseal any territory, including the taboo ones, and conquer all four Great Labyrinths and all other dungeons using brute force."

I hope my smile didn't slip...

The seemingly innocent look that Luna shot Frederica seemed to see right through her, making the hair on the back of her head stand up. It took everything she had to maintain her composure. The implication of Sol's words was that he wouldn't hesitate to use violence to eliminate any enemy element that he got tired of trying to deal with—that it was in fact something to be expected. And it was clear to all that he was not merely full of himself or delusional. Frederica herself fully understood this, and she

commiserated with the adventurers within earshot who had inadvertently spat out what they were drinking.

“However, I would like to avoid resorting to that if possible.”

Relief washed over Frederica and the several adventurers who now had drinks dribbling from their lips. Even though they knew Sol was joking and were quite sure he wouldn’t do it, the fact that he did indeed have the strength to physically eliminate anyone and anything in his way lent his words extra weight.

What Frederica found most frightening was that when she heard him, she felt not only fear but also a twinge of attraction spiked with immorality.

“Is that because you want to obtain all the cards you need to conquer dungeons with as little fuss as possible?” Frederica marshaled her mental faculties and made an effort to appeal to Sol to show that she understood his thinking process. She had to be at least that capable if she wanted to stay by his side.

Sol had told the elves that he planned to create a party of all the monsters featured in the Kuzuifabra. Now, he already had Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon and Aina’noa la Avalil the Elven Queen. That left three: the Lifeless Divine Beast, the Vacant Demon Lord, and the Cursed Hero. It was safe to assume that they weren’t going to fall into his hands as conveniently as Aina’noa had.

“Mm-hm. I’m going to need everything that each country knows. The Holy Church too, which probably knows more than all other countries combined. And they can’t tell me anything if they’re all dead.”

Confidential information was what Sol prized most at the moment. As entities that greatly surpassed human lifespans, countries and organizations had written records that they had built up and passed down through the ages. Sol was hoping that in their pages would lie clues that led to other characters from legend. The Evil Dragon and the Elven Queen weren’t going to be of much help in this aspect, since they had been locked away a thousand years ago.

“I don’t think you have to worry much about members of the Panhuman League adopting a hostile stance toward you, Lord Sol.”

Sol shook his head. “I’m pretty sure that would depend on the Holy Church. If we openly pit ourselves against them, we will get many more countries and people turning against us than we

expect.”

“That…I cannot deny.”

It was true that the majority of commoners saw the distinction between hating God’s enemies and the Church’s enemies. However, Sol was of the opinion that the effect of religion on the people over a thousand years was not to be underestimated, and Frederica agreed. Sometimes, piety, blind belief, and fanaticism motivated people to take action that went against self-interest and morality. Anyone who had studied history knew that fact.

It was sensible to avoid being the target of this phenomenon, which held no consideration for who was strong and who was weak, or who would win or lose. The best way to deal with such enemies was to avoid making them in the first place.

“That’s why I’ve always thought the best idea is to split the Church,” Sol explained. “The conservatives who want to preserve the status quo can be the old faction, and ours, which I guess we can call the ‘true’ faction, would be built up with flexible ideals that favor the development of human society in a way that’s convenient to us.”

Frederica’s eyes widened. Even she, a member of royalty, had never thought of that.

Sol continued. “At the top, we need someone who is capable but just the right degree of worldly. And I think Cardinal Ishli fits the role perfectly.”

He had no intention of immediately wiping out the other Church faction. If he played his cards well and avoided directly clashing with it, it could prove useful in many ways, such as being a receptacle for everyone who vehemently opposed his beliefs. He didn’t believe in religion, but he didn’t deny it either. In fact, he believed in the existence of God and saw the need to deal with Him. Of course, the god in his mind wasn’t a transcendental being who saved and guided souls, but someone possessing human emotions, a will, and powers that could only be attributed to a deity. In other words, someone in the exact same circumstances as Sol himself was right now.

It seemed realistic to infer that it was this being who had given Sol his powers. Just like with Sol and his companions, that being could probably also take Player back any time they wanted. In light of that, Sol felt the need to prepare for every contingency he could think of.

“In that case, I recommend we prioritize seizing firm control of Emelia.”

“It’d be much easier with your help. Can I count on you?”

No matter how pragmatic Frederica was, she was still a princess. It was natural for her to put her country above the rest of the world. She was bound by duty to ensure that on the off chance that Sol actually got sick of dealing with the world at large and drew lines, she and Emelia would be firmly within the group he wanted to keep.

“Of course. May I ask that you come with me?”

“I imagine that would be simplest. But before that, we’re going to the Elven Forest.”

It had been decided that Sol would seize control of Emelia, with Frederica as its core. However, ensuring that the Captive Elven Queen joined him as a companion was far higher on his list of priorities. Frederica fully accepted that.

For the ruler of the monsters, the four human superpowers and world church were nonessential objectives. Istekario, Amnesphia, and Poseinia could just as easily offer all that Emelia could. The only difference was who was standing at his side and managing what was given to him. It was sheer serendipity that Frederica had managed to land herself in that very coveted position, and such a boon could be swept away in the blink of an eye on a whim.

As things stood, chances were high that Sol would make contact with Young Emperor Fritz in dealing with the Aina’noa problem. It was fortunate that, no matter how beautiful his features, Fritz was a boy, but Frederica was not going to underestimate his ability to take advantage of the situation. At the moment, she did not yet have any way of guaranteeing that Sol wouldn’t switch to favoring Istekario over Emelia.

“By all means.” Frederica put on her biggest smile and made carrying out Sol’s will her primary objective. She had no particular desire to annihilate Istekario. Before meeting Sol, there had been a part of her that vaguely wished the county would perish so that it wouldn’t give her headaches when she assumed a position of power in the future, all while knowing it would never happen.

Now that Sol was in the picture, however, she didn’t mind if Istekario remained. She wouldn’t even mind all that much if Fritz earned Sol’s affection. All she cared about was that she herself

did too, and that Sol felt *some* attachment to her and her country.

To make that happen, it was her calm analysis that she needed to first motivate Reen, the childhood friend who carried a torch for Sol, to make the first foray into his heart, no matter how unreliable she seemed for the role. It was said that all great men had a fondness for the sensual pleasures, but there was no way to make one indulge in them if he had never had a taste.

Chapter 4: The Elven Forest

A thousand years ago, the capture of the Elven Queen had led to the elven race's Darkening and also caused the burning down of the World Tree. It was said that the remnants of both were now in a hidden village deep within the Elven Forest.

The forest itself was in the very heart of Gio Nest, the most dangerous area in the vicinity of Garlaige, which itself was a city in the middle of nowhere on the border of the Kingdom of Emelia and the Istekario Empire. To this day, neither country knew the exact location of the village in question.

Expeditionary forces had been sent multiple times, but thanks to the Holy Church, the general attitude was that elves were a demihuman race and therefore one to be shunned. As such, it had been a long time since anyone was serious about finding them.

Before that attitude took hold, however, demand for them had been high, even after they had been branded enemies of humanity and the Elven Queen had been captured. That was because, despite the Darkening, their race was extremely beautiful. And because they had been weakened by being cut off from access to outer mana, humans were able to hunt them down to fulfill their vile, insatiable desires. Since they had lifespans far longer than those of humans, each and every victim was subjected to a sickening tragedy that lasted multiple human generations.

Ironically, by strictly condemning all demihumans—including elves—as unclean, the Holy Church had actually protected them in a way. At the very least, openly possessing demihuman slaves was now widely considered a severe moral evil.

Of course, whether the elves were targets to be enslaved or targets of discrimination was a distinction that only mattered to the perpetrators—namely, humans. The elves understood their current situation as a result of having lost the strength they'd possessed during Era Gran Magicka. As a race that lived so close to nature, they saw it as a matter of course. Natural law stated that the strong preyed on the weak.

But as a race that possessed both will and wisdom, they still

felt anger and resentment even though they saw what was happening as natural. At the same time, one of the deep-seated flaws of the human condition was that when desire was denied on a surface level, it would fester as even greater depravity in places unseen.

One certainty was that the elves had every intention of taking revenge against humans the moment they regained their strength. A thousand years ago, they had acted with the composure and arrogance befitting a superior race, but now they understood to their very bones what a huge mistake it had been. No human had the right to deny them their revenge or to condemn it as evil.

The elves' anger and resentment only continued to build as the years went by, even when the targets of their rancor died as subsequent generations simply did the same things again and again. However, individuals aside, humanity as a race was not entirely stupid. They knew that the demihumans would never forgive them for the way they'd been treated, and they feared what would happen should the demihumans regain their strength one day. Many of those in power made it a policy to stamp out all possible roots of future conflict while their race was still on top. Thanks to their efforts, other than those who had been roaming the world, not a single elf had fallen into the depraved hands of man for a thousand years.

Several races that the humans considered beautiful had been wiped out in the meantime. Thankfully, that wasn't true of the elves. The obvious difference was the existence of the Elven Forest, which no human had ever reached.

"And that's because of this fog, no doubt," Sol observed.

"Is the fog not normal?" asked Frederica.

"The fact that it's affecting Luna like this proves it's far from normal."

Not only had the All Dragon, the pinnacle of all magical beasts, lost her sense of direction, she actually looked extremely ill, as though suffering from mana intoxication. The silver lining was that the display windows of Player were not flashing red. The fog's ability to cause harm had likely been sacrificed in exchange for making its ability to repel intruders so potent that it even affected dragons. The only way to do this was by using a barrier spell, which was very much in character for a race famed for its unparalleled proficiency in magic. Their best and brightest

had probably come up with it back when they still had power. Now, there was a magic tool that kept it going as opposed to an individual—there was no other way to explain how it was still active a thousand years later. The entire area was permanently enveloped in a thick fog, no matter how clear the skies were. The most veteran adventurers—even those with Ranger-type talents—would lose their way in no time flat. And since it was in the middle of Gio Nest, getting lost almost always meant encountering and being killed by monsters.

The region couldn't be mapped with satellites either, though that was something known to only a tiny handful of people. Taking this as proof that their technology still stood no chance against the blessing of the World Tree despite it supposedly being dead, the Holy Church had quickly decided to leave the place alone. This was the smart way to handle what was considered by some to be a pseudo taboo territory, but not all humans could admit that reaching the Elven Forest was a feat beyond them. Out of sheer desperation, they designated the area a "special frontier region" and, taking advantage of the fact that they knew its general location, adopted the stance that they were turning a blind eye to the elves on purpose.

After a thousand years, however, both humans and elves had come to believe the lies—as in, humans truly believed that they were turning a blind eye to the elves, while the elves accepted the mortifying misconception that they weren't worth wiping out at the cost of human lives. The humans were sure that, unlike small adventurer parties, which could indeed be easily misled, they could burn the whole forest down if they brought their full strength in numbers to bear. In other words, they were greatly underestimating the impenetrable barrier that was still very much in effect.

"Too bad the fog doesn't work against Player, though. This way, guys." With sure steps, Sol swiftly strode deeper into the fog.

His companions weren't all that surprised, as they had already come to accept that anything went when it came to Sol. Luna was not scared, but the miserable look on her face betrayed how ashamed she felt.

Julia sighed. "Seriously, is there anything you *can't* do, Sol?"

"Well, we just got lucky this time," Sol replied, smiling wryly. "Our prior arrangement came in handy."

Regardless of how accurate his map was, it would be of no help whatsoever if he didn't know where the elves' village was. But he knew the exact locations of the two royal guards who had gone ahead, so all he had to do was ignore the bewitchment that was trying to lead his senses astray and go straight. That was how he managed to reach the hidden village without a guide, pulling off another feat that no one had achieved for a thousand years.

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"We have been awaiting your arrival, Lord Sol."

"We confirm that nothing hostile has entered our detection range."

At the entrance to the Elven Forest, Sol was greeted by Frederica's two royal guards and the two elves he had met in Taboo Novem.

The elves were absolutely stunned upon seeing Sol unaffected by the barrier and showing up out of the blue. Sol had said he would drop by, sure, but they had not thought it would be *this* soon. Naturally, no preparations had been made to welcome him. Moreover, they had yet to finish convincing the Elder Council to work with Sol, much less the rest of the village.

Of course, Sol understood that it was unreasonable to expect so much to be done in only a few days. Still, the elves must have at least acknowledged the royal guards' overwhelming strength and accepted them as guardians if they were here as the welcoming party. And well they should, since they were the only ones who had noticed Sol's party approaching.

"That said, we were pretty sure that even monsters would have a hard time finding this place, much less humans, but…"

Now that they were over Level 100, the royal guards were aware that they had become superhuman. Despite that, they knew without a doubt that they could not reach the Elven Forest without an elf to lead the way. They were wondering whether the elves really needed them for protection if they already had such a powerful barrier in place when Sol had just walked right up.

To assuage their shock, Julia shrugged dismissively. "Sol's just being Sol."

"Isn't he just amazing?" Reen smiled.

The way Sol saw it, all he had done was walk with the physical

stamina of someone over Level 100 straight toward the two royal guards, which wasn't some great feat. There had been a fog, but it hadn't been particularly harmful. He had literally just shown up.

In light of this, Julia's and Reen's comments weren't so much to cover for Sol; rather, they were being directed at the royal guards, whose gaping stares had earned them a reproachful look from Frederica.

"Ugh..." Luna groaned.

"Lady Luna, a retainer ought to be proud when their master achieves something they themselves cannot," Frederica told her.

In contrast to Sol, Luna was extremely depressed that she, the pinnacle of all magical beings, the one who claimed the name of All Dragon, had failed to do what Sol had found so easy. The reality, however, was that the fog had affected her far more than the humans because it interfered with one's magical senses. As a dragon, traveling through the fog had made her so ill that she had even needed to rest a few times, and she was extremely mortified by that.

"I suppose so..."

Luna now cringed to remember how, at the start, she had cockily offered to summon her Astral body and fly everyone over in the blink of an eye. If Sol hadn't said "Hey, wanna run there?" on a whim, she would have either gotten lost in the sky, which she considered her home turf, or become lightheaded and crashed, which would have been the kind of dark memory that would make her want to roll herself up in her blanket at night and endlessly flail around in bed. Not only was Frederica's reminder to accept their liege's amazing power correct, but it was also a way to alleviate the scars that this incident left on Luna's heart.

The two elves kneeling behind the royal guards took Luna's dejection as a personal failure.

"We are deeply sorry! We had no intention of testing you all! Please believe us!"

"Don't worry. We understand," Sol replied. "You were planning on coming to get us before we got lost, right?"

"Absolutely! Again, we apologize."

If Sol truly thought that the elves were testing him, it wasn't a stretch to imagine he would take offense. If the barrier had actually worked on him, it might have helped him to appreciate

the elves more. However, it had been entirely ineffective, which meant he might see it as mere insolence. If he got indignant that his valued servant had been made a fool of, the elves would have nothing to say in protest.

Thankfully, Sol was chortling, which greatly relieved the elves. His good mood meant that Luna would likely be in a good mood as well.

Without further ado, the elves led Sol's group into the village and toward the World Tree sapling where the elders awaited. Along the way, Sol's eyes were seized by the unimaginably colossal remains of the World Tree.

"So the World Tree actually exists..." he murmured in wonder.

"I know, right?" Reen replied.

Julia and Frederica were also astounded by the wall of dead wood stretching from far up ahead to loom behind them. The Elven Forest was actually a massive forest that had grown inside a caldera formed within the trunk of the dead tree. The hollow was so immense that it dwarfed present-day understanding of the term "giant tree." And, surprisingly, the massive wooden wall surrounding the forest—the bark of the old World Tree—was not truly dead in the full sense of the word.

The fog that not only repelled all non-elven intruders but even obscured the area from overhead electronic surveillance was produced by the growing World Tree, which stood so high in the middle of the Elven Forest that no one would first think of it as a sapling. And that was not all. At multiple spots on the surrounding wooden wall towering higher than not only Garlaige's city walls but even those of the royal capital, water that was seemingly created by magic fell in voluminous cascades, filling the caldera so that a lake was rising to cover the roots of the thousand-year-old trees. In spite of the thick fog outside, the sky was clear and unobstructed inside the hollow, allowing the sun to cast distinct shadows of the countless gigantic branches and leaves on the surface of the water. Rainbows lay scattered all around the inner bark wall where the many waterfalls threw up mists that refracted the sunlight.

The sight was so breathtakingly beautiful that if Sol hadn't known better, he would have thought that he had wandered into Elfheim, an elven paradise spoken of in myths. The sensation was further amplified by the fact that he and his group were now walking on massive tangled branches that stretched above the

lake. Frederica, who considered herself a bit of a history buff, was looking around with sparkles in her eyes and childish wonder on her face.

“Truthfully, this would have been pretty terrifying if we didn’t have Luna,” Sol commented.

Though the path was wide, it was still just twisted branches, and it was far higher than Garlaige’s city wall. Without having first experienced Float and what was practically aerial battle, he would surely have been taking each step with a hundred times more trepidation.

It finally made sense how the elves had managed to survive for a thousand years. There was plenty of space here, and they were well and truly protected from both humans and monsters.

“Lord Sol, please allow me to clarify something,” said one of the guides. “What you see now is a transformation that occurred just the other day when our queen returned to us.”

“It is true that this forest had more than adequately sustained us before,” the other elf added, “but it was when Her Majesty assumed her seat at the World Tree sapling that water—or, more importantly, outer mana—started filling this land like never before.”

Sol shot a look at the royal guards, who would have witnessed this change firsthand, and they confirmed with a nod. He sighed in regret. “Aww, I wish I’d been here to see it.”

“I am of the same mind,” Frederica agreed quietly yet passionately.

Considering how fantastical the Elven Forest now looked, it was only natural to want to see how it had gotten that way in person. Unfortunately, it wasn’t exactly possible to ask for a do-over.

Seeing how down Sol and Frederica seemed, Julia said comfortingly, “Hey, look on the bright side. There’s still the real thing.”

“The real thing?” Reen tilted her head quizzically.

“The World Tree will grow back when the Captive Elven Queen is truly freed,” Julia explained. “Clearly, the Kuzuifabra wasn’t exaggerating in its description of the World Tree—it was actually underselling it by a *lot*. I’m sure that will be quite the sight.”

“I see.” Reen nodded in understanding. “Now that’s something to look forward to.”

The Elven Forest had been transformed into a fantastical

wonder merely by the return of the Elven Queen even though she was still cursed. If what was currently still only a sapling assumed the World Tree's full glory when she woke up, that was going to be an incredible spectacle indeed.

The simpleminded way that Sol and Frederica easily bounced back and grew motivated again made Julia think that they were perhaps a better match for each other than she had thought.

"In other words, Aina'noa is currently half awake?" Sol asked.

"Yes, sir," one of the guides confirmed. "Thanks to the return of our queen, the World Tree has regained a small portion of its functions. It is more than enough for us to live in abundance. However..."

"Being only a sapling, it doesn't yet have the power to release your queen, does it?"

At the end of the day, the only way to fully restore the World Tree was to destroy the nier organa artifact known as the Imperial Seal, which served as the linchpin for the curse that still bound the Elven Queen.

"To our deep chagrin, you are right."

"Don't worry; I made the members of Circulus tell me how I can do it myself. I'll take care of it."

Sol's path was already set in stone. He hadn't actually expected the World Tree to be able to free Aina'noa. If it did, then great, but if not, he didn't feel chagrined about it like the elves did. He already knew of a concrete way to make it happen.

"You managed to make them talk?!"

The offhand comment from Sol greatly surprised the elves, who knew nothing about his new skill. They had witnessed for themselves how severe the effects of lifelong indoctrination could be on short-lived humans. Based on their experiences, the soldiers from Istekario would never have conceded such crucial information in a million years.

Of course, there was no doubt in their minds that even the famed magic special force Circulus wouldn't stand a chance against Sol's party, who had defeated Kuzuryuu with practically a wave of the hand. However, they were having difficulty imagining the mages doing something that would cause them to be branded traitors to their country. The Istekarians had been raised not only to put their twisted ideals above their own lives but even to take pride in doing so. Technically, the elves were the same in that not a single one had broken under torture and led a

human expedition to the Elven Forest in the past millennium. There was no true way for someone who had yet to die to know whether they themselves, as beings with a will, could truly maintain that will in the face of certain death.

It was a complete mystery to the elves why a race that could hold so firmly to their pride could not acknowledge and accept that other races had their own pride too. Clashing due to a difference in values was understandable, even if it went so far as genocide. But when a stronger race trampled a weaker race not because of inviolable values but because of mere greed, it was sheer madness. What such people viewed as their values were probably imitations instilled through brainwashing passed off as education.

"Mm-hm, they talked," Sol said casually, smiling.

His answer terrified the elves. In a way, the power to easily bend a madman's sense of values was far more of a threat to beings that had a will and an ego than the strength to kill a taboo territory boss with one strike. It implied the violation of one's subjective self. It was because people believed there were things they could uphold in the face of death that they could claim they wouldn't bend their knee to tyranny. If even that could be denied, then what was the heart? What was self? What was will?

Somehow managing to suppress their fear from peering into this philosophical abyss, one of the elves asked, "Um…are you saying that you will kill the emperor of Istekario for our sake, Lord Sol?"

Clearly, the elves knew what their queen's final seal was. More than a few of them had been alive for over a thousand years, so that was hardly surprising.

"If necessary, yes, once. Right, Julia?"

"Don't ask me. You're the one calling the shots. But I would appreciate it if you explained to all relevant parties that it was you who gave me this power."

If the Imperial Seal sought a new host when removed from its current one, Sol could handle it without issue. At his level, he had obtained what many people yearned for: the power to overcome death. The Revive spell was not all-powerful, as it basically healed the physical damage that had led to the target's death. But it could be used even if the target had lost most of their head, suffered full-body disfigurement and dismemberment, or

been burned to death. The only requirement was that it had to be cast within three minutes of death.

Understandably, the times that Julia had been able to test out this spell were quite limited. As a result, it hadn't really sunk in for the group how incredible that power was. Instead, another question came to their minds: If magic could be used to overturn a confirmed death, then what was life? What did it truly mean to be alive? In the same vein, what was magic? And what was the mana that made it possible?

Although the spell had yet to make waves, Julia's concern was valid. Through several experiments on animals, she knew for sure that the spell worked. That made it a valid card in Sol's arsenal, and he wouldn't hesitate to use it when he saw the need. Julia wouldn't object to its use either, but the issue was how it would make her look. She was already lauded by many as the Saint of Healing, and there were nobles and influential merchants who practically worshipped her. It didn't take a genius to imagine how people would treat her if word got out that she had the means to take the sting out of the final frontier of death, even if it carried a time limit and did not apply in cases of death due to old age. Just imagining it sent chills down her spine.

"Rest assured, Lady Julia," Frederica said, "the world will look at all of us the same way just for being members of Lord Sol's party."

Though she understood what Julia was getting at, Frederica's reassurance wasn't as helpful as it sounded. Being in Sol's party was indeed a big reason people treated Julia differently, but part of the fault also lay with Frederica for the way that she, the first princess of the Kingdom of Emelia, made a show of waiting on Sol hand and foot. That said, it was true that Sol's renown was growing by leaps and bounds, what with killing the succubus, killing Kuzuryuu and unsealing Taboo Novem, gaining acknowledgment from a cardinal of the Holy Church, and now—though word had yet to spread—obtaining the allegiance of the elves. He had gone to the effort of coming up with the clan name of Libertadores, but they were practically getting left behind.

On the flip side, the acclamation of the Saint of Healing was already through the roof, and news of her conquering death wouldn't change that or the treatment it elicited. So in a way, Frederica was right.

Tears welled up in Julia's eyes. "I'm not going to get dumped,

am I?”

Sensing how serious she was, Frederica took her hands in consolation. “The heir of Viscount Walden’s family, Lord Sephiras, is a good man.”

What worried Julia wasn’t what the world thought of her. No, she was afraid that because of what the world thought, she would lose Sephiras Howard Walden, the man she had quietly developed a relationship with and even wanted to marry. She had been casual when telling Sol and Reen about wanting to marry, but it actually meant a lot to her. It would crush her for it to get called off; that was how much she loved Sephiras. There weren’t many guys who could look at her without merely seeing the Saint of Healing. Her chances of meeting another exception whom she cared about just as much were practically nonexistent.

Julia was worried that if people made even more of a fuss over her, and Sol got even more famous—such as from having the princess of a big country waiting on him—Sephiras would see her as too burdensome to marry. It wouldn’t be strange for some people to suspect that Sol had already laid hands on her thanks to her great beauty, the amount of time she had spent with him as his childhood friend, and the fact that he had even granted her the power to overcome death. It wasn’t unthinkable that the Walden family would want to distance themselves for their own protection.

Funnily, what Frederica was inferring from Julia’s state was that Sephiras was truly a good man. She couldn’t be more different from him. If she were in his position, she would definitely have taken advantage of her betrothed to get close to Sol, the man who had the power to shake and move the world, even at risk of losing it all. And if, in the process, she felt it necessary to give up on Julia, the person to whom she had promised her hand in marriage, she would do so without a second thought.

Although the two had only just met, Frederica saw Julia as an intelligent woman. In fact, she even saw Julia as one of her own kind in more ways than one. Given that, Frederica truly respected her for wanting to hold on to someone so badly that she’d tear up despite thinking he might act out of self-interest, whether to distance himself for the sake of self-preservation or take advantage of her with the resolve to break a few eggs to

make an omelet, as Frederica herself would. This reflected on Sephiras well too, since a man who was all guile and no substance wouldn't be able to make a woman like Julia fall so hard for him.

"After coming this far, I don't think that's something you have to worry about." Sol, who was part of the reason for Julia's misgivings, handily waved them away.

"You really think so?"

Sol's character was rather straightforward. Anyone who spent a little time with him would soon understand that he was the kind of person who would sincerely support a childhood friend's marriage as opposed to suddenly getting jealous and pulling her back. But the image of him that was out in the world had long left his control, becoming exaggerated and altered at an exponential rate. He was aware of this, so the possibility of the Walden family getting cold feet hadn't evaded him. That said, it seemed very unlikely that Sephiras would give up on Julia now, and there was no way the kind and timid face that he showed Julia was all there was to him.

The proof was that Sol knew about the lengths that Steve had gone to in attempting to limit who got to approach Black Tiger when they were still the guild branch's top-earning party. Men wouldn't retire because of romantic relationships and therefore could be largely left to their own devices in that respect, but a significant percentage of women retired when getting married, and the data was clear that the chances of them returning would plummet if they got pregnant and gave birth.

The difference between the usefulness of individual talents was almost cruel in its starkness, but there was no gender discrimination in their distribution. In light of this, unwanted romantic overtures toward female adventurers harmed the Adventurer's Guild's bottom line too, and the guild never hesitated to eliminate such threats. That was the real reason there were female adventurers who commanded great popularity, be it for their looks or abilities, yet were almost never approached.

There was no doubt that Sephiras had been put through the same gauntlet, and yet it did not seem to have fazed him. More than that, he had gone so far as to talk about marriage with Julia. Sol took that as a sign of Sephiras's competence, grit, and most of all, his attachment to Julia. Of course, he wouldn't go so

far as to believe that Sephiras wasn't at least partly motivated by self-interest. However, without a love that overcame everything underneath it all, a high and mighty noble would never weather all the blowback he received from the guild upon stooping to be with a mere adventurer.

"I mean, I wouldn't swear by it. But I really don't think he would dump you for such a reason after all this time."

Taking all of the above into account, Sol didn't believe Sephiras was likely to back off now just because Julia's reputation grew bigger. He probably understood the burden that it brought, but if that were enough to turn him off, he would have buckled from the pressure exerted by the guild and the Saint of Healing's devotees long before.

"Interesting. So you know how to read other people." Julia smiled, delighted that her fiancé was being praised by Sol, someone with a power greater than she could imagine and exponentially gaining more recognition even at this very moment. Her sarcastic comment, which came with an implied "even though you're so slow when it comes to yourself," was meant to mask her embarrassment.

"You're not just other people, Julia. You're my childhood friend."

Julia gave Sol the side-eye and sighed. Then, sensing that she was at a disadvantage in fighting alone, she looked at Frederica as if asking for backup.

"What do you think about that, Princess Frederica?"

