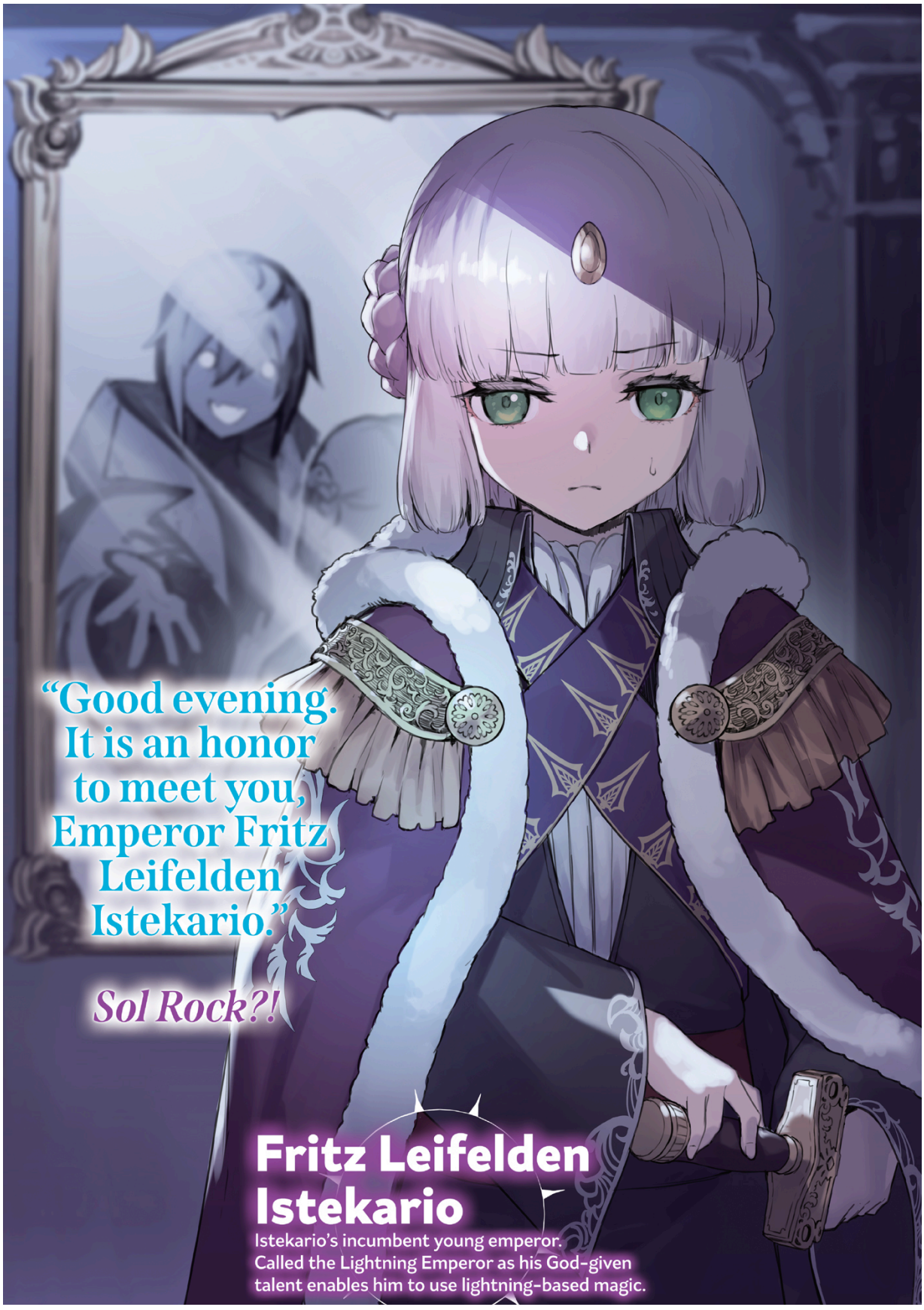

3
Author
Sin Guilty
Illustration
NAKAMURA 8
The Boy Who Ruled the Monsters


3
Author
Sin Guilty
Illustration
NAKAMURA 8
The Boy Who Ruled the Monsters




“Good evening. It is an honor to meet you, Emperor Fritz Leifelden Istekario.”
Sol Rock?!
Fritz Leifelden Istekario
Istekario’s incumbent young emperor.
Called the Lightning Emperor as his God-given talent enables him to use lightning-based magic.




"A cheap imitation of the man-made Hero won't be getting the better of me."
"Sol! I'm strong now! I got strong! Stronger than you!"
"What's this, 'boss'? Your vibe has changed completely in the short time I haven't seen you!"


“In that case, Lady Reen, I will lower their numbers to where you can easily deal with them.”
Frederica’s Numbers armament also had the color of her foundation suit as a base, with the white accentuated with blue and gold at key points. Despite being armor, it also amplified her presence as a royal.
Number Five:
Type Hecatoncheires

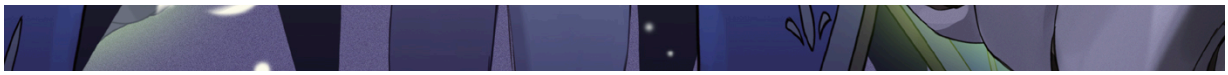


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Chapter 1: The Young Emperor of Istekario

It was late in the night of a new moon, a night when the clouds covered even the faint light of the stars. By firing Divine Punishment at the fortified city of Garlaige without prior notice, the Holy Church had effectively declared a holy war—an Oratorio Tangram—on the Kingdom of Emelia. Thanks to Reen stepping up in her newly created armis magicka, Number Nine: Type Kuzuryuu, the orbital strike failed to leave a mark, and the satellite was promptly shot down by Luna using her Astral form. The peremptory attack failed to harm Sol's group in any way, but there was no turning back any longer. The war gong had been struck, and several days had passed since.

Gaielaria was the capital of the Istekario Empire, the superpower that dominated the southwestern part of the continent and was known for its military superiority. Unsurprisingly, its size dwarfed that of Garlaige, the largest fortified city of neighboring Emelia.

Gaielaria was surrounded by five massive walls erected using techniques that had been lost to time, with the imperial castle towering in the middle. Within the first wall, the outermost one, were the residential and commercial districts of the common residents. Within the second wall were military facilities under the control of the army which, together with the third wall, served as an impregnable line of defense. Beyond the third wall was another commercial area. Though smaller, it was a lot more beautiful and stylish due to its main clientele being the military and nobility. Past the fourth wall was the residential area of the nobility. The significant difference in elevation made this section seem less like a wall and more like a very well-maintained man-made cliff. This very easily lent itself to the portrayal of the nobles living high up on a

plateau, looking down at the masses.

The only thing inside the fifth wall was the imperial castle itself. The area encircled by this wall was naturally the smallest but still extremely spacious. Interestingly, many who worked in the palace came from humble origins and were therefore assigned quarters that were purposely built at a lower elevation than the nobles' quarter. Conversely, the imperial family's quarters were the highest in the entire city. The fifth wall was consequently much taller than all the others, being practically a tower in and of itself.

Even though the city lay in the middle of a large, flat plain, assaulting the castle would require an incalculable number of troops. Even if an army managed to get through all five walls, it would find the palace sitting in the middle of a giant man-made lake filled by a limitless source. There was only one entrance, and crossing a bridge was the only way to get to it short of bringing a boat through all five walls. The bridge was broken up into sections, with each section being a separate drawbridge with its own guardhouse and gate. If all the bridges were drawn, there was essentially no way to gain access to the castle.

The empire understood how well the castle was built to withstand a siege and therefore made sure it was always stocked with plenty of supplies. The most important resource, water, was not a concern thanks to the same source for the lake, which served as a defensive measure, being located inside the fifth wall. This source only needed mana to operate and produced so much clean water that it supplied the rest of the city via aqueducts. In short, the royal castle was the perfect symbol of a country known for its military superiority. It could hold out against a siege for years.

The equation was entirely different for nonhuman opponents, of course. Against monsters—especially giant ones—Gaielaria was still no match for the Emelian cities protected by Absolutus. Even walls created with lost technology were no obstacle to monsters with the strength to cause continental catastrophes.

Still, Gaielaria was extremely defensive as far as capitals of continental superpowers went. If Istekario ever lost a war, it would not be due to its capital falling. The only option would be to seize

the rest of the country and force the crown to yield. Attempting to capture the capital any other way would lead to unspeakable casualties.

The safest place in this very safe city was, of course, the emperor's quarters. At the highest point of the castle, it was as far from the main entrance as physically possible. The Tower of Lament, where the Captive Elven Queen had been held until recently, was probably the only other place just as safe—or rather, just as removed from the rest of the world.

◇◆◇◆◇

"Is that you, big brother? Kurt?" asked Fritz Leifelden Istekario. After an exhausting day dedicated to his duties as the figurehead emperor of Istekario, he had been about to go to sleep when he sensed a foreign presence in his bedroom, which was supposed to be the most secure location in the country.

Fritz had received his talent just last year, which meant he was but a thirteen-year-old boy. He had silver hair that glittered in the light, clear green eyes that drew people in, and features so beautiful as to capture the gazes of men and women alike. He was known by the two common aliases of Young Emperor and Lightning Emperor, derived from his young age and lightning-based magic talent, respectively.

The purity of his blood made him more than suitable as official heir to the empire's throne, and his personal abilities were so great that even the word "prodigy" did not do him justice. On top of that, his talent was very much above average in terms of strength. The artifact that had been planted into his forehead as a third eye when he had assumed the throne—a nier organa known as the Imperial Seal—enabled him to further tap into the full potential of his talent, cementing his name near the top of the list of all past Istekarian emperors in terms of combat capability.

In contrast to the stern face that Fritz maintained when dealing with foreign diplomats, he was now his usual gentle self. Many people, if they laid eyes on his current appearance, nightwear and

all, would believe it if they were told that he was a cute little girl. He was just one of those boys.

"Sorry, but I'm not Kurt. Good evening. It is an honor to meet you, Emperor Fritz Leifelden Istekario."

The person who responded was not, as Fritz had expected, Kurt—the vice leader of Circulus, Istekario's famed elite magic special force.

"I am Sol Rock, currently branded an apostate by the Holy Church and a kill-on-sight objective of the Oratorio Tangram."

Sol Rock?!

The calm and composed introduction filled Fritz's chest with shock. This was the Church's bitter enemy, master of the All Dragon, and now supposedly puppet master of Emelia. This man, who was as much an adversary to the Church as to Fritz himself, had clearly infiltrated the most secure room in Istekario with little effort. In doing so, he had proven beyond a doubt that now that he had the All Dragon at his beck and call and had access to high-tiered spells like Float and Teleport, no door or guard could stop him anymore.

This made sense. All the world's armies combined couldn't unseal a single taboo territory, which was what made them taboo in the first place. So someone who could manage it with a wave of his hand could certainly come and go as he pleased.

There was only one possible reason for Sol's visit at this time. He was there to seize and destroy the Imperial Seal, which not only enabled Fritz to draw on outer mana but also served as the seal to the curse binding the Captive Elven Queen. Fritz would have to die.

When the Elven Queen had been stolen the other day, it was likely that Sol had drawn the information out of Circulus. That meant they were alive still, but not because Sol had spared them—they had defected to his side. Despite understanding this, Fritz did his best to swallow his surprise and fear and seek the best course of action.

"G-Good evening." What he went for was a greeting common for this hour but delivered with fear in his voice.

"Impressive. I was planning on warning you not to make a commotion next. Didn't think you'd greet me normally."

Judging by Sol's surprise, Fritz had made the right choice. "Well,

it’s clear you can infiltrate this room without raising any alarms, my lord. If you meant to kill me, you could have easily done so without saying a word. So I determined that calling for someone was the more dangerous move.”

It had been game over the moment the target of the Oratorio Tangram had set foot in the emperor’s own room. This was way beyond what the handful of guards standing outside could handle, and calling for them would only aggravate the situation.

Sol looked more impressed than surprised. A moment later, his expression turned into a friendly smile. It was like Fritz had passed a test and Sol had acknowledged him as someone worthy of negotiating with. However, Fritz wasn’t as composed as Sol seemed to think. Facing the person who was in all likelihood going to kill him soon was understandably making him nervous. He would be dying tonight, and there was no avoiding it. That said, as sitting emperor, it was his duty to make his death as meaningful as he could.

Having acknowledged Fritz as someone with whom conversation was possible, Sol asked curiously, “What about fighting me off? There’s a reason people call you the Lightning Emperor, isn’t there?”

Fritz put on the best smile he could manage. “My talent isn’t actually as incredible as the rumors say. It is true that I can use it with practically unlimited mana, but...”

If it had been gentlemen thieves or high-ranking adventurers standing before him, he would have won, hands down, against even five or six people. The pairing of the talent that had earned him the alias of Lightning Emperor and the nier organa on his forehead made for a formidable force indeed. But unfortunately, it wasn’t all-powerful.

“Let me guess,” Sol said, sounding happy for some reason, “you can fire off as many shots as you like, but they simply do nothing against monsters above a certain threshold in strength?”

“That’s correct,” Fritz replied, inwardly relieved that Sol had decided to engage. “I once attempted to conquer a dungeon but found monsters on the ninth floor and lower simply shrugging off my spells. What can such magic do against someone who can unseal taboo territories?”

Antagonizing such an opponent would be sheer folly. Even if Fritz threw all caution to the wind and fired off every spell in his repertoire, they wouldn't scratch the two monsters before him. The one time he'd entered a dungeon to test his own strength, it had been branded into his heart that there were beings in this world he simply couldn't touch.

Sol laughed sympathetically, thinking back to similar experiences during his time in Black Tiger. "Oh, yes. The monsters in dungeons and taboo territories are something else."

Using Player, he had created the ideal party with a dedicated tank, healer, physical attacker, and magic attacker. Then, he had boosted their attack, rate of recovery, and defense as high as he could, on top of which he enabled them to use their skills and abilities to their full extent through the liberal use of his own skills, MP Recovery and Cancel Cooldown. And yet, there had still been monsters far beyond their reach. Creatures that could overwhelm even humans who spent every waking moment developing their God-given talents in dungeons were a dime a dozen in this world.

This was why the bosses of taboo territories were left alone, with Country Eater being the prime example. And of the numerous dungeons scattered across the continent, no one had ever made enough progress to reach a double-digit floor.

Humans who, based on Player's leveling system, were in the single digits simply could not hurt the monsters that could push them into the double digits. Even if they absorbed everything they could from the monsters they actually could defeat, they would not obtain the strength needed to go further. In other words, this was a limit of humans as a race, and they were barred from further progress by the very world they lived in. Perhaps there were exceptions elsewhere in the world, but at the very least, the Miracle Children who had been leveled up to the limit with Player and the emperor who could tap into the incredible synergy between the most powerful tier of elemental magic and a nier organa that produced boundless mana were not among them.

It was the All Dragon, a true monster, becoming the servant of Player that had changed everything.

"And you are the person who annihilated those 'something else' monsters, Lord Sol."

"Only thanks to Luna. She was the one who reconnected the broken chain of growth."

Though the status of adventurer and emperor were vastly different, now that Sol knew Fritz had the same experience of facing impossible odds for the sake of realizing his dream, he was starting to relate to him. As a result, their conversation was starting to take on a rather friendly air.

"Wait, we're getting offtrack." Sol cleared his threat. "I came here today, knowing full well the impoliteness of doing so, because there is something important that I have to discuss with you."

Unfortunately, the purpose of his visit was anything but friendly, and Fritz understood this. He smiled wryly. "Hearing the person who holds my life in his hands speak so respectfully is making my heart jump out of my chest. Now I understand that loud threats truly are mere bravado of the weak."

There was no doubt that Sol's "important" topic was the freeing of the Elven Queen. He was here to kill Fritz, and there was no getting around it. Moreover, demonstrating his ability to kill the emperor of the greatest military power on the continent before any clashing of swords would be most effective in throwing cold water on other countries dancing to the Church's tune.

The members of the Panhuman League still felt safe and were convinced they were on the winning side despite what they knew about Sol only because of their blind faith that the Church possessed some far greater power. It was the same reason that Fritz had allowed Istekario to be made the standard-bearer of the campaign. However, his current situation proved, with more persuasiveness than a thousand words, that this belief was nothing more than a self-soothing lie.

If the Church truly possessed the power that everyone believed it did, it would never allow the emperor of Istekario to be assassinated at this juncture. By killing Fritz, Sol would show that not even the Church, much less Istekario, could stop him and that everyone was entirely at his mercy.

Assuming this was true, Emelia was taking on the Oratorio Tangram alone only because doing so would make it easier to rule over the continent afterward. It would be able to do whatever it wished with the countries it defeated, so it wanted as many enemies as possible. In other words, the holy war was just a charade for Emelia—and Sol.

Sure enough, the state of affairs on the continent was developing exactly as Sol wanted. All other countries had already publicly declared that they would be joining the Holy Church's side in the Oratorio Tangram. Unlike normal wars, the justification for this was based on shared religious morality, which meant that surrender was not an option. This in turn gave Sol the right to take the same stance against his enemies. He had been branded an apostate based on the accusation that he intended to attack God and His beloved children. If he actually went and did it and they failed to stop him, they couldn't then cry, "You didn't tell us you were going to do that!"

If a being with the power to end the world was trying to do so for real, perhaps fighting to the last man, despite knowing there was no way of winning, was indeed the right thing to do. If that wasn't the case and it was just a plain old war, then the victor had every right to ask whatever they wanted from the defeated, no matter how unreasonable. They could lift one country up like a close friend while trampling another underfoot, and there would be no grounds for which the latter could seek redress. If someone would rather die than live in such a world, they could go ahead and end their own life. Someone who still wanted to live, however, would have no choice but to accept their lot as one who had been bested in battle.

The silver lining in Fritz's case was that instead of killing him off without warning, his opponent seemed willing to conduct negotiations of some kind. Sol was likely open to finding a way to use the emperor's death and the resulting liberation of the Elven Queen to avoid Istekario's collapse. If that was the case, it was Fritz's duty to make sure he died in exchange for terms that would best serve his people.

"Truthfully, your ability to stay so formal in this situation scares me even more, Your Majesty," Sol informed him.

There was indeed an odd feeling of closeness blooming between these two who had each had their fair share of challenging impossible odds. However, Sol's character, as revealed by his ability to initiate a conversation in this manner with someone he was planning to kill, was weirding Fritz out a little. He could never say it aloud, but he thought it rich that Sol was the one claiming to be scared. Sure, someone who was about to die—and not the one doing the killing—seeming calm and collected could make for a rather surreal scene, but Fritz wondered if he was being childish for thinking that such an evaluation was the prerogative of a third party. And yet, the sardonic smile that touched his lips was not childlike at all.

"I always strive to be someone worthy of being called 'Your Majesty.'"

That applied to how he was to die as well. That was the one thing he had to get right tonight, even if he failed to convince Sol to accept any concessions. The last emperor of Istekario had to go with as much poise and dignity as possible.

Though they were fellow challengers who had faced impossible odds, perhaps this was the difference between one who eventually overcame those odds and one who never did. According to the natural order, those who were weak had no recourse but to accept whatever treatment the strong wanted to mete out. A less than prudent man might swear till his throat went hoarse, but this wasn't an option for Fritz, who had to make use of even his death for his country's sake. A ruler's legitimacy was based on him properly fulfilling the heavy duties sitting on his shoulders. At least, that was how Fritz saw it.

A country or two was worth nothing in comparison to a legendary monster for the man who ruled such monsters. There wasn't a thing that Fritz, who wasn't even a girl, could do or offer to change Sol's mind. In conclusion, him dying today was a foregone decision. So he wanted to make the best of it.

"I am truly sorry to ask this, Lord Sol, but before we get to your important business, may I have a moment with my brother? By whom I mean Vice Captain Kurt 'Shadow Diver' Sachsen of Circulus."

One part of dying the proper way was to do so with the fewest regrets possible. To that end, Fritz wanted an accurate understanding of the chain of events that had led to their current predicament.

"Ah. Go ahead."

Because of the request, Sol realized that Fritz had correctly deduced that Kurt was the reason for Sol's presence here and that Fritz was aware he would be dying tonight. And yet, his composure was still showing no sign of cracking. Sol was impressed all over again.

"Kurt. My brother."

"Here."

Since Fritz had been given permission, Kurt emerged from the shadows at his call. This man whom Fritz called "brother" was indeed Kurt "Shadow Diver" Sachsen, the vice leader of Circulus, Istekario's famed elite magic special force. They actually were siblings—Kurt was the illegitimate child of the former emperor, which made him Fritz's half brother. His identity was why he had known more about the Captive Elven Queen than his superior, Captain Walter "Multicast" Froitzheim. Of course, the truth about him could not be made public. Even so, thanks to the noble blood in his veins and the powerful talent he had been blessed with, he had managed to climb to the position of vice leader of the core of the country's military power on sheer merit and with none of the special treatment a royal would receive.

As could be deduced from the way Fritz addressed Kurt, Fritz knew everything but was on good terms with Kurt regardless. Both being sons of the emperor, despite one being a legitimate heir and the other a bastard son, perhaps it was natural that they had come to appreciate each other. They had been taught their whole lives that that was just what an emperor did.

"Since when, brother?" Fritz asked, but Kurt didn't answer. Now, they were no longer brothers but betrayer and betrayed. "Was it when you failed to retrieve Aina'noa?"

After a pause, Kurt simply said, "Yes."

Fritz hung his head heavily, deeply regretting giving permission

for the plan to dispose of the Elven Queen. Death would still have caught up to him in the end, but at least he wouldn't have had to experience the betrayal of the person he loved and trusted most in the world.

The sensation was not new to him. He had assumed the throne at such a young age because his father had essentially been murdered, and he was now a puppet of those who had orchestrated it. If all Fritz cared about was getting revenge for his father, he probably had the strength to do it himself. However, he would likely be killed in the process. His mother, who was still alive, and the other half siblings with whom he had a good relationship would also die in the fallout. Worst of all, if the upper echelons of the country were thrown into further disarray, life could get very hard for the honest, hardworking citizens who were not at fault in any way.

The Istekario Empire had been gaining the image of a declining superpower as of late. The three other superpowers—especially Emelia, which Istekario had been at loggerheads with for centuries—would pounce at any sign of weakness it displayed. At the same time, there were any number of medium-sized countries desperate to take its place. Istekario was a superpower, and one with a long and storied history, but the honest truth was that it was in a precarious position at the moment.

On a personal level, Fritz had been attached to his father. The emperor had had him late in life, and he, being a prodigy, had been a handful, but the man had still raised him with plenty of love. He had been almost too kind to rule a country identified by its military strength, always opting to try conversation before resorting to violence. He had made a serious effort to establish friendly relations with other countries, and Fritz respected him for it.

Unfortunately, depending on one's perspective, what he had been doing seemed like a willful endeavor to lower Istekario's national prestige. Fritz understood that without the traitors having to spell it out for him. There was no doubt that his father had been a great parent and an upstanding person, but the case could be made that he had been utterly unfit to wear Istekario's crown.

Fritz knew that the traitors had opted to quietly remove the

previous emperor and install Fritz as a puppet instead of staging a public coup. He could see that they were simply trying to help their country in the way they thought best, and that was why he had been willing to play along. He had done his utmost to act cocky and belligerent, just as those pulling his strings wanted him to.

For such a life to end after the betrayal of his own flesh and blood would be far too tragic. Even so, Fritz could not avert his eyes from the truth. He hated the thought of dying while deceiving himself even more. With a sad face, he looked down at Kurt, who was kneeling before him with just as much agony in his expression.

"I understand that there is no resisting such a stark difference in strength. However, you were the one person I thought would stay by my side to the end, Kurt. That's all."

"Fritz..."

Since he did not know about the skill Subordination, Fritz was under the misconception that Kurt had weighed the pros and cons and made the conscious decision to abandon him. That, for the sake of protecting Istekario, he was trying to sell Fritz for the highest price possible, since Sol would be killing him anyway. Fritz also considered this the fair thing to do, which made the whole situation all the more tragic.

Given that the current emperor's demise was set in stone, it could even be a good thing that Kurt, who was a member of Circulus and had royal blood, was already in Sol's camp. The position would give him much more leverage to protect the people of Istekario. Even so, Fritz wished that Kurt had chosen him, his brother—half siblings though they were—before their country.

This was a thought that a sitting emperor had no right to entertain. All the more so for Fritz, who held the idealistic belief that it was the ruler who served his country, not the other way round. However, despite knowing how foolish he was being, he couldn't bring himself to hide his true feelings all the way to his inescapable death. How much easier it would have been if Kurt *had* chosen him over Istekario and Fritz had instead spurned him for doing so! Dying was dying, but to die thinking he had an ally to the end as opposed to finding out he had never had one from the start made a world of

difference, even if it was but a self-serving show of kindness based on lies and misunderstandings.

For his part, Kurt was absolutely crushed by the look on his brother's face, as Fritz was the one person he had resolved to protect to his final breath.

Unable to bear the air in the room any longer knowing he was the reason for it, Sol spoke up. "Kurt didn't betray you. I coerced him with one of my skills."

"Huh?" Fritz looked at Sol with as much confusion as Kurt. Of course, neither of them knew about Subordination, but a skill would explain why Kurt had blabbed so readily.

"Plus, he didn't really betray you. He found a way for you to come out of everything in the best way possible. Despite being Subordinated, he managed to give me an answer that satisfied what I wanted. That goes to show how badly he wanted to protect you."

It was clear that Sol wasn't lying and actually had a high opinion of Kurt. Someone who had been Subordinated did not become a complete puppet. Carrying out Sol's will would become their top priority, but everything that they had held precious until then would remain precious to them, and the human nature to protect those things would still be alive and well. Beliefs instilled by brainwashing and indoctrination would be released, but the relationships that a target had built up would remain.

As proof, what Kurt had given Sol was an answer that would benefit both Sol and Fritz. It still looked like a betrayal to Fritz, who didn't know the details, but if it hadn't been for Kurt's intercession, Fritz would have been killed on the spot. While spilling Istekario's secrets, Kurt had learned of Julia's miraculous powers. This had given him the idea to ask that, in exchange for having Fritz join Sol's side and dying at a time of Sol's choosing—therefore freeing the Elven Queen—he bring Fritz back to life afterward. It wouldn't cost Sol anything to oblige, so there was no reason for him to reject the proposal.

"That...is an incredible power," said Fritz in a daze.

The strength to kill monsters from dungeons and territories, when elevated to the level of the All Dragon, could definitely enable

someone to bend the world to their will. However, being able to directly manipulate people's minds, hearts, and very souls was something entirely different. All human effort and growth was meaningless in the face of that power. To negotiate with someone in command of it was an exercise in futility. Man could yearn to be equal to God, but it simply wasn't possible. Such was what it meant to be human.

If Sol used Subordinate on Fritz this very moment, the young emperor would promptly lay bare all his desires and true thoughts merely upon being asked. But the same power that terrified him had also saved him. In learning of its existence, he had also learned that Kurt, despite being in Sol's thrall, had done his best to make the most of Fritz's death. At least, that was what he thought Kurt had done, as he still did not know that Sol's group also had the ability to resurrect people within a certain time frame after death.

Despite not knowing the whole truth, Fritz was happy enough. He saw that Kurt had resisted a godlike force to the best of his ability, puny human that he was, all out of regard for Fritz's life. It was thanks to Kurt's efforts that Fritz hadn't been stomped underfoot without a word and had instead been given an opportunity to negotiate before dying.

This understanding helped Fritz to shore up his resolve. Kurt had done his part, so it was now up to the emperor who loved his people to do everything he could from there.

"Lord Sol," Fritz said, "to clarify, were you and Kurt talking about the freeing of the Elven Queen, Aina'noa la Avalil, and the timing of when it is to be done? I am willing to carry out all your instructions."

"You have conditions?"

"None in particular."

Given everything, Fritz decided to forgo any attempt at affecting the situation and assume a fully submissive attitude. Trying to be clever or pull a fast one on someone with such overwhelming power could only end badly. By no means was he wasting the opportunity that Kurt had won for him. To purposely not use it despite having it as an option and opting to submit instead *was* the best way to make use of it. Given the existence of absolute power, gaining the goodwill

of that being would yield better results.

"Well, all right. If you're willing to act as we tell you, we promise we won't invade and obliterate Istekario."

"Thank you very much. So, when should I die and in what manner?"

"That's what we're going to discuss now."

"I...understand."

As if confirming that Fritz had taken the right course of action, Sol promised him what he wanted most. It was simply a verbal promise with no guarantee, but Fritz knew that Sol's word was worth more than anything else in the world right now. At the same time, the matter-of-fact way in which Sol moved on to the topic of his death made him think, *Does this man not have a shred of humanity in him?* He was completely creeped out, but not due to an instinctual fear of death. Rather, it was a sense of strangeness almost bordering on revulsion in response to something alien.

"So, when you come back to life, will you become one of my companions?"

"Of cou— Huh? I'm sorry, what?"

The request that Sol made like it was a matter of course evoked the first authentic reaction of the day from Fritz—that of dumbfounded astonishment. Never had it crossed his mind that Kurt had found a way to help him live and not simply die.

Kurt laughed with tears in his eyes. "Lord Sol has overcome even death, Fritz. This will free you from that accursed Imperial Seal *and* the crown that you never wanted in the first place."

Funnily, the first thought that came to Sol's mind upon seeing Fritz's complete bewilderment was that a good face was beautiful even with a dumb expression on it.

"Um, if you can actually do that, may I make a request?"

"Hm?"

"If you will, Lord Sol, could you bring me back not as emperor of Istekario, but simply as one of your companions?"

As betrayed by the look on his face, Fritz's head was filled to bursting with questions at the moment. The sharp mind that had gotten him through many crises was nowhere to be seen, and he

had been reduced to a robot that could only say “What?” and “Huh?” Though he had thought Sol a godlike being, it had never occurred to him that death, an inescapable end that came to all living beings, could be conquered. Responding with “Really? Cool!” after suddenly being told that someone had managed such a feat was beyond even him.

Despite all that, if he truly wouldn’t end up dead and Sol actually wanted him, Fritz knew that he simply had to get close to Sol. Should Istekario be allowed to continue existing after the holy war, the best position from which to profit wasn’t at its head but at the side of its new master.

Though slightly taken aback by Fritz’s fervor, Sol agreed. Seeing that, Kurt rejoiced from the bottom of his heart.

Chapter 2: Invisible Strings

Late enough, the lights that lit up the entertainment district of Magnamelia, the capital of Emelia, would wink out one by one, eventually being replaced by the softer illumination of the moon and the stars. Foot traffic never petered out entirely, but the demographic changed substantially over the course of the night. Early on, the streets would be filled with those seeking a quick drink after a long day of work or heading to a brothel, spurred by pent-up desire and paltry savings. By this hour, though, they would have already stumbled home or slipped into tired, blissful slumber in the arms of an escort. The pedestrians now were those with a bit more spending potential hitting up a second or third tavern and, mixed in among them, a sprinkling of those who lived and breathed in the dark.

Those who were actually rich and normal commoners had no business being out and about in the entertainment district this late at night. A young girl and an old man who were neither of those things were heading somewhere, clad in long cloaks with deep hoods that completely covered their faces. They were practically shouting that they were residents of the underworld with this getup, but such overt behavior was important on the night streets. Making it obvious to upstanding citizens that they were people to be avoided helped both sides avoid unnecessary trouble. Those who still went after them were either absolute idiots or drunk out of their minds. That, or...

“They’re taking us lightly,” the girl growled.

“With this being the third time since we entered the capital, I would be hard-pressed to disagree with you,” said the old man.

There were those who tried to approach the pair with ill intent. Right before their vexed exchange, the girl, Eliza Chantal, had killed off three assailants without anyone nearby being any the wiser. The

man, Valter Berheit, had killed two. Their attackers, who had been hidden in positions where they'd thought they could carry out their mission just as covertly, had been either beheaded by invisible strings made of mana or pierced through the forehead with a small metal rod.

After seizing total control of the underworld of Garlaige, Eliza had accompanied Sol to Magnamelia with Valter. She had thus far been unable to secure a sit-down with the local powers that be, which had made her more impatient by the day. And when she had finally been invited for a face-to-face, some genius organization had thought it a good idea to attack her on the way. Needless to say, she was in a foul mood.

By now, no hit man on the payroll of any underworld organization could put a scratch on her. She could detect them long before they got close enough to detect her, and the instant they directed hostility toward her, taking care of them quietly like she had with the group just now was child's play. Those who fell victim to her in this way were promptly retrieved by Valter's men and plied for all sorts of information, starting with the organization that had sent them.

The organizations that had tried to make a move against Eliza were, as a result, absolutely terrified of her and now behaving themselves. However, the capital, being the capital, had underworld organizations in the double digits. Fending off two or three attacks was hardly enough to convince them all to stop.

That said, there would be at least a bare minimum of information being exchanged between organizations. If the current situation was one where each group thought, *So-and-so got done in, but we can do better...* then, well, that was the very definition of Eliza being taken lightly. To make matters worse, the assailants who had made the latest attempt were worse in quality than before. Despite having lost their initiative from a significant distance, they still thought they could win with numbers alone. Instead of scattering in a fluster, about a dozen of them were now trying to encircle Eliza and Valter with such lamentable teamwork that the pair could not help but sigh.

Before all this, hit men had been sent to Garlaige while Eliza was

still there and had been duly rebuffed. Yet, no lesson had been learned. Her frustration was all too understandable.

This time, Eliza and Valter purposely went into a deserted alleyway, allowing the attackers to box them in and get closer than the other teams before had. They wanted to see the faces of these men who, despite having lost five of their number in an instant, still thought they had a chance at victory. However, Eliza quickly regretted this decision. When she pulled back her hood to reveal her face, the vulgar looks that greeted her told her those she was facing were less than thugs, much less professional hit men. One swing of her invisible mana threads was all it took to separate their heads from their bodies, with their faces frozen in the middle of shifting from leers to confusion at their sudden change in viewpoint and the bizarre sight of their associates' heads rolling on the ground. The hit men hopefuls were dead before they even had time to feel pain.



"Should we simply raze the capital's underworld to the ground and start afresh?" Eliza asked, her adorable young voice filled with barely suppressed anger.

The frightening thing was that if she actually put her mind to it, she did have the ability to kill everyone in Magnamelia's underworld. The way she saw it, someone taking her lightly was also taking Sol lightly, and she simply would not stand for it. If the leaders of these organizations didn't wise up after all the attacks she had fended off, perhaps directly carving a lesson into their bodies was the only way to reach them. Forming new organizations with the foot soldiers who remained would be a large undertaking, but Eliza would much rather do that than allow people to continue belittling Sol.