"Mm-hmm. Definitely a hazard."

It was now clear that Julia was no longer a problem. It wasn't as if she had never been interested in Sol during the long time they had spent together, but she had gotten over it ages ago. While Reen had fallen for Sol upon figuring out what he was doing for the party, Julia's first reaction had been to fear what he would ask for in return. This demonstrated the difference in the sincerity of their respective affections for him.

"It makes sense with Lady Reen, who is the first and final woman who loves Lord Sol with no strings attached. But if he's like this, the rear palace is going to be a handful indeed..." said Frederica.

"So, position can turn pleasantness into womanizing. Fancy that," Julia murmured.

Their concern was not unfounded. They were of the opinion

that, as someone with absolute authority, Sol only needed a small number of people to whom he could truly open his heart, and that that was enough to keep all other women he was interested in tied to him through benefits. In fact, having only Reen in that core position was ideal.

It was entirely possible to develop a relationship founded on mutual benefit into one of mutual respect. Frederica actually thought such relationships far more trustworthy than ones based on insubstantial things like fate or love at first sight. She shuddered to imagine what would happen if Sol were a natural womanizer, because she would be getting a massive headache if he unwittingly made young ladies from distinguished backgrounds fall in love with him and then just let them be. At that point, she really would have no choice but to set up a rear palace and ensure that he gave each one of them attention.

"Who're you calling a womanizer?"

"Huh? I don't quite follow..."

Unfortunately, Sol and Reen hadn't the faintest idea what was stressing Julia and Frederica out so much.

"Well, at the very least, they're a match for each other."

"If I may be frank, given my position, it's going to make my job much harder if they don't pick up the pace."

Despite being such a good match for each other and being close enough to cross the line at any moment, Sol and Reen were still taking their sweet time. However, Frederica couldn't be too tough on them because she knew that she had been their biggest obstacle. It hadn't been on purpose, but she had joined Sol's harem at the exact timing when it would have been easiest for the two of them to get together.

"Because you're waiting in line?"

"Embarrassing as it is to admit, exactly so."

The way that Frederica looked with the blush on her cheeks was like the consummate painting of a pure and chaste princess, but the rather salacious reason for it tickled Julia's funny bone.

"We should invite Eliza too and have a party of just us girls one of these days."

"My! I've always wanted to take part in one."

Since Eliza had a stake as one of the girls close to Sol, there was no having a discussion without her.

Having largely caught Frederica's intentions, Julia was rather amenable to lending a hand to break through the current

deadlock. The more Sol's immediate circle was roses and sunshine, the more leeway she would have to enjoy her own married life.

She looked at him teasingly. "Still, a pretty childhood friend, a princess whose beauty is known even in other countries, a quiet and devoted younger girl who's charming enough after being healed, and a cute-as-a-button little therianthrope who's actually the All Dragon. That's quite the harem you've got there, childhood friend of mine. You're practically a protagonist from myths and heroic epics."

The self-conscious way that Sol and Reen choked on their drinks made a cute, sweet sight in Julia's eyes. The thought of being a part of their circle elicited a wry smile from her, but she was sure that in such a situation, she would be suffering from stomach pain just as often as Frederica was. The least she could do was kick her childhood friends' backs to get them to stop dragging their feet and hurry to the development the princess wanted.

In the one-in-a-million case that Reen said she wanted to have Sol for herself, Julia would be extremely surprised but was ready to support her in any way that she could. At the end of the day, Julia was a girl too. She fully understood the allure of a man who could have any woman he wanted but still chose to open his heart to only one. And if Sol actually took that route, her respect for him would shoot through the roof.

Then again, it would also depend on whether he was doing it because he truly wanted to or suppressing his heart. The ideal would be that he had eyes only for that one girl, of course. And yet, a man who had to keep himself in check and therefore greatly cherished only that girl somehow seemed larger than life and therefore struck a chord in Julia too.

All these deliberations were running through her mind, with Sol, a man who had the status to make even a princess into a concubine, as the model. At this moment, it hadn't occurred to her in the slightest that these thoughts were equally applicable to her own spouse, future heir that he was to a viscount's family.

In contrast, Frederica had a faint notion: Women close to Sol were going to become truly special figures in the coming era, so much so that the current hierarchy of royalty and nobility would be rendered moot.

"You wanna join us, Sol?"

“Thank you, but no thank you.”

Julia knew it was taboo to bring a guy to a girls’ party, but she was also thinking about how much faster it would be to work things out with all parties sitting together. There was a small warning bell in her mind that the situation might suddenly develop into one where she would have to quickly leave the scene, though.

In any case, Sol was erring on the side of caution and firmly turning down Julia’s offer. Men had a tendency to want to put women on a pedestal, no matter how well they knew them.

“Pity. But Lu, you don’t get to say no, okay?”

It wasn’t as if Julia had expected Sol to actually reply with “Oh, since you’re offering…” Her aim was more to get him to verbally confirm that he wouldn’t be taking part. And it was with that assumption that she was going to involve Luna, who was, in a way, the very core of Sol’s party and harem.

Sensing the unspoken “you’re a girl now too, all right?” behind Julia’s smile that brooked no protest, Luna weakly turned to her master for aid. “M-My lord…”

Unfortunately, she was being hung out to dry.

“Don’t worry. It’s not like they’ll eat you. You’re a girl too, so it wouldn’t hurt to take part in a girls’ party every so often.”

“I… Yes, my lord.”

Very few were Luna’s equal in fighting strength, but that strength wouldn’t do her any good at a party. When facing those her master cherished, she was little more than the young, immature girl she looked. This made her extremely uncomfortable, to put it mildly. Even so, it was Sol’s hope that she would grow closer to the other girls through this opportunity. It wouldn’t hurt for all of them to get along with each other.

The elves, who had sensed that they weren’t supposed to interrupt the earlier conversation but could tell that it had now reached a lull, spoke up.

“We have arrived.”

Sure enough, the group was nearing the tip of the branch and coming up to what looked like a bird’s nest. However, they weren’t quite there yet. The elves had interjected a little earlier because the opportunity had presented itself.

“Ah, sorry,” Sol said, apologizing for having gotten so occupied with the conversation. “Hm? What is that?”

The structure up ahead did not seem like their destination. Besides looking like a bird's nest, it was too small to be a house. It wasn't merely an entrance either, as the foliage came to an abrupt end behind it, making the path a dead end.

"I see. So teleportation is available here. Unsurprising for the World Tree." It was Luna who answered Sol's question. Put simply, this place was a node on a mana ley line that ran throughout the parts of the old World Tree that had yet to fully die. In the context of a train system, this would be a station. The ease with which Luna was able to see the ley lines in detail explained why they were also called dragon veins.

Do dragons have a connection to the World Tree? Sol mused. *Maybe that connection can be traced all the way to the Elven Queen, who controls the tree. For all I know, maybe all the card monsters are related to each other as keys to ruling this world.*

"You are correct, Lady Luna," one of the elves confirmed. "We will be using this nexus point to teleport directly to the foot of the sapling."

"I see. The World Tree really is amazing," Sol said, deeply impressed.

As it turned out, the group was heading toward the audience chamber where the Elder Council, the highest governing body of the elves, was waiting next to their still slumbering queen. Teleporting over did indeed seem like a great idea, as the sapling was so far away that it would take the whole day to reach it on foot.

The elves noticed Luna shooting them jealous looks over how impressed Sol was. They didn't dare comment on it out loud but dearly hoped that Sol would realize what it meant to have a servant capable of personally casting Teleport so devoted to him. In short, there were those who would be forced to suffer jealous stares from the All Dragon whenever he carelessly threw praise around. It was his duty to also praise his far more capable servant whenever praising someone else—because his servant was Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon, a being with the strength to destroy this whole world on a whim.

◇◆◇◆◇

"Lord Sol, before all else, please allow me to thank you on behalf of our entire race. We thank you from the bottom of our

hearts for your assistance with our millennium-long wish to bring back our queen."

After teleporting, Sol's group found themselves in the largest hollow in the World Tree sapling. The space was so huge that they normally would have had difficulty accepting it as being inside a tree, but after seeing the remains of the previous World Tree, their surprise was tempered to "wow, this is big for a sapling" level.

The entire Elder Council was prostrating before the teleportation magic circle. The older elf among the two that Sol had rescued, Izlentia, once again formally thanked him, and everyone else said, "We thank you deeply" in unison.

Izlentia and his companion, Alphilion, had done their very best to explain how Sol had not only saved them from Istekario's famed Circulus but also summarily defeated Kuzuryuu, the boss of Taboo Novem. Thanks to their efforts, all the elves fully understood their obligation to show him gratitude.

The elves were indeed a proud race, but the base of that pride was their self-respect: They believed that only those who could respect themselves could respect others. Therefore, it was a matter of course that they gave their thanks to Sol for helping them with the recapture of the Elven Queen, an endeavor that they had been committed to even at the risk of the annihilation of their whole race, on behalf of their weakened people. It didn't matter whether Sol was human or elf, nor did the friction between the elders and the younger generation have any bearing here. Among the elves, at least, holding a different opinion did not contradict a shared system of values.

Normally, Sol's group would have been astonished to see members of a race they knew to be proud prostrating themselves like this. But what pride meant to humans was very different from what it meant to elves. Rather rudely, they weren't exactly registering the elves' thanks, as their attention was almost entirely seized by the figure floating in the center of the space that served as the central hub of the World Tree sapling.

Halfway to the ceiling, which soared far higher than the audience chamber in Emelia's palace, was a vortex of mana so concentrated that it was actually visible, shining with constantly changing colors. That in itself was a sight exquisite enough to seem like a scene straight out of a myth, but the way that the Elven Queen floated within it, arms loosely outstretched in a

completely open pose, further turned it into a vestment that amplified her beauty to the realm of the divine.

Aina'noa's hair, done up in two pigtails, swirled leisurely in the dancing light, seemingly protecting her defenseless form. Thanks to the outer mana that illuminated her from varying angles and in varying colors, there were instances when she seemed to recover her snow-white skin and dazzling turquoise hair. It felt like at any moment, the Elven Queen would open her eyes, restoring her people to their strength of a thousand years ago and spurring the World Tree to shoot up and pierce the clouds once more.

Prompted by the stares of Sol's group, the elders also turned to look at the Elven Queen. The vision that they associated with the sight was undoubtedly much more detailed, as they had lived that fantasy a thousand years ago. When they considered that those memories could come to life, depending on how things developed, it brought a tear or two to more than a few eyes. And the person with the power to make that happen, Sol, was now here in their midst.

"We are aware that the purpose of your visit today is to check in on our queen and the World Tree, Lord Sol. Unfortunately, you see our current situation. We are deeply sorry."

"That is indeed my first goal, but as I said earlier, I already have a plan of action. Leave it to us to work out the timing for when we pull off the release."

"A-As you wish."

Just like earlier, the matter-of-fact way Sol spoke erased the elves' frustration and shame in the blink of an eye. The wish they were so desperate to realize that they would cling to him like wretches was already a done deal in his mind, with the only question being when to take action. Even the elders, great sages who had lived for thousands of years, couldn't help but drop their jaws in astonishment.

Izlentia and Alphilion suppressed giggles as they realized that they had probably made the same silly face before. It was strange how the differences in opinion between the elders seem to pale to insignificance in the presence of such an amicable absolute being. In fact, such differences probably *were* insignificant to the absolute being. The unconscious way he conveyed that perception evoked self-deprecating smiles from the elves. They realized that this was no time to be held back by

things like shame and regret, understandable as those emotions were, and that they should be straightforward about what they wanted Sol to do for them, no matter how small he might think the request.

"Also, that's not my only goal today. Rather, I'd say the other thing is more important. Frederica."

"Yes, my lord."

Shockingly, Sol made it sound like releasing the Elven Queen was only a secondary objective. Sure enough, when he saw that she remained bound despite being in the central hub of the younger World Tree, not only did he not despair or put on a brave face, he was even relaxed enough to be enthralled by her beauty.

Equally shocking was the fact that the first princess of Emelia, a country that could wipe out the elves just as easily as Istekario could—though it wasn't openly hostile toward them—was acting like Sol's secretary or assistant. There was so much that the elves wanted to ask, but their role at the moment was to stay quiet and listen.

"In accordance with Lord Sol's will, Libertadores and Emelia both request a formal alliance with the elves. This comes with a promise to meet all of the Elven Forest's needs, be it food, medicine, resources, or anything else. Additionally, Emelia will expeditiously free all demihumans held against their will within its borders, whether elf, therianthrope, or any other race, publicly apologize, and offer reparations. We will immediately act on any information regarding elves who have been mistreated, so feel free to let us know. Outside of Emelia's borders, we, as Libertadores, promise to do the same as best we can."

With a calm smile, Frederica went on at length to spell out points that no one would normally believe. This deal was so advantageous to the elves that if the circumstances had been different, they would have thought they had heard wrong or flared up under the assumption that they were being made fun of. However, Frederica had been clear and succinct, and she'd spoken using the name of her country. More than that, she had left no doubt that she considered her identity as a member of Libertadores, a mere adventurer clan founded by Sol, to be more important than her role as first princess of Emelia, one of the continent's four superpowers.

All this showed just how serious she was. Regardless of what

she herself thought, Sol Rock, the man with absolute power, was indeed promising the elves everything that Frederica had said, all in exchange for the elves allying themselves with his group.

"What is it that you want us to offer in exchange?"

"Nothing in particular. All we ask is that you accept Lord Sol's hand of friendship."

"For that alone, you would really do all this for us?"

"Yes."

It did not escape the elders' attention that no details regarding the alliance had been specified.

One tried to ask, but Frederica simply said, "We only want to get along with you" without the smile on her face slipping for a second.

Normally, no one would believe such a deal. It would get torn to bits for being sheer nonsense. It wasn't even presented as a written contract that could serve as evidence and forestall a "he said, she said" situation. It didn't matter that this agreement was between a large nation and a race that it could wipe out whenever it wanted. In fact, the greater the difference in military strength, the greater the need there was for evidence. Even if this was all a big deception, it made no sense not to dot the i's and cross the t's to add credibility to the hoax. A lie had to be believable. What was *not* believable was listing a bunch of conditions that were all favorable to the elves. It was understandable that they were now extremely on their guard.

And yet, the person making the offer, Sol, was someone who had been entirely unaffected by the fog that the elves considered their last line of defense. Furthermore, not only was he stronger than the two strongest members of the elven race, but he had managed to kill a monster that the humans who currently controlled the world considered too dangerous to touch. In other words, he had no need to lie.

Despite knowing that, the elves, who were used to making decisions as a council, hesitated to leap at the proposal. As a result, an awkward silence filled the hall. This clearly couldn't be allowed to continue, but no one knew the right thing to do.

"Ah, you want more details regarding the apology and reparations. Regarding the apology, depending on the mistreatment that the elf in question underwent, death is not off the table. As for reparations, we'll strive to do right by you as much as possible."

Misconstruing the silence not as the elves being wary of a deal too good to be true but as discontent over being asked to forget about everything that had happened before in exchange for profit, Sol made an effort to expound on what he had in mind. Needless to say, no one in his party expressed surprise or objected to his words, including Frederica. If that was what he wanted, she considered it her personal mission to make it happen.

"So you are not asking us to give up on getting revenge?"

In contrast, the elves were floored, with the elder who had spoken looking put on the spot. An absolute being who was promising to give them benefits going forward was not using it to coerce them into forgetting all the humiliation they had suffered and had even declared that they would receive apologies and reparations as well. Despite being human himself, he was saying that he did not mind the demihumans making his kind pay for their transgressions with their lives. What was more, he would be judging those humans not by the self-serving laws they set up themselves, but by what the victims claimed they had suffered. That was not something that could be just glossed over.

"As long as it is within the realm of individual responsibility."

Sol was making it clear that he was only offering retribution against the culprits themselves, not their families, their clans, their countries, or the entire human race. He believed that only those who committed a crime should be punished for it and did not believe in collective responsibility. There was a certain logic to also holding those who watched responsible, as well as those who turned away and pretended not to see or those who had the power to help but didn't. However, Sol simply didn't want to do it, so that was that, regardless of the morality of drawing such a line. In exchange, the identity of anyone directly responsible would do nothing to stay his hand, be they a king, an emperor, or the head of an influential noble family. As long as Sol or those whose opinion he valued decided that someone deserved to die for what they had done, such was their lot.

"I confirm that Emelia has already agreed to abide by Lord Sol's will." Frederica was now sincerely relieved that Emelia had been more lenient with demihumans than other countries had, even though that had been due more to condescension than compassion. After all, Sol's own worldview had been influenced by the relatively impartial education he had received when he

was young. In fact, he had thanked her in person several times for that. As he put it, he thought it extremely fortunate that he, the bearer of such power, had grown up shaped by Emelia's social mores.

However, though she kept it to herself, Frederica's reaction was not gratitude or relief. No, the way Sol sounded like he was determining Emelia's worldview to be most preferable after having conducted an objective evaluation of all available worldviews sent chills down her back. It was almost like he was a god giving out a passing grade on how to be human.

"Of course, I'm not offering to settle the past entirely out of the goodness of my heart. To start, I want all demihumans to become my allies and for you elves to lead them. Also, I want you to teach me all the knowledge and things about the past that only you remember, given how long you've lived. This includes technical know-how of magic equipment. If any who know how to apply that knowledge are still alive, I very much want their cooperation."

As it had just occurred to him, Sol talked about what he expected to gain from the alliance, unaware of how the smile on Frederica's face was stiffening. What he was asking for might not have seemed like much to the elves, but these were all things that he could not obtain elsewhere. There was much that he could learn about what had happened during the past millennium from someone who had actually lived through it, and being able to use Player to train up elves, in light of how much their numbers had dwindled, was an opportunity that he would seize no matter the cost. If money would do the job, then he would pay every last penny and more. It didn't hurt his conscience in the slightest to condemn a bunch of his fellow humans to suffer the consequences of their despicable actions either.

"To be clear, I want us to have a relationship of give and take. I don't intend to just hand out charity like I'm better than you."

Sol wasn't thinking of himself as some great paragon of justice who was punishing evil on behalf of the weak and powerless elves. All that he was doing was using Player to give power to those to realize their desire to tear apart the humans who had abused them for generations. The ones who were willing to humor his interest in using Player on their race would, as a side effect, obtain the strength to kill whom they wanted,

and whether they did so would be entirely up to them. Their assailants likely believed that the strong had license to do whatever they wanted to those weaker than themselves and therefore couldn't cry foul when they were subjected to the same fate once they became the weaker side. Or rather, they could, but there would be no one to listen.

Of course, Sol truly did believe all this, but much of it came from his immaturity, and it looked quite different from an outsider's perspective. Frederica, Julia, and even the elves who had just received his suggestion all understood that. However, Sol's view was "let's exchange things that we each want." It was like two collectors who had dedicated their lives to acquiring completely different things had produced something they didn't care an iota about and were each offering it to the other to obtain something they considered priceless. Since the objective value of what was being traded could be ignored under such circumstances, perhaps the ability to obtain anything desired purely through trading could be considered a sort of absolute power too.

A different elder asked, "We heard that you intend to take our queen on as a subordinate. Is that true?"

His question was based on what he had heard from Izlentia and Alphilion, which gave it credibility. The biggest reason Sol wanted to support the elves was surely his desire to add the Elven Queen, a monster equal to the one he already had as a servant, to his retinue. Sol's failure to include this as a condition for the alliance came across as rather suspicious.

"That's something for me to discuss with her personally after I free her. Just to clarify, the alliance I'm suggesting isn't something I expect all elves to comply with. My hope is to be on good terms with your race as a whole while also having official authorization to scout individuals. Conversely, even if those of you who call the shots decide that you cannot say yes as a race, we will still approach your people one-on-one. I only hope that it doesn't come to that, though."

In Sol's mind, the individual took priority over the whole. As he clearly stated, he had every intention of scouting elves in private regardless, which meant the main point of the alliance was to prevent those individuals from feeling out of place among their peers. Depending on interpretation, this could be seen as a denigration of the elven community as a whole, but those

conducting the negotiations were also individuals, just as they were elves. An insistence on prioritizing the decisions of the community over personal agency was sheer drivel that would only make sense to those so weak they could only survive in a group. The truly strong prioritized their own will above the group's. This was the natural order. From a different perspective, Sol was trying to help lift the weight of the decision from the backs of the elders who were stuck in their collective way of thinking.

Determining that Sol was done speaking, Frederica asked, "Does anyone have anything more they want clarified?"

"No, that is enough," one of the elders answered.

"Do you accept the alliance?"

"The Elder Council accepts the alliance and promises to abstain from all actions protesting it."

If there were no further questions, the only thing left to do was await a decision. Sol and Frederica didn't care much what the reply was, even if it was simply to request more time for deliberation, in which case they would simply judge the Elder Council incapable of making decisions and begin negotiating with elves one-on-one, starting with Izlentia and Alphilion.

"Thank you very much." Frederica smiled. "We wish to immediately begin making arrangements to deliver supplies, so please appoint someone who can oversee the proceedings as soon as possible. Additionally, please inform all of your people that anyone with information on elves who have suffered mistreatment is to provide that information to these two subordinates of mine."

The best-case scenario was that the elves agreed as a whole. That was why Sol had first brought his proposal to the Elder Council. Clearly, that had been the right move. The next step was to prove that his promises weren't empty, and the best way to do that was to immediately start carrying them out.

The royal guards had had time to make preparations so that they could take swift action with the information they received, at least pertaining to cases within the borders of Emelia. Frederica could only pray that her father and brothers had not stained their hands with this dreadful business. If they had, her plans to persuade them would fall through and she would have to assume the role of executioner.

As could be inferred from this development, Sol was

prioritizing bringing the elves to his side over securing his hold on the Kingdom of Emelia. Frederica thanked God from the bottom of her heart that she was in a position where she could affect that decision, no matter how slightly.

"Far be it from us to refuse, but we have our pride too. If we simply accept everything you are offering without doing anything in return, the young'uns will laugh at us for being senile old fools sitting on our laurels. With that in mind, please allow us to reciprocate. To start, we offer you history as we know it. Next, although we no longer have the means to reproduce them and only know of them as concepts, we will teach you what we know about magic techniques used during Era Gran Magicka."

Frederica was in the middle of a courteous "Thank you" when Sol excitedly blurted out, "Yes! That will make Gawain incredibly happy!"

As much as Sol, being a boy, was thrilled about creating cooler and more powerful weapons, the princess was brimming with eagerness to learn truths that had been forgotten for a thousand years. She bit back a smile of her own as she said, "Indeed, he was lamenting that the techniques needed to shape Kuzuryuu's materials into their final form were lost in their entirety and that he had no idea how to start."

Now that the elders had decided to enter into an alliance with Sol—though it was effectively still vassalage—they did not hesitate to contribute everything they could. Their difference in opinion with the younger generation was, at its core, due to what they each saw as the most effective way to help their weakened race survive. Now that they were under the protection of someone with absolute strength, such worries were largely rendered moot. The elders thought it obvious that their newest priority was to provide whatever their great ally wanted. Nothing was to be held back.

When Gawain had touched the materials harvested from Kuzuryuu's corpse, he had instinctively understood what form they were to take as weapons. However, he hadn't the faintest idea how to shape and assemble them into that form. Terms and systemized techniques that he wasn't familiar with had popped into his head, but without a manual or an example of their application, there was no way for him to reproduce them. Just knowing what the finished product was supposed to look like meant nothing without the fundamental knowledge of how to

build it.

This classified it as lost technology, and Sol had thought he would have to give up on getting access to such items until he seized control of the Holy See. It was indeed a happy surprise that he could now borrow the wisdom and knowledge of walking encyclopedias who had actually been alive for more than a thousand years. Obtaining weapons at the level of what could be made with Kuzuryuu's materials would go a long way toward realizing the plans he had.

One of the Elders smiled wryly. "To be honest, one of our engineers expressed great interest in working with the materials harvested from Kuzuryuu upon hearing of its death."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Sol. "I hope they can join us as soon as possible."

Apparently, geniuses in specialized fields—or what others might call maniacs—existed among other races too. This time, it turned out to be another member of the Elder Council. That person had been restless ever since Izlentia and Alphilion returned successfully from their mission to steal back the Elven Queen, bringing with them news of the death of a taboo territory boss and a man who could freely shape materials from that boss at will. As an engineer and craftsman, she was willing to sacrifice whatever it took for the opportunity to take part in that process lest she spend the next few millennia feeling regret. Her reaction was exactly the same as Gawain's the other day but augmented with the frustration and yearning that came from thinking that what she wanted was beyond reach.

The disagreement between the Elder Council and the younger elves no longer meant anything to her. All she cared about was that her race wasn't rash enough to get shunned by the absolute being who held the power to realize the dream she would do anything for. That was why she had kept herself in check until today—until this moment.

However, that absolute being had just expressed his desire for her contribution, because even the craftsman in his employ was having trouble handling Kuzuryuu's materials. There was simply no way for her to continue holding back her excitement.

The engineer in question shot up from her seat and shouted, "Do you mean it?!"

Objectively, it looked like a child had suddenly interrupted an important meeting. However, the other elders seemed to have

expected it. They looked up at the ceiling as if to compose themselves before one of them introduced her.

“This is the engineer, my lord.”

Sol, who always looked calm and composed, was now visibly confused. “Uh…is she a child?”

“How rude! Despite my appearance, I’m the oldest person in this village! I’m also the strongest drinker!”

The speaker was very indignant, but Sol was not entirely in the wrong. She looked extremely young, even for an elf, and was shorter than even Luna. Frankly, she had the appearance of a little girl.

“Uh…is that true?”

Another elder sighed. “Yes, my lord. Lamentably.”

The long-suffering expressions on the elves’ faces lent credibility to the claim. Sol’s surprise was instantly replaced by curiosity. It was true that elves looked young, but none of the individuals he had spotted so far looked as young as this engineer. If it was true that she was the oldest, something had to be at work besides individual differences. That gave rise to the possibility that she was using magical means to maintain her youth. Or perhaps she was even a great sage who had perfected a method to turn back her clock. The realization that he had obtained an ally who possessed an incredible mind on top of lost techniques from Era Gran Magicka set his heart pounding.

“Wait, did she say she drinks?”

“Does that mean elf wine exists?!”

However, Sol’s excitement paled in comparison to the ardor that Julia and Frederica suddenly displayed. The claim “I’m also the strongest drinker!” implied that there was alcohol in the Elven Forest. Naturally, the immediate assumption was that it was elf wine, a legend among humans who enjoyed drinking. Any of them would have reacted with equal fervor.

That said, it was a complete surprise to the rest of the party that their illustrious princess had such a passion for alcohol, especially when she seemed even more excited than Julia, who Sol and Reen already knew enjoyed drinking.

The mention of elf wine also had Luna smiling, indicating that even dragons found the drink a treat, which made a lot of sense considering how often myths and legends depicted dragons who loved alcohol.

Despite being a little taken aback at the exaggerated

reactions from the two women who had quietly and courteously supported Sol from behind this whole time, Alphilion said, “Yes, we, uh, do brew our own wine. Would you like some? I’ve heard that humans find it quite overwhelming.”

The elves’ lives were by no means extravagant, and elf wine was therefore a luxury for them too. But it wasn’t important enough to be held back from someone they owed a great debt to and would continue being protected by.

In the first place, elves took pride in the wine they made and were happy to hear other people enjoying and praising it. Naturally, many of them were drinkers themselves. Alphilion was no exception. There had been plans to host a welcoming feast from the start, and elf wine would have been served regardless, but now that Sol’s group had expressed an interest, the elders would surely bring out the bottles they had kept for thousands of years. After all, the best wine, especially that which could never be replaced, had to be enjoyed with those who could truly appreciate it.

“Would we ever! Ah…”

Clearly, Frederica shared their view. Her smile was probably the biggest that Sol had ever seen on her, but she suddenly came back to her senses. The way she turned around with trepidation to see how Sol was looking at her made him look past her princess front and view her as a cute, normal girl for the first time, but that was a secret he wasn’t going to tell her.

Reen and Julia also looked happy that Frederica was starting to show her true self. The sight reminded Sol of a saying from a demihuman race that “wine creates lifelong friends,” even though no one had had a drop yet. At the same time, he realized what a scoundrel he must look like to be drinking while surrounded by the combined beauty of Frederica, Julia, Reen, Luna, and the elder who looked like a little girl, not to mention an entire race known for its attractive features.