Valter, whom Sol had appointed Eliza's adviser, sighed. "I would not recommend it."

If he didn't do something and simply let her show up at the gathering still quivering in rage, the smallest thing might set her off and prompt her to kill everyone present. Sol had made her so powerful that not even Valter could stop her if she got serious. That was why Valter wasn't her chaperone or mentor, but her adviser. If she wasn't willing to listen to his input, then letting her do as she pleased took precedence above all else. His understanding was that this prioritization was the best way to earn Sol's trust. Funnily, even though the difference in strength between them was like that of an irate hunting dog and a puppy, Valter's position allowed him to feel comfortable speaking his mind.

Eliza paused. "In that case, what *do* you suggest?"

"Well, my advice is to just deal with the attacks when they happen but otherwise only focus on carrying out Lord Sol's orders."

That sounded awfully like overlooking people making light of Sol. Eliza's flash of anger changed to something quieter and more intense. "And what is your reasoning?"

Within Sol's inner circle, Eliza was the second-most emotionally dependent on him, after only Luna. There was a side to her that could be called fanatical. That wasn't a bad thing in and of itself, but Valter didn't want her to slip into being a mindless zealot who used her power on those around her indiscriminately for the "noble cause"

of acting for Sol's sake. In fact, as her adviser, it was his job to stop it from happening. Therefore, he didn't mince words.

"People say that a dog takes after its owner."

There was no need to clarify who was the dog and who was the owner. Eliza's face, which had been on the way to becoming a stone mask, was instantly filled with surprise, then quickly turned red. She had gotten Valter's message and was flushing with mortification.

She bowed deeply. "I was being rash. I'm very sorry."

Her power, the power that enabled her to shrug off ambushes from more than a dozen men, did not belong to her. Even if she was taken lightly or exposed to licentious stares, her job was to carry out the orders she was given, period. She could remove someone if they tried to get in her way, but brandishing her power under the sophism of "how they're treating me equates to how they're treating Lord Sol" just to vent her own anger was something else entirely. She was strong enough to step away and bring matters back to Sol to ask for his decision whenever needed. She would be the one taking him lightly if she didn't do so and made calls on his behalf.

Being a rabid dog who would snap at even those not worth her while was a bad look, but she was no stranger to people looking at her with contempt. However, the mere suggestion of Sol's reputation being smeared due to her actions nearly left her beside herself. The only correct reaction to make was to immediately bow and apologize.

"Should we get going? Though reducing them to dust would be going too far, I'm all for teaching them a lesson. It's an unwritten rule in our world that we must never, *never* let people take you lightly."

Lady Eliza is a bit shortsighted, but thankfully, she's someone who's ready to admit her mistakes and learn from them.

The best way to describe Valter's current state of mind was that of a grandpa who was proud of his granddaughter, though the context involved a bit too much violence for such a heartwarming metaphor. Now that Eliza had some perspective, he didn't mind her venting within reasonable limits at the coming gathering.

"Okay!"

Her glowing smile and enthusiasm brought a doting grin to his face. As a snapshot, it could pass as a moment between an adorable young girl and her loving grandfather. Considering the reason for Eliza's excitement, however, this was but one more illustration of how Sol's closest companions were just as unhinged as he was.

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Some time passed, and it was now the dead of night. Just as before, this was the entertainment district of Magnamelia. Specifically, it was one of the upper floors of a large brothel, a floor only accessible for special customers. It was also the venue where the Assembly, a gathering of the leaders of the organizations that dominated the underworld in the capital, would soon begin.

"How inane," spat Valter after looking around the room, his lip curling blatantly. He had left Garlaige to accompany Eliza because he was her ticket to this gathering, but he was dressed like a butler and made a show of treating her as his mistress. And it was clear that he was angry about the Assembly's choice to host the meeting in such an inappropriate location.

The man who obviously fancied himself top dog here laughed in a deliberate, carefree way. "Come now, what's with the scary face, Ice Blue?"

The alias Ice Blue was held in high esteem in this world, even now that Valter had gotten older. This name was derived from his talent, which gave him the ability to weaken targets in his view to the point where they couldn't even move, effectively freezing them in place. It worked on both people and monsters, leaving them vulnerable to the hidden throwing weapons that he had mastered through diligent training.

In this world, the pride that people had in their fighting ability was largely founded on the talent that they had received from God. To block someone's talent was to take away that foundation, and few knew the first thing about how to fight without it. The very thought of having to do so struck such fear into their hearts that they called Valter by a different alias when he was out of earshot:

Talent Killer. Adventurers and soldiers who had undergone rigorous training were perhaps different, but the renegades who served as muscle in the underworld stood no chance against him.

Though there had been no new stories of his exploits over the past decade, his contemporaries now occupied the upper ranks of criminal organizations, and to them, his name was synonymous with fear itself. When he had left the capital and moved to Garlaige ten years ago, almost all the gangs in the capital had thrown up their hands in celebration.

As the veterans flinched inwardly at seeing Ice Blue in a truly foul mood, the man from before, who headed the largest underworld organization in Magnamelia, did his best to maintain a cool face. Regardless of how he felt inside, he was the owner of this establishment, and in this industry, showing weakness was fatal.

"A place like this suits a gathering of people like us, doesn't it?"

A brothel was a place where men could indulge in food, wine, and women. It was almost representative of the entertainment district, and for good reason. Hosting the Assembly in one was hardly grounds for reproach. In any city's entertainment district, there were both high-class brothels that valued formality and rules and cheap brothels where lust could be sated with mere change. Valter understood that if Eliza was to rule the underworld, she had to get used to all of them. What he took issue with wasn't that the Assembly was being held in a brothel, but that this wasn't a normal one.

Even brothels had to abide by the laws of the country they were in, which made sense, because otherwise the nation in question wouldn't allow them to conduct business. In that regard, it could be said that Emelia was more civilized than many others on the continent, which meant its entertainment district was bound by somewhat stricter laws. However, unsurprisingly, establishments run directly by underworld organizations had ways of legally circumventing such laws. Some places broke those laws but took measures to ensure they would never be targeted by investigators. In the one-in-a-million chance they were, they would be notified of the exact time and given a list of everyone coming. In short, there

existed brothels that presented a refined and elegant front but catered to twisted and depraved desires far beyond the bounds of law and common sense.

Having stages with beautiful women dancing erotically in outfits more provocative than mere nudity was within legal boundaries, albeit barely. But this particular floor that had been chosen for the Assembly was dedicated to exhibitionists. In other words, all manner of sexual acts were taking place in plain view. This was illegal not only in Emelia but pretty much the rest of the continent as well. The room was filled with a cacophony of profane cries and moaning that would make anyone grimace.

Unsurprisingly, Eliza was absolutely floored. Thanks to the strength that Sol had bestowed on her, she could disregard all threats of violence with a smile. If Sol was insulted, she could kill the offending party with that same smile on her face and zero hesitation. In the short time since she had met him, she had practically accepted him as her God. However, the ability to deal with malice directed straight at her in this manner required experience in leading others in the underworld, and that was the one thing that she sorely lacked.

This was, in a way, a negotiation of sorts, and one had to gain experience and "level up" just like in combat. Eliza still had a lot to learn to rule over those who made a living manipulating human malice and desire. Still, the men who saw she was flustered knew this was no time to derive amusement from the sight. Valter was practically radiating rage, and the cold sweat running down the men's backs let them know that he was most certainly not acting. He had seen through the bravado shown by their leader, and the flinty eyes of Ice Blue were not those of a predator eyeing prey but those of a religious fanatic whose god had been denigrated.

Normally, a crazy young girl who claimed to have taken over the entirety of Garlaige's underworld wouldn't be left alive. Rather, she would be killed in the cruelest way possible—not so much to teach her a lesson, but to teach the rest of the world that "we don't take such jokes lightly." That was why hit men had been dispatched to Garlaige. But all of the attacks had been foiled, and fear had infused

the very bones of the survivors who returned bearing the remains of their companions. This had proven that Eliza's claims were real. The organizations of Garlaige, which surpassed those of the capital in fighting strength, had truly fallen.

Besides revealing that the infamous Ice Blue was involved, the survivors to a man had simply said, "Please ask Lady Eliza yourself" no matter what questions they were asked. A few had been tortured as examples, but none had cracked. More than that, their reactions and those of the others had made it clear that they thought being flat-out killed was far preferable to the alternative. With that being the case, killing any more of them would have been pointless, so the gangs had had no choice but to oblige the "request" the survivors bore from Eliza for an extraordinary session of the Assembly.

That said, simply yielding and obeying without resistance lacked refinement. Eliza might have been able to defend herself with ease in Garlaige, her home ground, but this was the capital. Some organizations thought their familiarity with the city gave them the advantage. However, the assailants they'd sent had been broken like toys and returned to their employers as if to say, "This is the price for disregarding our prior warning."

The first organization that had fallen victim to its own hubris in this way was the one led by the man who had spoken first. In doing so, he had learned that not only was Ice Blue alive and well, but he had become even more ruthless than before. Though this made the man's blood run cold, he couldn't let it show. Even if it was merely bravado, he had to act like he wasn't scared.

Since he was dealing with a young girl, he thought he could get back at her a little by choosing this venue for the Assembly. Never did he imagine that it would anger Ice Blue. He could understand Valter being fearful of the adventurer said to be backing Eliza, Sol Rock, but surprisingly, Valter was terrified of the girl herself too. This was clear to the man, even though the reason for it was beyond him. He harbored no doubt that should the girl express her displeasure with him through either attitude or words, Ice Blue would promptly end his life, despite fully understanding the repercussions. The bloodthirst that Valter was broadcasting with his

anger was that intense.

All this went to show that Eliza, the child with exceptional looks, possessed great power of her own. Perhaps her battle strength surpassed Valter's, or perhaps Sol, a man who had reportedly killed Kuzuryuu without getting a scratch, held her in such favor that he would never forgive anyone who earned her ire. Either way, it changed nothing. Regardless of how it had happened, her ability to visit the same result on those she saw as enemies was a power, and if she could wield that power, she was powerful. It wasn't worth trying to maintain one's pride or seizing the initiative in the conversation if doing so risked invoking her wrath.

As the man made an effort to hide the panic coursing through his veins, Eliza managed a stiff smile and asked, "Um...this place is a bit noisy. Is the venue for the Assembly farther within?"

She didn't seem to understand that this location had been chosen to spite her. That was partly due to her lack of experience but also because members of the Gafus Gang had frequented brothels too, though this one looked much fancier. Furthermore, Eliza knew that Gafus and his men often brought women back to the hideout whenever they earned a little spending money and indulged themselves until daybreak. In other words, the Assembly being held at such an establishment actually seemed somewhat natural to her. Therefore, she took what the man had said to Valter at face value.

The man had been a bit too forthright, true, but what he'd said had made sense to her. No one had addressed her directly yet, and of course, no one had said anything to belittle Sol either. These people had obliged her with an extraordinary meeting, so there was no reason for her to consider them enemies, much less kill them. She even felt a little embarrassed, half for losing her cool so easily and half for what she interpreted as Valter being overly protective. It was partly to curb his anger that she decided to speak up.

"Of course. We have been deeply discourteous. I beg your forgiveness."

Eliza herself thought that she had spoken rather timidly, but the man's response was dramatically different from what she had expected. While he had been casual with Valter, whom she thought

far more dignified than herself, he was clearly treating her as someone above his station. Even she understood the significance of his doing so not behind closed doors but out here in front of all his men. This led her to the realization that Valter's anger was the reason and then to the somewhat misguided message that it really was important to not be made light of in this world.

"Oh, uh, don't...don't worry about it."

Furthermore, thanks to his apology at the end, she had caught on to the fact that this venue had been chosen to put her, a newbie in the industry and a young girl to boot, in her place. She was so embarrassed that she hadn't gotten it right away that she ended up stammering a bit when replying.

Sol didn't agree, but Eliza thought herself a bit of a failure for being unable to fully utilize the power he had granted her, even though it made her so strong that she could kill even high-ranking adventurers and royal guards in an instant. To make up for that, she renewed her will to get meaningful results from the gathering.

Properly understanding that it wasn't her own behavior but the brief lines that Valter had spoken and his anger that had changed the underworld leaders' attitudes, Eliza reflexively shot her guardian an apologetic look. Valter gave her a kindly yet wry smile in reply, then suppressed his anger and bloodthirst. Thanks to the time he had spent with Eliza as her teacher, Valter could roughly tell what she was thinking. Without doubt, she was far too kind to stand above reprobates like himself.

That said, ensuring that the two of them were taken seriously wasn't their top priority, because they were here to carry out Sol's orders. Valter realized and regretted that he was still boxed in by the unwritten rules of the underworld. It was out of respect for Eliza, who knew far better how to act as one of Sol's companions, that he doused his anger. He had no right to be her adviser if he was behaving like this after chiding her for the exact same thing on the way over.

Their concern about being taken seriously was that it raised the likelihood of one and one's allies being attacked and therefore losing resources and capital. Conversely, if being attacked was no threat

regardless of time and place, and the other side was so weak in comparison that it could be crushed at any time, being taken lightly was no issue at all. In fact, there were even situations where instigating an enemy into doing so would make it easier to determine whether they could be useful or not.

Sol had already given Eliza and Valter the strength to carry themselves this way. He probably even expected it of them. Though Valter had sighed and chided Eliza for nearly going on a rampage due to her feelings for Sol, he himself was going down the same path after seeing Eliza being mocked. It was simply laughable. As a result, the situation ended with Eliza and Valter finding something for themselves to work on and the worst-case scenario of the man being killed for his impertinence was avoided.

At the same time, Eliza was entertaining a somewhat indecent idea. Put simply, she wanted to obtain special abilities she could use on Sol that were beyond the other members of his harem. Currently, she was still a little put out by—and honestly, a little afraid of—the expression men wore when they were consumed by desire. However, the entertainment district was filled with women who could teach her how to evoke that look. Since she was a quick thinker and had been convinced that she would never need such knowledge when she'd still had the burn on her face, she had a tendency to run to extremes in her mind.

She thought it a matter of course that she'd offered her heart and body to Sol. However, she had no intention of competing for his favor with his childhood friends or, perish the thought, an honest-to-goodness princess. He would naturally form a wonderful relationship with Reen based on the years they had spent together, and Frederica, who was known as Lilium di Regnum for her stunning beauty, was available to give him a romance with someone born with both noble blood and looks, which could normally only be experienced by the very successful. That raised the question of how Eliza, who had been born in the slums and was indebted to Sol for healing the terrible burn that she had given up on fixing, could repay him. She had actually been at quite a loss.

And now, a hint had unexpectedly fallen into her lap. To spell it

out, it would be her place to entertain the rougher desires that could not be satiated by the childhood friend he was on good terms with and the princess who would in all likelihood become his primary wife. She was getting it into her head that it suited her to learn how to happily take such treatment. The bestial looks on the faces of the men on this floor elicited nothing but fear and disgust from her, but just thinking about Sol directing such a look toward her made her feel hot inside.

Of all people, it would be Frederica who became caught up in the rampage caused by this strange misconception in the future, giving Sol a rather serious headache.

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"Now then, let's begin the Assembly," declared Eliza from her seat at the head of the expensive yet simple round table, with Valter standing behind her. "That said, I don't need any of you to say anything. I'm only here to make a request."

The man whose life had just been spared had led everyone to a plain meeting room on the top floor of the building. Upon entering, all of the underworld leaders had been asked to turn in their weapons and leave behind all but one of their escorts, who was similarly disarmed. This room was spacious but rather bare of ornamentation. Too much furniture would make the host suspicious, so all venues for the Assembly looked pretty much the same. And if the authorities or a hostile force tried barging in, the commotion on the lower levels would serve as a warning bell, allowing those upstairs to escape through secret passages.

No matter how much effort was put into bribing officials, someone who was dedicated to carrying out their duties faithfully would appear every once in a while. Then again, this was extremely rare. The preparations were more to deal with the royal guards, who showed up far more often on extrajurisdictional raids. It was said that corruption could never truly be wiped out, but there were always going to be those who tried. Unfortunately for them, those who were willing to stick to the rules would always decrease the

more society and the economy developed, and the few who remained would be called fools. Such was the incorrigible nature of man.

"We...understand," replied the man from before. "But first, may I ask that you humor a simple request and allow me to report something?"

His attitude surprised the other seven leaders at the table. They had never seen him act this way. The organization he led was the largest in the city, and they had all experienced violence at his hands, having no choice but to simply grit their teeth and back off—on many occasions, at that. He was so powerful that he could make anything happen, no matter how ridiculous. There had to be a reason that such a man was acting so subservient. They knew that the pair from Garlaige weren't to be underestimated out of hand based on how easily the elite hit men from the capital had been foiled and because they were backed by Sol Rock, an adventurer so extraordinary as to earn the ire of the Church. Even so, it was a shock seeing someone they had feared bending the knee so readily.

The presence of Ice Blue was big, but not enough of an explanation. That meant the most powerful among them had determined that the most effective strategy from all their arsenals—which wasn't individual strength, as one might think, but the use of numbers to poison a target's life with malice—would not work in this case. Someone impervious to such a strategy wouldn't blink in the face of bluster that insinuated connections to the underworld or a large organization. Given that, the wise thing to do was admit defeat and, as the weaker side in the exchange, prove one's usefulness to the more powerful side so as to avoid being ground into nothing.

This man's attitude conveyed as much to his seven counterparts with more eloquence than a thousand words.

"What is it?" Eliza replied.

"Would you deign to give us a demonstration of your overwhelming strength?"

Perceiving how serious the man was from the cold sweat beading his forehead, Eliza nodded slightly without letting her smile slip. An instant later, all the leaders and escorts in the room felt a slight

tightening around their necks, followed by the stinging sensation of a shallow cut. They instantly got the message that Eliza had the ability to behead them at any given moment. Though they couldn't comprehend what she had done, they understood that this was the power that demanded respect from even Ice Blue.

The intention behind the man's request was to prevent the loss of associates for stupid reasons. He wasn't acting entirely out of compassion, of course. These were capable people who would be changing from troublesome opponents into colleagues going forward. Since they would be serving a master who could kill them any time she wanted, having capable people to whom tasks could be delegated was a matter of life and death. The question of whether to follow orders would be moot if they were obliterated for being a dysfunctional organization that couldn't carry orders out.

His plan worked. The other leaders fully understood that they were completely at Eliza's mercy.

"Th-Thank you very much. Moving on, the first report. There is one organization that is absent for this Assembly."

After expressing his gratitude to her for obliging his request, he sought Eliza's permission before cautiously moving forward. Seeing that, the seven other leaders knew this was no place for their usual cheap threats and stayed quiet. They inwardly breathed a sigh of relief that they had listened to the dead-serious advice of the surviving hit men and had shown up.

"After this gathering, decide who among you will be taking over their territory. I won't interfere."

Sixteen people reflexively gasped in unison, followed by the man saying, "A-As you wish."

The leaders had been curious about how Eliza would respond to being snubbed by the ninth group, but she was already talking like it no longer existed. She didn't even give those present instructions to take action against them, which meant she planned on crushing them herself. No doubt, those who did not listen to her were worthless in her eyes. It would be one thing if it was Ice Blue making these calls, but no, it was a young girl, and she didn't look at all conflicted. In other words, this was nothing to her. A bona fide

underworld organization was little more than something to crumple up and throw away simply because she had no use for it.

The thought of how they would have been erased if they hadn't attended the Assembly sent chills down the leaders' backs. It didn't take much imagination, not after being shown how their heads could be removed in the blink of an eye should they make the slightest faux pas. That Eliza had done it as a demonstration and not a show of force very persuasively hinted at the immense power held by the man behind her, Sol Rock.

"What else?" Eliza asked.

Since the man had said "first," it implied that wasn't the only point of discussion. No matter how measured Eliza's tone was or how she continued to smile, he got the distinct impression that she was running out of patience.

In a voice tinged with more trepidation than before, he said, "There are, um, elements who have gone underground despite being part of our organizations. We are terribly ashamed to admit it, but we currently have no way of locating them."

When the organizations had decided to capitulate after half their hit men had returned severely maimed and carrying the remains of the other half, some of their members had vehemently refused to swallow the humiliation and gone rogue. Of course, that was merely a cover story, and those men were actually meant to be used as a card against the force from Garlaige. Revealing their existence right off the bat had also been part of the plan. The organizations would apologize for failing to keep their men in line while making themselves indispensable to their new liege, who would need their help to locate and deal with those loose cannons. It was meant to be a bargaining chip, albeit a somewhat malicious one.

Now, however, the inability to properly manage one's pawns had become grounds for being wiped out. The rogue hit men had become ticking time bombs, but to really sell the deception, they had actually gone dark without establishing a method of contact. With these being men who possessed talents specializing in assassination, even the organizations would have a hard time finding them quickly.

Not that Eliza or Valter cared. If the leaders didn't immediately take action and line up the corpses of every last rogue member by the given deadline, their own heads would fly first. And as weaklings, there would be nothing they could do about it.

"Oh, that. You don't have to worry about it anymore."

To their surprise, Eliza's reaction indicated that she already knew about the problem and wasn't alarmed by it. That meant that either she was confident there was nothing the hit men could do to harm her, which actually made a lot of sense. Or...

Reflexively, the head of the group asked, "Um, what do you—"

"You don't have to worry about that anymore," Eliza said again, speaking a little slower and smiling a little wider.

All eight leaders and guards decided to stop speaking *and* thinking. Would their incompetent hit men clowns lose their lives while making reckless attacks? Or had measures already been taken to ensure they literally stayed underground, never to reappear? Even worse, had they been forced to reveal their mission before being killed? Well, there was no point in thinking about it anymore. Since those present were still alive by Eliza's grace, she clearly thought them useful for something, so all they had to do was shut up and receive her orders. Come to think of it, their own organizations were run the same way. If someone insistently asked about something they had been ordered to not ask about, or if someone too smart for their own good went sniffing around trying to piece together the bigger picture, their guts would be spilled in an alleyway or they would be floating down a river as a bloated mess within the day.

The room fell quiet and the group obediently stopped worrying.

Eliza looked around, confirming that no one else had anything to contribute. Then she said quietly, "It is time for Lord Sol's instructions."

This was the same girl who had treated an entire organization like it no longer existed and responded with "oh, that" to news of hit men who had gone rogue, which would have given a normal citizen nightmares for days. And yet, when she said Sol's name out loud, she looked visibly nervous. The same was true of Valter.

Despite everything that had happened, these leaders still had the

observation skills that had gotten them to where they were. They correctly inferred what would happen if they ever called Sol's name casually without a title or made fun of him. They also made a mental note to warn their underlings to exercise extreme caution in their words and behavior so as to not anger these gods, because retribution would be swift and exacting.

Those with seats in the Assembly had enough street smarts and the confidence to listen to their instincts in a world where mistakes could lead directly to death. Against an opponent far superior in strength, raising a fuss like a sore loser would only get them killed that much faster, and only villains in fictional stories could be so dumb yet allowed to live.

"First off, all efforts to take advantage of the Oratorio Tangram are strictly forbidden. If you find anyone doing so, stop them."

This was the one thing that Frederica had insisted Sol pass on since he had set about taking over the underworld. By now, those familiar with his and Luna's power, such as Frederica's personal guard, the royals and ministers of Emelia who had met them in person, and the nobles important enough to take part in meetings with them, were beyond being shaken by anything. They properly understood that, even if Sol and Luna lost to whatever the Church had in store, they had no choice but to remain fully dedicated to Sol's side unless they had irrefutable proof that the pair were dead. After all, it would be the Church that they lost to, not Emelia. If Emelia brought every drop of its fighting strength to bear, it couldn't scratch a single scale on the All Dragon. The country had no choice but to put forth every effort as allies of the duo until that pair fell to an even greater power. Whether Emelia would be destroyed along with them or could convince the winner to let the nation live on would depend on how the chips fell. In any case, the land and people would remain even if the royal family and nobles were wiped out, so it wasn't that bad a gamble, all things considered.

The situation was very different for the general populace. They understood that Sol and the All Dragon was powerful from hearing about how they had unsealed taboo territories and seeing Luna's Astral form in action. However, that was not enough to allay their

consternation over being condemned as apostates by the Holy Church and literally every other country on the continent, as they were just simple laymen. There were already preparations being made to denounce aggressive overtures made under the cause of the Oratorio Tangram, which were sure to come. However, having underworld forces taking advantage of this crisis to do as they pleased would complicate things greatly. They had needlessly bloated numbers and were deeply entrenched in the citizenry, making it near impossible to wipe them out as one would an invading army.

The solution was to first subjugate the leaders of that underworld. Since they themselves were such masters at using fear and the promise of profit, those same tactics would also work wonders on them.

"Oh, and those who already have a leash around their neck are expressly forbidden from carrying out any orders from your masters. Instead, you are to immediately report such orders."

Sol, as advised by Frederica, wanted to use this opportunity to gain a clear picture of all those in the government who had ties to the underworld. This sort of thing was hard to identify from up top, so his plan was instead to seize complete control of the underworld and allow the lower-class nobles and merchants who were involved to think they were doing a good job dodging the law.

Sol wasn't interested in being some symbol of justice who exposed evildoers. He would be satisfied with ensuring that he had the reach to affect everything he wanted, both good and evil acts alike. After all, his goal wasn't to create a perfect world, just one where he was free to clear every dungeon and unseal every territory so that, at the end of it all, he could conquer the Tower and discover what lay at its farthest reaches with his own eyes.

As the gang leaders listened quietly, Eliza continued giving out instructions, still smiling. "We are to thwart all chaos inside Emelia that may be caused by the war. Lord Sol thinks we are the best equipped to do this because we will be the ones eagerly fanning it otherwise. Failing means demonstrating to him that he has no need for the existing organizations."

What Eliza was saying could have been perceived as a threat, but from another perspective, it also was a chance for the gangs to prove to Sol that they could produce the results he wanted and therefore convince him not to dismantle them. As long as they did what they were supposed to, Eliza, who was clearly special to Sol and considered herself part of the underworld, would speak to him on their behalf.

Knowing this, the heads of the gangs committed themselves to quelling all commotion in Emelia with their full resources. They weren't doing so for some naive, idealistic dream like Valter used to have. Any idiot could see that when Sol won the holy war, Emelia's power and influence would increase by an order of magnitude. And if the gangs had Sol as their backer, chances were high that they could take advantage of the obscene amount of wealth that would flow in. It would be an absolute catastrophe if he lost, of course, but there was no point thinking about it, not when they couldn't stand up to him even now. This was a gamble, one where winning meant achieving heights they would otherwise never come close to in their lifetimes. Just being able to be at the table was already a stroke of fortune.

It was, however, too early to celebrate.

"Oh, one last thing, and you can do this after the Oratorio Tangram. I want you to settle with all your victims. You'll have six months."

"I'm sorry, what?" The gang leaders returned confused looks. They weren't protesting the order, but they were simply caught off guard.

"I recommend that you deal with them with full sincerity. What I don't recommend is taking a high-handed approach. If they feel coerced..."

The sentence didn't need to be finished. The age of criminal empires founded on the principles of taking advantage of the weak was ending, soon to be replaced by clandestine organizations protecting the interests of an absolute power in theaters that had to remain out of the public eye. The solutions applied would still use violence and the managing of interests, but there would be an

expectation of some form of honor and chivalry.

"What about those we can't talk to?"

The gang leaders had both the confidence and capital to satisfy almost everyone who might step up and claim to be a victim and report back to Eliza with straight faces and light hearts that they had squared away all their books. But there was obviously no way to negotiate with those who were already dead, and there were countless others who were beyond mere apologies and compensation. Theirs was a weighty trade, one that simply wasn't viable without creating such casualties. Many were staying quiet only because they had no power—given the opportunity, they would demand nothing short of the deaths of their aggressors in as cruel a fashion as possible.

"I'll leave it to your judgment. What's important is that we ask for forgiveness, not that we actually receive it."

"I...see..."

Eliza's leniency was a surprise, but if that was all she wanted, the gang leaders were happy to get on board. It made sense that a little image management was needed to enter the service of the man who would be ruling the world.

Eventually, however, they would come to know how important it was to be forgiven based on the difference in treatment received by those who took Eliza's warning to heart and those who only went through the motions.

Chapter 3: Offensive Defense

On the western frontier of Emelia was the fortified city of Garlaige, and the region around it was commonly called Gio Nest. This was an area of gentle sloping hills previously designated "Taboo Duo," which had been unsealed after Sol's group had killed its boss, Cerberus. This was where the Panhuman League Army, headed by the Holy Church and Istekario, was facing the army of Emelia, which had sided with Sol. The two were a hair trigger away from starting the Oratorio Tangram.

At the same time, two thousand fully armed cavalry were standing by far away in an abandoned village in the small kingdom of Hykalion on Emelia's eastern border. No effort had been made to hide their affiliation. In fact, not only were they and their horses wearing their official armor, they had even brought their banners. Their mission was to invade the bountiful kingdom of Emelia during the commotion of the Oratorio Tangram and plunder the unprotected villages near the border. The soldiers' feelings about this aside, the king of Hykalion and his ministers didn't seem to think the act reprehensible enough to merit hiding their army's identity.

This was informed in part by the Church's declaration that all attacks launched against Emelia during the Oratorio Tangram were vindicated by God. As both a guarantee and a way to monitor the situation, the Church had dispatched a hundred Temple Knights to accompany Hykalion's force. Though small in number, they carried weapons of lost technology issued by Pope Gregorio IX, which made them more powerful than even two thousand cavalry.

The soldiers here fully understood the tragedy that would soon befall the citizens of Emelia, which surely had no choice but to focus all its attention on the Oratorio Tangram. The Church had every intention of wiping out the nation and carving up its expansive territory and rights along with the three remaining superpowers.

They certainly weren't going to give away parts of this endless fountain of wealth to the surrounding small and mid-sized countries no matter how loud those lesser kingdoms clamored, but direct neighbors letting off a bit of steam could be overlooked.

In other words, not only was plundering of the villages close to Emelia's borders tacitly allowed, it was even recommended. Since Emelia had chosen to side with Sol, who had been branded an enemy of God, its citizens were enemies too and therefore no longer human. They were sinners with no rights, and pious believers should not hesitate to kill them. Nothing done to them would be condemned by God, because they were only something evil in human form. Also, being such dreadful sinners, they had no right to their wealth. As such, if a vanguard of God happened to find their possessions in his bags upon going home, it didn't count as plundering.

That was how license given by a religious authority turned armies, which were fundamentally designed to inflict violence, into mindless man-eating fiends whose actions would cast a curse on generations to come. War was senseless enough as it was, but given a religious excuse, the worst acts were quickly justified and true madness became commonplace. Both were foolish and tragic, but war spurred and satisfied by greed was marginally better than wars of faith in that the former sought to follow some codes of conduct and could end upon reaching a compromise.

Of course, Frederica had foreseen Hykalion and its ilk taking such action under the cover of the Oratorio Tangram. That included how the Church had gone beyond tacitly approving such behavior to openly recommending it.

"A king who experiences plunder once will always do it again," she had told Sol.

He had agreed with her and taken countermeasures.

She had then continued, "This applies to all countries. Any nation can turn into an aggressor when a fool or a tyrant takes the crown. Emelia was responsible for worse seven hundred years ago."

Frederica had a real passion for history and therefore knew all about the barbaric acts that Emelia had committed—some even

worse than war—in its long past. That was what enabled her to anticipate what Emelia's neighbors would do and lent her words weight. In the same way, she had accurately predicted how the Church would react when Emelia decided to side with Sol after he had been declared an apostate.

Thanks to her education in the history of Emelia's neighbors, it also had been obvious to her which countries would be keen to dance to the Church's tune. There was no doubt in her mind that the one most likely to take full advantage of the situation was Hykalion. Though technically the second-largest of Emelia's neighbors—the first being Istekario—it wasn't all that big. However, it had been hostile toward Emelia for generations, going so far as to instigate Emelia's other neighbors to attack it together more than a few times.

In the present day, Emelia saw Hykalion merely as an odious weakling whose bark was far greater than its bite, but the dynamic between the two kingdoms wasn't entirely without cause, according to history. The Emelia of today did its best to be just and upright, but the country had seen its fair share of foolish and bellicose kings. As Frederica had mentioned, Emelia had gone on the warpath roughly seven hundred years ago, committing one-sided massacres that even its citizens couldn't justify. After defeating Hykalion, Emelia hadn't taken it as a vassal country but rather annexed it, treating it as a mere province. It was only through the intervention of the Church and the Panhuman League—and most of all, the passing down of the Emelian crown—that Hykalion had been liberated and internationally acknowledged as a country once more.

It was understandable that Hykalionis, who all learned this history when young, hated Emelia. For its part, Emelia didn't care about being liked. Even so, the new king at the time had accepted the Church and Panhuman League's intervention and officially apologized for the atrocities committed by his predecessor. Additionally, though money could never really make up for what had been done, he had paid the full amount of reparations requested by the Church, the League, and most importantly, the new Hykalioni royal family. After that, Emelia had further accommodated Hykalion in ways that it didn't with its other neighbors.

And yet, after seven centuries, Hykalion still cursed Emelia. Not only did it try to get money out of the larger kingdom at every available opportunity, but it even operated behind the scenes to have Emelia crushed by its neighbors. Naturally, present-day Emelians were less than happy about this. They also had the self-respect and arrogance of citizens of a superpower, which meant the relationship between the two countries would only grow increasingly antagonistic as long as human nature didn't change. Both sides thought they were in the right and senselessly hated each other.

Ten years ago, something had happened that significantly altered the situation. Upon succeeding the throne, the new king of Hykalion had invaded Emelia as a way to divert his citizens' attention from the problems that riddled his country. The embers of the past were thus brought back to life as a blaze that consumed those currently alive.

Of course, Hykalion had stood no chance in a straight fight, not being such an inferior national power with such a weak economy. It had once again reached out to the eight other neighbors on Emelia's borders, including Istekario, but all of them had declined. By then, they had known that Hykalion wasn't trying to further its national interests and only wanted to act on personal grudges that were aggravated over time. More importantly, the other countries couldn't join Hykalion even if they'd wanted to because they had been gradually becoming vassals of either Emelia or Istekario over the past few centuries as the standoff between the two became increasingly radicalized. Those who accepted Emelia as their suzerain obviously had no interest in attacking it, and those on Istekario's side couldn't do as they pleased and attack without express permission.

Having been effectively isolated, Hykalion's economy suffered greatly. The king still launched his attack, plundering territory that, based on dubious sources produced by self-proclaimed historians from within his country, he claimed belonged to Hykalion seven centuries ago and was therefore rightfully his. Normally, no signatory of the Panhuman League would be allowed to get away with doing this, but both Istekario and the Church had defended Hykalion's actions, likely as a way to check and hassle Emelia, which had been

seen as the biggest of the four superpowers at the time.