However, this was an unfounded worry. If a third party had been present, what they would have seen wasn’t an irresponsible person making young children drink, but a goddamn harem protagonist being waited on hand and foot by drop-dead gorgeous beauties. And their reaction would have been: “Please explode and die.”

Chapter 5: Banquet

The welcome feast in the largest hollow inside the World Tree sapling was in full swing. The sun had set a while ago, but the faint magical light being emitted by the lake surrounding the venue was holding back the veil of night so effectively that there was no need for fire at all. The elves were used to this sight, but the human group marveled greatly at it, imagining that they were gazing at a scene from a myth or legend come to life. The breathtakingly beautiful Elven Queen, still floating in the position of power in the middle of the hollow, further amplified that impression.

Reen sighed. “It’s so beautiful…”

Ever the shrewd self-made woman, Julia reflexively replied, “It’d make for a great tourist destination,” prompting a nod of agreement from Frederica.

Aside from the floating queen, everything here was pretty much how Luna remembered it, and she therefore did not look particularly moved. Sol was sitting a ways away, but he was far too occupied to properly enjoy this wondrous view.

On the other hand, the elves were trying to show his group the very best hospitality they could. Having had almost no contact whatsoever with humans for the past millennium, they were discovering, to their surprise, just how highly humans valued elf wine. The way Frederica had forgotten herself when she first heard it mentioned had been little more than a glimpse.

The elves’ livelihood was by no means affluent, and therefore their stock of elf wine wasn’t all that significant. That said, it was something they absolutely needed for rituals and celebrations, so they always had a certain amount available at all times. Since their saviors were interested, the elves did not mind opening every last bottle that night. Along with the alcohol, they also set out more than enough food to feed the whole village, not hesitating to empty their larders.

“They sure pulled out all the stops,” Julia commented.

“When the elves celebrate, they do it wholeheartedly,” explained Luna, who had some familiarity with the race. “They believe that it is an outright disgrace to ply guests with food and

drink while they themselves endure empty stomachs. They would rather not have a feast at all if that was the only option."

To entertain a guest in the true meaning of the term, besides paying great attention to every last detail, the hosts had to enjoy themselves too. This was not just a matter of pride; it was a way of life that the elves could not imagine compromising on.

"Also," the elf serving Julia and Luna said happily, "we heard that even if we emptied all our stores, Emelia would send more food. That's how we're able to hold such a large banquet. No words can express how thankful we are." She then bowed deeply to Frederica, with all the other elves nearby following suit.

Since someone with the strength to wipe out their whole race had promised to provide support, there was no point in doubting him. So they were now holding their biggest feast in a thousand years.

"Looks like the elves' love for revelry hasn't dimmed in the slightest after all this time," Luna said with a faint smile on her lips while watching them wholeheartedly enjoying themselves.

Of course, this was a banquet hosted as a show of hospitality, so wine and food alone were not enough. All the more so when the guest of honor was a man. As the race known throughout the continent for its beauty, the elves saw this as an opportunity for their gifts to shine.

Simply put, Sol was currently surrounded by the prettiest girls of the prettiest race clad in outfits that were as flimsy and revealing as possible while still coming off as chaste and innocent. That was why he couldn't just enjoy the mystical view of the Elven Forest like his party members were doing.

Julia appraised the crowd. "One is beautiful, one looks innocent, one looks cute, and one is practically oozing sexual appeal."

"And it's obvious the dancers and musicians are ready to go to his side if he simply says the word," Frederica added.

As royalty, she understood well what the elves were trying to do. Despite how young they looked, the girls vying for Sol's attention were surely much older than he. It was probably child's play for them to seduce a seventeen-year-old boy using techniques they had polished for longer than a human's lifespan. All of them were confident that if they could catch his eye and drag him to bed in a drunken stupor, they could secure an unshakable position by his side. They were practically licking

their lips in expectation but showed no sign of it whatsoever. Julia shuddered a little in fear at how masterfully they were hiding anything that would raise his suspicions.

Despite not looking happy with the situation, Luna said, “I suppose you can say this course is only natural for the elves. Since they aren’t doing it with ill intent, we can’t really get in their way.”

Given that Sol wasn’t entirely displeased with the attention, it wasn’t Luna’s place as a mere servant to protest. The same went for Reen and Frederica, who couldn’t kick up a fuss about being “his women” when everything was being carried out under the pretext of thanking and welcoming the whole party. Before they knew it, they had fallen into quite the predicament.

Their seats weren’t actually that far from Sol’s, but they were definitely too far away for private conversations. Of course, they were by no means being neglected. In fact, out of consideration for Sol, there was an all-female staff attending not only to Reen and Frederica but also to Julia and the two royal guards. Apparently, the elves were sensitive to subtle details like that just as much as humans were.

Currently, Julia was the only one with the ability to observe the situation as a whole, and she was enjoying it very much. The royal guards didn’t share her composure because the way Frederica was acting out of character had them on the edge of their seats. Of course, it didn’t help that they were wearing the same elven outfits as the girls around Sol. These had been offered to them before the banquet, and they had accepted upon seeing how happy it made him.

Reen and Frederica were busy fighting the temptation of the fabled elf wine by reminding themselves that this was a bad time to get drunk. Luna thought a little alcohol could help them become more honest about what they wanted, especially since they were now wearing alluring outfits that they would never don under normal circumstances. Being drunk was a great excuse for being a little forward. In that respect, the elves who were making a serious effort to seduce her liege seemed more logical in her eyes.

“That said, those female elves fawning over my lord are getting on my nerves. Before they get carried away any further, I ought to teach them that only those who already have my lord’s favor are suitable for him.”

Reen was plenty attractive as a girl. In the same vein, Frederica was so beautiful that she was known far and wide as Lilium dei Regnum. She was more than a fair match for the elves in terms of looks. Unfortunately, the two were wholly inexperienced in drawing men in. The former had the innocent love of a childhood friend, while the latter had the resolve and intelligence of a princess, but they were still greatly disadvantaged against the elven women who had been femme fatales for several times the years those two had lived so far. Although Sol tried to act more mature than his age, he was just a seventeen-year-old boy inside. And teenage boys were lamentably weak to direct advances of a sensual nature.

Luna found it a personal affront for her master, the master of the All Dragon, to be considered easy prey by lowly mortals. She would indeed have no right to interrupt him if he were fully enjoying himself, but thankfully, she could tell with a glance that although a tenth of him was into it, he was two-tenths embarrassed and seven-tenths troubled. In other words, a tenth of his mind was instinct and the rest was all reason.

In light of this, Luna determined that it was within her rights to teach these elves who thought they already had her beloved master wrapped around their fingers a lesson for making light of him.

Having picked up on what Luna had unconsciously muttered out loud, Julia shot her an amused look. “Does the legendary All Dragon have a way to deal with those four knockout beauties?”

She couldn’t imagine Luna having a way to instantaneously turn Sol into a stud with a thousand nights of experience, All Dragon or no. However, Luna had made it sound like she had something specific in mind that would work against the four elves whom even Julia had to concede she couldn’t measure up to. It didn’t look like she was going to resort to violence, so Julia was curious about what she had up her sleeve.

“I obtained it recently. Since my lord hasn’t expressly forbidden it, I don’t see any problem with using it a little.”

Lately, Luna had been making an effort to be cordial to those within her liege’s inner circle. While matter-of-factly answering Julia’s question, she casually used a certain skill. Though weakened, the elves were still rulers of the forests. If what Luna did had any offensive capability, one of them might have sensed it. However, the skill wasn’t an attack, and its use only took an

instant. Therefore, no one besides Julia had a clue that something had even happened.

The result was so drastic that Reen went “Huh?” in surprise while Frederica murmured, “What’s going on?”

All four elves fawning over Sol had started acting strangely. Needless to say, they didn’t grimace in pain as if they had suffered an attack, nor did they lose consciousness. But from their exaggerated reactions, anyone could tell that *something* had happened.

As could be inferred from the term “fawning over,” the elves were touching Sol somewhere in some way. The sexy older girl standing behind him was practically gluing her entire upper body to him. And yet, all four suddenly pulled back at once as if his body had given them an electric shock. Right after that, they collapsed around him, breathing heavily and quivering. The sexy girl who had had the most skin contact instantly blanked out and lost all bodily control due to—and this was obvious to everyone who had experience in this area—overwhelming pleasure.

“Aaaah… Wh-What is…this?”

The girls on either side and in front managed to maintain their mental faculties somehow, but the one behind Sol fell back on him after jerking away. As a result, her body shuddered two or three times as if she had continued to get shocked. She only got out a few feverish murmurs before losing consciousness and going limp.

Of course, Sol was surprised. He called out to the girls who’d had him in the palms of their hands mere moments ago, but aside from their bodies jolting every time they heard his voice, no coherent reply was forthcoming. All dancing and music stopped abruptly, as the same thing was happening to the dancers and musicians who had been sending him passionate gazes. They seemed better off for having been farther away, but when he called out to them with concern, they were quickly reduced to the same state as the first four. All the girls Sol tried to help or even just looked at were almost instantly intensely aroused. Needless to say, the few male elves in attendance were entirely unaffected. However, they were so bewildered that they seemed rooted in place.

“I’ve amplified the sexual pleasure felt by any who see my lord, catch his gaze, hear his voice, or come into contact with him tenfold. This is a skill that I obtained from the succubus the other

day. It's just perfect for such a situation."

Luna nodded in satisfaction at her handiwork as she revealed what she had done. The other day, she had fought and devoured a nameless succubus who had been monitoring Sol by masquerading as Fiona and taking over her life. Thanks to this, Luna now had all the skills that the succubus had possessed. And because she had used one of those skills, every tiny thing that Sol did was giving all female elves nearby incredible sexual pleasure, turning them into puddles of arousal completely robbed of self-control.

"Is that…something you can use against us?" Frederica asked apprehensively.

"Don't worry," Luna replied. "I would not use it on my lord's companions without permission."

Having read between the lines, Reen asked, "In other words, if Sol ordered it…"

"Of course, I would immediately do so," Luna answered without missing a beat.

"Oh man…" Even Julia was alarmed. She had no intention of denying the dignity and agency of humans or elves, but there was truly no better way to demonstrate that they were still just animals at the end of the day. The power to control sexual pleasure, which directly affected the proliferation and prosperity of a race, wasn't something that could be easily resisted. "You look way too calm for having wreaked such havoc, Lu. But I suppose it *was* effective."

"All females are little more than infants before my lord. I do believe this is a quick and easy way to teach them how futile it is to seduce him." Luna puffed out her modest chest with pride. She cut an adorable figure and couldn't have been more right.

"Yeeeeah…can't argue that."

Julia had no choice but to concede that what Luna had done was incredibly effective at discouraging people from making light of Sol. It should serve as a deterrent to those who knew they could not overcome Sol with force and might therefore approach with similarly underhanded means in the future. That said, his companions couldn't help but shudder when they imagined Luna using that same power on them. This was especially true for Frederica, who had resolved to use seduction if needed. She felt mortified, as if a spotlight had been shined on her hubris.

Alas, Reen, Frederica, and Julia were members of a race with an insatiable appetite for pleasure. Though scared, they were at the same time also intrigued. At least one person gulped unconsciously.

“I don’t think my lord would appreciate it much, but…do you want me to use it on you?” Luna offered.

Julia laughed. “You sure know how to goad people, Lu. Well, it’s clear we’re the only ones left who can attend to Sol. It’s kind of cheating, but do you two want to show up the elves?” She was able to maintain a composed front only because she wasn’t a candidate for Sol’s affections. Also, she was instinctively afraid of this power that Luna seemed so casual about using and was therefore trying to make Reen and Frederica take point.

“Huh? Uh, I-I guess?”

“Let’s do this, Lady Reen. We have a catastrophe on our hands.”

Sure enough, all of the women around Sol were having trouble even standing up. Reen, Frederica, and Julia were the only ones who could take care of the situation. If they did, they would also be saving the elves some embarrassment. Thanks to Luna not using her skill on the trio, they would be sending the message that Sol was always accompanied by women who could stand his charm when he “got serious.”

This couldn’t have been farther from the truth, but once the affected elves recovered, they would naturally tell other people how irresistible Sol was when he “got serious.” Truthfully, even Reen, Frederica, and Julia were curious about what an assault that left targets in such a state felt like. They were hardly the only ones with questions, and it wouldn’t be long before word spread like wildfire.

Just as Reen and Frederica got up and headed to where the female elves were on the ground and the male elves were staring in a daze, Julia grinned mischievously. “Oh, right. I’ll stop casting Remedy on Sol starting now. Same for you two also, to keep things fair.”

This whole time, Julia had been casting Remedy, a spell that removed status effects, on the rest of the party in short intervals as they downed cups of elf wine. In other words, they had been cheating to avoid getting drunk. Sol had asked for it so that their group wouldn’t disgrace themselves before the elves just as their alliance was getting off the ground. It would be rude to turn

down the wine that the elves had offered them out of goodwill, especially because it came from bottles that the elders had produced from their hidden stores after seeing Frederica's and Julia's overreactions. The elves had turned out to be very good at holding their liquor, so the only way the group had been able to keep up was through the reprehensible strategy of repeatedly using Remedy while drinking.

"You intend to disobey my lord's order?"

"It's a special right for being his childhood friend. In the first place, it's discourteous to secretly use magic to not get drunk at a banquet. And secondly, it's Reen and Frederica going up to him now. You won't object to things happening between them and Sol, right?" Julia's disapproval of the strategy wasn't surprising, given her fondness for alcohol. No, what Luna found shocking—to the point of awe—was how brazenly Julia would disobey what Sol had asked for. However, there was nothing that Luna could say when Julia played the childhood friend card.

"I see your point, my lady," Luna replied. "However, to truly keep things fair, shouldn't you apply the same condition to yourself?"

"Wha—? No, see, I'm going to be marrying someone else. I can't risk something happening."

"Don't worry, I will take responsibility and ensure that nothing happens. And if you don't agree, I will simply do to you what I did to the elves."

"Ugh. Oh, fine. Then the condition goes for you too."

"I am the All Dragon. Do you think elf wine is enough to get me drunk?"

"Oh, come on!"

As a loyal servant, Luna couldn't bear placing her master in a situation where he alone was at a disadvantage, even if it was at the request of one of his childhood friends. If Julia had such plans, then at the very least, she had to do the same to herself. It was impossible for her to secretly use magic on herself without the All Dragon noticing. If Sol was onboard with the idea, Luna would be happy to take part in what was basically a drinking contest. Being a dragon, she loved alcohol too and had a great tolerance for it. She wasn't going to let go of what would turn into an opportunity for her to snuggle with a drunk version of her master.

Now that her plans to enjoy the spectacle as an unaffected

bystander had been dashed, Julia voiced a few choice words while joining Reen and Frederica in making their way over to Sol's side. The only thing she could do now was to stick to the role of spurring the other two on while staying in the back herself.

Finally realizing that anything he did would only worsen the situation, Sol sank back into his seat. He knew that Luna was the only one with the ability to cause what was happening, so he asked, "What did you do to the elves, Luna?"

The All Dragon cheerfully floated into his lap as if it were her own reserved seat and lifted her chin as high as she could to return his questioning gaze. With a bright smile and zero remorse, she replied, "I used one of the succubus's skills on the females. It affects all those you stare at, whisper to, or try to touch. Those who look at you for a long time also end up the same way."

Oh, right. I remember her mentioning something crazy like Sensitivity Manipulation being on the list when she devoured that succubus. It's at best morally gray, but now I see how powerful it is on a battlefield of feminine wiles.

"Well…thanks. You got me out of a tough spot."

"I sensed you were enjoying the situation a little but determined that you were feeling much more troubled by Lady Reen and Lady Frederica seeing you that way. Also, I could not overlook my master being made light of."

"Yeah, it wasn't my finest moment."

The call Luna had made was ruthless, but it had indeed laid low the elven ensemble that Sol had been struggling to fend off, and in one fell blow, to boot. His shoulders slumped with mortification, but there was nothing that he could say other than thanks.

"No one can blame you for not being able to handle something you don't have much experience with," Luna continued. "However, it's on you to go practice and gain experience. Why do you not, when Lady Reen and Lady Frederica—Lady Eliza, even—are available? If you simply want a partner to practice with, I am also at your service."

"Um…"

Luna's ongoing rebuke wasn't coming from a place of jealousy or petulance, but vexation at seeing her remarkable liege at the mercy of pretty faces. Even when ripped out of the context of the

intricate relationships between guys and girls, her very indignant words were logically sound. It would be one thing if Sol had been rebuffed, but the situation was one in which he had any number of people who could help him out, so long as he wished for it. As a dragon, a race that highly valued battle, Luna simply couldn't comprehend why he was making no effort to overcome such an easily exploitable weakness.

All that said, she was aware that she was woefully unsuitable for this specific issue, and therefore a part of her also wanted to do something about the fact that she melted whenever Sol touched her. To that end, she was willing to bear a little pain. She had heard that the pain was something all human females experienced once, and if humans could withstand it, there was no way a dragon couldn't.

Upon reaching Sol's side a beat later and seeing how despondent he looked, Frederica tried to stand up for him. "Lady Luna, that's more something for *us* to approach him with. And unfortunately, we're not much better than—"

"Do you want to work on it right now, then?" Luna cut in curtly.

Though without experience herself, Frederica had plenty of knowledge and wanted to push Sol more proactively. However, her hands were tied as long as Reen had yet to make a move. So she redirected Luna's question.

"What do you think, Lady Reen?"

"I will, um, do my best," Reen replied, her face flushed but her eyes shining with resolve. It seemed that even she had felt threatened by Sol's behavior with the elves.

"Um, Reen, you don't have to force—"

Sol's intention was to give Reen a way out of the corner that she was being backed into, but Julia determined that it would be detrimental to allow the conversation to be shelved now.

"Sol, let's drink without cheating," she said in a low voice audible only to him, then turned to the male elves. "Excuse me, it looks like he got a little careless about keeping a lid on his abilities. Can you help tend to your kin who are on the ground?"

"O-Of course! Right away, my lady!"

The men were snapped out of the stupor caused by the sight of their women being in a condition they had never seen before and quickly escorted them out of view of their esteemed guests, whispering furiously among themselves.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?”

“No way, man.”

“Even those four?!”

“Did Falosrien seriously faint just from touching him?!”

As they passed Sol, they shot him glances filled with awe for so thoroughly trouncing those whom even they, as men, stood no chance against. They swore never to make advances on Sol’s female companions, who were touching him without being affected in the slightest. All the elves who had thought humans powerless against their breathtaking beauty and perfected skills had just had their conceit dashed to pieces.

“So, what is with this situation?” Sol asked no one in particular.

Now, Luna was in his lap, Reen was sitting on his left, Julia was on his right, and Frederica was plastered to his back in place of the sexy older elf named Falosrien. In other words, the members of “Sol’s harem” had taken over the positions manned by the chosen elven beauties from earlier, leaving him just as troubled as before. In fact, the situation was worse because it was no longer mere strangers but girls he knew personally. Moreover, they were wearing very skimpy clothing, and two of them even had feelings for him.

“We are simply doing what the female elves were doing earlier,” Luna replied. “This is to demonstrate that we will not embarrass ourselves even when you get serious, my lord.”

Sol, who had no recollection of ever “getting serious,” couldn’t help sighing, but he understood what his servant was getting at. Basically, she wanted to rid the elves of the notion that he could be easily manipulated and let them know in no uncertain terms that he was already taken. Her method was particularly effective against elves, a race known for its beauty. Beyond that, having a reputation as someone who couldn’t be moved even by female elves would go a long way in his future dealings with other demihuman races.

Though Sol didn’t much like the thought of his image growing too exaggerated, it came with the added benefit of drastically lowering the number of impertinent men who would flirt with his companions. One look at the elven men currently hanging back and staring at him in awe was all he needed to realize how drastic the effect would be.

By this point, no one but Sol and Luna could defeat Reen’s group in a straight up fight. Very few attacks, even ones that

caught them off guard, could even touch them, thanks to their HP barrier. As long as they were careful about not getting poisoned, there was simply no way to harm them or coerce them through force.

Julia smirked. “Isn’t what we’re doing already embarrassing, though?”

As she expected, Luna was the only one who reacted to her provocation. Not only were Reen’s and Frederica’s faces dyed crimson, the significant amount of skin that they were exposing was also clearly flushed. It was a stretch for them to act like masterful enchantresses who were composed and in control of the situation in such a state, but who could blame them? They had adopted the same postures used by the elven beauties, which meant Reen was hugging Sol’s left arm to her chest and Frederica was resting her chin on his left shoulder with her entire torso pressed up against his back. The only term that could be used to describe how they looked together was “harem.”

Noticing that Reen and Frederica were sighing and letting out heated moans every time Sol moved even slightly, Luna tilted her head quizzically. “Strange… I’m quite sure I only used the succubus’s skill on the elves.”

Julia chuckled. “Lu, I’ll teach you something interesting. All girls, dragon or human, can feel more pleasure than just ten times the usual when they touch the person they love.”

“Julia!”

“Lady Julia!”

The two girls in question raised their voices in protest, but they weren’t very convincing with their smitten expressions. Reen had gone beyond just hugging Sol’s arm to interlacing all ten of her fingers with his, while Frederica had moved her head closer such that their cheeks were now touching. The unprecedented amount of skin contact was making Sol’s heart beat so fast that his mind couldn’t form a single coherent thought, much less churn out a reply to Julia’s teasing.

“Interesting. All girls, you say. I see.” Luna looked straight at Reen and Frederica, who were making the most besotted faces she had ever seen them make even though she most definitely had not cast the succubus spell on them.

When she thought back to how she herself acted when her master touched her, she realized that she couldn’t challenge

Julia's assertion either. Then a gush of pride filled her as her thoughts veered off into the unrelated tangent of how incredible her master was that he made all the girls in his circle, including her, so infatuated with him without the aid of a spell.

Not satisfied with teasing only the girls, Julia turned to Sol. "But it doesn't only happen to girls, does it?"

Although Sol had looked much more troubled than embarrassed earlier, he was now blushing just as hard as Reen and Frederica and was absolutely petrified. "Umm... I'm really sorry to ask this, but Reen and Frederica, can you, uh, let go of me for a moment?"

Having figured out that the situation was just going to get worse the longer he let Julia run her mouth, he was begging for a brief respite so that he could gather his thoughts.



After a moment of consideration, Reen simply said, “No.”

“I’m…sorry too,” Frederica added, “but we need to show the elves that we’re fine when we touch you.”

Despite being beet red from head to toe and having a pulse racing faster than they had ever experienced even while in battle, both girls firmly rejected Sol’s request. According to Luna, he had been happy about being doted on by the elf beauties—a tenth was not nothing—so they were now insisting partly to punish him. More than that, however, the fact that he was blushing harder and was more flustered than he had been when surrounded by girls the two thought far more attractive than themselves made it out of the question for them to let up.

They were aware that their mental and physical states were very abnormal at the moment, and yet they were over the moon that Sol was reacting so much to them as girls. No matter how embarrassed they were or how much it killed them to do so, this was the time to double down. They knew it instinctively, regardless of how immature or noble they were. That said, embarrassing was embarrassing, so it was perhaps unsurprising that they decided to take advantage of Julia’s declaration to tap into the drunken courage offered by the elf wine.

Reen reluctantly disentangled her left hand to pick up a glass and downed half its contents. “Here, Sol. You want some too?”

“Uh…sure.” Strangely aroused by the glistening sheen of sweat on her neck, he failed to muster any resistance and obediently finished off the rest of the glass.

“Could you help me drink some too, Lord Sol?”

Upon seeing their exchange, Frederica became worried that they would get drunk on their own and leave her the only one dying of embarrassment. As both her hands were on his shoulders, she couldn’t reach for a glass herself and therefore badgered him to help her, using the most coquettish expression she could imagine.

Someone would have had to give Sol a prize if he had been able to feed Frederica mouth to mouth, but such an advanced move was naturally beyond him. No, he was the same old wuss who had to fully concentrate to bring his glass to the girl’s glossy lips without spilling a drop. Despite his best efforts, the awkward posture made it so that a trickle spilled from the corner of Frederica’s mouth as she drank. The sight made not only Sol but even Reen and Julia gulp.

Although elf wine was very easy to drink, its alcoholic content was extremely high. The average person would instantly get drunk from half of a slightly larger glass without help from a spell like Remedy. Now that their levels were in the triple digits, Sol, Reen, and Frederica had livers functioning far beyond normal human capacity, but this wine very much lived up to its legendary status. Before becoming detoxified, it seared their livers and turned their brains to mush.

"My lord, it's become hard to sit here."

For some reason, Luna started shifting around as if her seat had suddenly grown uncomfortable to sit on. Upon realizing the reason, Julia, who had started taking small sips herself, had to bite her knuckles to stop herself from bursting out in raucous laughter.

It was from this point on that Sol, Reen, and Frederica—already thoroughly plastered—began a conversation that they were entirely serious about but that seemed equal parts childish, heartwarming, and hilarious from Julia's point of view. Despite how certain Luna had been that she, being a dragon, would never get drunk, being in the body of a little girl turned out to be a big factor that she had not accounted for. It took no time at all for her to get drunk too, but she just curled up in Sol's lap and contently snuggled up to him, and nothing alarming happened.

Normally, this display would have left the elves baffled by what they were being forced to watch. However, it had been only moments ago when their own women had been rendered so aroused through a mere gaze or touch that their hips instantly gave way. These girls, on the other hand, were touching and playing with Sol for a prolonged period of time and only looking flustered with no sign of losing consciousness. With that in mind, the elves concluded that, despite the childish dialogue, they were an audience to some high-level psychological strategy.

In the end, the banquet continued late into the night until the wine knocked out every last person besides Sol.

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"I didn't expect Frederica to be the last one standing."

The girl who had insisted "I'm not dwunk yet, and I'm not shleepy!" to the end was now breathing quietly with her head still resting on Sol's shoulder. After making sure she really was

asleep, he freed her from her awkward position and laid her dainty yet supple body next to where Reen was nodding off. His shoulder was damp, but he chose to ignore it.

Thanks to the display window at the edge of his vision, he knew the positions of every living being present at the venue and had confirmation that every single one of them had passed out. That was something that would normally never happen, but when Sol had discerned that Reen and Frederica had started a figurative fight, he had invited everyone to join the drinking contest. No elf would ever back down when challenged to a drinking contest, especially not the heavyweights who had been selected to fill out the attendance list at the banquet so as to not embarrass their race in the presence of their guests. In the end, however, all of them had been forced to let go of both their pride and consciousness.

As for Sol's party, Julia had been the first to go down. She loved wine like few others, but she wasn't particularly good at holding her liquor. The reliance on Remedy that she had developed over the past few years had backfired too, and she couldn't stop once she started enjoying herself. The sight of Reen and Frederica acting entirely out of character and seesawing between blatantly flirting with Sol and talking his ear off with complaints had sent her into fits of giggles until she had eventually slipped into a contented sleep. Though she was great for contributing to the occasion's vibes, she turned out to be the most unsuitable one for guzzling down large amounts of alcohol without Remedy's help.

The next was, surprisingly, Luna. She had drunk the elf wine like water, thinking herself the All Dragon of a thousand years ago. Unfortunately, she was now in a split body, and the body of a young girl no less. She had gotten wasted quite fast, and for some reason, her bestial instincts had surfaced in full force, with her becoming obsessed with grooming Sol's lap. She had started by reaching for a place that was *not* his lap, but after a severe scolding, she'd had no choice but to give up on it. Eventually, after giving his lap an extremely thorough beauty treatment, she'd also slipped right into sleep. If she ever found out that her drool had then proceeded to make a large damp patch, she would probably remain bedridden for several days.

Losing to Frederica by a hair's breadth, Reen had gotten to a state where she was just repeatedly saying, "I'm not dunk! I'm

not dunk!” while laughing uproariously about how she was touching Sol and making him touch her. She seemed to be having a very good time indeed. Rather than competing with Frederica, it was more like the two of them were working together to test the limits of how far they could tease Sol. At the end, she went right out and said, “Oh man, that was sho fun” before blacking out.

The last one, Frederica, was burdened by being a member of Emelian royalty, which meant she considered losing Sol’s favor the absolute worst-case scenario. As a result, she had a tendency to be overly cautious both when making and resisting advances. She could not tap into the leniency that naturally came with being a childhood friend to freely mess with Sol, nor could she give in to her instincts as though she were a dragon. Truthfully, she felt a little jealous of the others.

When she’d become old enough to do so, she had immediately drunk enough to throw up to confirm how she would act when inebriated. Ever since, she had made sure to drink to her limit once every year to check on how her growth affected her in this regard. In light of her identity and beauty, knowing exactly how much alcohol she could handle and being able to turn the situation into one that benefited her country even when drunk was crucial. This was why she had been rather confident when Sol had first declared the drinking contest. When cheating through spells or skills was taken out of the equation, she was sure that she had the most experience with alcohol within the group. Average humans could never even dream of beating elves in drinking, but her level was over 100, and she was well aware of how much that elevated her body’s abilities. She had assumed that included her liver function, and sure enough, she had managed to outlast everyone attending the banquet aside from Sol.

However, she had underestimated how fearful wine could be when it was truly appreciated. Until now, she had treated wine merely as a poison, and her testing of how it affected her mental faculties and the best way to take advantage of its effects had been conducted alone. Tonight, there were two major factors that she had failed to foresee: She was with a guy whom she wholeheartedly wanted to earn the affections of, and she was with another girl whom, despite being rivals in love, she considered a friend of the same standing as herself. Tonight, she

found out for the first time how having fun when drinking influenced her behavior. In other words, this was the first time in her life that she'd gotten truly drunk.

Reen was partly responsible for egging her on, but having the excuse of being drunk gave her the license to have a little too much fun touching Sol and making him touch her. Thanks to her training, she wasn't the type of person who would forget what she did when drunk, so she would definitely want to dig a hole and bury herself in it when she regained consciousness the next day.

To make matters worse, seeing Sol acting surprisingly composed despite being extremely embarrassed prompted her to say things that she would not even dream of saying when sober. If it had been merely the likes of "I need you to make a move on me so I can fulfill my duties as princess" or "get to the next base with Reen already so I can too," then she could have perhaps justified it at a later time. However, when Reen had brought up the topic of why Sol wasn't laying his hands on her, it had prompted Frederica to spill all the complaints she had about being born as a girl in a royal family. From there, she'd springboarded to talking about Sol's ability to treat her like a normal girl despite all the aforementioned shortcomings, how happy it made her, and how being with him allowed her to make the biggest contribution she could to her country.

It would have been just peachy if she had stopped there, but alas, there was no limit to how big a hole someone could dig themselves into when drunk. Frederica herself did not know what had flipped the switch in her, but she'd started to passionately expound on how it turned her on to be treated harshly by someone she had no hope of resisting. Naturally, Reen and Sol had been greatly taken aback. If Frederica had been sober, she would have laughed off what she'd said as a joke to smooth things over. Unfortunately, it made her really happy to be entirely honest with the boy she liked and her very first friend, and she instead went on to provide details that she had never voiced in her entire life and elaborate with rapidfire speech on kinks that even she had been aware were perverse.

Sol sighed. "What just happened...is very much going to turn into a whole thing, I imagine. How should I handle it?"

Of course, being the only person who remained conscious to the end meant that Sol remembered it all. That included Julia's

cackling, Luna's grooming, Reen's unexpectedly forward approach and the honest feelings she had for him, and Frederica's numerous sexual overtures based on fetishes that would shatter her image in countless ways should they become publicly known.

"The reason I'm so resistant to alcohol has to be Player, right?"

Despite having outdrank not only the elves but even his overleveled companions, Sol was only feeling slightly tipsy. It was true that he had the highest level, but since he had already given everyone else as many stats as they could take, his level wasn't enough to fully explain his exceptional resistance to alcohol.

It seemed obvious to conclude, then, that Player was giving him a certain amount of resistance to most, if not all, status debuffs in this world. That made sense in light of how a player was, by definition, an external presence. No matter how much the player's avatar inside a game was affected by status effects, it wouldn't impact the player controlling that avatar whatsoever.

During his days with Black Tiger, Sol had participated in numerous parties where wine had flowed like water. However, he had never developed a sense of wariness toward drinking to oblivion. Part of it was because the wine being served had been nowhere near as powerful as the legendary elf wine, but also because Julia had always been on hand to cast Remedy as soon as she noticed anyone getting too unruly. Thanks to her, hangovers had never been more than a slight buzz.

Now that Sol thought about it, he realized the reason those drinking parties had always ended with Julia and him being slightly tipsy was that she had been cheating the entire time. When she stopped doing it…well, the lamentable state that everyone ended up in was plain to see.

"I guess this is an easy way to get people to be honest with me…maybe?"

If alcohol had the power to reduce Frederica, someone Sol considered far more talented than himself, to such a state, then it could prove much more useful than he had thought. It was a big discovery that he himself wouldn't go beyond being merely tipsy no matter how much he drank.

At the same time, Sol also found himself wishing he had drank till all inhibitions went out the window when he had been with Black Tiger. If he did, his relationship with Mark and Alan

might have ended up being very different.

In any case, if Reen and Frederica had actually meant everything they'd said tonight, there was no more reason for Sol to hold back or be evasive anymore. As a teenage boy, he had both the interest and the appetite. After having a proper conversation with Reen when they were both sober, he would be more than happy to change the nature of his relationship with her.

"But before that…"

Sol looked up at the Elven Queen, still floating serenely in the core of the World Tree's mana. There were countless holes in the walls and the ceiling of the hollow, as the World Tree sapling was like many giant trees interlaced together. The way the queen was illuminated by both the moonlight and starlight filtering through and the fantastical light emanating from the surface of the surrounding lake truly gave her a breathtaking, divine beauty.

"I have to get Aina'noa to join me just as I did Luna and set everything up so that I can devote my full attention to going dungeon delving and unsealing territories."

What Sol was currently seeking was strength, not beauty. Gaining experience with wine and women wasn't bad, but they would lose all meaning if he allowed them to come before his primary goals. For that reason, he would now reach for the Captive Elven Queen just as he had the Bound Evil Dragon. He would make the being who had ruled over the World Tree and controlled the outer mana that filled the world a thousand years ago become a member of his party.

To make it happen, he was willing to sacrifice anything. This included creating a schism in the world's religion and crushing underfoot anyone who refused to comply.

Chapter 6: Taking Over the Underworld

There was a general perception that adventurers started their days late. This was because, even though they earned far more than those who lived inside city walls and worked respectable jobs, they poured everything they had after paying for equipment and training into pleasure. Of course, rookies couldn't afford to waste any money, and those at very high ranks would get into investing and starting businesses, effectively becoming more noble and less commoner. The ones in the middle of the curve, however, made up the bulk of the adventurer population, and a majority of them indeed lived this way. That was why the overall impression of adventurers was that they were big earners *and* big spenders.

In light of these circumstances, the fortified city of Garlaige, which was also known as a city of adventurers, had a nightlife district even bigger than that of Magnamelia, the capital of the Kingdom of Emelia. To illustrate how impressive Garlaige was, it was often pointed out that two of the city's largest restaurants had even opened branches in the capital. It was little wonder that adventurers were almost constantly hungover on their days off.

None of this mattered at the moment to the members of Libertadores, Sol's newly established clan, who had drank till they blacked out after causing all manner of commotion. Although they were mostly still asleep, Sol, their ringleader, had gotten up early in the morning and was already back in the vicinity of Garlaige. Naturally, he was accompanied by Luna, his faithful retainer.

Reen and Julia wouldn't be as bothered, but Frederica would surely think it a huge failure on her part that she had been unable to see Sol off. Not that he would blame her, of course. Together, those at the banquet had depleted not just the elf wine of legend but bottles that had sat in the elf elders' cellars for thousands to tens of thousands of years.

"Ugh, this is more grueling than I'd thought." Sol grimaced while sprinting on in the battle mode that he had obtained when his level had reached the triple digits. The wine from last night

was still in his system, making him feel ill in a way that he couldn't quite describe.

Thanks to his talent, he had a high tolerance for drinking and therefore wouldn't get hammered or actually throw up. That said, wine did give him a bit of a buzz, and if he went straight to bed, he would wake up with a minor hangover. Put another way, Player would tolerate changes to his mental and physical state that wouldn't compromise his decision-making capability. It wasn't so strict that it robbed him of his ability to feel hot or cold, for example.

As a bit of an aside, though spells like Remedy could alleviate the mental fog and the urge to throw up caused by inebriation, they couldn't entirely remove a hangover after it had already set in. Sol was at fault for not having used it before going to sleep, but his mind had dropped the ball precisely because he had been drunk. Many who loved drinking absolutely hated the sensation of losing their high spirits and sense of being all-powerful in the blink of an eye and suddenly returning to sobriety. Sol didn't consider himself an aficionado, but even he had an aversion to the sensation.

The situation last night had gone far beyond such considerations, but he often purposely chose to succumb to sleep despite knowing he would regret it when waking up. Of course, it was a bit of a rich person's dilemma, as healing spells normally fetched handsome prices and therefore the idea of using them for a mere hangover would never even occur to most people.

"So, wine affects even you, my lord?"

"And you look just fine and dandy. Dragons really are amazing."

From what Sol could see, Luna had already made a full recovery. He recalled the strange behavior that she had exhibited last night but now wondered if she had simply been playing along in a situation where everyone else seemed to be losing their minds.

"I'm…actually not."

"Really?"

"Regrettably."

The truth was, she was feeling down. She had loved drinking back when she was in dragon form, but she had never once completely lost herself like humans did. The All Dragon had

drank only to enjoy the taste and slight buzz. That she had embarrassed herself so much now that she was in human form was a huge shock to her. What made it worse was that she had been aware she was embarrassing herself but had been enjoying herself so much that she'd continued doing so as a way to show Sol her affection.

Now that the sun had risen and it was a brand-new day, the memories of last night were killing her inside. As the final nail in the coffin, she had been fast asleep until her master had woken her up. That last thing was what she found most difficult to accept. Of the myriad forms that she could have chosen, adopting that of a child had probably been a large factor. She was actually more hungover than Sol was, since he hadn't gotten as drunk in the first place. She just seemed fine because she had gotten used to much greater agony, having been imprisoned for a thousand years. That, and she was making more of an effort to hide her expressions than usual to prevent Sol from noticing how much she was writhing in mortification from the still vivid memories of last night. If he had been in top condition, he might have been able to see through her bravado.

"Found them. Ah, they're surrounded."

The target Sol was searching for had appeared on the edge of the zoomed-out display in his view. He had left his sleeping party members in the Elven Forest to come all the way here early in the morning to make contact with Eliza and her party. As it turned out, he had found them surrounded by roughly thirty red dots, each of which represented a monster.

"What do you want me to do?"

"They should have no trouble against a pack of shadow wolves, but I want to talk with them right away, so wipe the monsters out, please."

Through Player, Sol had already given Eliza's group all the skills they needed to carry out their respective roles, not to mention all the HP, MP, and stats they could accept. To them, shadow wolves were trash mobs, strays that didn't live in a territory, much less a dungeon. Such weaklings were no threat to the group, even more so if they'd leveled up, which they surely must have after all the requests Steve had mentioned them completing. Still, being able to fight thirty shadow wolves with no risk of losing didn't mean they could do it fast. The wolves weren't going to give Eliza's group all that many experience

points anyway, so Sol ordered Luna to just get rid of them.

“Okay.”

Before Luna’s cute voice faded, she had already activated Multilock Homing Laser, a rather convenient offensive spell that she had obtained from devouring the Fiona-look-alike succubus. As she floated in pace with Sol, thirty-two rays of light shot up into the sky from her back, then traversed several kilometers in the blink of an eye, each slaying a different shadow wolf.



This overwhelming display of power left Eliza's group stunned, but they quickly remembered that there was only one person capable of it, and delight flooded their faces.

"Lord Sol!"

Just as Eliza had expected and hoped for, Sol and Luna abruptly teleported into view, floating above the ring of shadow wolves that had been reduced to mere corpses. In the next beat, she knelt and said, "Good morning, my lord" by way of a more appropriate greeting. Johan and Louise managed to do the same in concert with her.

All three immediately recognized that Sol and Luna had changed drastically from that fateful night they had first met. Their strength wasn't merely the kind that Eliza's group could now sense because they had gotten stronger than most veteran adventurers. No, the pair was emanating an aura that would make all beholders instinctively think, *No way am I winning in a million years.* In fact, it wasn't so much an aura as a magical glow with mass that was just blasting out like an open faucet.

"Good morning," Sol replied in his usual easygoing tone while slowly descending. "I heard from Steve that you guys are up to something interesting, so I came to check up on you. Looks like he was right."

"I'm deeply sorry. If you want us to stop, we can immediately turn our attention to territories or dungeons." Eliza's voice was quivering. Discerning from Sol's words that her group had been acting against his wishes, she was afraid that he would berate them. Or worse, erase them.

Maybe I was too thoughtless. Johan, Louise, I'm sorry.

It wasn't as if Sol had paused to answer, but the precious few seconds in the lull felt like years on the executioner's block for Eliza.

"Oh, it's not that I want you to stop or anything. I just wanted to ask why you're taking on quests of this nature en masse." By the time Sol's feet touched the ground, he had switched off his battle mode, and the flaring torrent of mana that had frightened Eliza's group so much vanished without a trace. Luna stayed at his side, still floating, looking happy about being out in nature.

Luna had seen through the group's fear, but she couldn't understand the cause. According to Steve, they had been focusing their energy on a rather odd type of request, but it wasn't like they had been slacking off or misusing their power. If

Eliza was acting like Luna herself did when she messed something up, it would have made sense to her, but that wasn't the case. So Luna was truly puzzled.

"Of course, my lord." Eliza heaved an inward sigh of relief as she noted how Sol only looked curious, whereas Luna, who would have been glowering if Sol was angry, was actually in a good mood. She could see why he would have questions, and as long as it didn't make him mad, then all was well. If he determined that what they were doing was unnecessary, they simply had to act according to his instructions going forward. Even so, Eliza remained deferential and proceeded to explain herself in a courteous way. "My intention is to spread the name of Libertadores among those of the bottom caste of society, like we used to be. In other words, to gain popularity among the common people."

"By accepting requests that pay badly?"

"Yes, my lord."

On their first day, Eliza's group had completed the training course for beginners and passed a test with scores that had immediately promoted them to Rank B. But after that, they hadn't accepted a single Rank B request. It wasn't that they were challenging themselves with Rank A requests or missions. On the contrary, they only took on requests of Rank C or lower that, in exchange for having a low payout, carried little risk. Thanks to having Rank B strength, they were going through their assignments like they wanted to wipe them out. Not even rookies were interested in such jobs, so no one was complaining. Not that they could, since the group were actually rookies.

They were also taking on requests that were unpopular for other reasons. For example, those issued by impoverished villages that, despite only offering a pittance of a reward, were far away and possibly involved with powerful targets that almost no one knew anything about. Ones that involved a large area and took time due to not having a clear goal, such as "Kill the hordes of large rats in Garlaige's sewer system that have grown sharply for some reason." Ones where the reward and danger could fluctuate so much that it might turn into a wasted trip, such as "There are shadow wolf sightings on the road to such-and-such town so please kill them and destroy their dens if you find them."

In short, these were all requests that no sane adventurer

would accept but that the guild had no grounds to turn away. The kind that adventurers mocked before promptly putting them out of mind. The adventuring business was, of course, not a charity. Adventurers put their lives on the line, abused their bodies and minds, and poured fortunes into their weapons and equipment. Some of them even considered requests that did not offer rewards commensurate with the task an affront.

On the other hand, those requesting such jobs were truly in need of help, and the amount they offered, which the relevant adventurers considered chump change, was a small fortune gathered with great pains. Despite being told that no one would accept their request, they had no other recourse but to register them. They would pray fervently, knowing the only other thing that they could offer, their gratitude, wasn't worth a thing. And in most cases, these people would leave the world before their request was even removed from the bulletin board at the guild. There were perhaps a few in the pile that would have led to a windfall for anyone foolish enough to accept, but no one would ever know.

"Because of our background, we understand what a blessing it is to have someone accept the quests that we're now taking on. It's because they pay so badly that we can earn true gratitude from the people."

The joy on their faces did not appear to be an act. Thanks to their encounter with Sol, they now had the power to become the kind of "foolish" adventurer they had once prayed for but known better than to expect. Of course, they were not only motivated by mere sentimentality. While they were earning goodwill with the Adventurer's Guild for clearing a backlog of unpopular quests, the speed at which they were able to go through such tasks thanks to their overwhelming strength meant they were actually making a rather tidy profit. They weren't going after the well-paying jobs that other adventurers made their living from, so they weren't stepping on anyone's toes. In fact, because they had been introduced to the world with great fanfare as rookies of Libertadores, they were helping to offset any ill will that people held toward Sol for his meteoric rise to fame.

In short, Eliza's plan was to earn the gratitude of the masses the slow and steady way while Sol's group stood at the forefront dealing with taboo territories and dungeons and whatnot.

"I see. I love that. It's a wonderful idea."

“Th-Thank you, my lord!”

After listening to her full explanation, Sol was deeply impressed. Because he was so obsessed with his own dream, such considerations had never even crossed his mind. If he had been in Eliza’s shoes, he would have cleaned out the entire slate of quests and missions that would enable him to level up in the most efficient way, not sparing a moment to think about his fellow adventurers or the requesters.

In fact, that was pretty much what he had been doing the past two years. There were times when he’d had to work hard to discourage Mark and Alan from taking on jobs far beyond their abilities, but never once had he been inclined to accept one that was a waste of time to gain popularity or out of sentiment. Since all he had heard from Steve was that the group was taking on “strange” jobs, he had been worried that they were getting overconfident and reaching beyond their abilities.

How embarrassing.

As it turned out, Eliza was far more mature and intelligent than Sol had given her credit for. Her group was not overextending, and they were having a lot of fun fulfilling jobs with power beyond their wildest dreams. Not only were they making people happy by doing so, but they had earned far more than they would have in a month a few days earlier. Johan and Louise had gotten just as hooked as Eliza, and for good reason, even if being surrounded by thirty-plus shadow wolves had made them want to cry a little.

As the cherry on top, Sol was impressed and had even praised the group for what they were doing. In Eliza’s mind, that was a massive success. Now she wanted to cry for a different reason.

“Do you really have no interest in taking on dungeons and territories, though?”

Eliza’s eyes shifted a little. “Um, it’s not that I have no interest, but…”

It wasn’t only Johan and Louise she wanted to head into dungeons and territories with. And there was a part of her that wanted to help Sol in such places in the same way he had saved her, though she knew how improbable it was.

Dense as ever, Sol sadly didn’t pick up on her feelings at all. “That’s fine. Still, being even stronger would probably help you do what you’re doing more efficiently, right? Also, I imagine it’d make things easier if you had enough strength to clearly set

yourselves apart if you're to continue expanding your organization."

Since Eliza had proper reasons for the direction she had set, which would be beneficial both to Sol and Libertadores, there was no need to force her to stop. Rather, he thought it better to support her so that she and her group could finish their inefficient quests with greater efficiency.

"Just as you say, Lord Sol."

It was a decision that Eliza was grateful for. Currently, Johan, Louise, and she were the only former members of the Gafus Gang who had been blessed with strength by Sol. When they'd returned that night, after a bit of a commotion, they had seized complete control of the gang. The staggering quantity and quality of gifts from Sol that they had carried into the hideout the next day had cemented their position.

Johan and Louise were superior to Eliza, a healer, in terms of sheer offensive strength, but knowledge of Sol's existence ensured that they would never dare think of vying for the position of boss. Even so, there were men in the gang who were trying to claw back some power by instigating Johan. However, if Eliza grew so strong that even Johan and Louise didn't stand a chance against her, such problems would naturally go away. Truthfully, she wanted to expel such troublemakers from the group, but there was a good chance they would just set their eyes on other children, and bringing such people into line was also a part of what Sol was asking of her. After learning what she had about how helpful strength was and how it could best be utilized over the past few days, she was very grateful that he was offering to give her even more.

"Then can you give me some of your time now, Eliza? Afterward, I'll help out with your quests for the day."

Sol wanted Eliza to be stronger. That way, he could start filling his significant number of companion slots with her subordinates without having to worry about upsetting the balance of power in her organization. The quickest way to do that was to go give the closest taboo territory boss a love tap and raise Eliza's level to the triple digits.

◇◆◇◆◇

"Aaaaah..."

Eliza was in a huge fluster because a torrent of magical light was bursting from her body. Thanks to the incredible strength that Sol had granted her the other day, she had already completed quite a few quests. Some of them had involved fighting monsters, so she and her party had leveled up once. She hadn't expected it to happen again this morning, since she had only gotten through two quests so far, but she knew from firsthand experience that leveling up came with a drastic increase in physical ability and a mysterious burst of light. She had thought, *Right, this is how adventurers get stronger,* and felt happily reassured that if she continued applying herself, she would eventually have what it took to carry out Sol's order to take over the underworld.

Alas, leveling up just the one time had done nothing to mentally prepare her for what was happening now. The persistent waves of pleasure coursing through her body and the unending light show told her that her strength was growing faster than she could comprehend. The reason for the phenomenon was no mystery: She was staring at the corpse of the enormous griffin that had been the boss of Taboo Quattuor mere moments before.

"It's a rather strange feeling, isn't it? But anyway, as long as you don't walk into any taboo territories or go deeper than the tenth floor of any dungeons, you're now pretty much invincible. You have the strength to handle any high-ranking quest or mission the Adventurer's Guild approaches you with, so feel free to accept any that strike your fancy."

Despite understanding the words Sol was saying, Eliza's mind currently lacked the capacity to process them. When leveling up yesterday, she and Louise had shot each other looks and barely managed to get through the experience without Johan catching on. The strange blend of pleasure and pain thrusting upward from the navel and spreading through the body was apparently not a big deal for guys, but the two of them had nearly collapsed.

Judging by Johan's behavior at the time and how Sol was now chuckling while experiencing the same rush of level ups, the contrast in sensation was likely based on gender and not merely an individual difference. Not even Reen, Julia, and Frederica's two royal guards had been able to keep a straight face throughout the ordeal, while Frederica herself, despite her pride as a

princess, had blinked back tears. It was all too understandable that Eliza's knees had buckled, leaving her sprawled on the ground.

"I…understand. I will make sure to heed instructions from the guild going forward."

"Don't feel obliged to overextend yourselves, though. And in the future, when things settle down a bit more, let's hit up a dungeon or two."

"I'd love to!"

Sol was choosing to not comment on Eliza's red face or how she was on the ground. Dense though he was, he could tell from her teary eyes that she was desperately hoping he wouldn't. His suggestion made her so happy that under any other circumstances she would have seized the opportunity to give him a big hug, but she literally couldn't muster any strength in her legs at the moment, and she hated it. She had no business sitting on the ground excitedly shouting her head off like a puppy that couldn't control its bladder.

"All right, with this your strength has become magnitudes greater than that of normal people. Let's see… For starters, can you pick out thirty candidates for me? Say, five parties of six members each?"

"Um…candidates, my lord?"

The "what for?" wasn't said but heard. Sol seemed to have already moved on to another topic, but Eliza was having trouble keeping up. In the first place, the "with this" part of his statement was referring to how Luna had killed the griffin with a punch from her Astral form one second after the three of them had teleported right in front of its face. On top of everything that Eliza was going through, her mind was still trying to process the sight of a taboo territory boss—something that had been viewed by the world as the very embodiment of terror for centuries—being cut down like a wild chicken.

"Yep. I'll give thirty people of your choice the power to fight monsters too."

"Wha—?!" Despite her confidence in her ability to remain unsurprised at this point, Eliza was floored yet again. After acknowledging the merit of her idea, Sol was immediately willing to spread his power around, as though the gift he had given his childhood friends and Eliza herself meant nothing to him.

This saddened Eliza, who didn't know that it was only after the

recent massive jump in level that he was able to do this. She was aware that of the members of his inner circle, she was the one he had the least attachment to. Even so, she had thought she mattered to him because he had used his godlike power on her. It dismayed her a little to learn that it had all been in her head.

"With five more parties besides your own, you'll be able to handle a lot more of those quests that no one else wants to do. I think it's a good plan of action for the present. If that's still not enough, just let me know and I can give you more."

The enthusiastic way Sol was speaking indicated that he had not noticed Eliza's change in mood. Unfortunately, the joy of being a special person to someone else had never meant much to him.

"I do have one condition, though: If any of those thirty people—and Johan and Louise too, now that I think about it—break any of the rules that you set for the organization, you *must* punish them severely."

"I… I understand fully!"

Eliza cheered up just as abruptly as she had felt down. The heavy mantle that Sol was placing on her shoulders indicated that he *did* consider her among his special few after all! It was because he had expectations for her that he was giving her greater power—power to stand at the top of a growing organization as its leader. Though he was providing her with a lot of support, he was asking a lot as well. At fourteen, she was still just a child, but no one would ask so much from someone they didn't trust.

Eliza wasn't stupid. She knew that Sol could secure the services of any number of people far more capable than she, but he was choosing her, and that meant something. It didn't escape her attention that he hadn't specified that she had to kill those who broke her rules. If needed, she would probably have to go further and sow fear into the very core of their souls, like he had with the Rank A party that had accosted him at the Adventurer's Guild. In other words, giving someone the quick relief of death could be interpreted as a betrayal of his expectations.

Going forward, Eliza had to become much stronger, much cuter, much prettier, and far more ruthless than anyone else. This was the only way to make her god want to continue using her.

"Well then, let's head back and finish up your quests. You picked up quite a few, didn't you?" he asked.

“No, there’s no need. We are more than capable of handling them ourselves. Please feel free to rest,” she told him.

“You sure?”

Carried by elation, Eliza decided to make a gamble. “Um…instead, may I ask that you use that time for me tonight?”

“Sure thing.”

The immediate acquiescence without even asking for details made her balk a little, but Sol had been planning on spending his whole day with her in the first place. That said, both sides would be better off if he would dedicate his efforts to something that she earnestly wanted his help with and give her room to deal with things she now had the strength to manage on her own.

Unable to bear any misunderstandings, Eliza explained, “One of the regular gatherings for the slum gang leaders is happening tonight.”

Ah, that’s why, Sol thought as he replied out loud, “Got it. It starts late at night, I assume? Guess I’ll go find something nice to eat till then.”

If Eliza showed up to such an affair with Johan and Louise, she would definitely be made light of, despite having grown strong enough to kill all the participants and their escorts. Word of the incident at the Adventurer’s Guild had spread, but these people had great confidence in their ability to fight indirectly. Many would talk down to Eliza’s group, convinced that they could break the spirits of mere children in myriad ways. Having Sol present would certainly make things go much smoother.

Almost overnight, Sol had become a titan attributed with killing Kuzuryuu and seizing the first princess’s heart. If he didn’t think it beneath him to participate in a gathering of the underworld, then Eliza’s group would gain a lot of respect for having the influence to compel him to do so.

“For the same reason, um…I…”

Sol’s read on Eliza’s intentions had been pretty much on the dot. What he didn’t see, however, was that she was also trying to use this occasion to secure a certain position for herself.

She worked up her courage, then blurted with a red face, “C-Could you find it in your heart to allow me to be one of your women?! I know I don’t deserve to ask, but I heard what a huge help it is, and, um, uh…”

Despite what she was asking, she had yet to experience love. She was so embarrassed that she felt like her face was suffering

third-degree burns again, but this was not the embarrassment that a normal girl would have felt. This was shame from thinking that she was being unbelievably presumptuous in making such a request. It had been only a few days since her burn was healed. That was far too little time for her to raise her self-esteem back up to a healthy level. In spite of all that, she had successfully voiced her very first wish as a girl.

There was a brief pause, then Sol said, “Funnily, someone else asked me the same thing.”

Eliza, who had reflexively closed her eyes, opened them slowly upon hearing only slight exasperation in his voice. She found him making a face with exactly the same emotion.

“Please forgive me if I’m wrong, but…was it Princess Frederica?” Eliza asked.

“You can tell?”