The king of Emelia, King Ethelweld, had maneuvered the crisis as best he could, given that the casualties were only a few small settlements that didn't pay much tax. In exchange for a little dirt on his face and some land that wasn't worth much, he could make the Church look good, avoid being ostracized by the League, and gain the image of a mature and reasonable country. And so that was what he had chosen. The king of Hykalion had made a big fuss about successfully carrying out the revenge of a millennium, but it was of little bearing. Emelia had gained much more from this incident than it lost. Despite having the strength and justification to retaliate, Ethelweld had come away looking wise for choosing not to fan the flames of war.

The villages that had been overrun didn't see things in such a positive light, however. Though they were nearly negligible when it came to national statistics, they had been real people living real lives. King Ethelweld would have done all he could to protect them had he known ahead of time, since a country that couldn't protect its people was a self-eating snake that would eventually consume itself alive. It was only because everything had been over already that he'd made a bitter choice that would benefit his country best.

It would be tasteless to use the word "thankfully," but because Hykalion had been thorough in its pillaging, not a single person survived the attacks on the villages. Dead men told no tales. Consequently, voices within Emelia that had called the royal family weak for its decision hadn't gained much traction. The citizens had simply celebrated their gains, touting the platitude that revenge never did anyone any good.

However, Frederica, who had been very young when this incident happened, was still ashamed of how her father had handled things, partly because of her pragmatic way of thinking but, more importantly, because she had taken on the only two survivors of the villages as her personal guard. They had been at the Royal Academy as students and therefore avoided the attacks.

As a result, she had made thorough preparations to prevent the same thing from happening during the Oratorio Tangram. Normally,

this would involve evacuating villagers to their closest fortified cities, which was a passive but reasonable measure. Now that she had the favor of the Wayside God, however, she could take a much more aggressive approach. Thanks to Sol, she had access to individual fighters who had been power-leveled and thorough intel on all the forces lying in wait beyond Emelia's borders to invade in concert at the start of the war.

What was to stop *her* from going on the offensive first?

◇◆◇◆◇

The two royal guards directly under Frederica's command approached the ruins of Kapeli Village, the place they had once called their hometown. They made no effort to hide themselves, simply strolling up in full view of two thousand Hykalioni cavalry and one hundred Temple Knights.

One of them was Leticia "Blade Conjurer" Ahskalid. A bit taller than the average woman, she was a brown-haired and brown-eyed beauty with well-balanced proportions that her white-themed royal guard armor and cloak really brought out. She was usually all smiles and talked a mile a minute to make up for her taciturn and deadpan partner, but at the moment, her face was as stony as her partner's normally was.

The other was Lydia "Steel Wire Master" Ducray. In contrast to her partner, she was shorter than average, had more well-endowed proportions, blue hair, and blue eyes, and was still a teenager. She was somewhat similar to Julia in height and assets, and it was clear that her smile could light up a room if only she smiled. Now, however, her face wasn't even blank as usual. Her beautiful features were twisted into a clear expression of revulsion.

Since these two had accompanied Frederica to Taboo Novem, their levels were now in the triple digits, the highest among all humans save Sol and his inner circle. The soldiers from Hykalion and the Church, whose strength only came from their God-given talents, were no match for the pair, regardless of the significant difference in numbers. However, the soldiers had no way of knowing this and

therefore could not imagine what their intention was in showing themselves.

When the two reached the commander, Lydia, who was usually the quiet one, asked in a flat voice, "What are all of you doing here?"

"Huh? What are Emelian royal guards...?" The man could tell at a glance what Lydia and Leticia were. It made sense that Emelia had precautions in place, but knowing exactly where to find the Hykalion force was shocking. Equally mystifying was that only two people had shown up, even if they were royal guards. Sure, during peacetime, a commander of two thousand men had nowhere near enough authority to make the call to harm them, due not to a difference in fighting prowess, but the prestige of the nations they represented. When Frederica had sent these two to the Elven Village in her place, it had been out of trust in Emelia's authority as much as in their newly acquired individual strength.

Indeed, it was this common knowledge that stopped the commander from immediately ordering his troops to attack the moment he realized that his force had been discovered. However, this was not peacetime, and his was an assault force planning to invade Emelia. It occurred to him mid-sentence that the situation was way beyond what a visit from two royal guards could change. The presence of the Temple Knights, which served as a reminder of the Church's support, also boosted his confidence.

"So you will not answer?" Lydia asked.

The distinct lack of fear with which she posed her question made the blood rush to the commander's head. "We have no obligation to. Need I remind you that this land belongs to us? What we do on our own land is none of your business, filthy Emelian!"

It would have been different if the force had crossed the border, but this abandoned village was most assuredly now Hykalioni land. Even though Lydia and Leticia were royal guards, it wasn't their place to censure the army of a foreign country. The reason for this force's positioning couldn't have been more obvious, but that was how national sovereignty worked. If the current exchange was taken out of context and examined in isolation, Emelia was in the wrong

for having royal guards in its employ intruding on Hykalion land without permission.

Of course, there was no way for the commander to know that Emelia's new ally gave it so much strength that it was no longer bound by such sophistry. His ignorance was why he felt so sure of the advantage he held in having two thousand troops versus the pair of interlopers.

"And that only happened because you cowards licked the shoes of those who peddle war and religion," spat the usually reticent Lydia, revealing the full extent of the abhorrence she felt.

"How dare you! You little p—" The commander was clearly about to blow up at Lydia, but the cold, steely gaze of her partner made him instinctively swallow his words.

This place, which had been left abandoned for the past ten years since it had stopped being Kapeli Village, was where Lydia and Leticia had been born and raised. Despite having received the strength to fight monsters, they had failed to protect what they held most dear. The despair would have warped their young, impressionable hearts beyond recognition had they not already met Frederica. Losing their birthplace meant losing their neighbors, friends, and family. It was likely that they would have been consumed by anger at Emelia for failing to protect their home; themselves for the same thing; and most of all, Hykalion for razing it to the ground.

Lydia sneered at the noticeably frightened man. "Are you just stupid? Did you not understand that I was giving you a chance to make an excuse?"

Fortunately, the duo had indeed met Frederica. They had managed to survive to this day instead of being consumed by the flames of rage and resentment or stumbling down a path of destruction. That said, it wasn't as if they had forgotten their rage and resentment or become enlightened. They had simply come to terms with having to live with the relentless fire that burned within. It was through pure self-control that they did not expand the target of their anger to all Hykalionis, Emelians, or themselves.

Needless to say, they hated Hykalion. They hated Hykalion's royal

family, its nobles, and every single citizen who supported and propagated the lies that their society fed them. However, they had the discernment to know that it would be wrong to visit the same atrocities they had suffered on anyone other than those who were directly responsible. Consequently, they had dedicated their lives to protecting their country so that the same tragedy would never happen again, while carrying their anger, bitterness, and regrets to their graves.

Now, however, they were standing before people who were planning to do the same thing that had happened ten years ago. There was no way they could remain calm. While Leticia had become silent and blank-faced, Lydia was more expressive than normal and speaking with clear animosity.

It was because of how much anger they held that they had offered the commander the chance to say something. Since they were soldiers too, they understood how much weight orders from above carried. The correct answer that the man should have given to convey that he had a line he would not cross should have been something like "We have set up camp here because we were ordered to. However, we have no intention of repeating the terrible mistake from ten years ago." Everyone was a human before they were a soldier. There were things that Lydia and Leticia would never do even if ordered. They had been hoping it would be the same for the commander.

There was nothing to be done about soldiers killing other soldiers. That was simply how countries were run, and armies were how a country physically carried out its will. Therefore, when two countries were at odds with no room for compromise, their soldiers would have to cross swords. If humans were advanced enough to resolve their differences solely through discussion, the continent would have been unified ages ago. And yet, there wasn't the slightest sign of it happening after a thousand years. Given that, it was probably an immutable law that strength determined which side would have their way in a conflict.

However, turning the strength to kill monsters on noncombatants was not war. A community that could make such a call was not a

country but a horde of savages, lower than beasts merely playing at being human. This was why the pair from Emelia had asked the Hykalioni commander if he had the dignity and pride of someone representing his men and his country.

"You must be the stupid one! Are you seriously so full of yourself that you think we would back off after being intimidated when things have gotten this far? Emelia's been branded an apostate nation by the Church! You're all enemies of humanity! Not even the smallest country recognizes your authority anymore!"

This proclamation was the worst thing the commander could have said. He was practically declaring that the two thousand men he led were planning to massacre citizens living honest, earnest lives near the border under Emelia's protection—and that not only was being called out on it by royal guards of the country in question not enough to stop him, but that he would kill the two of them first to kick things off.

The Temple Knights, who were clustered a short distance away, were simply listening with smirks on their faces. If the god they worshipped approved of such inhumanity, Lydia and Leticia couldn't see how it was any different from a devil. It was up to the two of them to eliminate this devil wearing the mask of a god so boldly, as well as the beasts that so proudly called themselves its devout acolytes, using the power that Sol, a man, had bestowed on them.

"In that case, we will deal with you as threats to Emelia." The rage was boiling with such ferocity in Lydia's chest that, in trying to keep it hidden, her voice came out as hard as steel.

Leticia was smiling without knowing it. In a way, the worst answer was the best answer these two could have hoped for. The dark emotions they had expected to suffer like a curse for the rest of their lives could finally be vented on someone.

Before becoming this way, the two couldn't comprehend how the Hykalionis could continue hating Emelia for something that had happened seven centuries ago, which amends had even been made for. Surely an understanding could be reached through dialogue. Past tragedies were sad but not really relevant to those living today.

After everything that had happened, however, the two women

fully understood wanting to curse someone for generations. The atrocities that they had suffered should never be forgotten or wiped away. If they had children, they wouldn't be able to hold themselves back from relaying every last detail. Considering how deftly the Hykalioni royals had taken advantage of this very human urge, it made total sense that their citizens had turned out as they did. After all, that was how vehemently the two women cursed Hykalion.

"Hah! With just the two of you?" The commander was unnerved by the almost crazed reply from the two soldiers, but common sense boxed him in so tightly that it suppressed the alarms going off in his head. He was facing royal guards from a superpower, but he and his men were all elites with talents granted by God that distinguished them from their peers. And since it was two thousand of them against two, losing was unimaginable, even if they suffered some casualties. Furthermore, the bestial desire aroused by the thought of being able to draw first blood from two beautiful girls who were presumably the crème de la crème of Emelia, a country he had always felt inferior to, further distorted his decision-making capabilities.

"You will learn the hard way what the term 'one-man army' truly means."

The lust in the eyes of the commander and his surrounding subordinates erased the last vestiges of hesitation in Lydia and Leticia. They had been telling themselves that the men before them weren't the ones who had actually burned Kapeli Village to the ground and that they would remain innocent if they were simply incapacitated. However, all that evaporated in the blink of an eye. Everyone here was scum who had every intention of using orders from their country as a pretext to stomp on ordinary people.

If Lydia and Leticia hadn't shown up, the Hykalioni force would have gleefully carried out their plan. In fact, if the two of them hadn't received Sol's favor, they would have become their very first victims. The pair couldn't care less that God had supposedly given permission or that the League was willing to accept extenuating circumstances. The just thing to do, even with criminals who planned on committing murder and pillaging under such a pretext,

was to take the high road and rely on international law, but Lydia and Leticia were beyond such lukewarm measures. The duo had been granted the strength to clean up trash. What they ought to wield against enemies who could bend law to their own convenience using their nation's influence wasn't justice, but pure brute strength. Put simply, there was no reason for them not to kill everyone there. Cancers had to be excised.

Having been thus convinced, Lydia and Leticia unleashed their full strength.

"Kill them!" screamed the commander.

The two thousand from Hykalion had never before witnessed the outpouring torrent of inner mana characteristic of the superhumans who were now known as Libertadores in Emelia. Even so, the commander realized right away how gravely outclassed he was thanks to the strength he possessed, weaker though it was by several orders of magnitude. The only way to deal with individual opponents of extraordinary strength was with numbers. Basically, it was the same strategy he used against large, powerful monsters.

Unfortunately, the command to his subordinates, who had been watching the situation unfold nearby and whose eyes had been stained by bestial desire as well, had been given too late. Even if it had been given earlier, Lydia and Leticia wouldn't have received a single scratch, protected as they were by the invisible Player-derived barriers called HP. Now that they were going all out, they were walking catastrophes that no number of those still bound by human constraints could stand against. The only way to oppose such overwhelming violence was by using a different kind of power—persuasion through frank and sincere dialogue. The moment the commander had abandoned this approach, he had sealed the fate of all of his men.

A magical light effect that normal humans couldn't see shot out in a circle around Lydia, accompanied by a clear, high-pitched sound.

"Huh? What the...?"

The next moment, the commander was on the ground, voicing dumbfounded confusion as he looked up at the two women despite not having moved a muscle. The pain had yet to catch up with his

brain, but he had been forcibly shortened thanks to Lydia's steel wire going straight through his knees. When he looked around in a fluster, unable to comprehend his situation, he found everyone in view not only missing their legs, but straight up chopped into pieces. This bewildered him even further.

Lydia's wires had killed everyone who had reflexively entered battle readiness in response to the commander's order. She and Leticia had also made it a point to take out the one hundred Temple Knights first and foremost. The Temple Knights each carried a piece of lost technology called a flame quiver. These could only be used once but boasted enough destructive power to shave a few percent off Lydia's and Leticia's HP barriers. They could take a few hits, but a barrage from a hundred flame quivers, especially since the projectiles had homing functionality, could actually be a threat to them. This was why Sol and Luna had strongly impressed upon them the need to first eliminate the Temple Knights should they find any among the soldiers.

With that, the minuscule chance that the Hykalioni army had at victory was destroyed.

"We'll let you live till the end. Lie there and watch," said Lydia.

A commander had to shoulder responsibility for those under his charge. She believed that he ought to bear witness to everything that would be happening to his men because of his own words. The massacre of all two thousand soldiers was set in stone, but Lydia wasn't planning on punishing them while denying them death as Sol had done. Since they were talent-holders who were willing to do anything as long as they were ordered to, all she wanted was for them to return their talents to God. It wasn't her place, but Sol's and Frederica's, to manifest the kind of hell that would make a lesson of the Hykalioni royals and nobles who had issued the order to trample innocent citizens both ten years ago and now.

"A-Ah, ahhh, AHHHHH—"

"Ugh, that's loud. On second thought, you can die now."

When the pain finally registered and the commander started shrieking, Lydia promptly split his head down the middle. She wasn't interested in dealing him undying punishment, but neither would she

hesitate to kill a piece of trash who could get so excited about ravaging noncombatants.

"Gaaah!"

"What on earth is happening?!"

The Hykalioni soldiers whom Lydia's wires had yet to touch naturally fell into a terrified panic at the surreal scene of slaughter and started to scatter. They could hardly be blamed, as they had gone from thinking they were going to steamroll their enemies one moment to seeing their commander and all the senior officers close to him reduced to lumps of meat the next. They made mad dashes to their beloved horses, scattering in all directions in an attempt to put distance between themselves and the two monsters in human form. However, flying blades conjured by Leticia accurately beheaded them in quick succession, causing a chain of figures falling off horses that seemed almost comical.

The horses were left entirely unharmed. They forlornly prodded their masters' headless bodies with their noses, indicating that the Hykalionis had probably been good horse masters, if nothing else. Since Lydia and Leticia had refrained from directing any bloodlust at the horses, it seemed to them that their masters had abruptly stopped moving.

There were those valiant enough to fight back, few though they were. It wasn't wrong for someone who had built up confidence in their strength, believing it enough to face big and powerful monsters, to take action to eliminate threats to their own life. Of course, those who specialized in close-quarters combat couldn't bring themselves to rush toward certain death, but those who were used to fighting from afar, such as archers and a handful of mages, promptly launched their most powerful attacks while Lydia and Leticia were still far away.

"Take that!"

"Blow up!"

"Burn to cinders!"

Shouts went up to accompany dozens of attacks delivered with the intention of killing their targets. These were attacks developed through unmeasurable dedication and effort that, their effectiveness

against monsters aside, had more than enough power to kill a human.

It was child's play for Lydia to use her wires and Leticia her flying blades to neutralize the entire barrage. However, they intentionally let them land, because doing so was the best way to instill despair. Those who had fired the attacks had believed that even one, let alone dozens, would finish the job, but to their shock and disbelief, the pair emerged entirely unscathed.

At the end of the day, these soldiers' levels were only in the single digits. No matter what they did, they had no hope of fully whittling down the HP of the two who were already in the triple digits. One attack could perhaps take off two or three points, but the total was less than ten percent of their barriers' durability.

As the heroes fell to the ground, too petrified with horror and disbelief to run, flying blades and wires mercilessly made short work of them. Anyone else standing in Lydia and Leticia's place would have died for sure. The disgust that they felt at the thought of the soldiers happily using such deadly attacks on noncombatants was more than enough to override their own guilt over killing weaker opponents.

In almost an instant, half of the Hykalioni force had died. The one thousand still alive were those who had been unable to process what had happened, react to their commander's order, or make the split-second decision to run away. In other words, the survivors were the ones who had been unable to do anything at all. And now they couldn't move, because the scene before them told them that they would be killed for taking any action, no matter what it was.