“No, I mean…yes, sort of.”

Both Frederica and Eliza thoroughly understood how great an advantage it was to bear the reputation of having been “claimed” by Sol, even if it wasn’t true. One was the first princess of one of the continent’s superpowers, while the other was a vagrant from the slums whose face had been horribly disfigured by a large burn up until a few days ago. And yet, when they asked for the same thing, Sol had made the same awkward face. Seeing that gave Eliza a small fuzzy ball of happiness inside.

She had actually been watching from afar yesterday when Sol paraded into Garlaige before the body of Kuzuryuu, accompanied by Princess Frederica and his childhood friends Reen and Julia. Yes, Eliza had been granted great power. Yes, the burn that had made her despair so deeply had been healed. However, at the end of the day, she was still nothing more than a resident of the slums. She was fundamentally different from the girls at Sol’s side who had smiled so brightly while being showered with praise and adoration. At least, that was how she felt.

Just as she had made up her mind to keep to the shadows, however, Sol had become so happy with her suggestion that he’d gone and brought her along to defeat a taboo territory boss, granting her unbelievable power. Though she had thought that the miracle she’d witnessed yesterday was something special only to be granted to special girls like princesses or childhood friends, he had disabused her of the notion as readily as

breathing.

“Well…I don’t mind if it’s just an act, I suppose.”

“I’ll make sure to explain it properly to Lady Reen and Her Highness!”

Unable to contain her joy, Eliza burst into a fit of giggles. She now understood that all Sol cared about was whether someone could help him realize his dream, and it didn’t make a difference whether that someone came from the palace or the slums. That said, there was no way to tell what would happen in the future. Even if he currently had zero interest in summoning her at night, much less considered her a love interest, she was free to dream, and it had been confirmed just now that she was of value to him.

The thought that someone like her could compete with a princess seemed both flattering and ridiculous at the same time. It took a while for Eliza’s giggles to subside. When she saw that she was weirding out Sol and Luna, however, she started laughing again for a different reason.

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Though Garlaige was called “the city that never sleeps,” the veil of night had fallen over it everywhere but the nightlife district, and silence filled the streets. The slums were no exception, though light could be seen spilling out of one dilapidated warehouse on the bank of a canal inside the city walls, and there were people within.

At the bottom of a cleverly hidden staircase was the door to a salon that was the right cross between extravagant and sleazy to be perfect as a meeting place for the big shots of Garlaige’s underworld. In fact, it had been built for that express purpose and was considered neutral territory. Then again, it wasn’t like there was someone checking for weapons at the door, so it was neutral only insofar as the bosses were willing to play along.

“I’m last,” Eliza noted as she walked in alone and scanned the room to see a lot of people sitting imposingly, backed by armed escorts. She had come well in advance of the hour she had been told, but it was clear that everyone else had gathered even earlier.

“That’s right,” replied the large man sitting in the extra fancy couch in the middle of the room with a smirk. “We all wanted to make sure we were here in time for the big entrance of the

young lady who's supposed to be tonight's leading actress." He cackled loudly, prompting around half of the other bosses and their escorts to join in.

This man was the leader of the gang that held the most influence in Garlaige's underworld, one filled only with renegade adventurers who were all too happy to get physical. However, his laughter, as well as that of those around him, was in large part an attempt to hide his surprise. That Eliza had shown up without a single escort was surprising enough, but what truly took everyone's breath away was how flawless she looked in her makeup, styled hair, stunning crimson dress, and perfectly coordinated accessories.

The emaciated brat with a face marred by a terrible burn was gone, replaced by someone who seemed to emanate a bewitching aura. Her crimson hair ornament, in concert with her wig and dress, had practically erased all traces of youthfulness. She was clearly a young girl, but even the gangsters who had tasted countless women found themselves drawn to her. The large man calling her a "young lady" had been a meager attempt at diminishing her presence.

Eliza's current appearance was the handiwork of Frederica, who had suddenly shown up in the middle of Eliza's meal with Sol. Instead of feeling jealous, Eliza had been stunned that a princess was making a real effort to get along with her. That, and she felt honored that Frederica, who was likely going to represent Sol in the public sphere going forward, seemed to acknowledge her as his representative in the underworld. Frederica had even taught her how to act so that people took her seriously on occasions like tonight, though she wasn't confident that she had retained it all in such a short time. She was also slightly concerned about how far royal etiquette would get her with gangsters, but perhaps the methods to command respect from others weren't so different at the very top and very bottom of society.

When he finished laughing, the large man spoke again. "So, that bastard Gafus kicked the bucket and now a young lady thinks she can just take his place? You figure it's that easy?"

That question was the biggest subject for tonight's gathering. Everyone knew the only reason the man had shown up was to ask it, which made his threatening tone nothing more than cheap provocation.

“Did you not hear about me?” Eliza asked. Only those at the very top of Garlaige’s underworld were allowed to join the gathering. Given their position, there was no way the men didn’t know what had happened at the guild.

“Here’s a spot of advice for you, young lady. It’s important, so I’m only gonna say it once. Rule number one: You give me a straight answer when I ask you a question, *brat*.”

With his growling voice and threatening demeanor, he was clearly trying to hammer into Eliza the idea that *he* was in charge here. Just like before, this was mere bluster. She now had the strength to kill him and all his men in one punch. In fact, she could kill every single person in this room, bosses and escorts alike, without breaking a sweat. That was what it meant to be blessed by Player and to have a level in the triple digits. From where she stood, renegade adventurers who could brag about being Level 3 or 4 from killing monsters were no different than common citizens who lived in safety behind city walls.

Even so, Eliza was scared. Sol had gone into great detail about how his talent worked, and she fully understood that she now had the ability to instantly execute monsters that even Rank A adventurers would struggle against. Unfortunately, logic was not always effective at alleviating fear. She was facing a different kind of monster, one that would torture people out of pure malice and steal everything from those without the strength to resist. No matter how hard she pushed it down, dread continued welling up from deep within. The number of people these men had preyed on wreathed them like an aura that made it hard for her to breathe.

“Did you…not hear about me?” Eliza repeated, directing all her energy into keeping her fear off her face.

There was no better way to make it clear that she couldn’t care less about the stupid underworld’s stupid rules and that she had no intention of playing along. Honestly, if Sol hadn’t been with her, she didn’t think she would be able to act so tough.

“You piece of—”

“Boss!”

The large man would have fallen for the same kind of cheap provocation he himself had made moments ago if not for the cry of consternation from his escort. He would have been incensed further if there had been even a hint of rebuke in that shout, but fortunately for him, it had been filled with nothing but fear. So he

caught himself before fully getting up and threw himself back down onto his fancy couch.

That escort was the best fighter in the large man's organization. Since he wasn't all that bright, he offered his service so that the large man could use his strength to its full potential—specifically, to steal from the weak—in a way that benefited both of them. His fear was a clear sign that a simple exchange of fists was a bad call here.

The large man clicked his tongue, then tried to resume the conversation. "Guess you aren't a high-ranking adventurer for nothing. But why're you unarmed, then?" His tone remained as haughty as before, likely because his pride wouldn't allow him to relent.

"I don't need weapons inside city walls."

"Hah! We got a real tough one here, boyos. The other two are the real deal too, I take it?"

He could tell that Eliza's insinuation that she didn't need weapons to deal with renegade adventurers wasn't just a bluff. Someone who could talk like that in the present company while standing alone and unarmed was either truly powerful or a complete lunatic. But even insanely powerful humans could not live entirely detached from the world, and that meant having weaknesses that could be exploited. There were countless ways to do so, and it was thanks to their expertise in this field that the large man's gang had been able to maintain the top position in Garlaige's underworld.

What the man didn't know was that this was the worst approach to take when dealing with those associated with Sol. Having failed to properly understand what had happened at the Adventurer's Guild, he was about to make the same mistake as the Rank A adventurers who had represented Hecatoncheires.

"Will this gathering acknowledge me as the new leader of the Gafus Gang?"

"Now listen here, young lady. Being confident in your strength is fine and dandy. You must be something indeed if my man here is scared of you. Your little friends, however..."

If the thug had just accepted Eliza's request, he might have been allowed to live. Sadly, he wasn't as smart as he had thought. If she had been born a prodigy with the ability to heal her own burn and stand up to the scary faces gathered here, she would have let people walk all over her like they'd done until a

few days ago. That could only mean she had met someone who had suddenly pulled her up to where she was now. The man should have connected the dots, because it was his own life and standing on the line. By starting off in a high-handed manner, he had practically signed his own death sentence.

Those Eliza considered her companions were, by association, Sol's companions too. And Sol was not one to let any hint of violence toward those under his protection go unpunished. To everyone's surprise, he abruptly appeared in the air with Luna, glaring down at the large man and declaring, "Eliza, these guys are lost causes. It'd be faster to start with a clean slate."

A small part of him had been hoping that these gangsters would have their own brand of honor or chivalry, or at least that they subscribed to some warped sense of justice. It was now clear that they didn't. So the easiest course of action was to wipe them out using the violence that they knew so well.

"Sol Rock!"

Everyone who was someone in the city of Garlaige at the moment, be they from the general public or the underworld, knew his name and face. After the incident at the guild, it had become common knowledge that he had the ability to appear out of nowhere and float in midair. Even so, it was a huge shock to witness him using this magic from legend in person. After the large man called his name, no one else could say another word.

"Did you say what you did knowing that Eliza is a member of my inner circle? What was it again? Oh, right. 'A word spoken is a past recalling.' That's a saying in your line of work, isn't it?" Sol cast a contemptuous eye over the frozen gangsters, his face devoid of expression. The calm tone he used sent ice coursing through their veins, each word plunging them further into despair.

The casualties from Hecatoncheires had been Rank A to a man, which meant they had reached heights that the renegade adventurers present could never even dream of. And yet, not one of them had regained consciousness. Their bodies had been perfectly restored just as many times as they had been shattered, but their minds and souls had been ground to nothing through the process. They had been executed for all intents and purposes.

"Wait a moment, we can talk—"

This was no time for jokes. No one wanted to end up the

same way, even if the only other option was death. It was a shock that Sol, who could unseal taboo territories and had earned the affections of a princess, would personally show up to such a gathering. The various bosses knew that he had only known Eliza for a few days. They also knew how merciless he was to his enemies and had therefore assumed there was no way he had forgiven Eliza, Johan, or Louise, instead merely using them as disposable tools to get in touch with Garlaige's underworld elements.

But Sol was fiercely protective of the companions he chose for himself. The bosses who had ridiculed Eliza would have to pay. Even those who hadn't actively added to the mockery were being held collectively responsible for one idiot's failure to correctly read the situation. In Sol's eyes, those who held their tongues were still tacitly endorsing such behavior. The excuse "*I* didn't say anything" wasn't going to fly here.

"Luna."

"AaaAHH! Wha— No, stop, don't— Let's ta— NOOOOOOOO!"

The large man shot to his feet in horror as a tide of wriggling black things with a dull shine rushed toward him. Little sounds filled the air as they started eating the man alive, chewing up his flesh and digesting it. In no time at all, he was lying on the ground as a misshapen lump that looked nothing like a human.

Luna promptly used healing magic to restore him to full health so that he could once again be eaten alive from the very first bite. The boss—and his men—had been reduced to nothing more than meatbags, but they would never have the relief of death so long as the multiple healing spells Luna cast on them remained in effect.

Apparently, Luna was worried that her liege would get tired of her for being a one-trick pony, which was why she had gone with something other than endless freefall this time. As the All Dragon who had devoured all her kin and stolen their abilities, she had command over all offensive magics, ranging from the four elements of wind, fire, earth, and water to holy spells and curses. What she had just used, as befit the Evil Dragon, was an infernal hex that dealt unmitigable damage to someone commensurate with the sins they had committed.

"Let me think about this. Luna, you can stop healing them after doing it as many times as those they killed begged for mercy or forgiveness."

“Sure thing.”

Until the grudges of those the large man had killed were fully satisfied, he would continue to be devoured by the black things. Normally, this process would be conducted slowly and actually end when he himself became a curse, but thanks to Luna’s very potent healing magic, he was suffering a torture far worse than repeatedly falling from a high place. If the man had the ability to speak now, he would surely be begging desperately for death. Luna had no interest in hearing it, though. As ordered, she simply continued healing him and his men with her bottomless mana pool until they had paid their dues.

“When the healing stops…will you let us go?” asked another boss.

The large man and his two escorts had become little more than three quietly spasming masses. However, the other renegade adventurers present knew with certainty, based on the magical light pouring from Sol and Luna, that these two had more than enough mana to do the same thing to everyone present until the sun rose.

Running was not an option. Neither was defeating the pair. The only thing the bosses and escorts could do was pray that they would be exonerated if they retained their senses of self after paying their respective dues. Based on their rap sheets, they would probably have to die at least a handful of times.

“No,” Sol replied bluntly. “I’ll just stop torturing you and allow you to die.”

In other words, death was a foregone fate. Sol was just taking them there in an extremely cruel and horrific way.

An older gentleman with distinctive silver hair and a mustache, who looked out of place in this gathering of ruffians and hoodlums, sighed deeply. “Young master, we understand full well that you can take all our lives at a whim. But if you don’t mind me asking, why haven’t you already done it? Why did you go to the trouble of showing yourself?”

Sol let the question asked with shored-up courage hang in the air for a beat, then replied, “Because Eliza asked me to.”

“I…see. And you have determined that we are not suited for the new era that you plan on building?”

“Are you saying you’re different?”

Sol’s face remained blank as he answered the gentleman’s question with one of his own. He wasn’t thinking of anything as

grandiose as building a new era. But it had just set in that the gang led by the man who was now a writhing, twitching lump had by far the most say in the city's underworld, and that the other groups were so weak that they couldn't keep it in check. In that case, Sol felt they should resign themselves to facing the music for everything they had done up until now. Starting an organization from scratch was going to be a large undertaking, but he wasn't against going to the trouble depending on the gentleman's answer.

"Not at all." The man shrugged self-deprecatingly, looking like he was trying to pass himself off as sophisticated while he still could. "I too am filth, just as much as that *thing* you're torturing. The fancy clothes I'm wearing were all paid for by taking advantage of people's weaknesses through deceit and violence. I have no excuse."

A glint of interest crept into Sol's eyes. "In that case—"

"Lord Sol," Eliza interrupted loudly. She was sure that his next words were going to be "then die."

Intentionally adopting a curt tone, he asked, "Yes?"

"I know what these people are, but eliminating them all is..." Aware that she was effectively speaking against him, Eliza's heart was nearly in her mouth. Luna, who was even more expressionless than Sol at the moment, truly terrified her. Eliza also knew that when love soured, it could turn into hatred many times greater in enormity. Now that Sol had taken a liking to her, there was no telling what he might do in response to disobedience.

Even so, there were those whose lives had been saved by these gangs from the slums. Eliza herself came to mind as an example, as did Johan and Louise. The same was true of the other kids in the Gafus Gang. Until a few days ago, the gang had indeed been keeping them alive by feeding them and giving them shelter.

"Is what?"

"I know I am being presumptuous, but...could you give me the authority to decide what to do with them? I swear I will properly punish those who have stepped too far out of line."



She couldn't just sit back and let Sol lump everyone present together and kill them all. She knew more than anyone that this world had no chivalry and no concept of helping the weak or fighting the strong. Every single resident of the slums, including her, was scum who had survived by stealing from others. That was indisputable.

And yet, there were those among them who would be willing to atone by helping Sol keep his hands clean as he built his brand new era. They were the same as all the others in the eyes of upstanding citizens living in the light of the law, but having been one of them, Eliza could tell the difference. If possible, she wanted to save them from being killed as collateral damage for one fool's mistake.

"Sure."

"Uh…really?" She had been almost certain that she would be punished for trying to exploit his kindness, but to her surprise, he agreed in a heartbeat.

"All right, all of these people are now yours to deal with." Leaving her staring in shock, Sol turned to the old man he had spoken to earlier. "How should I address you, elder?"

"My name is Valter Bernheit, my lord." The old man's attitude showed that he understood he had been saved by Eliza's courage, as the girl could have simply followed Sol's orders. He, at least, knew the appropriate way to act toward someone he was indebted to.

"Valter, would you serve as Eliza's advisor?"

"Should that position not be held by Lord Johan or Lady Louise, my lord?"

"They will be her left- and right-hand aides. I want you to support her with your wealth of experience in this world."

"Very well, my lord. My life was saved by Lady Eliza, so it is hers. When I was young, I aspired to ideals but shamefully threw them aside, falling on the harshness of reality as an excuse. I will now dedicate what little time I have left on this earth to carry out with pride the dirty work needed to protect what can only be guarded by violence wielded in the shadows. This I swear."

Valter had done his homework on both Eliza and Sol. It was his hope that by joining the former, he would obtain from the latter the power to carry out his promise. Eliza had saved him from the end he deserved for his shrewd silence, so he now made up his mind to enter service to the two of them for the

sake of realizing what ideals he could.

“Well, that’s that. Everything’s up to you now, Eliza.”

“Uh…yes, my lord!”

In Sol’s eyes, the gamble that Eliza had taken wasn’t as big as she thought. In fact, he was impressed that when she had asked to be “one of his women” that morning, she had been actually asking for permission to demonstrate that she was someone he would listen to, as she had just done. Sure enough, no one in the organization formed from those chosen by Eliza would ever think of disobeying her in the future. They now knew without a doubt that her words were Sol’s will. Someone who could bend an absolute being’s will was, by merit of that alone, strong. Like the famous fable, all beasts had to make way when the fox walked with the tiger backing it.

Sol felt embarrassed that he had thought Eliza would just announce out loud at this gathering that she was one of his women. Luna alone seemed to have caught on to the discrepancy in interpretation, but she wasn’t one to butt in where unnecessary. She shot Eliza one final amused look before teleporting away with Sol.

In any case, Eliza had successfully carried out the order he had charged her with a few days ago. This night, all underworld elements in the city of Garlaige had fallen under her command to become her hands and feet. A few of those present and those under them had to go the way of the large man who was still squirming on the ground, but to their great relief, they were simply executed.

The salon was never used again, though for the next few years, stories of something humanoid still writhing inside made the rounds, eventually becoming an urban legend that was passed down through the generations.

Chapter 7: The Kingdom of Emelia

The Kingdom of Emelia had a healthy economy, a reliable military, and a long history as one of the four great nations of the continent. However, the Istekario Empire, its neighbor, had it beat in military might; the Amnesphia Sovereignty to the north had an even longer history and greater religious authority; and the Poseinia Eastern Seaboard Federation to the east had a slightly larger economy. There wasn't a single thing that Emelia could claim to be the best at, and all of its citizens knew it, from the king to any commoner on the street. It was a bit of a sore point for them, but at the same time, also a sign that everything was at a high standard and reliably fulfilling its role.

In other words, Emelia had a better military than Amnesphia and Poseinia, a longer history than Istekario and Poseinia, and a stronger economy than Amnesphia and Istekario. Though not at the top in any one aspect, Emelia was undeniably superior to the other superpowers in terms of gross national power. It was a lot like one of those brilliant students who manages to secure the position of valedictorian despite not coming first in any single class.

As a result, Emelian society felt freer than others—or at least, more laid-back. This was a distinctive difference from how Istekario valued might, Amnesphia piety, and Poseinia opportunism and shrewdness. That said, Emelia was by no means a paradise. There was significant disparity of wealth, and racial discrimination still existed, but the demihumans who bore the brunt of it still preferred Emelia to other countries by half.

The kingdom's borders contained both the fertile plains in the center of the continent and the deep bays that made for great trading ports in the south, but that alone wasn't enough to guarantee a country's stability in this world. The countless monsters spawned by the territories and dungeons dotting the continent were a far more pressing threat than other countries were.

Thankfully, the more powerful the monster, the more unwilling it was to stray far from its home, which was why human society had yet to be wiped out. Of course, monsters in

the low to mid ranks were still more than happy to roam, and they always left chaos in their wakes. What protected people from them were each country's standing army and the Adventurer's Guild, and much effort was taken to ensure that the robust continent-wide economy that supported these organizations ran smoothly. The Holy Church's job was to keep people's values and ways of thinking anchored in the same basic tenets and ideologies. Being the weakest race meant humans had none of the spare time or resources they needed to wage war against each other.

How Emelia managed to remain relatively more stable and at peace compared to its neighbors largely came down to a special power at the command of its royal family. Although the throne didn't rule with an iron fist, its authority had never once waned because the people understood how crucial it was to the country's prosperity. This power, Absolutus, was a unique skill that could nullify all attacks. That meant everything from man-made weapons to God-given talents, including magic. Once Absolutus was cast on a target, the effect was permanent. And given that it could stop even a taboo territory boss, there was little wonder it was still held in such high regard in this day and age.

Once, people had thought the skill a mere exaggeration or a bluff. Ironically, what had allowed the Emelian royal family to prove the skill's efficacy and earn even the Church's grudging acknowledgment was the greatest crisis in human history: the Country Eater catastrophe. After watching the creature shrug off Divine Punishment, the Panhuman League had rallied together to build a huge wall to imprison the boss monster. Unsurprisingly, the idea was a failure, with the giant slime swallowing up all the structures it came into contact with, including all the sentries. However, the part of the wall that Emelia was in charge of not only wasn't dissolved but even became a spot that Country Eater never went near again.

The one who had cast Absolutus on that stretch of wall was Alfred ol la Emelia, the crown prince of the time and a man who would go on to leave his name in the annals of history as the Mage King of Emelia. The incident cemented the reputation of their three biggest cities—the capital Magnamelia, the fortified city of Garlaige, and the port city Jeuno—as absolutely impregnable havens against monster onslaughts. Living in these

cities became the ultimate goal for people who were successful in life, including those from other countries.

Garlaige was a thriving metropolis that attracted people despite being on the border with Istekario and located in the middle of an area dubbed Gio Nest for having nine taboo territories in close proximity. There was no doubt that the people's rock-solid faith in Absolutus was at the foundation of the city's prosperity.

Naturally, the one who inherited this unique skill would get the crown too. One's parentage generally had zero bearing on the talent they received, but Absolutus was an extremely rare case that did require lineage. It was essentially only because of this one skill that influential families still made a point to wed those with powerful talents. As a result, Emelia was sometimes ruled by a queen, not a king.

Unfortunately, Frederica had not inherited Absolutus. To make matters worse, while the Emelian royal family had a reputation for having a high proportion of those who received talents useful for fighting monsters, no talent had blossomed in her at all on the day she came of age. Consequently, she had earned the nickname "the Letdown Princess." Since then, she had made so much effort that she'd gone from having nothing other than her beauty to being officially acknowledged by the current king as third in line for the throne. Even so, since she did not have Absolutus, the chances of her taking the crown were next to nil.

Quitting simply wasn't in her nature, though. Despite thinking that nothing would come of her efforts, she had continued applying herself. Thanks to that, she now was in a place where she could achieve anything she wanted. Becoming queen no longer mattered to her, and she was the happiest she had ever been. The person who had inherited Absolutus, that dream-granting power that Frederica could only revere and yearn for in vain, was the second prince, Maximillian zen la Emelia.

At the moment, Prince Maximillian was standing dumbstruck in the audience chamber in the palace at the heart of Magnamelia, first among the cities famous for being unassailable. He was definitely not alone in his astonishment, as the spacious room, which had been built in the golden age of humanity known as Era Gran Magicka with techniques that had long been lost to the sands of time, was practically buried by the

enormous body of Griffin, the boss that had reigned over Taboo Quattuor. As if that wasn't shocking enough, Frederica was floating in the air before the corpse with an unfamiliar man and a therianthrope girl. The whole group had appeared out of nowhere.

"My apologies for the surprise, Your Majesty and Your Highnesses. I, Frederica, have returned from Garlaige." Frederica, who had gotten used to floating, knelt gracefully in midair and bowed her head while announcing her return and proffering her greetings. Naturally, being in midair meant she was so high up that she was looking down at her father and brothers.

After a long pause, the king replied, "Welcome back, my beloved daughter."

His feat of taking the situation in stride, overcoming his total surprise and the disrespect he was being shown, drew different looks from his three children: surprise from his sons along the lines of "Is he for real?" and appreciation from his daughter with an unspoken "Impressive as always." One had to have iron nerves to wear the crown of a nation as large as Emelia. And based on how his daughter had committed such an outrage with such confidence, he immediately understood that the best course of action was to offer complete submission to her two companions.

He hoped that he would be able to hold the initiative in the coming discussion, but even if he couldn't, he had to at least keep his sons and nobles from saying anything stupid. The weight of the task was no less than protecting his country. Since he was dealing with a being who had the power to kill Griffin—which all Emelians could recognize as the boss of Taboo Quattuor—with almost no signs of struggle, and who then appeared in this room out of thin air, he knew that a gaffe could easily lead to Emelia's obliteration.

On the flip side, the fact that Frederica, who deeply loved her country, had brought such a dangerous person back with her meant that if talks went well, this could just as easily be the best news the country had received since its founding.

"Would it be too much to ask that we talk at the same height?" asked King Ethelweld kain la Emelia. "The burden of looking up for a long time is too much for my old body."

His white hair and mustache confirmed that he was quite

advanced in years. At first glance, one might even mistake him for his children's grandfather. The three were so young compared to him because he had only begun applying himself to producing heirs after assuming the throne, which had happened rather late due to how long his predecessor's reign had lasted.

In fact, Ethelweld was quite a bit older than his wife and concubines. However, his body was still toned and he had a face with shapely features engraved with lines from holding a position of great responsibility for a long time. One might not think it from the aura of an old wise king that he was exuding, but he used to be a very eager fighter. On top of inheriting the unique skill that guaranteed him the throne, he was also blessed with great talent as a mage. In his youth, he had spent practically all his energy charging at dungeons and territories, consequently earning himself the nickname Mad Prince of Explosions. There was still a surprising number of former adventurers who were still alive and remembered this awkward phase of the king's life.

Thanks to his past, Ethelweld probably understood best out of everyone here how much strength was needed to defeat the giant monster lying on the floor. Deliberately saying "talk" instead of "having an audience" with this group that had so rudely appeared without permission indicated that he fully understood their overwhelming difference in power.

"Pardon us. Luna."

"Sure thing."

King Ethelweld heaved a small sigh of relief upon realizing that this absolute being who could kill Griffin so easily held at least a modicum of respect for him due to his position as king. It was a stroke of fortune indeed. Given that, his priority was to act like the king that this man, Sol, expected of the ruler of a large nation, even if that meant deviating greatly from what his vassals hoped from him.

There was another pause as he got over the surprise of his visitors suddenly teleporting before him when he had expected them to slowly float down. His daughter's composure, as she had already gotten used to this method of travel, helped a lot.

"Am I right to assume your esteemed self is Sol Rock? And beside you is Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon?"

Frederica had sent Ethelweld a report by courier horses ahead of time, so he had a pretty accurate grasp on everything that had

happened in Garlaige. Normally, he would have had a few days still before she'd made it back to the capital, so he had gathered many of his retainers and ministers in this large room to inform them and arrange for men to be dispatched to verify her account. That was when she had suddenly showed up in person.

Of course, Ethelweld realized that she had done this on purpose. There was no way it would take someone with the strength to unseal a taboo territory the same amount of time as a normal person to traverse the distance from Garlaige to Magnamelia. To the king's chagrin, this little stunt had revealed that he and his subordinates were not as good at keeping their cool when dealing with unexpected situations as he would have liked.

"That's right. I'm Sol Rock, and this is Luna."

"Do I have leave to call the All Dragon by her name?"

"Since that is how my lord introduced me, I don't mind."

"As you wish."

Sol did not kneel, but he seemed willing to talk with Ethelweld as equals. His servant, however, was making it clear that she was staying still only because her liege wanted her to. Ethelweld reminded himself to be very careful about what he said. That included *not* actually calling Luna by her name, despite what she said. At least, not until he had earned a bit more acceptance from her and Sol.

Maximillian spoke up. "Your Majes—"

"Silence, Second Prince," Ethelweld snapped. "I did not give you permission to speak."

The harsh tone was intended to give Maximillian a jolt, as in spite of what he was seeing, he was obviously having trouble stepping out of the mindset that he was heir to the throne of a large country. When a king was speaking with someone of equal or higher status, mere vassals had no right to join in. Ethelweld even felt a little dismayed that he had been so remiss in his son's education that the boy couldn't correctly discern the power dynamic in this conversation. Small problems that weren't rectified in ordinary times had a tendency to rear up during crises, possibly driving situations to a point beyond repair.

Experience dealing with someone superior had to be built up over time, in politics and battlefields alike. In this aspect, Ethelward was the only one who could teach Maximillian, who had inherited Absolutus. The responsibility lay on the king and

the king alone.

As chills ran down Ethelweld's back due to worries that the short exchange had disappointed Sol, Maximillian's face paled from the unprecedented harshness of his father's tone and desperation in his eyes. Maximillian was far more stunned than dispirited, as no one had ever rebuked him in such a way—even when disagreeing with him, people had always started their sentences with "You have a point, but..."

"Oh, there's no need to be so stiff and formal, King Ethelweld, because Frederica will be speaking on my behalf today. Frederica."

It wasn't clear whether Sol had guessed what Ethelweld and Maximillian were thinking, but he did not hesitate to fully hand Frederica the initiative.

"Thank you, Lord Sol."

Of course, this arrangement had been planned in advance. The bright smile on Frederica's face indicated that she had been ready for it. However, the way she acted like it was natural for her to do Sol's bidding greatly surprised her two brothers, who knew full well how wilful and capable she was behind her pretty face and disarmingly graceful mannerisms.

"Very well." Ethelweld nodded. "Frederica: I, as king of Emelia, accept all the conditions that were sent to us in writing. Public arrangements will be made once the Office of the Governor-General of Lord Sol's sovereign region is established. Is that acceptable to you?"

Unlike his sons, Frederica's father was not unsettled by her behavior. On the contrary, he took it as a sign that, though it could be strengthened further, she had successfully forged a bond with Sol. He took Sol's decision to entrust Frederica—a member of Emelian royalty—with negotiations to mean that he had no intention of running roughshod over the country, at least, not at the moment. Therefore, the best course of action was to quickly accept everything that Frederica had proposed before Sol changed his mind.

Frederica, who had expected this decision, confirmed it. "If you agree to acknowledge the monster territories that Lord Sol unseals as a self-governing area, then that will do. The parts within the internationally recognized borders of Emelia will be taxed as stipulated. Also, we have plans to build a fortified city in the heart of Taboo Novem and will be commissioning Emelia for

its construction.”

It was safe to assume that the Holy Church and Istekario were beginning to move. Conflict with them could no longer be avoided—not after intruding into and unsealing two taboo territories, securing the Captive Elven Queen, and establishing formal relations with the elves. Given that, it was necessary to quickly cement Emelia as an ally and move on to making countermeasures.

By this point, Frederica had absolutely no intention of leaving Sol’s faction. On the off chance that she completely dropped the ball and failed to leverage the relationship she had already formed with him, consequently turning Emelia into an enemy, she would just think “what a shame” and accept it.

Thankfully, her father, as the king, had made the right decision, so she considered it her duty as first princess to arrange things so that Emelia could enjoy the benefits of this partnership to the fullest extent.

“What will you do?” Ethelweld asked.

“I will serve Lord Sol,” she replied, “both as first princess of Emelia and as a woman.”

“Has he given you leave to do so?”

Frederica glanced at Sol, blushing slightly, before answering, “Yes.”

Chills ran down Ethelweld’s back as he was reminded just how terrifying women could be, even if the one in question was his daughter. Her coyness drew out some red in Sol’s cheeks in turn, making the king think he might be able to build a rapport with him as a fellow man.

“Then serve him you will.”

Ethelweld made a mental effort to shift gears. The person before him was no longer his daughter or third in line for the Emelian throne. She was, by merit of having some influence over the being who could shape the future of this world however he wanted, clearly someone of much greater standing than himself. The two of them were the only ones present who properly understood this.

To clue everyone else in, the king posed a question. “May my vassals have permission to pose you questions?”

“Permission granted,” Frederica replied.

By asking her for permission, Ethelweld was making it clear that they were definitely not on equal footing. To be precise,

Emelia, the greatest of the four superpowers on the continent, was unconditionally capitulating to Sol. Through her actions and tone, Frederica was also affirming that this was the only correct call to make. Regrettably, now that the floor had been opened, someone was going to reveal that he as yet could not see the wisdom of doing so.

For the past few years, the country of Emelia had been split over the question of whom Frederica was to be married off to. Without her knowledge and input, second prince Maximillian had been trying to tie her to an influential noble family within Emelia while first prince Franz had been advocating to use her to consolidate ties with a friendly country. And yet, though she had revealed it pretty much only in passing, there was no doubt that her highest allegiance had shifted to Sol in spite of the position she still held in Emelia, and her father had acknowledged it in his capacity as king. This sudden development left Maximillian with his pants down, so to speak, as he had already all but exchanged promises with one noble family. The severity of his problem paled in comparison to the crisis that was currently staring at the country as a whole, but he was wholly unable to see that, and it was going to cost him.

"Frederica... I mean, Lady Frederica, far be it for me to protest against something His Majesty has already decided on, but have you considered the consequences of not only intruding upon a taboo territory—within our borders though it may be—but even going so far as to unseal it?"

It was Maximillian's right to speak first, as he *was* in line for the throne. Though he could indeed have benefited from a firmer hand in his life, he was by no means an idiot, thanks to having been born with the sharp mind of a royal and receiving the highest standard of education with the most thorough curriculum imaginable. He did not make the faux pas of addressing the person his father treated as someone of superior standing as his younger sister, and was using diplomatic language to point out the biggest issue that he saw with Sol's group. He could at least see that this was something he had to first confirm before he commented on the idea of her marrying Sol at the risk of sounding like a fool. The other vassals wanted to know the answer just as badly, so they all fell silent and waited with bated breath.

"We are fully aware of the possibility of the Holy Church

condemning us as apostates, if that is what you are insinuating. In regard to this, we have already recruited Cardinal Ishli of the Garlaige diocese to our cause. To start, we plan on splitting the Church into two."

"Wha—?!"

The bombshell that Frederica dropped in a casual voice was way beyond what Maximillian and his lackeys had imagined. He had been so sure that Sol was seeking to gain Emelia as a backer before petitioning the Church for forgiveness and obtaining permission to unseal further territories in exchange for the massive leaps in progress that they would bring. In this world, the closer one was to the ruling class, the greater they valued the ability to avoid stepping on the Church's toes. However, Frederica—or rather, Sol—didn't care for such half-hearted measures. He considered even the Church something to be manipulated, and to prove it, he claimed to have already secured the support of Cardinal Ishli, the second-greatest authority figure in the Church in Emelia.

Surprise colored even the faces of King Ethelweld and Prince Franz. All of the most important people of Magnamelia had been gathered in this audience hall. Naturally, that included *the* biggest authority figure of the Church in Emelia, the cardinal at the head of the archdiocese that covered Magnamelia. However, though he had definitely been present up until Sol's appearance, he no longer was. Only a few people had noticed his sudden disappearance, and none of them wanted to think about who had done it or what was happening to him at that moment.

The charming smile on Frederica's face, the self-assurance in Sol's pose, the way the All Dragon was cuddling up to her liege in his long coat, oblivious to her surroundings... Everything about this trio struck fear into the hearts of the king and first prince.

And yet, Frederica wasn't done. Still smiling, she continued. "Also, we succeeded in taking the Captive Elven Queen off Istekario's hands, so war with them is probably unavoidable. I believe it very likely they will join forces with the Holy Church to declare a crusade against us. An Oratorio Tangram, if you will."

Completely forgetting his manners, Maximillian shouted, "What have you done?! The Church declaring an Oratorio Tangram against us means all the other countries—"

"Will turn against us too, yes. But that won't be an issue."

The difference in military strength that dismayed Maximillian

so much no longer meant anything. Griffin had been brought here specifically to demonstrate that fact. Sol had thought the method a little excessive in showiness, but apparently Maximillian and the ministers were still not getting the message. Frederica had expected her brother to at least notice the cardinal's disappearance, but he was disappointing her on every count.

"In fact, the more countries that take this opportunity to stand against Lord Sol, the better it works out for us."

Thankfully, Ethelweld and Franz seemed to get it, so Frederica decided to move the conversation along with them alone. She was genuinely surprised by Maximillian's weakness in responding to emergencies, considering that he was usually so much more capable than she was. She found herself thanking a god she did not believe in for granting her the opportunity to be tempered in adversity.

"To that end, would you be so kind as to send a missive to all members of the Panhuman League? Something along the lines of 'Join Lord Sol as an ally or your country will be wiped off the map' would do nicely."

"As you wish."

Purposely instigating the nations of the Panhuman League into siding against Emelia would make it much easier to control them afterward. Being able to say "I told you so" after beating them would go a long way. Moreover, the threat would give those countries a perfect excuse to simply contribute their forces to the Holy Church's host instead of opening new fronts of their own. Not taking part wasn't much of an option for them when the message bore the name of the head of state joining forces with Sol and declaring war on the Holy Church and the Panhuman League, no matter that its contents were so ridiculous that it would be merely mocked and dismissed under any other circumstances. So most countries would naturally choose to side with the Church for the moment and wait to see how the situation developed. Ironically, Frederica was of the mind that the nations that declared they would be siding with Emelia in this situation were the ones she really had to be on guard against.

"Your Majesty!" Maximillian cried, still attempting to protest Ethelweld's decision.

"I love Emelia," Frederica interrupted, "which is why I am

making the offer that I believe would be best for its future. If this country cannot accept it, however, we do not mind considering it an enemy. It would then be similarly subject to the conditions I laid out earlier."

Maximillian's mouth opened and closed several times as his brain strove in vain to come up with an apt response to her declaration that she didn't mind turning her spear on Emelia. He knew that his words wouldn't hold water if he reflexively cried out, "You can't do that!" based on logic that had just been undermined. He needed proper grounds to make a rebuttal, but nothing was coming to mind.

Frederica smiled sweetly. "That said, I ask that you take a breath and think about this calmly. Don't expect too much from me just because Lord Sol tasked me with handling the negotiation. I wouldn't hesitate to wipe out the entire sitting royal family of Emelia if doing so would save its citizens. I can continue the lineage myself, after all."

She loved her country. Of course, that included her own family—as in, the royal family—and the noble families who had faithfully served hers for generations. However, if she determined that the head of the country was no longer serving its role and was actively harming the people, that very love—for she loved the citizens and the land too—was why she wasn't beyond replacing it in its entirety. She wasn't here to protect those with their own agendas.

It wasn't as though the people would complain if their next prince or princess was the child of Sol, the avatar of absolute power. That Frederica remembered to look at Sol when talking about "continuing the lineage" impressed Ethelweld once again.

The first prince scratched his head and opted to speak frankly. "I imagine you can. Anyone who thinks they can make demands of someone who was able to kill Griffin in one strike and intrude this far into the castle can't be in their right mind. However, I do have to ask this: Is there any possibility that the Holy Church or Istekario possess resources more powerful than Lord Sol's?"

Despite being the firstborn, Franz teo la Emelia had failed to receive Absolutus at his coming-of-age and had therefore had no choice but to step aside for his younger brother in the line of succession. What he *was* blessed with was business acumen, which synergized greatly with his amiable personality to enable him to make great strides in developing trade with other

countries.

At this point, he had given up aiming for the throne and accepted that his role was to support his younger brother's rule by managing the kingdom's economy. Frederica, who commanded unmatched popularity, could head the military, while he, by offering irresistible benefits, would gather the goodwill of the nation's biggest merchants. If Maximillian could bring the nobles in line with the authority granted by Absolutus, the three of them could have brought about an almost ideal reign. At least, they would have in normal times. Alas, the continent was currently undergoing an extraordinary shift the likes of which it hadn't seen in a thousand years.

"The possibility exists." Frederica inclined her head. "However, does that change your current situation in any way?"

"I guess not." Franz smiled wryly and shrugged. "The only way it would be is if the Church steps in at this very moment. If it can't, threats like 'the Church won't stand for this!' are nothing but bluster."

Right away, Frederica understood that he had brought up this question for the sake of spelling things out for everyone else. Those who were underestimating Sol because he was being nice were nothing but fools. Her and Franz's exchange was to implicitly warn the ministers that if they revealed themselves to be such fools after their king had already caught on and was acting accordingly, they might lose their ruler's favor. If Sol suddenly said, "Enough, Frederica. Let's kill everyone here," they would have no way to resist. The overwhelmingly powerful resources that the Church might or might not have was something that could only protect other countries. It was too late for it to be brandished in Emelia's defense.

"In the first place, if the Church truly had such resources, why hasn't it used them to help the people living in fear of monsters? Isn't that in itself a valid enough reason to rise up against them?"

"It is indeed. In that light, wouldn't it be too merciful to send the missive you requested to all countries? The Oratorio Tangram could be a great opportunity to eliminate the most troublesome ones."

The point that Frederica was raising made logical sense from the perspective of the common masses. The decision not to alleviate the people's suffering despite keeping in store power that could neutralize Sol, a man with the strength to unseal

taboo territories without breaking a sweat, would be more than enough grounds to brand the Church evil. Even if there was a perfectly valid and compelling reason, what Sol offered was immediate profit and a very easy-to-understand promise of protection. Leading the residents of Garlaige—and Magnamelia, once they saw Griffin's body—into turning against the Church wasn't going to be hard. Such an operation would give Cardinal Ishli an opportunity to shine. He would be in the public spotlight, loudly proclaiming that he believed in a new Church and that what he was rejecting wasn't God, but the old order that merely sat on their power instead of trying to make things better.

"Everyone who witnesses Lord Sol's power will immediately understand how worthless traditional military strength has become."

"Even so, there are bound to be those who won't get it unless they get an actual black eye themselves. I daresay the same is true within Emelia too."

"Well…"

Thus Franz's suggestion of eliminating problematic factions. Though logical, Frederica was indeed somewhat naive. Humans were generally quite smart and astute on an individual level, but they had a tendency to become extremely mindless in groups. If expectations were set too high, it could bring about untold casualties.

Frederica had a little too much faith in others, which made her think that everyone else was just as brilliant as she was and that they would always make the same choices she would. In contrast, Franz, who lived in a world where ideals and greed clashed in the name of business, was far more familiar with the depths to which human folly and cunning could sink.

Having never seen Frederica falter in such an obvious way, Sol tried to offer a helping hand. "If not one country takes up arms against us, we can always pick a few that seem inclined to in the future, then claim that they already have and crush them as examples. If it is necessary to do this for the sake of a smoother rule down the line, we'll just write off the casualties as unavoidable collateral damage. For what it's worth, it's already been decided that we're going to turn Istekario into a punching bag. Is one of the four superpowers not enough?"

"I…see." Franz was so shocked that words failed him for a moment. What Sol was saying was that if there were countries

they wanted to cull, there was no need to wait for them to make a move first. He could stomp on them regardless of what they were or weren't doing. As the saying went, dead men tell no tales. Even if they hadn't done anything to deserve being obliterated, they wouldn't be able to protest when Sol's side later told the world that they had.

The fact that Sol could kill any number of people at any time based on a mere whim would be burned into the very bones of those who witnessed the chosen armies being culled. Never again would anyone dare entertain the thought of making an enemy of him. At least, not until the next generation grew up.

Due to Sol's ability to grant both untold wealth and absolute death with ease, there were people who were starting to see him as God incarnate. His methods were ruthless but undoubtedly effective. Strength was, in a way, the indicator of how much someone could make happen as they wanted to.

"Of course, Lord Sol," Frederica replied stiffly. "I will provide you with a list."

This was when everyone present finally caught on to the reasoning behind King Ethelweld's instant capitulation. Namely, the entire Emelian army put together would never stand a chance against the giant boss monster lying dead before the ministers and princes, much less the man who had killed it. In the same way, the armies of other nations meant nothing to Sol either. Unless the Church truly had an ace up its sleeve, his victory was guaranteed. And even if such an ace existed, there wasn't time to use it for Emelia's sake.

There was still no way to tell if Frederica's encounter with Sol was a blessing or inevitable misfortune. Regardless, those present had no say in the first place. They finally understood that.

"Now, here's a little something to prove to everyone here that they're on the right side of history. Lord Sol, may I?"

The moment Sol nodded, Frederica shifted her mental state into battle mode so she could provide the proof she was promising. She was sure that it would be more than enough to make even the calculating, opportunistic nobles want to suck up to him of their own free will.

"My dear brother, Prince Maximillian. If I remember right, your guards wear armor enchanted with Absolutus, yes?"

"Uh, yes."

The prince who had been left out of the conversation halfway through answered half out of reflex, confused about why Frederica was asking that now. The truth was that over the years, Absolutus had weakened so much that it could no longer be used on large-scale targets like city walls. This was something known only to Ethelweld and Maximillian; it had been kept even from Franz and Frederica. To conceal this fact, Maximillian had obtained permission from Ethelweld to cast Absolutus on his guards' armor. The enchanted equipment could deflect not only swords and arrows but also magic and special abilities used by monsters. As well as being a source of great pride for the knights, the armor served as the perfect way to reassure the world that the special skill that symbolized the authority of the Emelian royal family was alive and well.

And yet, it shattered like glass. Having reached the triple digits in level, Frederica managed to close in on Maximillian's guards faster than they could react and destroyed their large shields.



Before, she had learned from Luna that, despite its name, Absolutus was not actually absolute. It could indeed nullify attacks below a certain threshold, be it physical or magical, and therefore seem impervious and everlasting. However, it could nullify attacks beyond that threshold only once and would dissipate upon doing so. That was the level Frederica's current strength was on. Though the guards all possessed talents that enabled them to fight monsters, it simply wasn't possible for their eyes to follow her movements at single-digit levels. She had dispelled Absolutus with one hit, then given the shields a light tap to shatter them.

"This is the power that I received from Lord Sol after having met him only a few days ago."

Everyone was struck speechless, from the king to the lowest minister.

"He can also grant it to anyone he chooses." She canceled battle mode and flashed a gentle and beautiful smile filled with the sweet poison of a demon cajoling someone into making a pact. "And as it happens, he's promised me thirty slots to give out as I please."

Not even Ethelweld or Franz could hide the desire that flashed in their eyes. This was power that could destroy Absolutus and overwhelm taboo territory bosses. What had been a mere pipe dream for even those chosen by God could now be obtained simply by earning Sol's favor. Anyone would react the same way. Despite being aware that it could be taken back by Sol at any moment on a whim, humans could not help wanting to surpass God.

All were equal before the allure of such power, regardless of age, gender, or wealth.

Chapter 8: The Numbers

The talent belonging to Gawain Baccus, the famed weaponsmith who had signed an exclusive contract with Libertadores, the adventurer clan founded by Sol, was Magic Blacksmith. This was a unique talent, which meant he was the only one who held it at present. He was the only person alive blessed with the ability to shape materials from monsters into the forms that God wanted.

When Gawain touched a material, he received a divine revelation that showed him how it could be used to bring out its full potential and the techniques and additional materials needed to turn it into its ideal form. For a while, Sol had worried about Gawain feeling imposter syndrome due to his work not being based on the skills he himself had developed over the years, but Gawain had come to terms with it long ago. Besides, he still needed to employ the skills and experience he had accrued over his career to apply the techniques that he saw in his revelations. They even revealed how he could obtain the necessary techniques, but he was the same as everyone else in that he still needed to practice and train until he could use those techniques well.

Because of this, Gawain had already picked up all the techniques that the divine revelations showed in relation to low-tier monster materials. He had also devoted a lot of time to study, consequently becoming an authority on all materials, the places where they were sourced, and any other techniques he heard mention of. The breadth of his knowledge went far beyond what was immediately relevant to blacksmithing, reaching even high-level military science development. Whatever a divine revelation told him he needed, he spared no effort in obtaining it, for that was what it meant to be a Magic Blacksmith.

This was the power he had been given, and not doing something that he was capable of wasn’t an option in his mind. He was never too stubborn, obsessed, or proud not to take action. Ever since childhood, what gave him the greatest joy was using his own two hands to create weapons and armor that no one had ever seen before. Even if he really was just tracing lines

already drawn by someone else, the path was something new to him and he was the only one who could bring the end product into the world. The draw was irresistible to him.

If he really wanted to create the ultimate weapon starting with just himself and a drawing board, he could always do it after he had finished making everything that Magic Blacksmith encompassed. After obtaining all the knowledge of his predecessors, after mastering every technique under the sun, after giving form to every conceivable thing that God had prepared blueprints for, if the idea for a weapon or armor that he wanted to create from scratch came to his mind, he wouldn't mind devoting the rest of his life to that pursuit.

Unfortunately, until Sol had suddenly made the insane claim that he would unseal taboo territories, Gawain had become tired of his calling. He hadn't laid his hands on any new materials for a long time and understood that anything greater was out of human reach. Neither was he interested in using the knowledge and techniques he had accrued thus far to create something original.

Gawain was aware that despite the world lauding him as an artisan, he wasn't the kind of person who was keen to make something from nothing. If anything, he wanted to recreate one of every weapon in existence, which made him more of a collector. That number could be in the thousands or tens of thousands; he didn't care. All he wanted was to make them with his hands and see them with his eyes. And because these were weapons, he had no interest in locking them up like treasures or having them decorate the mantles of kings and nobles. No, he wanted powerful adventurers to use them and fight even stronger monsters for him.

As a natural result, Gawain had been going without rest since Sol's "awakening." He was probably even busier than Sol, who had been rushing about all over the land. To start, an entire basilisk was delivered to Gawain's workshop. This was already extremely rare as far as materials went, but the next day, Sol returned to Garlaige with a bombastic parade, bringing back Kuzuryuu, the boss of Taboo Novem. As if that wasn't enough, though it wasn't clear how or where he was keeping them all, Sol claimed that he had also killed Griffin, the boss of the fourth taboo territory; Hecatoncheires, the boss of the fifth; Abyss Spider, the boss of the seventh; and Phoenix, the boss of the

eighth. Griffin was on display at the central plaza at Magnamelia, and Gawain himself had taken part in the fight against Hecatoncheires, so at least those two were confirmed facts.

Despite everything, Gawain was now facing an insurmountable wall. He had been here countless times before, but this time, the problem was truly far too great for him to overcome. He was standing in front of a giant pile of parts that were to be assembled together into a final product. It had stumped him so much that he had seen it in his dreams. He would even sell his soul to the devil if it meant being able to complete this final step, but there he was, feet rooted to the ground.

"Hey, Old Man Gawain. How's progress?"

Currently, Gawain was in his personal workshop, a place that he had banned pretty much every single disciple from. He was cooped up there, clutching his head, when Steve, the general manager of the Garlaige branch of the Adventurer's Guild, popped his head through the door.

These two had gotten to know each other thanks to Sol's little materials misappropriation scheme and developed what turned out to be a rather long relationship. Of course, due to the nature of their connection, they had never been able to hang out publicly and go for drinks. Now that Sol had become some all-powerful figure who lorded it over the Kingdom of Emelia, however, their concerns had become moot. Therefore Steve, who had been swamped with work himself, had come over now that he had a brief moment's respite in search of an available drinking partner.

Steve had also become a big deal, which meant the pool of people he could casually invite for a drink had grown very limited. The younger staff members would be far too uncomfortable to drink with him, and if it was a woman, *he* would be the one who had to walk on eggshells. As it turned out, just finding someone to drink with was an ordeal as an older bachelor with a high enough position. To make matters worse, his reputation was still shooting up day by day due to being "someone Sol trusted." That made Gawain, who was in a similar position, the most appropriate person.

"Ah, Steve. Thanks for all your help gathering this stuff. I know it was a handful."

Steve waved a hand dismissively and laughed. "Lord Sol asked

for them. You don't owe me any thanks. More importantly, judging by your tone, you're stuck again?" He knew how eager Gawain had been to get his hands on the materials in question, but the requests had been proper jobs with great profit margins that the Adventurer's Guild had accepted from Sol with top priority.

"That said, I'm pretty sure we got everything on that long-ass list of insane things you asked for. Even Lord Sol's party went out in person."

The task at hand was to create a set of armis magicka from Kuzuryuu's materials. Sure enough, everything on the list had been accounted for, their quantities double-checked. And yet, Gawain was still standing here with an obvious frown on his face. That had to mean there was a problem somewhere else.

The "again" in Steve's comment hadn't come out of nowhere. At first, Gawain had been stumped by the unbelievable breadth, quantity, and difficulty of the secondary materials needed for the project. As could be gleaned from their conversation just now, this problem had been resolved by tapping into the Adventurer's Guild's extensive membership pool, with the most difficult items left for Sol's party to take care of in person. In short, brute force had broken through that wall.

Next, Gawain had realized he lacked knowledge. Thanks to divine revelation, he knew the shape and function of each part and what monster parts were needed to create them. He even knew how to process the materials, but the tools and techniques that the processes required had been lost in modern times, and there were no references in existence. He had gone so far as to obtain permission from the royal family to enter the palace library and flipped through every forbidden book in there, but nothing shook loose. This, again, was resolved by Sol. He sent over an elven elder who was practically a walking encyclopedia with thousands of years of knowledge. She was all too happy to apply everything she knew to transform his workshop into a high-level mechanized factory, elevating it to the standard of workshops from the pinnacle of human development, Era Gran Magicka. Never again would a sword be forged here; such a task was beneath a facility like this.

"Ugh, tell me about it."

Despite everything that had been done for him, here he was, stuck again. At the start, he had loudly proclaimed, "As long as

you get the damn materials, I'll make you weapons and armor that will make your goddamn eyes pop out!" As time went on, however, he realized with great shame that he couldn't take a single step without Sol's help. Even so, he was willing to accept help where he fell short, because his priority was and always would be to produce equipment—or it was probably more accurate to call what he had in mind "armaments"—that no one had ever seen before.

What he found at the end of his full-pelt run, however, was that he did not have what it took for that final step either. It was a crushing realization. He was probably feeling the saddest he ever had in his life. This wasn't something that could be just laughed off over a glass of wine.

"So, what's wrong? Weren't you all gung-ho about how all your problems were solved in one fell swoop when the elf lassie came on board?"

To the best of Steve's knowledge, ever since the elven elder whose appearance really only suited the nickname "lassie" had joined the project, she had taken over all the steps that required knowledge and techniques that had been lost in the modern day. She had seemed like such a genius that Gawain had chuckled and asked, "Is there any point to me still being here?" Everyone involved with the project had become convinced that nothing was impossible for her.

"Who are you calling 'lassie,' hm?"

The elf in question was the one who reacted to Steve's question. Indeed, she was there too, clutching her head just as Gawain was doing and groaning in a corner of the workshop. This elder, whose appearance couldn't be farther from her title, had already earned the right to freely access every part of Gawain's workshop in the eyes of not only Gawain himself but also everyone in his sphere. When Sol had first brought her here, it had caused an uproar. However, once she'd demonstrated her abilities, the craftsmen, technicians, and researchers had stopped caring about her looks, as was their nature.

"You, obviously. I mean, I can't even begin to guess how old you really are, but looking like that, you're a 'lassie' to us."

She was still just "lassie" to Steve, who was an outsider. Things might have been different if her mannerisms and the way she spoke were similar to the persona Luna had adopted when speaking to strangers, but this elven girl seemed childish

through and through.

“How can you denigrate a *lady* with the ability to process monster materials of this level with the moniker ‘lassie’?”

“Someone who can handle materials taken from Kuzuryuu, a freaking taboo territory boss, may be a lot of things, but ‘lady’ sure ain’t it.”

“How rude!”

Despite the elf’s indignation, Steve’s position was far more in line with the common person’s point of view. She had the right to take issue with being called “lassie” given her position as an elder of the elves, but that wasn’t an argument to start treating her like a lady.

There was a reason that, of the nine taboo territories in the vicinity of Garlaige, the boss of the ninth one, Kuzuryuu, was the most feared. Namely, it had been mentioned five times in human records of the past millennia, with four of them related to it devouring the bosses of neighboring taboo territories and consequently expanding the ninth to the greatest in size. There had been thirteen taboo territories at the start. Numbers ten to thirteen had been absorbed by number nine after Kuzuryuu had killed their respective bosses. Needless to say, those bosses had by no means been weak. The fights had been historic disasters that created bursts of light and shock waves that had reached even Garlaige and caused great casualties among the adventurers tasked with recording them.