As Lydia and Leticia started walking toward the remnants of the defeated army, someone loudly shouted, "P-Please wait! We were...just...ordered..."

The rest of his excuse was delivered by a spinning head that failed to realize it was no longer attached to its body. Only when it thudded to the ground did it cease all motor function.

"I bet you Hykalioni soldiers were the same ten years ago," Lydia murmured coldly. "With the excuse of being ordered to do so, you delighted in killing and stealing from innocents while singing of your

triumph, didn’t you?”

Those who heard her understood that they would be killed even if they remained still. Despite the fear coursing through them, they felt compelled to run. However, whether they turned their backs or reluctantly started slowly backing away, every last one was summarily beheaded by Leticia’s flying blades.

This was a true massacre devoid of mercy. It was unreasonable, unjustifiable slaughter by an overwhelming power against which resistance had been impossible from the start. Yet, this was exactly what the vanquished force would have done to unarmed civilians if Lydia and Leticia hadn’t shown up. In fact, the two women were probably more merciful in that they hadn’t first robbed their victims’ dignity before killing them and didn’t plan on robbing them afterward either. Those who lived by the sword had no right to object to dying by an even larger sword. This applied to everyone equally. That was simply what it meant to use violence.

“No, please, we’re not like them! We really didn’t want to! But there was no way to defy orders! Please believe me!”

To stay still was to die. To run was to die. To justify one’s crimes with a lie was to die. In the face of inexorable death, those who remained finally resorted to confessing the truth in the most wretched way. Clearly, the two angels of death could see through lies. That meant the only path to survival was prostrating oneself and begging for mercy while being entirely truthful. It was a logical conclusion.

Lydia and Leticia believed the young Hykalioni’s desperate cry. They couldn’t see him lying under such circumstances. Since it had become clear that the first person to speak would be killed for doing so, he very likely meant everything he said. He really had been reluctant to trample on the weak, but he couldn’t defy an order. That was what it meant to be in an army, and he was simply doing everything he was told, blindly believing that it would benefit his country. What was more, he had yet to actually commit any atrocity. His was but an attempted crime, and one compelled by duty, at that.

It was in full knowledge of all this that Leticia sent a blade to chop off the head of the young man who had spoken. Lydia then

sent her wires after those who started bolting off in reaction.

"Why?!"

"No! Please, no!"

"We haven't done anything yet!"

There were a few whose final protests were still coherent, but most were simply screaming unintelligibly, having been driven mad by the threat of encroaching death.

At this point, Lydia and Leticia had no intention of letting a single person live. They were going to use the power they had been given to deliver death in the most ruthless and one-sided way possible, such that those who came to investigate after the war ended would shake in their boots.

This wasn't exactly what Sol and Frederica had asked for. Sol had only asked that the auxiliary force from Hykalion be sidelined, without specifying how he wanted it done. On the opposite end of the spectrum, if the initial exchange had made Lydia and Leticia think, "I wish the commander from ten years ago had been like this one!" they could very well have stuck to only keeping watch on the enemy army until the Oratorio Tangram was over without killing a single person.

It was based on their conversation with the commander that they had mutually decided, without even having to discuss it, to reduce this mob that wouldn't have thought twice about inflicting violence on innocents to dust. As two people who had experienced their hometown falling victim to such outrageous injustice, they felt so strongly about their choice that they wouldn't regret it even if they were to be rebuked by Sol and Frederica later.

The last soldier looked up, his face covered with tears and snot, his voice too hoarse to make a sound, and his lips in the middle of mouthing "Why?" as Leticia mercilessly separated his head with a flying blade.

With that, the Hykalioni invasion force camped out in an abandoned village had been wiped out to the last man—unknown to the rest of the world, having been unable to offer the least amount of resistance, and without being granted a shred of mercy. The massacre had been perfectly thorough and based on nothing more

than circumstantial evidence.

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Every last soldier who had gathered here at the ruins of the former Kapeli Village where Lydia and Leticia had been born and raised, with the aim of repeating the tragedy of ten years ago, was now dead.

Leticia, who had remained silent all throughout, turned to her childhood friend, who she knew shared her feelings, and said, "I wanted to become an adventurer who carried this village's name."

Her voice and expression were not those of a soldier who had just wiped out an enemy force, nor were they those of a madman who enjoyed killing. They weren't those of a royal guard of Emelia either, or those of a member of Libertadores, Sol's chosen few. They weren't even those of an avenger whose hometown had been erased ten years ago. Leticia was simply speaking of a dream she used to have as a girl whose story included losing her home to the malice of man. She was standing before the appalling field of corpses that she had created with her own hands, having returned to her usual self.

"I know," Lydia replied softly, having also reverted to her normal taciturn manner.

"We made so many plans to make our village prosperous as the home of two people with incredible talents."

"Mh-hm."



Having been fast friends since childhood, they had shared the same dream. Neither had been all that interested in becoming famous and successful, either as soldiers or adventurers. They had enjoyed a certain amount of popularity from the other sex during their three years at the Royal Academy but found that it wasn't in their personalities to get passionate about love either. That was why they had planned on registering as adventurers after their graduation and returning to Kapeli Village, eliminating nearby threats to make their home a peaceful and laid-back place. Innocent and naive as they were, they had even envisioned themselves going out as needed to earn extra money adventuring to make Kapeli Village more prosperous.

But everything had gone up in smoke due to the compromise the powers that be had made. Lydia and Leticia now possessed incredible strength, but there was no changing the past. They understood better than anyone that their dream was dead, far beyond any hope of restoration.

"It's okay. Someone else can dream of making their hometown prosperous and living a laid-back and happy life."

"Leticia..."

Leticia looked like a load had been lifted from her shoulders. Lydia, who had joined her in the massacre without hesitating for a beat, knew what she was going to say next.

"That's why I... I'm gonna dedicate myself to being a sword for Lord Sol and Princess Frederica, who will create a world where that dream can come true. That's my decision."

Lydia flashed her the biggest smile she ever had. "I will too."

The two of them did not think for a moment that Sol would lose the Oratorio Tangram. On the one-in-a-billion chance that he actually did, the two of them would be condemned and executed as devils for the massacre they had carried out today. Although they were strong enough to wipe out two thousand soldiers without breaking a sweat, if the Church had the ability to take down the source of their strength, Sol, and the one who backed *him*, Lunvemt Nachtfelia, they would be as powerless to resist as the Hykalionis had been.

But if Sol won, the world would surely be carried into an era of

expansion and development the likes of which it had not seen for a thousand years. All territories would be unsealed, including those that had been branded taboo by the Holy Church, and Player would enable incursions into dungeons farther than any man had ever gone. A golden age wholly deserving of being called a second Era Gran Magicka would take the world by storm.

It was that world that Leticia and Lydia were swearing to protect.

"Thank you, Lydia."

"Mm."

Standing in the middle of a lake of blood and two thousand corpses that they had created of their own will, the friends exchanged carefree smiles. A third party would probably have described the scene as that of two monsters who retained human forms but had gone mad with power. But their minds were made up. They would become protectors of the coming age of expansion—merciless swords that passed judgment on the foolish.

In spite of Sol's presence as someone with such power that some would consider him a god incarnate, an attempt had been made to repeat the atrocity of ten years ago. Worse, if Lydia and Leticia hadn't received power from him, they would have been plunged into the living hell of knowing about it but being unable to stop it. In fact, despite having stayed alive to this day without being broken by the great loss they had suffered in the past, they would have been tortured to death while railing against their powerlessness.

Knowing this, the two of them gave up on humanity—including themselves—and condemned it as nothing more than a race of senseless beasts. Conscience was hogwash. Love and justice were figments of the imagination. Given the smallest justification, the strong would trample the weak, carrying out acts more depraved than what actual beasts would do without a second thought. Humans were beyond salvation.

Both ten years ago and today, the pair had learned that this was the nature of man. It was only in an ideal world, one that everyone dreamed about but could never realize so long as human nature remained unchanged, where such flights of fancy could become reality. True morality and absolute justice didn't exist in this world. At

present, power determined morality. One could moan and wail, but at the end of the day and regardless of the form that it took, it was those who held power who decided everything. The weak had only one choice: submit or die.

In short, humans could never create an ideal world because it was the right thing to do or because it was sublime. They could try, but their motivation would be the benefit to them and those around them. The distinction between good and bad was simply based on benefit. Once one accepted that, it became clear why the boundless benefits that Sol would soon generate had to be offered alongside unequivocal loss.

In this case, loss referred to the carrying out of unavoidable punishments. The threat of punishment was the only thing that could motivate humans to follow the rules set by their masters, beasts that they were. Exceptions must not be made, and there was to be no wiggle room. It was only by strictly and equally holding everyone to these rules, be they rich or poor, young or old, man or woman, that a law was a law and not mere sophistry.

This was why all two thousand soldiers had needed to die, even if Lydia and Leticia were to earn the ire of their mistress and, in turn, her master, and be granted death too.

"Well then, let's get on with capturing those who gave these men their orders."

"Mm."

The mission that the pair had been assigned was not yet complete. After fulfilling the order to incapacitate the force about to invade Emelia by annihilating it, they had to capture the king and all his ministers, as the ultimate responsibility lay with them.

Ruminating over their orders, Lydia and Leticia couldn't help but sigh in awe of how Frederica had foreseen the way the situation would play out. She had likely intentionally left it up to them to decide how to deal with the two thousand perpetrators while clearly specifying how she wanted the rest of the mission to be carried out.

Undoubtedly, this was going to be a show of force the likes of which no country had ever seen. A mere two people were going to bring an entire country—even if a small one—to its knees. Them

wiping out an army of two thousand was already enough to make other nations shake in terror. But it would be followed by the pair strolling into the capital, capturing the king and his ministers without a single casualty, and triumphantly returning to Magnamelia. At that point, for a country to even compare its strength to Emelia would become a joke. That was how absolute the difference in strength was, and everyone in the world would know it.

At a later date, the world would also learn the true reason Hykalion's king and nobles had been captured instead of killed outright. Based on what they would see, all would realize just how much mercy had been shown to the two thousand soldiers who had been summarily diced and dissected.

Since humanity had begun allowing itself the pretense of a constitutional government, the death penalty was considered the greatest punishment, a sentence to avoid at all costs. But after the Oratorio Tangram, not only would that status be yielded to many other punishments, but death would actually come to be seen as the most preferred, the most merciful of all.

Chapter 4: Oratorio Tangram

Ten thousand Emelian soldiers and a unified force of seventy thousand soldiers under the combined command of the Holy Church and the Istekario Empire glared at each other across the rolling hills northeast of the fortified city of Garlaige. This region was so expansive that it had more than enough room for the nearly six-digit body count, but it had yet to be named because it had been off-limits to all humans until recently. It had previously been a part of Taboo Duo, the taboo territory closest to Istekario out of the nine that made up Gio Nest. It was thanks to Sol unsealing the territory that the troops could be deployed here without fear. Otherwise, the boss that his group had cut down for levels and materials, Cerberus, would have torn through every last man, even if their numbers had been greater by a few orders of magnitude. Even now, humans were low on the continent's scale of strength.

The first taboo territory that had been unsealed, Taboo Novem, was closer to Garlaige and largely filled with dense forest. It was the largest of all the taboo territories in Gio Nest, but there simply wasn't enough open space for armies to maneuver, and it therefore wasn't suitable as a battlefield. This was actually a big reason that clashes between Emelia and Istekario had never gone beyond small-scale skirmishes despite them sharing a physical border.

Consequently, when the Church had branded Sol an apostate and declared the Oratorio Tangram, Sol had chosen to unseal Taboo Duo. It was right on Istekario's border and mostly open hills, which made it perfect for the war. He was going to unseal all the taboo territories anyway, so the order didn't matter much to him.

The Church and the League—whose combined force dubbed itself God's Army—saw no option but to go along with the choice. They would have had to split up their forces if they were to fight closer to Garlaige, which would result in them being defeated piecemeal by

Sol, Luna, or the Libertadores. Not that it still wasn't a stupid idea to throw seventy thousand men who couldn't have unsealed Taboo Duo themselves at a group of people who could manage it single-handedly.

Located at the center of God's Army was the Church's camp, with Istekario's troops protectively positioned in front of it. The general commander of Istekario and his vice commander looked out over the rows and rows of men, frank incredulity on their faces.

"To choose this formation against enemies who have defeated more than a few taboo territory bosses is sheer folly, to put it mildly," murmured Emperor Fritz.

Kurt agreed. "It's scary how people can just stop thinking because of faith."

Splitting up gave more troops the possibility of surviving the war. To line up their entire force on open hills without taking precautions against being mowed down indicated an absolute lack of thought. As Fritz pointed out, their opponents had, on top of killing taboo territory bosses, defended against a succubus's wide-scale bombardment and shot down a satellite from orbit. Fighting in a place with no cover at all was basically asking for a dragon breath cannon to the face.

"I'm hardly in a position to criticize other countries, though," said Fritz with a self-deprecating sigh.

Many of the nations present had gone to the trouble of detouring around Emelia to be here. Part of what drove them was fear of being branded apostates too if they didn't cooperate, but more than anything, it was their absolute faith in the Church that had dominated human society for a millennium. Everyone now knew that Sol's group had the strength to unseal taboo territories, but if the Church continued to declare them apostates, then it surely had something even more powerful up its sleeve. A calmer mind would have had its doubts, but all the countries fully believed this overly optimistic logic. The human weakness of believing what one wanted was difficult to overcome indeed.

Fritz, too, would have shown up devoutly touting the same flawed reasoning if he hadn't received a visit from Sol. Knowing that, he

couldn’t quite bring himself to laugh at the other countries.

Kurt grimaced in self-admonition over his earlier comment. “If we’re talking positions, mine’s even worse than yours.”

The Subordinate skill that Sol had used on him had freed him from the twisted values that had been instilled in him since childhood, forcefully eliminating all preconceptions and self-deceit that would hamper his ability to carry out orders. He now had the ability to see things objectively and process facts in an impartial manner. Because of that, he couldn’t help shuddering every time he recalled first meeting Sol and how he had attacked him without a second thought despite having just witnessed a demonstration of his strength. He had even less right than Fritz to mock God’s Army for nonchalantly lining up their banners on the hills.

“In any case, this is an opportunity too. I don’t know how it is for everyone else, but our pro-war faction won’t be causing us any more trouble after today.”

“That’s...true.”

The main political faction in Istekario—the same one that controlled Fritz—took great pride in Istekario’s military dominance. It was earnestly applying itself to its role as the main force of God’s Army, eager to both recover some honor after the enormous embarrassment of losing the Elven Queen and protect their king, who would have to die if Sol carried out his intention of freeing Aina’noa.

Upon succeeding the throne, each emperor of Istekario received a nier organa from their predecessor that served as the key to the Elven Queen’s consciousness. If this key was destroyed, the sitting emperor—in this case, Fritz—would die. He was a cornerstone of a nation that made hawkishness a national policy. All the trouble that the pro-war faction had gone to to set him up as a puppet gave them good reason to go all out in preventing his loss. The promise of all the benefits that would come from getting the lion’s share of the credit for winning the Oratorio Tangram certainly didn’t hurt either.

Never in their wildest dreams could they imagine that Fritz had actually already joined Sol’s side and was following his plan by being

here. They were equally in the dark about how Fritz planned on getting back at them for killing his father and doing as they pleased with Istekario. Now that he had such a powerful backer, they could no longer pull his strings.

Those most deeply involved with the military from the faction that thought itself in control of Fritz were present almost to the last person on the battlefield in various positions of authority. Some big names from the civil side remained back home, but they would be left helpless if those who usually did all the dirty work were to disappear in the coming engagement.

It was convenient that Fritz would get his revenge *and* make a showy example of the Oratorio Tangram's linchpin. For that purpose, he had made it a point to drag out every single noble on the pro-war side to this battlefield to meet their end. They had been all too happy to comply, each person more eager than the next to earn distinctions.

"To be honest, I find myself a little pathetic. I'm practically the fox who borrows the authority of a tiger. That said, since I am embracing being a fox, I will make an effort to be as cunning as one. When they killed my father, they claimed it was for the country's sake." Fritz smiled thinly. "I'll now take a page out of their book and allow them to contribute to the continued prosperity of Istekario with their deaths."

The culprits had looked very proud of themselves when plunging the dagger in. They had no right to complain when the same logic was applied in return.

With his shapely features twisted by equally fiendish glee, Kurt said, "Given how much they love our country, I'm sure they would be more than happy to become noble sacrifices for its sake."

Fritz was aware that he was doing a disgraceful thing: He was pandering to a powerful master and using that master's power to sell out those who technically were his allies. However, just because he had come to terms with acting as a puppet to prevent his country from falling into chaos, it most certainly didn't mean he had come to like his puppet masters. All the more so when they turned out to be little more than a bunch of self-important men who only dreamed of

bringing back the “good old days” and didn’t know the first thing about ruling.

Consequently, Fritz didn’t feel the slightest hesitation in eliminating them as cancers to the country that they had condemned. In fact, he was better than them, because he wasn’t simply deceiving himself and those around him with empty words. Once Sol won the Oratorio Tangram, a certain amount of purging was indeed going to be necessary if Istekario was to have more pages in its history book.

Worldviews and abilities aside, those who had pushed Istekario to the brink of oblivion would have to take responsibility for their incompetence. As they themselves had said oh-so-nobly, the only way for those whose ineptitude undermined the country to pay was with their lives. Since this applied to him too, Fritz wasn’t about to go easy on anyone.