The most recent mention was one of humanity’s great failures: The Holy Church, concerned by Kuzuryuu’s belligerent and expansionist nature, had tried using Divine Punishment on the boss in vain. It was beyond Kuzuryuu to launch a counterattack that reached a satellite in orbit, but according to accounts, it had shrugged off more than a dozen blasts of Divine Punishment, with the deflected strikes causing staggering damage to its surroundings.

Due to all this, fear of Kuzuryuu had been ingrained into the hearts and histories of this continent, being no less than the very symbol of things beyond human control. It really shouldn’t have been a pushover that could be killed in a single punch. But that was exactly what had happened. Therefore, it wasn’t that Kuzuryuu was weak, but that the All Dragon was just that powerful. This was why no one had questioned it when Sol, who such a monster called master, paraded home with the corpse of

the symbol of fear in tow and became lionized as a champion overnight.

“In our circle, even Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon—I mean, the All Dragon—is called ‘Lu,’” Steve chuckled. “There’s no point resisting, Saelmia. Lassie.”

“Ugh.”

Someone looking in from the outside might have thought a big, mean adult was picking on an innocent child. However, the elf named Saelmia, who had actually lived for thousands of years, could eat mere humans with fewer than a hundred years for breakfast in a verbal argument any time of day. A few of Gawain’s top disciples had actually tried to dismiss her not based on technical knowledge and skill but because they were adults and she was a child, and they’d ended up very much the worse for it. However, when the All Dragon, who had lived many times longer than she had, was pointed to as an example, there was nothing she could say in response.

Saelmia had been more than willing to offer everything she could, including even her body on top of all her knowledge and skills, to be involved with the development of an armament using Kuzuryuu’s materials. Even the greatest contributor to the project, Luna, allowed those whom Sol considered close companions to call her by the nickname “Lu.” Saelmia couldn’t very well ask for better treatment than the All Dragon and therefore understood she had no choice but to give up.

“Anyway, looks to me like you got all your parts. What more do you need?” Steve asked.

“I do have all the parts,” Gawain groaned. “I had the guilds for every craft in Garlaige working around the clock to finish everything, and it’s all here. This is everything that’s supposed to go into the armis magicka we’re making from Kuzuryuu’s materials.”

“Then all you gotta do is put ’em together, no?”

Having already moved on from the nickname topic, Steve threw Gawain a question that seemed obvious to ask from a layman’s point of view. No further requests had been made to the guild, and it didn’t seem like Sol had headed out to retrieve anything either. By all appearances, the countless needed parts were all lined up here in what had become the world’s most technologically advanced workshop, perfectly created and ready to be used. It wasn’t just Steve misreading the situation due to

his inexperience; Gawain had confirmed it too. So it was natural to question what else there was to do besides putting everything together.

“I…don’t have enough mana.”

The answer to Steve’s naive question was delivered with the bitterness of a man feeling his world crumbling due to the realization that the techniques and experience he had built up and taken pride in were mere drops in a big bucket.

“Ah, so the last step is *not* just a simple matter of slapping it all together. But, old man, weren’t you talking about how you couldn’t stop laughing from how much you had leveled up thanks to Sol?”

“I was.”

Due to his position, Steve knew a bit about the job Magic Blacksmith. Knowledge, technique, and the training and experience needed to fully utilize these tools were not the only things that Gawain required. The final step called for use of the miracle that people received from God: his talent. Put simply, a project was finished only by expending a large amount of mana to assemble the parts in a phenomenon that wasn’t unlike casting a spell.

Naturally, the quality and complexity of the final product greatly affected the amount of mana required. The equipment that Black Tiger had been using had already greatly exceeded the average in this respect, so it made sense that this would be truer so for whatever was to be made from the materials of boss monsters such as Kuzuryuu and Hecatoncheires. As a result, everyone in Sol’s circle who had a certain degree of understanding of Player was fully supportive of his choice to push Gawain’s MP stat to the very limit. Steve, who had known Sol pretty much since the start of his career as an adventurer, fully appreciated what a massive power-up this was. It was nearly as drastic as making Rank A adventurers out of a bunch of Villagers.

“Moreover, didn’t you drag your creaky old bones out to accompany Sol on one of his taboo territory hunts and become a member of Libertadores?”

“I did.”

Since Sol had determined that Gawain would have need of yet more mana than the added stats could provide, the old man had also become a member of Libertadores. Originally, the term had

been the name of the new adventurer clan founded by Sol after leaving Black Tiger. He had even gotten it officially registered with the Adventurer's Guild through Steve. However, in Garlaige and a small part of Magnamelia, that name was quickly shifting to refer instead to those Sol had personally freed from human limits.

To elaborate, they were those whose levels had reached the triple digits and whose bodies, upon mentally assuming battle readiness, would burst with a magical light due to the overwhelming torrent of inner mana coursing within. In so many words, these were the aides who had obtained superhuman abilities. The amount of mana they possessed was so much greater than that of normal adventurers that they were effectively invincible against everyone else.

In a way, Sol was the weakest in his group. However, without him, the others would lose the invincibility they were enjoying. There was no doubt that he commanded absolute power, but he was doing it in a way that had never been seen before.

In any case, Gawain had participated in the fight to unseal Hecatoncheires's taboo territory and consequently become the first noncombat member of Libertadores.

"And you still don't have enough?"

"Nope."

Because of his position, Steve had been asked quite a few times whether he would become a member of Libertadores too. However, the idea just didn't sit well with him. Plus, he felt like it wouldn't make a difference if the enemy he was facing had the ability to break through the HP barrier that Sol had cast on him. For these reasons, he had chosen to not do so. Surely, it would be helpful for at least one of Sol's close allies to retain the perspective of a normal human.

Still, thanks to his position, Steve fully understood just how massive Gawain's mana pool had become. "In that case, moaning about it here isn't gonna solve things. Go consult Sol. It's hardly the first time."

Steve couldn't really wrap his mind around the thought of having more mana than Gawain possessed, but he did know that was a matter to give up on and leave to Sol to handle. If the task was too great even with Sol's intervention, then this project of turning materials gathered from Kuzuryuu and Hecatoncheires into the armaments that Gawain was calling "the Numbers" was

simply beyond human reach at the moment.

"That's...true."

"All right, get things ready. I'll go fetch Sol and Reen."

"Sorry for the trouble."

Gawain knew that Steve was right. Sure, there was a part of him that was reluctant to admit to Sol that he still fell short despite all the preparation that Sol had done for him. However, at the end of the day, he was still beholden to the pressing desire to see the Numbers finished with his own eyes.

As it turned out, the problem that Gawain and Saelmia had been too embarrassed to report would be solved by Sol with little more than a wave of his hand. It was as if Player truly were capable of anything.

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"Is that true, Gawain?"

"I'm ashamed to admit it, but yes."

When Steve showed up, Sol had gotten up from a meal and immediately followed him to Gawain's workshop. Along the way, Sol had received a brief account of what had happened, so he was aware of the situation.

There was a lot of preparation that had to be done going forward, so Sol's group would have to split up and move separately. However, they were still together tonight. In other words, Sol was accompanied by Luna, Reen, Julia, Frederica, and Eliza—every single member of what was fast becoming known as "Sol's Harem" in Garlaige. Part of the reason for this name lay with the girls themselves, who had each started to emit a suitable aura in their own way after the recent banquet at the Elven Forest.

Eliza hadn't been there, but she was already known as one of Sol's women in the underworld. In a way, her reputation in this aspect was the most established. At the very least, all the members of the former Gafus Gang, including Johan and Louise, believed this without a shred of doubt. In their world, where the law of the jungle reigned supreme, this was the only reason that could explain the considerable investments that Sol had made in the slums. Furthermore, now that she was healed, Eliza was every bit Frederica's equal in terms of beauty, causing more than a few of her subordinates to worship her as the source of all

their recent fortune. Eliza did nothing to correct her men's misconceptions, as it made it easier for her to control her organization. If she really had to raise a problem, it would be the question of when she could turn those misconceptions into reality. She was very open to that being this night, but since she was in a line and all, it seemed likely to be one issue that would continue hanging over her for a while to come.

"Oh, don't sweat it. The fact that you still don't have enough mana to finish the Numbers makes me even more excited about how amazing they'll be."

Oblivious to the girls' worries, Sol was all smiles. In fact, he was in such high spirits that Luna couldn't help smiling as well, eagerly waving her tail.

"They will absolutely blow you away. This I swear as a Magic Blacksmith."

As Sol said, if the Numbers truly could not be finished even with the amount of mana Gawain had at his triple-digit level and bolstered by the stats from Sol, they would surely turn out to be marvels that would overturn the very concepts of what weapons and equipment were in this world.

"With them, any member of Libertadores would be able to defeat taboo territory bosses on their own," Gawain continued. "If we can actually complete them, that is."

Based on the way they worked, long-term usage was going to be a challenge given how thin outer mana was. Of course, Sol could forcibly prolong the duration using MP Recovery. However, there was little point thinking about all this before the Numbers were actually created. According to Gawain's intuition, he would need more than double the amount of mana he currently possessed. And his job would drain all of the requisite mana in one go during the final step, which meant it wasn't like Sol could top him up when he ran low. The process simply wouldn't start if he didn't have enough mana to begin with.

"Don't worry, Gawain. I have a solution to your mana problem. It *is* limited in that I can only help you finish one set a day, but given what we're doing, we won't be aiming for mass production."

"Once a day would be more than enough, considering how many days it took us to gather everything for Number Nine: Type Kuzuryuu and Number Five: Type Hecatoncheires, but still..."

To Gawain's surprise, Sol, the person who knew the most about Magic Blacksmith after Gawain himself, seemed fully confident in his ability to resolve the problem that he had been so sure spelled the end of the project. And he wasn't someone who ever exaggerated his abilities. In fact, he was probably in such high spirits because the final hurdle was so insignificant in his eyes. Gawain was very happy that the Numbers would indeed be finished, but he was equally taken aback by the way Sol could so easily deal with what had driven Gawain to such despair.

So, this is the feeling the other members of Libertadores were talking about…

Though fully aware of the lengths that Sol had gone to on his behalf, Gawain had thought that at the end of the day, *he* was the one who was bringing these never-before-seen weapons into existence. That hadn't changed, but he couldn't help feeling a wave of powerlessness when forced to admit he needed Sol's help to wield his own talent.

"So, how about we do that final step now? The lack of mana is the only issue, right?"

Clearly, Sol had no intention of putting things off any longer. He too wanted to see the completed Numbers as soon as possible and was practically champing at the bit to do the final step right here, right now.

"Uh, yeah. That's right. Everything we need is here…I think. If Reen and Princess Frederica would put on the base outfit that we finished before, we can finish up the Numbers right away."

Of course, there was no way that Gawain would object. He was just as eager as Sol to quickly lay eyes on the armaments, and those who would be wielding the Numbers were already there in person.

"Um…"

"Do we really have to?"

Reen and Frederica, who had tried on the mentioned outfits once, did not share that enthusiasm. If they'd known they were going to be doing this, they wouldn't have eaten earlier. They would have insisted on just drinking water.

"Reen, Frederica, I'm, uh, sorry to ask this, but can you get ready?"

That said, they couldn't defy a direct request from Sol. After a short conflicted pause, they both nodded in acquiescence. They had the sense of modesty of girls their age, but the way Sol had

blushed apologetically when asking certainly did motivate them a little. Being able to make the boy they had feelings for make a face like that outweighed their embarrassment.

“Well, I’ll leave you guys to it.” Steve, who had made the mistake of staying during that first session and felt extremely uncomfortable throughout, made the sage decision to take his leave. It was the best choice not only for him, but for Sol, Reen, and Frederica as well. The two girls would feel a lot less apprehensive if Sol was the only man seeing them in their outfits. Apparently, they didn’t see Gawain as a man because of how old he was. Self-deception sure was useful sometimes.

Even so, when Reen and Frederica finished changing and stepped out before Sol, their cheeks were dyed crimson. This was an entirely natural reaction, as their outfits were so thin that they went beyond being formfitting to merely looking like black paint. They were covered in glossy black from the neck down—basically naked but in a different color. Their silhouettes were completely bare and visible down to the smallest lines. Being girls, it was impossible for them to have gotten used to it just because it was the second time. They were trying to cover what they could with their hands, but the effort only added to the lewdness of the sight. Neither of them would have agreed to stand in front of the group in this getup if it hadn’t been Sol who had asked.

“Oh, wow…” Julia grimaced openly at the thought that she would have to wear the same thing one day.

In contrast, Eliza unconsciously murmured, “Aww…they’re so lucky” upon seeing all the womanly curves on Reen’s and Frederica’s more grown-up forms, which had been revealed without obfuscation or exaggeration, and comparing them with her own lack thereof. Her jealousy grew stronger as she saw how hard Sol was struggling not to look and realized her own scrawny body had nowhere near what it would take to evoke such a reaction from him.

“Why are human females so averse to showing their bodies’ lines? It’s not as if you two have meager assets. Why not stand up straight and own them?” Luna, for her part, couldn’t understand why Reen and Frederica were so embarrassed, as she herself was always naked when in dragon form. In fact, she had expressed her desire to go bare at home but had ended up getting a very stern talking-to from Sol and was grudgingly

complying with his demand that she stay clothed.

This wasn't the only reason for her opinion that Reen and Frederica should be proud of their forms, however. She wasn't entirely above feeling jealous, comparing their bodies to her own rather modest one. Since they were endowed enough to make Sol blush, they should gain confidence from it. She felt this way all the more because for some reason, Sol had firmly forbidden her from assuming her adult form after the one time she'd shown it to him.

"Don't worry. As the name suggests, that outfit is just the base," Gawain called out. "Once they're registered, you can wear whatever you're used to wearing over them. They're designed to be that thin precisely so they won't feel in the way. I worked damn hard on them, just saying. They're the product of techniques and materials that I'd never even heard of until recently. There was no ulterior motive."

Despite feeling a little down about not being seen as a man, Gawain made sure to give a proper explanation for the equipment he had produced. Jokes aside, he really had not designed the base outfits to be suggestive. They had simply ended up that way. Plus, it wasn't like the girls had to walk around all day wearing only them, and when the Numbers were deployed, the outfits would no longer be sexual. The intention was for users to wear their usual gear on top so that they could fight as usual and summon the Numbers only when encountering enemies at the level of taboo territory bosses or higher. In this way, these literally were base outfits. It was for the sole purpose of maximizing the girls' freedom of movement that the "foundation suit," which was necessary for controlling the Numbers armament, practically looked like body paint.

"Ugh..."

"It's fine. We understand."

It wasn't like Reen and Frederica would suddenly stop feeling embarrassed after hearing Gawain's explanation, but their position was one in which Sol could simply call them to his room at night if he was inclined to. They weren't worried about Gawain either, because they knew that he had been pouring all his time —save what he needed to eat and sleep to work at peak performance—into creating the Numbers. They also understood that the outfits' suggestive appearance mattered a lot less to him than making sure they performed to the specs he thought

necessary.

“It is true that this is better than even the most expensive clothing in every way,” Frederica further conceded. Not only were the foundation suits more comfortable to wear and to move in than anything she’d had the experience of trying on as a princess, they were even equipped with temperature regulation. And though they looked like little more than body paint, they offered far more protection than even leather armor. They could actually withstand quite a few strikes and magic attacks.

“I’m not against wearing something like this when alone with Sol, though,” Reen mumbled.

If the base outfits were indeed to be rated from the perspective of bedroom play, they were actually far more arousing than the high-class bodysuits sought by many. Each came with a price tag so great that a normal person’s eyeballs would pop out upon hearing the number, but there was a surprisingly large number of guys who would want to rip such an outfit and strip it off with their own hands. Reen and Frederica had no idea whether Sol was in this group, but the point was that they were receptive to the idea when alone with him.

Unfortunately, they weren’t alone with him right now. Consequently, they wanted to get the so-called “registration” over with as soon as possible and quickly put their usual gear back on.

“Please bear with it till you finish the initial registration and activation. To that end, please assume battle mode. The foundation suits will do the rest.”

Frederica hung her head. “So this *is* underwear…” Embarrassment aside, it just wasn’t proper for her, a royal, to stand in front of others in her underclothes. However, there wasn’t anything to be done about it, so she obediently did as Gawain asked.

When she and Reen assumed battle mode, the massive amount of inner mana created in their bodies overflowed and burst out. This prompted the foundation suits to remember the magical signature of their wearer and set it as the only one that they would react to going forward. Glowing lines ran over the glossy black surfaces, inscribing shapes and magical symbols in different patterns for Reen and Frederica. When the light settled, the registration and activation was over. If anyone else tried

putting on the foundation suits, all functions would be locked and they simply wouldn't start up. In other words, it had become equipment that only they could use.

After confirming that everything had gone according to plan, Gawain turned to Sol. "So, that's the prep work done. But as I said, I don't have the mana to do the next step. Are you sure you can do something about it, oh great leader?"

There was no point in having working foundation suits if the Numbers armament they were meant to control didn't get finished.

"Leave it to me. Three minutes should be enough, right?"

"As long as there is enough mana, I don't need three whole minutes; I can be done in an instant. Same as it's always been."

"Then we're good. I can give you as much mana as you want in that instant. Ready?"

The moment Sol used a particular skill from Player, a three-dimensional magic circle appeared before Gawain at a spot a little under his navel commonly referred to as the dantian. At the same time, the space above his head warped and opened up into a whirling hole shining with an array of colors. Pure mana that was neither inner nor outer spilled out and was rapidly sucked into the rotating three-dimensional magic circle.

The skill in question, Magicka Fonz, effectively created an artificial organa that drew pure mana from a dimensional rift for a target and enabled them to use it. As a result, said target would temporarily gain access to what was practically limitless mana.

"Well I'll be... Now I see why you can only use this once a day. I can finish up any number of projects simultaneously with this. *Ahem*. Reen and Princess Frederica, here goes."

If Magicka Fonz had been used on Gawain at his original level, his mind would have been blown away and his legs would have given out. However, now that his level was in the triple digits, he could bear the strain just fine. What's more, he had such masterful control of the flow that he could draw out only the amount that he needed. When Reen and Frederica nodded wordlessly, he threw caution to the wind and completed both Number Nine: Type Kuzuryuu and Number Five: Type Hecatoncheires in one go. That was the right thing to do in this case, as he was completely freed from the shackles of the amount of mana he needed for three minutes, making time the

resource that he now had to prioritize.

Because he was drawing mana for both Numbers at the same time, Gawain's entire body was obscured by a torrent of energy, making it look like he was a human-shaped mass of light. And before the eyes of everyone present, the never-before-seen armaments began taking shape.

First, the thousands of parts laid out in the workshop were enveloped in magical light. They then started coming together with mechanical precision as if guided by invisible machinery, with magical circuits coming to life in quick succession. As magic and technology united, they somehow came to look more and more alike. At its pinnacle, magic bore a great resemblance to extremely advanced technology, whereas the forefront of scientific and engineering basically looked like magic being deployed. In this way, the as yet masterless Numbers became finalized as separate units that, instead of combining, were temporarily stored in another dimension using the mana still flowing from Gawain.

The whole process had only taken a few dozen seconds. Of course, it wasn't over yet. In fact, it could be said that what was coming up was the greatest hurdle of all. Put simply, each had to be registered and activated too.

To start, a few large parts that had not been stored away floated to the pair wearing foundation suits and attached themselves. Of those, two were metallic rings. When the rings assumed positions above the girls' heads, they flickered to life. The metallic parts then disappeared, leaving behind angelic halos composed of mana. Reen's shone blue and had nine layers rotating at different tilts, whereas Frederica's was a simple ring of light surrounded by a pure-white outer ring broken up into five parts.

These halos were a lost technology called nier organa. While active, they constantly depleted their user's inner mana in exchange for constantly absorbing a massive amount of outer mana and directing it to the equipped armament. It would take much more mana than a human could supply with inner mana to power the Numbers—no matter how much they leveled up—but these halos made up for it by using outer mana as fuel instead. This made them practically the cores of the Numbers.

Now, although the Numbers could be activated and fueled with outer mana, the halos that supplied them with power could

only be formed and maintained with inner mana. That said, the rate of consumption was light enough that even someone without extra stats bestowed by Player would be able to keep it up for a certain period of time. This meant the Numbers had a lot of utility and that if they could become mass-produced someday, people would be able to use them to make actual headway in dungeons. There would have to be a lot more outer mana in the world than there currently was, though.

Next, the two central processing units in the form of large gems that had been made from Kuzuryuu's and Hecatoncheires's core magic stones sank into Reen's and Frederica's foundation suits at their solar plexus. They turned blue and white, respectively, as their appearance transformed from perfect spheres to that of cut jewels. The halos promptly connected with them through the suits and started drawing in outer mana and circulating it in the girls' magical signatures.

Outer mana was thin in this era, but the halos absorbed as much as they could and converted it to the girls' respective colors before directing it to their processing units through the circuits on their foundation suits, allowing the start-up process to begin. The Numbers would need a lot more mana to be used as weapons, but the current amount was enough to activate them.

Thin armor appeared on the girls' hands and feet, followed by the basic parts needed to control the larger units still currently stored away. The main armament parts came out next and deployed themselves protectively around their respective users, continually floating by way of magic so as to not burden the dainty girls with their incredible weight. Eventually, the halos shone with increased intensity, throwing blue and white light around, and every last part remaining in storage was summoned, joined, equipped, and deployed.

It looked like layers of armor had been added to Reen's and Frederica's foundation suits in the blink of an eye, but this was not actually armor. It was their Numbers armament, summoned from the dimensional pocket where it was usually stored using vast amounts of outer mana and kept afloat with magic.

While Reen had nine massive mechanical shields, Frederica had two giant mechanical arms that dwarfed her in size. All of this equipment was so enormous that even a high-level person wouldn't be able to pick them up, much less swing them around.

And yet, thanks to the processing units at the girls' solar plexus, they could control them entirely at will.

Reen's shields were large enough to easily protect one person each and could fly quite far from her. The third eye from each of Kuzuryuu's heads formed the core of each shield, with seven of them tailored to block each of the five elements and two polar extremes and the remaining two being cannon shields that could fire beams of specific elements by combining with the protective shield of the corresponding element.

Reen couldn't just start firing away here in the workshop, but she did begin manipulating the shields into various formations. She even tried joining the cannon shields—again, without firing them—as if simulating a fight inside her head.

Frederica's arms basically traced her movements as a pugilist and, by virtue of their great size, drastically boosted the damage she could deal. Not only that, but she could even use them as massive projectiles. Since these arms were made using Hecatoncheires's arms, she only had a hundred of them, but being able to launch a hundred missiles at something would make for a very powerful last resort indeed.

When she tried out a few pugilist skills, the arms flew with such speed and force that the very wind pressure created by their passing proved enough to sweep smaller monsters off their feet. Additionally, though this wasn't noticeable to anyone else, she was able to plant her feet properly when using her skills despite being in midair, making her suit very much tailored to the fighting style of a pugilist.

Naturally, neither girl had completely mastered their armament yet. However, they were able to wield them like extensions of their bodies thanks to the support provided by their foundation suits and halos, so it was just a matter of practice and experience.

After observing both suits at work and confirming that there were no problems, Gawain nodded with satisfaction. "So, the princess is snow white, and Reen is blue."

"This is just..."

"It's incredible..."

Reen and Frederica had forgotten all their embarrassment. Even Julia and Eliza, who had been dreading wearing the foundation suits themselves, couldn't help but to get excited imagining what their own Numbers armaments would be like.

Wearers could fight like normal with regular gear on a day-to-day basis, then summon the suits when encountering monsters or enemies that needed more of a punch. It was perhaps apt to call them “monster regalia,” as they were pretty much a version of the “god regalia” that the Kuzuifabra described the Hero clothing herself in, just made with territory boss materials. The easy swap between normal adventurer gear and special weaponry so advanced as to be anachronistic would surely make these suits the subject of legends portrayed in theatrical performances in the future.

“It’s a success,” Gawain announced. “I present to you, Number Nine: Type Kuzuryuu and Number Five: Type Hecatoncheires. See? When fully deployed, they aren’t all that… Well, actually, they kind of are.”

Three minutes had passed, and Magicka Fonz was over. The strain of miraculously completing two Numbers armaments at the same time had left Gawain drenched in sweat, but he was positively beaming with a sense of accomplishment.

There was just one tiny problem. He had expected the outfits to shed the criticism of being suggestive upon being finished, but that didn’t happen. It was true that there wasn’t an inch of skin visible below the neck, both hands and legs were protected by units too large to be described as heavy armor, and they were surrounded by superweapons perpetually floating like Luna was. However, because of how the girls were floating in the middle of their units, the lines of their slender forms were still plain to the eye, which created a different kind of eroticism from the foundation suit alone. The pairing of giant weapons with cute girls evoked a unique sensuality precisely because of the mismatch.

Forget being an old man or an artisan. Gawain, as one man and as the person who had created these armaments, bluntly blurted, “Damn, that’s sexy.”

“Gawain!” Sol exclaimed.

“Ah, sorry. But…strange. This isn’t what they looked like in the divine revelation.”

It was only because Gawain had almost completely grown past sexual desire that he was able to be so honest. Sol, who actually shared his opinion, couldn’t help blushing and chastising him. In doing so, he was basically announcing that he thought the same, making Reen and Frederica blush in turn.

“You were probably seeing them worn by guys.”

Sol was of the opinion that if it were men wearing the Numbers armaments, they would actually look pretty damn cool. The pairing of a well-toned body and giant weapons—be it in a crude and old-fashioned setting or a streamlined futuristic one—was something that spoke to guys in a different way than suggestiveness. Sol chuckled a little at how strange it was that the same armament could give such different impressions simply because of the wearer’s gender.

Of course, all the speculation meant nothing to the girls, who were still going to be looked at with lascivious eyes. Gawain figured that they would actually want it to happen if it was Sol doing the looking, so he said, “Ah, well, should be fine. You’re the only one who’d ever get to see them up close when they wear these anyway.”

“You think so?” Sol asked doubtfully.

Gawain shot a look at the girls and replied wryly, “Looks like it.”

Reen, who had her shields gathered behind her as if framing her form, basically had complete freedom of her hands and was abashedly using them to cover herself. On the other hand, Frederica couldn’t do the same, as her arms didn’t have the same range of motion due to being linked with her giant ones. Even so, both girls were observing Sol while looking like they were enjoying the situation as much as feeling embarrassed by it.

Gawain shivered a little at the reminder of how volatile women could be. The basic reaction to one’s immodest appearance being viewed with desirous eyes was shame, but whether that was accompanied by disgust or joy could vary dramatically depending on the beholder. If Reen and Frederica hated being looked at in such a way by all other men on earth but were happy with Sol being the only exception, then what Gawain had said was pretty much true. After all, Sol was the only one man alive who could stand so close during a battle when the Numbers had to be deployed.

“Oh, but Julia will be marrying someone else…” Gawain scratched his head, then shrugged. “Eh, it’s okay.”

“Not really,” Julia retorted.

Despite her protest, Gawain didn’t see much choice other than to let nature take its course. As already noted, he wasn’t the person who had designed the foundation suit or the Numbers.

Anyone with complaints had to bring them to the person who actually had designed them, be it God or someone else.

"In any case, we now have a verified way to create the greatest weapon and armor ever. And I have Sol to thank every step of the way. Next is to actually test them in battle and figure out how to fuel them properly."

"We can charge them up with Magicka Fonz, and I can top up the wearer's inner mana using MP Recovery. So we're good, at least theoretically. But whether this will work in a fight will indeed have to be tested properly. We'll do it using the remaining taboo territories."

Although the Numbers were completed, the outer mana in the atmosphere was far too thin to allow them to perform at peak output. However, the terminal magic stones at the center of the armament suits could hold a rather significant amount of mana, and the girls did have levels in the triple digits. With the help of MP Recovery and Magicka Fonz, conducting battle with the Numbers wouldn't be as impossible as it first seemed.

At this point, no one even blinked when Sol declared his intention to use taboo territories, which had been synonymous with death until recently, as testing grounds. If an unwitting third party had been present, they would have thought this group too far gone.