There wasn’t the slightest chance that the civil servants back home would step up to handle the aftermath of Istekario’s inevitable defeat. It didn’t take a genius to foresee that the nation would become everyone’s punching bag, and those nobles would surely all make a run for it. That would make it easy for Kurt and those under him to seize power in the vacuum left by Fritz’s death.

Entirely clueless about everything happening behind the scenes, the largest army in the Panhuman League was high in morale, already boasting about how they would receive the largest share of what would be left of Emelia after the war. In contrast, the other nations had no intention of directly facing opponents who could unseal taboo territories. Small countries had sent only several hundred men, and the more sizable kingdoms a few thousand at most. Truthfully, these troops had already fulfilled their duty the moment they had taken up position under the banners of the Church. Since they were facing God’s enemies, God should smite them Himself. The role of lowly believers was to bear witness to the judgment and sing praises of it afterward, then receive interests in Emelia as reward, probably based on their performance.

For its part, the Church had only compelled the Panhuman League to send troops so that the fight would have the appearance

of a holy war. It was ridiculous to expect mere human soldiers to take on the Wayside God and the All Dragon. The current pope, Gregorio IX, supreme commander of God's Army and God's executioner, was not counting on the armies gathered here for fighting strength. While the Church killed Sol and Luna with its stock of lost technology, Emelia's neighbors and former trade partners would annihilate the nation through force and commerce, respectively. After raising their banners, the troops at Garlaige could have become scarecrows for all the pope cared.

Pope Gregorio IX had given the countries sharing a border with Emelia permission to invade and pillage to their hearts' content the moment the horns of war sounded. He had even sent them Temple Knights armed with lost technology to assure them that he wasn't just offering a verbal promise and to ensure their victory.

Another millennium of peace would be built on the lesson that was to be made of Emelia for acting out against God's earthly proxy. The country's fate would be branded on people's hearts and the annals of history, such that all would dread getting on the wrong side of the worldwide peddler of religion. Those standing against the God it peddled were but trash to be swept away, not fellow customers deserving of forgiveness and tolerance. It was by killing, plundering, and ravaging these apostates—and redistributing their wealth to the real customers, the true believers—that God's authority could be demonstrated to all.

Alas, Pope Gregorio IX's grandiose scheme had already been waylaid. Chaos was sweeping through his command headquarters, hidden behind the twenty thousand-strong force from Istekario.

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"Someone tell me what's going on at once! The apostates Sol and Luna should be *here*! Then what is happening with the forces lying in wait on Emelia's borders?!"

"W-We don't know! All the Temple Knights we dispatched to accompany them have stopped responding! They've gone dark!"

No one had an answer for the dismayed pope. The plan to use

lost technology that enabled users to communicate over a long distance—something that was freely issued to those above a certain rank in the Church—to coordinate a simultaneous attack on Emelia had fallen through. It was strange enough for everyone on the other side to stop responding, but even more disturbingly, HQ had received a few final transmissions that could only be described as unintelligible, terror-filled babble.

Each Temple Knight sent to accompany the strike forces had been issued a lost technology weapon of significant strength. It should have been more than enough to let them handily obliterate the ordinary soldiers manning Emelia's borders. Emelia's standing army only numbered around ten thousand, including their royal guards, and that number was here in Garlaige, which meant those left protecting the borders should have been little more than local militia. The situation seemed to indicate that these puny forces had overwhelmed regular armies bolstered with Temple Knights, and that made no sense at all.

To one who could be objective, however, it was clear how this had happened. Pope Gregorio IX had bought a month of time under the orders of the Old Rulers, but during that period, Sol had unsealed all nine taboo territories of Gio Nest. As a result, there were now enough individuals with extraordinary strength to protect the entire length of Emelia's border. The armies of Emelia's neighbors, led by Temple Knights equipped with amazing weapons and all too eager to plunder a great superpower, had been crushed like ants by those blessed by Player. Just as Leticia and Lydia had been sent to Hykalion, Sol had dispatched others to the different forces lying in wait. The results spoke for themselves.

Sol and Frederica had no intention of mistreating the defeated soldiers of the Oratorio Tangram. The same went for the countries they belonged to. It was a war, after all. Those who lost would be treated accordingly, and there was no need for unnecessary cruelty.

The same could not be said of the outlaws who had no respect for the most basic rules of war and planned on taking advantage of the commotion to tear their way through Emelia. Those who could do this were not soldiers or countries, but monsters. As such, they

had to be preemptively dealt with.

On the other hand, the nearby countries that had rebuffed the suggestion brought by Temple Knights and restricted their military deployment to God's Army had yet to suffer a single casualty. Those messengers, who had raged about reporting back and making sure that the countries that wouldn't play along were branded as apostates after the war, were no longer in this world, but Gregorio IX did not know that, because they had been erased along with their communication devices.

"Hmph, no matter. We simply have to win here." Flustered but far from despairing, the pope decided that brute strength was the way out of his predicament. Once he brought the secret weapons of the Church to bear and wiped out Emelia's army, the Wayside God, and the Evil Dragon, everything would work itself out. If Sol and Luna weren't here but off protecting Emelia's border, then his victory would be that much more set in stone. What he had to do first, therefore, was annihilate Emelia's army to demonstrate the Church's power and authority.

He had planned on using display windows and voice amplifiers—more lost technology in the Church's collection—to give a speech to kick off the Oratorio Tangram and its subsequent attacks. It was a pity he had to skip that, but immediately attacking fast and hard was the right call.

And thus the war began.

"Order Istekario to open up space for us. The Church's armored division will bathe the heretics' army with flame arrows!"

"Yes, Your Holiness!"

Having regained his composure, the supreme commander barked out an order that sent a flustered knight rushing off to the troops manning communications. What was happening at the other fronts was unclear and worrying, but it was true that it wouldn't matter once Sol Rock and his allies were all dead.

The Temple Knights knew how much destruction could be wrought by the flame quivers they all carried and the "flame arrows" spat out by what they had been told were "armored weapons" from an age of mythology. There wasn't a sliver of doubt in their minds

that victory would be theirs. Having received permission from the Old Rulers, Gregorio IX had taken out every last lost technology weapon stored in the Divine Repository. During testing, the flame arrows had torn through monsters deep inside dungeons that those with talents couldn't have hoped to stand against. No human, be they soldier or adventurer, had any chance of weathering their assault, even with shields and armor. And Gregorio IX had enough weapons to wipe out all seventy thousand members of God's Army, let alone Emelia's ten thousand. This wasn't going to be a fight—it was going to be a massacre.

At least, that was what the Temple Knights expected. The original script had been to announce the start of the Oratorio Tangram, order God's Army to overwhelm Emelia's troops with sheer numbers, then deal with the Wayside God and Evil Dragon with a special surprise when they showed up to fight back. The start had gone a bit awry, but the schedule simply had to be moved up a little to compensate.

As Fritz's forces opened a path as requested, he murmured, "It's time to see what the Church can do."

"What they have in store is still a mystery," Kurt mused. "Emelia is one thing, but if it's enough to hurt Lord Sol..."

"That's an unnecessary worry. In any case, we've sealed our fates. If he is defeated, we will simply go down with him."

"That...is true. I apologize for my comment. It was superfluous."

Kurt's words could be construed as doubts about Sol, so Fritz was chiding him and allaying his fears. Now that they were officially Player's companions, they were privy to information shared through the system. Consequently, they knew that the troops deployed at Emelia's borders had already been annihilated. Based on that, they could tell that command HQ was pivoting, probably having learned the same information through other means.

Strange, awesome weapons roared into the space opened up by the Istekarian army. Indeed, they looked like something that no human could stand against. However, weapons that worked on the same principles should have been passed out to the forces that had been about to rush into Emelia when the horn of war sounded. At the very least, the Temple Knights with them had definitely been

issued some. And yet they had been wiped out—not even by Sol or Luna, but by a handful of their companions. Perhaps the lost technology that the Church put so much stock in wasn't that much of a threat after all.

In light of the many incredible things that Sol was capable of, it wouldn't be surprising if he was aware of Fritz and Kurt's conversation too. Given that, Fritz thought it a good idea to be mindful of what he said and did. Kurt had already been taught a personal lesson that such worries couldn't be laughed off.

"Still, those weapons sure look odd," said Fritz, changing the subject. "Are they powered by mana?"

"I think so?" Kurt replied.

Put plainly, "flame arrows" were missiles. What the Church had taken out of its repository were tanks and missile launchers, the mainstay land-based weapons of a bygone era. Powered not by mana but by high explosives and fuel, these weapons of mass destruction had no business being used in this age. No one knew how to produce or maintain them, meaning they could only be disposed of once spent. Even so, they easily tore through the HP barriers that protected monsters and greatly surpassed what humans of this era could achieve with mana-based talents. Though they only had one shot, the flame quivers that could be carried individually could blast away even monsters on double-digit dungeon floors. Tanks and missiles could deal far more damage in the blink of an eye.

For being able to kill monsters that could simply shake off a barrage of skills and spells from talent-holders trained to peak performance, the Temple Knights saw these weapons as no less than spears of God. There was no way they could lose with a whole arsenal of them.

The tanks and missile launchers that rolled up to the front line of the battle numbered roughly one hundred in total. As the Emelians braced themselves in the face of these weapons they had never seen before, the Temple Knights excitedly waited to watch them blown apart by the first volley.

The Emelians wanted to seize the initiative, despite being thrown

off by the fact that the Istekarians they had to clash with had stepped aside in favor of oddly shaped hunks of moving metal, with no declaration to herald the start of combat. A rain of attacks shot up under King Ethelweld's orders, but unfortunately, not even spells and arrows created with talents could pierce the tanks and missile launchers' armor, much less normal arrows. A metallic cacophony went up as the projectiles bounced off their targets without leaving so much as a dent.

Gregorio IX snickered gleefully. "These weapons can withstand attacks from monsters in taboo territories!" he crowed. "Nothing you throw at it will get through!"

The pope's vulgar grin was in large part due to relief that this was all that Emelia's initial barrage amounted to. He was now quite sure that the lack of communication with the Temple Knights about to invade Emelia was nothing more than a mishap. Otherwise, the opening salvo in the most important theater of this war would have been far more formidable.

"They attacked without waiting for the starting declaration! Now we have no choice but to retaliate!" Gregorio IX licked his lips, his face twisted into a hideous, sadistic snarl. The thought of the Emelians, so sure of their infallibility, being blown apart by burning shock waves that greatly surpassed the realm of magic aroused him intensely. "Fire all the flame arrows at once! Those who side with God's enemies deserve no mercy! The only way that such sinners can atone is with their deaths!"

Those manning the tanks and missile launchers complied right away. More than a thousand projectiles blasted off, each one sure to tear giant holes in the Emelian army's tight ranks, as there was no way mere humans could withstand something that could penetrate even a monster's HP. They didn't seem all that fast at first but accelerated so quickly that they ate up the distance in the blink of an eye. The next moment, the world was filled with blinding light and ear-shattering din.

The Temple Knights had taken advantage of the missiles' homing abilities to ensure that the barrage covered every inch of where the Emelian army was deployed multiple times. The resulting explosion

was so massive that the soldiers of God's Army could feel the heat and the trembling in the air all the way where they were standing. Although everyone's vision would take a while to recover, there wasn't a doubt in their minds that not a single Emelian had survived.

"Ha ha ha! This is what happens to apostates who...side... What?!"

Of course, Gregorio IX knew better than to think everything was over. The Wayside God and All Dragon still remained, so he fully understood that this was simply the appetizer. Even so, his voice petered out in the middle of a cry meant to encourage himself and those around him. He had been about to gloat about the Emelian army dying in one fell swoop and how there was no need to fear the apostates who had failed to protect them. However, in the middle of his sentence, the flames, which should have continued burning for a while, were rapidly sucked into a tornado. This was obviously not a natural phenomenon. As the heat receded, panels of rainbow light came into view. There was no mistaking that distinctive look: They were walls erected with Absolutus.

"No, that can't be!"

The Emelian soldiers all looked shocked and terrified, but every last one of them was alive and well. The apostates' side had demonstrated that they had the power to withstand a bombardment from the Church's precious secret weapons—and by using Absolutus, the unique spell that everyone knew belonged to the Emelian royal family, no less.

It wasn't a surprise that Absolutus could withstand a flame arrow. After all, it had protected a section of wall against Country Eater, a monster that had wiped out seven countries. However, deploying enough of them side by side to cover ten thousand troops was another matter entirely. No human possessed that much mana. Otherwise, Emelia would have conquered the entire continent long ago. It would have been stranger if it hadn't. Such a miracle was far beyond even King Ethelweld and Prince Maximillian working together. And yet, it had occurred. The only logical explanation was that Sol had something to do with it.

Every country gathered on this battlefield had witnessed the

entire sequence of events. Absolutus was famous, and the rainbow light that it gave off when deflecting attacks was known to all. There was no denying that Emelia had foiled the Church's secret weapon. It finally made sense why a single country had taken the stance it did even knowing that the entire world would become its enemy. Emelia wasn't mad—it knew it had a fair chance at winning.

After the coordinated invasion of Emelia fell through, so too did the attempt to wipe out its army. Twice now Pope Gregorio IX's plans had failed. A god who lost his infallibility was no longer a god. After all, a god was defined by his absolute power.

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"Whew, that lost technology was something indeed. Gave me the chills, it did," murmured King Ethelweld from his position in the sky.

The way he hovered so effortlessly—Gawain's skill had improved so much from working on the Numbers armaments that he could now make small accessories like rings and earrings that granted its wearer effects like Float and Fly—made him look like an archmage from legend. His naturally handsome features added to the effect, as did the showy outfit that he had spent a ton of money on. He hadn't told anyone, but his staff, which had magic circles rotating around it but still looked like a spear, was his favorite touch.

One might look at him askance for what he was doing, what with being king of a respectable country and old enough to be a grandfather to boot. However, Maximillian, the latest heir of Absolutus, had gone off to be an adventurer. Consequently, Sol and Frederica had decided to give Ethelweld the role of casting Absolutus during the Oratorio Tangram. He had acted reluctant, but everyone around could tell how excited he had been. No one told him, of course.

As preparation, Ethelweld had accompanied Sol on one of his taboo territory boss hunts. Thanks to his level now being in the triple digits and all the extra stats that Sol had given him, simultaneously casting enough iterations of Absolutus to protect his whole army was very much something he could do.

Of course, Ethelweld wasn't the only person who had been strengthened this way.

"You say that, but it didn't make it through Absolutus, Your Majesty," said Yolanda Fleaubert, one of the three people floating alongside Ethelweld, sounding impressed and amused at the same time. The special adviser to the magical division of Emelia's royal army was a blonde, blue-eyed woman whose beauty had not been diminished in the slightest by age. Thanks to her incredible talent with water magic, she remained an active counselor to the army to this day. The smile she always wore gave her the impression of a friendly old lady, but everyone knew that the higher someone rose in Emelia's ranks, the more they learned to be on their best behavior with her. She was a paragon whom many, even those who had grown up and assumed impressive titles of their own, could never deny. The sharp tongue that she had been famous for in her youth probably had a little something to do with that.

Bernard lu Blanc sighed. "I'd never imagined I would surpass my prime at this age."

A master of wind magic, the general manager of the main Emelian branch of the Adventurer's Guild looked every inch the sage, from his mild manner to his white hair, white beard, and steel blue eyes. The truth, however, was that he was a madman who used to be known as Scion of Sanguine Wind, an alias every bit as ridiculous as Ethelweld's "Mad Prince of Explosions." He had been so obsessed with reducing things to mincemeat with powerful wind magic that the smell of blood had always accompanied him, so the alias was his own fault. Now, however, he was an old veteran who brought unruly adventurers into line not just with his authority but with his ability, which was still in top form. It was he who had turned the roiling flame and smoke of the missiles into a tornado and dispersed everything into the atmosphere.

"Doesn't matter if it comes from God or Lord Sol. It's still power that we can wield of our own will. Now that we finally have abilities that live up to what we once dreamed, what say you we wrap up this national crisis nonsense like blazes and go hole up in a dungeon? You *can* come with us, can't you, oh mighty Majesty?"

The last person to speak up was Kevin Broctis, the only one of the four who didn't hold a steady job and remained an active adventurer even at his age. He had an extremely muscular body that could make one confuse him for a warrior, but he was very much a master of earth magic. His bald head, deep wrinkles, and single eye left no doubt about his advanced age, but his build was another matter entirely. As the only one who was still an adventurer, he had felt most keenly the presence of a wall that could not be surmounted, no matter how much innate potential he had and how much effort he put in. Like Bernard, he had his own thoughts about how Sol had so easily helped him surpass—no, more like smash through—that wall, but he had stopped worrying thanks to his positive and devil-may-care personality. Instead, he was practically jumping for joy that he had another shot at a dream he had failed to fully give up on in his youth—that of seeing the furthest depths of a dungeon in person with his companions. To sum up, he was an old man bursting with life.

Despite his casual tone, Kevin's voice was tinged with a dash of trepidation. He wanted to fulfill his dream with the same people he had shared it with, but unlike him, the other three had careers and positions appropriate for their ages, with duties crucial to the country that they couldn't just abandon at the drop of a hat. If he couldn't share the short remainder of his life adventuring with his companions, though, there would have been no point receiving such overwhelming power from Sol.

"It's mainly Lord Sol and Frederica calling the shots in this war," Ethelweld replied happily. "And Franz promised me he would take the crown once it's over."