"That, I'll leave to you guys to decide since you're doing the fighting. However, as you can see, these armaments aren't just swords that I can sharpen and armor I can pound. I ask that you bring them in for full maintenance every time you use them. They should be fine as long as you keep them charged and they don't get banged up too much in combat, but you never know."

"We'll make sure we do that." Sol nodded. "And if you need any materials or magic stones to conduct that maintenance, feel free to let us know."

The maintenance of even normal armis magicka cost an arm and a leg. It only made sense, then, that it would cost that much more for the Numbers. This wasn't an area that Sol would skimp on, though. In the first place, a lot of that cost would be due to the magic stones and materials needed, and he could procure almost everything himself. Although Gawain, being the only Magic Blacksmith alive, had every right to charge through the nose for the servicing fee, he was willing to do everything pretty much for free simply for the experience of being involved. As a

result, the cost of maintenance would practically be chump change. Well, chump change for Sol now, but the actual numbers still had enough zeroes to make other men faint.

"Yep, I'll be counting on you. Reen and Princess Frederica, I would appreciate a detailed account of how it feels to use the Numbers. When doing maintenance, I can make adjustments based on your feedback."

"Understood," Reen said. "By the way...how do we return to normal?"

She was more used to this kind of request from Gawain than Frederica due to all her years as an adventurer. The armis magicka she had used so far had also undergone repeated adjustments based on things she had felt and noticed during combat. She understood how much more important this was for something as powerful as the Numbers. That said, if they weren't going to conduct any tests right away, she didn't want to maintain this appearance for a moment longer than needed.

"Right, sorry. The Numbers are summoned and stored using keywords spoken in the wearer's voice. They're 'Summon' and 'Store' by default, so everything will be put away if you say 'Store' now. The keywords can be changed. Just let me know and I'll update them when I check them out."

When Reen and Frederica tentatively called out, "Store," their units were immediately enveloped by a blinding light and complicated symbols, and they disappeared into a dimensional pocket. First went the large floating weapons, then the armor on their limbs, and last were the processing units and halos. A moment later, their foundation suits reverted from blue and white to their original glossy black.

"Later, practice swapping between your normal gear and the Numbers. Since you're just summoning and storing the suits, you shouldn't run into problems with not having enough mana, be it inner or outer."

The pair had reverted to their revealing appearances, but apparently if they had been wearing something on top of their foundation suits, it would have reappeared. Testing this swap was indeed going to be a priority. The girls acknowledged this as Julia and Eliza brought them coats to cover up.

"Got it!"

"Understood."

With glittering eyes, Sol declared, "All right, let's run through a

bunch of tests now and try out combat tomorrow!”

The sight of Number Nine: Type Kuzuryuu and Number Five: Type Hecatoncheires in their finished forms had left him extremely excited, and he was eager to get started. This would normally be a rather demanding request, but his party had already unsealed several taboo territories in normal gear, so they could do so even more comfortably now that they had greater firepower. There was plenty of time for him to do all the tests he wanted, and Reen and Frederica were eager as well.

Since fighting in the air was going to be their default when using the Numbers—and somewhat differently from how Float and Fly worked—they were going to need as much practice as they could get. No matter how incredible someone’s equipment was, they could still be defeated by someone with weaker equipment who had mastered its usage. Unlike swords, shields, and normal armor, the Numbers reacted even to their wearers’ eye movements and thoughts. Obviously, familiarity with the suits would make a very big difference.

“My lord, how do you feel about first having them train with me?”

Given the circumstances, Luna’s Astral form would make the perfect sparring partner. She could precisely control how powerful it was and bring out several at a time. Killing one would only deplete her mana and not hurt her personally, so Reen and Frederica could freely go all out.

“That’s…actually a good idea. I’d appreciate it.”

“It’d be my pleasure!” Luna puffed out her chest, looking very reliable. She would never hurt her liege’s precious companions, and Reen and Frederica knew that and trusted her. Even more, they were thankful for the opportunity to fight against something larger than taboo territory bosses before facing actual bosses tomorrow.

Unfortunately, since the girls wouldn’t be using their cool new weapons just yet, Sol and Gawain felt a little disappointed.

Side Story: Creating a Hero

“Is it really true, Frederica?”

In the center of Magnamelia, the capital of the Kingdom of Emelia, stood the royal palace. In the center of the palace was a tower that only members of the royal family could enter. And on the balcony at the top of that tower, a prince with breathtakingly handsome features turned to ask his sister for confirmation again after having done so countless times.

This was Maximillian zen la Emelia, the second prince and the man who had been first in line for the throne.

“You’re getting annoying, Maximillian,” Frederica replied, doing her best not to let that annoyance show on her face. However, in successfully keeping her smile, she accidentally let her true thoughts slip out.

What Maximillian was confirming repeatedly with a bright smile the likes of which Frederica had never seen on his face were the terms that Sol had promised: One, Prince Maximillian was to yield his position as first in line to the throne to Prince Franz. Two, in exchange, Sol would grant Maximillian skills and stats to be a tank and would do the same for the roles requested by five others of Maximillian’s choosing. Three, Maximillian would get to keep his title as prince but was to be released from all duties related to the running of the kingdom.

In summary, Maximillian was surrendering not only the right to be the next king but also all official authority in exchange for starting a new life as an adventurer. He had even declined being power-leveled like Frederica so he could start from the very bottom with his own party. The childish grin of wonder on his face was because the wish he had had as a boy was finally coming true.

So, this is his true character...

Truthfully, Frederica was still overcoming her astonishment. After a period of great commotion, it was decided, with King Ethelweld’s approval, that the Kingdom of Emelia would effectively become a vassal state to Sol. Before Frederica said anything, Maximillian had immediately offered to yield his position as heir to Franz or her. Frederica couldn’t realistically

rule Emelia while serving Sol, so the future crown ended up in the lap of the first prince. Franz had international connections and skill as a merchant, and Frederica was in support of him becoming the next king, so Sol had accepted the arrangement without a second thought. What Maximillian had asked for as a reward was already detailed above.

Maximillian had had a bit of a reputation. Some had called him “a capable man with darkness within,” some “the prince who never smiles,” and some “the coldhearted realist.” Frederica had shared this evaluation. Once he’d learned that the Absolutus he had inherited no longer required him to protect the country’s interests because it was now under the protection of a much greater power; however, he had seemed to transform into a different person. He was friendly and affable, and he acted like it was perfectly natural for them to get along because they were siblings. As it turned out, he was just a happy-go-lucky pretty boy at heart.

I guess he was trying to live up to his duty as a royal in his own way before.

Since he had inherited Absolutus, he had been trying to hold himself to a standard he considered appropriate for the heir of a large country, even if he was to be shunned by his brother and envied by his sister. Upon realizing this, Frederica felt ashamed at how immature she had been and how much she had lacked insight.

“I did want the throne, but…”

“Give up, Franz. Father can probably hang in there for about a decade more, but you are far more suitable as heir than Maximillian.”

Franz, on the other hand, seemed unsure what to feel about the throne he had yearned for suddenly being given to him. As the oldest sibling, he had understood his younger brother’s conviction and therefore resigned himself to supporting the country’s finances. But now that Maximillian was practically throwing away the crown like a hot potato and Frederica was making it clear she no longer cared for it either, he was understandably a little put out that it seemed like he was being made to succeed by process of elimination. That said, he now had the greatest backer ever and the throne was the best position from which to help not only Emelia but the entire continent to flourish, so he was fully motivated to do his best.

Maximillian guffawed. “Was that a jab at me, sister dearest?”

Franz shot the adventurer wannabe a look and sighed. “To think the day would come when getting the throne felt like drawing the short straw…”

“Life sure takes weird turns,” Frederica giggled.

“Can I just say, it sure took a weird turn with you!” Franz said.

Frederica nodded in full agreement as though they were discussing somebody else’s business. She had been so popular with the army that quite a few great nobles had been wary of the possibility of a coup d’état, and now she was just walking around giving off the vibes of a girl in love. It wasn’t like she had lost her sharp mind, and her significant other was a man who clearly could affect even royalty with ease, so Franz wasn’t overly worried. As their brother, he did feel a little lonely to see them striking off on their own paths, but he was equally happy that their relationship had reverted to one where he could hold such feelings for them.

“Oh, don’t pout, Franz. Lord Sol said he is thinking about making you like me.”

Sol couldn’t very well allow the current and future kings of Emelia, the country that he was planning on making his base, to die out of the blue to something silly like assassination, so he had indeed casually mentioned wanting to bring them up to Frederica’s level when he had a spare moment. In other words, he saw making someone powerful enough to suddenly appear in the audience hall and strike everyone into dumbfounded astonishment as nothing more than insurance. Franz was a man, so the thought of becoming strong enough to wipe the floor with monsters from dungeons and territories did quicken his heart. Though it wasn’t really his character to do so, the idea of going dungeon delving with a group of close friends was something that struck a chord in every boy, including him.

“About that… We might have to keep an eye on father.”

“Ah…” Both Franz and Frederica looked up at the sky in resigned agreement.

Their father, the esteemed King Ethelweld, had asked Sol with a dead serious expression if he could go dungeon delving too after fulfilling all his duties as the current king and handing everything off to Franz. There was no denying that he was starting to emit a youthful energy that probably harkened to his days as the Mad Prince of Explosions. The thought of the king

rounding up the grandpas and grandmas he used to party with decades ago and charging into dungeons had all of their children clutching their heads in consternation. And it left them a little bit jealous, if they were to be honest.

"That said," said Franz, "it all depends on how things play out."

They were aware that being able to have such worries was a blessing. However, those worries would be the least of their problems if they were to lose in the coming all-out war against the Holy Church and the Panhuman League. Emelia would be wiped from the map, its history ended. The resulting fate of the royal family hardly needed to be spelled out, especially since they had been denounced as apostates.

"Do you two think the Church really has a hidden ace up its sleeve?" Frederica asked.

"It would make sense," Franz replied. "And I'm sure they have absolute faith in it."

"You really think so?"

For some reason, Maximillian seemed to have suddenly regressed to being a brainless little kid, so Franz and Frederica decided to ignore him to keep their very serious conversation going.

"But it doesn't make sense that they haven't used it against Country Eater."

If the Church truly had something that they were so sure was powerful enough to defeat Sol and Luna, it was indeed valid to wonder why they had held it back this whole time.

"Not necessarily. Like you said, they might have goals that they're prioritizing over humanity's peace and development. In fact, we can't rule out the possibility that they orchestrated the tragedy two hundred years ago."

Of course, the Church could be pursuing a different goal than what people thought.

"As a way to control public consciousness?"

"Over several generations, even."

Perhaps there was a reason the Church didn't want humanity to prosper like it had during Era Gran Magicka. That reason was shrouded in mystery, but if it truly existed, impressing upon humankind that there were still great, terrible things out there beyond their understanding was indeed an effective method to keep the population suppressed. Though religion did have the power to affect people's hearts, it alone could not explain an

effort to manage the human race so that it wouldn't die out yet couldn't take over the world either. Along that line of thinking, the Adventurer's Guild suddenly seemed rather suspicious as well, considering the hold it had over everyone blessed by God with talents that enabled them to fight monsters.

"If that's the case, the Church must see Lord Sol as a mortal enemy."

"Why?" Maximillian asked, but everyone ignored him again.

Sol's plan to unseal all taboo territories and conquer all dungeons ran directly opposite to the Church's assumed goal of curbing humanity's progress. It was only a matter of time before his efforts ruined the deceit that the Church had deemed necessary to subject the human race to for the past millennium, so it would have to eliminate him at all costs.

"I think we can safely say the upper echelons definitely do. Otherwise…well, if I were in their shoes, I'd immediately instate a Hero and kick up a big fuss about it."

"Since they haven't done that…"

"They must be really confident they'll win. They probably have their cards already set up and are just waiting to reveal them. Our own cards are so powerful that I can't imagine how we could lose, but we shouldn't rule out the possibility of the Church trying to strike at us directly."

"As in, trying to win by fighting outside of the rules?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if that's the Hero's actual purpose."

"Right, the Kuzuifabra."

From this perspective, there was room to consider that it was the Church that had ended humanity's prosperity a thousand years ago. For all anyone knew, the Kuzuifabra, which every citizen of this continent had grown up hearing, could be a lie fabricated for the Church's convenience that bore no resemblance to what had really happened. If Franz and Frederica had known about Luna calling the Church "liars" in the sky above Garlaige, their doubts would have become near certainty.

"In any case, it doesn't change the fact that we'll be relying entirely on Lord Sol and Lady All Dragon. Speaking of which, where is our great lord at the moment?" Just as Franz was asking after their absent liege, from his unobscured vantage point he witnessed a pillar of light, so bright as to blind his eyes despite it being high noon, descending from the sky in the northeast—the direction of Garlaige. "Ah."

The light, which was falling from high above the stratosphere, was unmistakably Divine Punishment. It crashed down with fury as if to set the entire city on fire, but before it landed, it met with a large wall of light in the sky and scattered harmlessly.

The sight was much like the night when the All Dragon had done the same thing, but Luna wasn't in Garlaige at the moment. The person who had just blocked the orbital strike was Reen, who had grudgingly stayed in the city. Sol and Frederica had asked her to because they had seen this coming. Sol had even learned Float from Luna through Player and given it to Reen so that she could intercept Divine Punishment from high up in the sky.

A moment later, the All Dragon's Astral form materialized far above the three royal siblings' heads and fired off an extremely thick dragon breath cannon into the sky. With that, the Church was down another attack satellite.

"Ah, they were above us," Frederica noted.

Maximillian murmured, "It's like we're living in a fantasy world now..."

"Pretty much," Franz chuckled.

The three were not startled because they had been warned this might happen beforehand. That said, they still couldn't help feeling shocked and incredulous when witnessing it firsthand. The citizens of Magnamelia, who hadn't received the same warning, were probably in a great uproar now. Like Maximillian said, it didn't feel real. However, the fight against the Holy Church had just begun, and that was very real.

"Well, the Church can't turn back now," Franz said. "We have all been officially branded apostates, and the Oratorio Tangram against us has most certainly been issued to the Panhuman League."

"It's going to get busy."

According to Sol's instructions, Cardinal Ishli had informed Adrateio when Sol had left Garlaige. As a result, the Church had made a move to destroy what they saw as the nest of the apostates in lieu of the starting shot of the Oratorio Tangram. Unfortunately for them, the Divine Punishment strike, which they had thought could only be stopped by the All Dragon, was blocked by "Iron Wall" Reen, a former Villager who had simply been leveled up like crazy. One other former Villager, "Saint of Healing" Julia, had been posted in the Elven Forest just in case,

but the Church had apparently got the message that using Divine Punishment wouldn't work anymore and would just get another satellite destroyed, and therefore decided to cut its losses. Consequently, there was no second—or rather, third—Divine Punishment strike.

"Well, we're still better off than the other side," Franz said. "Thank God for our fortune."

"Thank God," Frederica echoed.

With that, Ishli was now irrevocably on Sol's side. Having been nearly turned into a noble martyr would give him incredible influence, and all the other degenerate clergymen in the Church would surely flock to him. The truly pious ones who would be willing to give their lives to prove they weren't apostates could be left to their own devices.

The starting shot of the Oratorio Tangram had very much not ended up the way the Church had expected. Franz and Frederica wholeheartedly thanked a god they did not believe in that they weren't on the other side, where countries were probably being coerced into joining a fight they had no stake in.

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The north of the continent was controlled by the Amnesphia Sovereignty, and within its borders was the self-governing city-state known as the Holy City of Adrateio. High up above the Holy See in the heart of Adrateio, fragments of the Tower, which Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon had destroyed a thousand years ago, floated in a spiral. They weren't visible to the naked eye at ground level due to their small size and high position above the clouds. However, someone who had the ability to see footage of the cloud of fragments would realize that they were still operational and alive despite the passage of the millennium.

The magical light running across surfaces at regular intervals and the detailed magic circles that had been deployed were proof that remnants of magical science, which should have been wiped out along with humanity's golden age, Era Gran Magicka, still remained. Among the countless floating fragments, there was a particularly large one enveloped in a multilayered rotating spherical magic formation. And inside that fragment, the peak of technology lost to this world was currently being employed. Simply called Hero Creation, this was a process to remake a

normal human into a Hero, someone who could protect the human world even against gods if needed. This was the world's greatest taboo, the ultimate fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.

"Injecting dragon essence, 0.02... Tangram phase wave variation exceeding 0.5 percent. Rejection detected."

A naked man was floating inside a giant transparent cylinder connected to countless cables and filled with an emerald-green liquid infused with a high concentration of mana. Numerous tubes from the top and bottom of the tank were attached to his body all over, pulsing repeatedly.

"Injecting SPIRITUS SANCTUS essence, 0.004; PATER essence, 0.006; and FILIUS essence, 0.01... Scutum Fidei core DEUS values stable."

Numerous display windows floated around the cylinder, and whenever one of the numbers turned red, a robotic female voice sounded out and appropriate measures were taken. Each time, the subject jolted as if he had received an electric shock.

As announced, the latest value to turn red had returned to being green, all while the various parameters on display continued rising or falling at a steady rate. The subject's eyes were closed, and he seemed unconscious, but the anguish engraved on his face indicated how taxing the process was.

When the numbers reached a certain threshold, an alarm rang out and several ominous organs were created inside the liquid and successively buried inside the subject. Red light flashed insistently in the chamber, announcing that whatever was happening had entered its final phase.

"Nier organa numbers one to nine confirmed to have taken hold. Outer mana absorption rate stabilized at 2.4 percent."

"Inner mana production organa enlarged by sixty-seven percent. Maximum reached. Commence joining to nier organa."

"Joining...successful. Subject transformation beginning."

The subject that had started out human was gradually turning into a very different form.

"Joining of numbers one to nine all confirmed. Launch Oroboros."

"Oroboros launched. All green."

Now that the base transformation for turning a human into a Hero was complete, the creation phase was about to begin.

"Hero Creation, sequence start."

"Nier dragon eye mutation confirmed."

“Start of nier dragon horn generation confirmed.”

“Nier dragon wing generation failed. Retrying. Error. Nier dragon wing generation abandoned.”

The subject’s skin was stained darker and darker until it was pitch-black. Despite originally being human, he started growing horns, a feature unique to magical beings, and behind his closed eyelids, his eyeballs were remade as imitations of those of a dragon. Wings should have sprouted from his back, but they didn’t take, so their creation was canceled.

“Otherworld interference element extraction successful. Affixation complete. Connecting to the Wayside God successful. Begin analysis of combative barrier.”

Next, the “otherworld interference element” that had originally been within the subject—the power from Player—was thoroughly analyzed, extracted, and assimilated. This was the biggest reason this man, the former leader of Black Tiger, Mark Ros, had been chosen as the subject.

The night Sol had paraded back into Garlaige with the body of Kuzuryuu in tow, Mark had drunk himself into a stupor in a run-down tavern on the outskirts of the city and been subsequently kidnapped by the Church’s operatives. They had then won him over by telling him that Alan had died and that the strength he believed was his own had actually come from Sol.

Now, all Mark had to cling to was the power and the narrative that the Church had provided him. The only thoughts in his head were to kill Sol for the sake of protecting his pride and to flee from the fear of being killed like Alan had been. When he wasn’t thinking that, he was dreaming of the false glory that he would receive once he succeeded.

“Synchronicity with god regalia at 11.45978 percent. Predicted operational duration: 56 minutes 41.54 seconds.”

So that he could make full use of this incredible technology, Mark had been granted something that would allow him to show off his identity as a Hero—a power that a human had no business wielding. A thousand years ago, the original Hero had managed to defeat Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon in her dragon form and bind her thanks to the god regalia, the most powerful armis magicka that had ever been created. And now, Mark’s body had been drastically altered so that he could use the same thing.

“Nier Hero Mark Two, subject name Mark Ros, awakening.

Operational limit approaching in 107 hours 54 minutes 29 seconds…28 seconds…27 seconds…”



The cost had been great, however. Even if he did nothing, Mark's life was guaranteed to end in under 108 hours. Of course, Mark himself had not been made aware of this. Having just woken up from a prolonged session of agonizing physical alteration, his mind was still foggy. Depending on how much his consciousness recovered, doping him and manipulating him like a puppet was very much among the options that the Church was considering.

When all sequences had finished running, the lights of the Old Rulers appeared around Mark and began conversing with each other. From the very start, it had been their intention to use Mark and dispose of him afterward.

"Now then...it was a rush job, but we managed to finish in time."

"A throwaway product."

That said, there was no way to perfectly predict what would happen when Mark joined with the god regalia, so they had measures in place for the ranks of the Purgatonia to climb from seven to eight. Needless to say, everything had already been prepared, from the processes that the first man-made Hero had undergone a thousand years ago to the ingredients needed to do so.

"Can't be helped. And this time, Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon is our only opponent. We only need a stopgap to subdue her."

"True."

According to the Kuzuifabra, it had been the Hero and her party against Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon from the very start. And yet, the conversation between the Old Rulers made it sound like the Hero had been facing more than just Luna in the struggle. As suspected, the account that the Church was spreading, the Kuzuifabra, was indeed filled with lies.

"The time for humans to be trampled by monsters is nigh."

The Holy Church—or rather, Pope Gregorio IX—had done a good job buying time. Since he still believed that he had the upper hand against the Wayside God and his servant, the All Dragon, he had tried making an example of the city of Garlaige while the two were away, but the attempt had blown up in his face. After that, he'd made a grand proclamation denouncing Sol Rock, the resurrected Evil Dragon, the recaptured Elven Queen, and Emelia's royal family as apostates and called for an Oratorio

Tangram.

All countries on the continent had received orders to gather their forces in Garlaige to form one massive Holy Army, while those that shared a border with Emelia had started making preparations to launch their own attacks when the Oratorio Tangram began. Naturally, all this took time. Emelia's foreign diplomats had also done a surprisingly effective job trying to improve the situation, such that almost an entire month had passed since the first shot was fired. However, the Holy Army and Emelia's forces had finished deploying on a field outside Garlaige now. The kingdom's neighbors were also standing at its borders, exchanging heated stares with their defensive detachments.

Gregorio IX still firmly believed that his forces would overrun the enemy the instant the battle began, but the Old Rulers were sure the opposite would happen. However, since Nier Hero Mark Two had been finished in time, there was no doubt that the war would go the same way as a thousand years ago.

Given that, sowing the fear of the Wayside God and the Evil Dragon into the hearts of the people now would be helpful in controlling humanity for the next millennium. They just had to have the Hero appear in the end like a miracle from God to "save" the world.

"As the scriptures say, that which kills gods and monsters must be man. But is this still man?"

"If you go there, what are we? Let's just say that being able to adapt according to need is also human."

"Even after losing the appearance of one?"

"When there is no choice."

With that, the Old Rulers' lights disappeared. Exploring the possibility of walking hand in hand with the Wayside God and his monsters had long been rejected from their minds. Humans had to remain human in the state they deemed ideal.

To be continued in *Oratorio Tangram and the Freeing of the Elven Queen.*

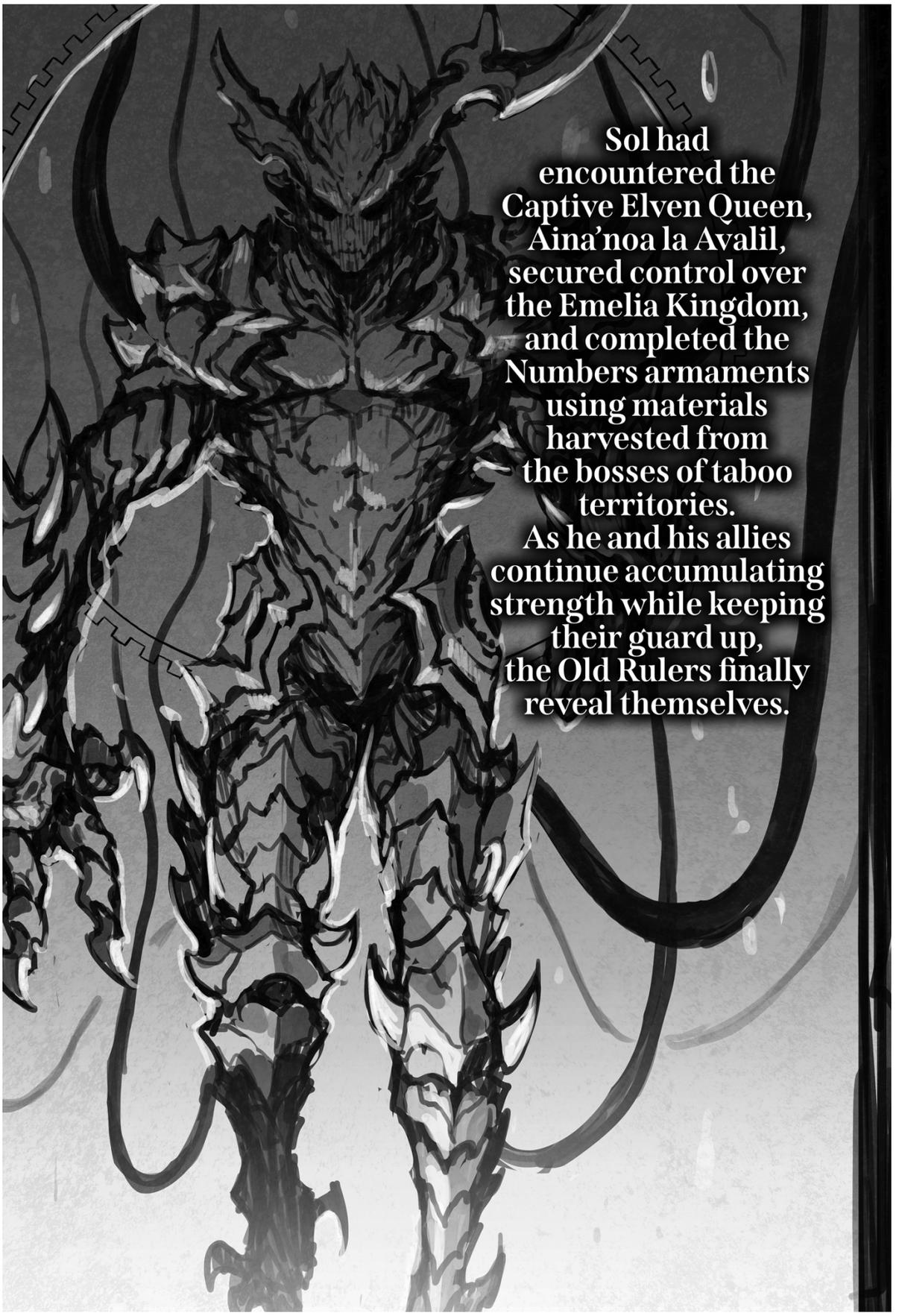
Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up volume two of *The Boy Who Ruled the Monsters*. I am Sin Guilty, the author of this humble work. Thanks to you (the reader) reading and supporting this series, we have successfully released the second volume. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

So, this volume depicts a lot of things being set in motion leading up to the eventual clash with the Holy Church. I greatly enjoyed writing the side story, where I was able to include content that I couldn't get to in the Shosetsuka ni Naro version. The insert art and colored frontispiece in that side story that NAKAMURA 8 drew were all true masterpieces. No one is more excited than I am to see him illustrate future developments in this story, so I will do my very best to write a work worthy of his art.

In the next volume, we will get to the grand, no-holds-barred war with the Holy Church. The Numbers armaments that were introduced in volume two will have plenty of time in the spotlight, with everything culminating in a face-off against the man-made Hero—who has undergone a very disturbing transformation—and his god regalia.

This is where I wrap up the afterword for volume two, all while hoping that you will also pick up volume three, which is confirmed to hit shelves next spring thanks to your much-appreciated support.

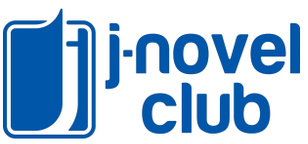

Sol had encountered the Captive Elven Queen, Aina'noa la Avalil, secured control over the Emelia Kingdom, and completed the Numbers armaments using materials harvested from the bosses of taboo territories.
As he and his allies continue accumulating strength while keeping their guard up, the Old Rulers finally reveal themselves.











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by Sin Guilty

Translated by Kamishiro Taishi
Edited by Tess Nanavati

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Illustrations by NAKAMURA 8

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