Kevin's worries were unfounded. His feelings were shared not only by Ethelweld, but also by the other two who had accepted the power-up that Sol had offered. While other people found love in their twilight years, they were going to chase a dream. And there was no one better to do it with than the same people they had spent their every waking moment dungeon delving with in their youth.

In fact, King Ethelweld's plan was, after winning this war and officiating the commencement of the subsequent world congress, to

abdicate and dedicate the rest of his days to being an adventurer. Everyone with ties to Emelia knew that it was Frederica—and behind her, Sol—who was running this war and would be running the world congress afterward. The feat of foiling the secret weapon that the Church had kept in store was but a prologue to the Oratorio Tangram.

Even so, it was more than enough for his final achievement as king. The other two also thought that the new world, remade as it would be based on Sol's absolute strength, had no need for the old guard. It was about time for them to step aside. They had more than earned the right to spend the rest of their days however they wanted.

"Aren't you glad your children turned out so brilliant and capable?" Yolanda cackled. "Good thing they took after her so much instead of you."

"I think they're similar to me in more than a few ways," Ethelweld protested.

"If that's true, I commend you for doing a great job hiding it all these years!"

The two continued a rather inane tête-à-tête that indicated they already had half a foot out the door while proceeding to incapacitate the tanks and missile launchers in quick succession. More missiles were fired, but they were made short work of. Using magic, Yolanda fired off highly compressed jets of water like laser beams, slicing up the armored weapons like paper scraps and inducing them to self-explode. On the other hand, though he was being made the butt of some rather insulting comments, Ethelweld had to focus on protecting his army and therefore could not vent by firing off the explosive fire magic he loved so much. His stress was climbing through the roof.

"You never could beat her in a verbal joust, could you, my king?" Bernard chuckled.

"Neither can any of you!" Ethelweld retorted.

Kevin let out a bark of laughter. "Now ain't that the truth!"

It couldn't be entirely chalked up to Ethelweld's mood, but the conversation between him, Bernard, and Kevin was fast regaining

the casual nature of close friends over the course of the fight. As the lone flower in the group, Yolanda couldn't help but shake her head and sigh about how boys never changed no matter how old they got.

While talking, Bernard redirected the tornado that was sucking up the fire from the flame arrows toward the Temple Knights, creating the comedic scene of them dying to the destructive forces they themselves were unleashing. Kevin raised countless pillars of stone from the flat hills, throwing the armored weapons that had somehow survived all the fire and raging winds into the air like mere toys to come crashing back down.

Four elders were one-sidedly decimating a battery of lost technology weaponry that should have had the power to easily obliterate an army in the tens of thousands. Holy or not, war was war, and no mercy was shown. The four rampaged to their hearts' content, demonstrating their overwhelming strength for all to see.

Rather than Player and the All Dragon, Sol and Frederica had decided to let humans power-leveled by monsters in taboo territories handle the start of the war and take on the role of destroying the lost technology that the Church brought out, almost as if they were putting into practice the line "that which kills gods and monsters must be man" that the Old Rulers were so fond of reciting. The king of Emelia and three others of great renown had thus risen to the occasion and accomplished the task with distinction.

While they were finishing off the last of the armored weapons and Temple Knights that had come to the front line, however, thirteen massive, multilayered, three-dimensional magic formations appeared in the sky high above them, radiating a torrent of magical light.

At the same time, a display window appeared in front of Ethelweld. In a calm voice, Frederica said, "Father, it's the Church's trump card. Please retreat immediately."

"Would you...mind us taking a crack at it?"

"Feel free. Just know that your life is your responsibility. The Saint of Healing is carrying out her part of the plan, so she is not here to provide healing or resurrection."

Ethelweld's group had been informed beforehand that the Church had more than just tanks and missile launchers in store, so they were not flustered. In fact, they knew that this was when they were supposed to exit stage right. Their role was to show off the heights that even normal people could reach, and they had fulfilled that and then some. Everything from this point on would be taken care of by Sol's inner circle and perhaps even the All Dragon herself.

Unfortunately, it was the nature of one who felt most alive on the battlefield to wonder, after being granted great strength, just how far that strength could go. Even Ethelweld was aware that he was making a foolish request, but none of his three companions could bring themselves to admonish him. They could not wait to try fighting as their ideal selves either—the versions of themselves that specialized in their element of choice, bolstered by all the stats that Player had given them.

Though a little surprised to be granted permission, Ethelweld excitedly turned to his companions. "Well, you all heard her. What do you want to do?"

Currently, Frederica was not Ethelweld's daughter, but a superior way up the chain of command. If what he said just now had displeased Sol, her reply wouldn't have been so lenient. It was safe to assume that Sol was fine with the request, as long as Ethelweld was aware of the risk.

"Gotta get a hit in first to tell," Kevin said.

Yolanda sighed. "Your head's still empty, I see."

"Like you plan on saying no?" Kevin scoffed.

"Let's give it our largest attacks and retreat right away if they prove inadequate," Bernard said. "And if Our Majesty's Absolutus is broken through...well, that's that."

The responses that Ethelweld got were exactly what he had expected. They had permission to challenge themselves against an unknown enemy, and all they had to do was put their lives on the line. None of the four were prudent enough to say no to such an offer. If they had been, they wouldn't have placed themselves on the front line of this war like they were still young and sprightly.

An image of Sol appeared beside Frederica's with a wry smile. "I

won’t stop you all, but please pull back if you find yourselves in over your heads. Frederica and Reen, can you back them up?”

Reen’s display also popped up. “Sure thing!”

Frederica nodded. “Understood.”

The four elders dying would be unacceptable. Sol’s victory would be guaranteed regardless, but it would be diminished. He was trying to frame this war as “humans living in the here and now” versus “the lost technology of the past that the Church kept hidden all this time,” and he wanted to win in no uncertain terms.

Furthermore, the sight of Ethelweld’s group living out the dream that Sol had once held—that of adventuring with his friends until they were old—gave him no small measure of vindication. This was why his treatment of them veered on what Frederica often implicitly called “indulgent.”

“All right!” cheered Ethelweld with such childish joy that his daughter couldn’t help but blush.

“I’m sorry, Lord Sol, Lady Reen...” she said, bobbing her head.

As the somewhat laid-back conversation drew to a close, the magic formations in the sky were finally completed. Massive humanoid forms started emerging from them, bathed in crepuscular rays. Clad entirely in white armor and wielding white greatswords and white shields, they looked like gigantic sculptures as much as angels, especially with the wings on their backs. The scene seemed like it was straight out of a myth.

Everyone stopped and stared slack-jawed at the sky, from the Emelian soldiers who were riding the high of their overwhelming victory to the Temple Knights in fear for their lives, from the Istekarian soldier on the front line to the armies of smaller nations standing in the back.

The apostles that had only existed in the Scriptures and on the stained glass windows of churches had appeared—thirteen of them, at that. This convincingly conveyed that Sol Rock was indeed an enemy of God, and that Emelia, who had sided with him, truly deserved divine punishment.

However, Ethelweld’s party wasn’t one to falter in the face of such a bluff. If a bunch of angelic figures were enough to get them to

back off, they wouldn't have stood against the Church and taken on the Oratorio Tangram in the first place. It was too late for such measures. They wouldn't hesitate to knock down a god, much less an angel. That was what it meant to be an adventurer—one who adventured.

As the one who stood between his troops and certain death, Ethelweld promptly expended all his remaining mana to cast several layers of Absolutus that stretched wide enough to cover all ten thousand men, with the inner layers increasing in thickness. Together, they looked like one giant barrier of light that could block a strike from God himself.

At the same time, Yolanda, Bernard, and Kevin unleashed the biggest attacks they could currently summon at the closest of the thirteen angels. Keeping in mind that these were opponents they were originally supposed to retreat from, they weren't stupid enough to spread out their targets. The only way for the weak to defeat the strong was to focus on taking them down one by one. This was something that all veteran adventurers knew.

And so, a perfectly controlled whirlwind enveloped one angel in an attempt to slice it up, while threads of water with the volume of a raging river compressed to the width of spider's silk burst forward, trying to bore holes in its body. To finish, a whole mountain appeared in midair and started its inexorable descent.

However, these phenomena were erased by the angel's white shield, as if magic meant nothing at all before the might of God. A casual swing of its greatsword then shattered the barriers that had easily withstood more than a thousand flame arrows. Ethelweld's party and the Emelian soldiers were as yet unhurt, but it was clear that an angel merely had to swing its weapon like a child swinging a stick and they would be wiped out.

"Ah, this isn't going to work," Bernard said. "We can't lift a finger against them."

Yolanda agreed. "Sorry, but we'll be leaving this to you young'uns to deal with."

The old veterans weren't too obstinate to accept the situation. Their full strength had proven insufficient, and they had permission

to retreat, so retreat they would. They would have fought to their dying breath if they'd been all that was left to fend off Emelia's imminent doom, but there was no need to go that far under the circumstances. There were even more powerful assets waiting in the wings, ready to take over for them.

Two Libertadores replied from their respective windows.

"Leave it to us."

"We got it!"

The embodiments of the heights that human strength could reach were about to face off against the Church's ultimate secret weapon.

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"No, that can't be!"

The sight of four mere humans completely neutralizing a bombardment of the missiles that he had such faith in shook Gregorio IX more than losing contact with his Templar Knights had. What was unfolding before him simply should not have been happening. Having climbed to the position of pope, he was privy to a fragment of the truth of the world and enacted the will of those who effectively still controlled all of human society. Put in a grander way, he was the exacter of divine will on earth. As such, it was *his* place to make others stare in shock. Him being the one doing so was plain wrong.

This was what should have happened instead: The foolish masses, having no way to protect themselves from the rain of flame arrows, should have run about in terror, learned that the measly strength that they were so thoroughly convinced came from God was nothing before the power of the Old Rulers, then died in regret and despair. The garbage who managed to survive, not by the grace of God but the mercy shown by Gregorio IX, should then have offered their absolute obedience through faith, and revered and worshipped him as the Pope of Resurgence until the end of time.

To render him flabbergasted was impudent in the extreme. It would have been one thing if the transgressors had been the Wayside God and the All Dragon, but these were just riffraff who

had been of piddling significance less than a month ago. As if that wasn't enough, they then went on to reduce the tanks and missile launchers produced by the Church into scrap metal using water, wind, and earth spells that were clearly archmage tier. It took no time at all for the armored weapons that should have obliterated the ranks of the apostates to be wiped out along with the troops who had also advanced when the Istekarian soldiers made way.

The armies perched on the surrounding hills had seen everything from start to finish. Needless to say, they were extremely shaken as well. Thinking about it now, the Emelian force had purposely abandoned common military strategy to assume the lower elevation to make this a display, shrewd bastards that they were.

"Those accursed apostates are not getting away with this! Damn heretics! It is the highest blasphemy to humiliate me—to humiliate God! I shall bring down true divine might on these fools and teach them a lesson myself!"

Gregorio IX had so confidently declared annihilation on his enemies, but it was his forces that had ended up being annihilated. The way he saw it, the Oratorio Tangram was the biggest production of his lifetime and someone had just trashed his stage. That said, though he was indeed so angry that his face had turned red, the setback was presently still something he could gripe and scream about. As he had said—in a voice loud enough for those around to hear—the development that he had seen with his own eyes had not shaken his faith in his victory in the slightest. He had enough conceit to see himself as God and had access to power that could back it up.

With great effort, Gregorio IX suppressed his anger and calmly declared, "I will now perform a miracle to enact God's justice. All members of God's Army, including the Temple Knights, are to stand firm in their current formations. Anyone who moves might die. Make sure everyone gets the message."

After seeing the messengers take off at top speed, the pope assumed the proper stance for prayer as taught by the Church. It wasn't necessary but served as a useful cover for activating the control mechanism for a lost weapon that the Old Rulers had given him and only him authority to use.

The control mechanism, which was embedded in his head but looked like a crown of thorns, suddenly started emanating a brilliant light. The light took shape as thirteen small rings linked up to form an angelic halo that floated above his head. Multilayered three-dimensional magic formations sprang up around him and formed an orb of light that obscured his misshapen overweight form and floated up a little.

As if emulating the halo on his head, thirteen gigantic rings of light appeared in the sky, then spherical magic formations were then drawn under them. Angel's ladders descended toward each ring, and from the light emerged colossal angels armed with swords and shields. Even Gregorio IX had no idea how all this worked. All he knew was that upon receiving permission from the Old Rulers, the sitting pope was able to command these autonomous weapons to crush enemies as he pleased. Like the rings, there were thirteen of them.

These man-made angels were incomparable to the succubus that the Wayside God had defeated. Operating at full power, one of them was enough to go toe-to-toe with a taboo territory boss. Gregorio IX had absolute faith in them, which was why he still was convinced that he would win the Oratorio Tangram. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that had the Old Rulers willed it, these angels could have gotten rid of even the infamous Country Eater.

The instant the armies that were deployed on the hills witnessed these harbingers of death being summoned and looming over them in midair, they knew they had made the right choice not going against the Church. The flame arrows had terrified them, while the four Emelians had destroyed the tanks and missile launchers that fired them like breaking toys. But in turn, a single angel had wiped the floor with the Emelians. The soldiers' conclusion, therefore, seemed justified.

Gregorio IX laughed mockingly from within his orb at the four who seemed to have sneakily teleported away. There was no need to pay them any further attention, he reasoned, because the plan to obliterate the Emelian army and march straight to Magnamelia was back on. Their getting away now didn't change their eventual fate on

the gallows.

The angel from before shattered the last remaining slab of Absolutus like glass as if signaling the end for the now defenseless Emelian army, then brought its massive greatsword down on them.

By rights, that one strike should have finished everything. Now that his trump card was in play, Gregorio IX only saw the Emelians as a warm-up before facing the Wayside God and the All Dragon. It hadn't occurred to him for even a brief moment that they would put up any resistance against the man-made angels.

And yet, the angel's colossal white sword was met by a sword of light that appeared out of nowhere, cleaving upward. When they met, the latter sliced clean through the former. The detached white blade spun through the air with a whistling sound until it plunged into the earth.

The sword of light was actually Reen's sword with its output cranked to the max. What the adventurers of Garlaige had come to fondly call Butter Knife could now, thanks to Reen's abundant reserves of inner mana, be pushed beyond its limits to bisect an angel's sword of judgment, quite like a knife through butter.

Reen attempted to follow through and slashed at the angel directly, but a giant magic formation over its shield deflected the blow. "Sol! Our usual gear isn't gonna cut it after all!"

"We can win one-on-one," Frederica added, "but it will be tough facing all thirteen of them with only the two of us while protecting the Emelian army."

After teleporting to the front line to replace Ethelweld's group, Reen and Frederica were still in contact with Sol and Luna, who were back at command, through Player's windows. Their getup looked very typical of a shield-bearing and a pugilist adventurer, but as one could tell from Reen's attack, everything on their persons, from Reen's sword, shield, and armor to Frederica's large gauntlets and martial artist's robe, were armis magicka of the highest quality. With this loadout and their current levels, they could each reach the end of a dungeon of fifty floors or less on their own.

Despite how the adventurers of this age were so hung up on being Rank A or Rank S, not a single one had ever cleared a double-

digit floor. In light of that, it was no exaggeration to call Reen and Frederica the strongest humanity had to offer. And yet, despite having their levels raised so high that they were now called "Libertadores" due to all the fights they had accompanied Sol on, and the fact that they were decked out in such impressive gear, the two realized they were at a disadvantage when facing all thirteen man-made angels. There was no way that something so enormous had been given the ability to float in the air but was only equipped with a sword and a shield. Although Frederica could probably hit harder than them, the fact that they had just shrugged off the biggest attack Reen could pull off in her current getup supported her call.

And yet, the two were not bluffing when they said they could defeat such opponents one-on-one in their normal gear. This went to show just how incredible they had become.

"I *could* have Luna or King Ethelweld protect the army, but I think it'd be better to have you two take care of the angels yourselves. All right, it's time to debut the Numbers," Sol announced.

Since he agreed with their assessment, they no longer had to hold off on using the aces up their sleeves, which they had spent so much effort preparing. Given how big and impressive their opponents were, the sight of them being slapped down not by the All Dragon but by two young girls was going to be that much more impactful. Then again, whether they could be viewed as merely "two young girls" at this point was questionable.

"Sure thing!"

"Understood!"

Their eager replies were promptly followed by them starting the transition into their most powerful forms. When they said their first keywords out loud, their bodies were enveloped by a vortex of magical light, and everything they were wearing, except their foundation suits, was stored in another dimension. They were high up in the air and quite far from each other, so there was no one to hear what keywords they had used—with the exception of Sol, who was still connected to them through the windows. That made him the only person who knew what they had changed the default of

“store” to. But based on how much they had leaned into their choices, it was clear how excited they were about getting to transform like magical girls.

Next, when the girls spoke their second keyword—the default had been “summon”—brilliant magical light drew beautiful outlines behind their backs. Reen’s was nine blue rings lined up slightly off-axis to each other, whereas Frederica had a snow-white ring of light surrounded by an outer ring of the same color but split into five fragments. The colors then seemed to transfer to the suits that had looked like mere black body paint—first to their central area, then spreading to the rest of the suit in polygonal sections.

Right after that, nier organa that looked like head accessories appeared in a flash of light and began sucking in the thin outer mana in the atmosphere. The mana was converted into the girls’ colors along with their magical signatures and primed for their use. Reen’s nier organa was a hair ornament that she wore on her left side, while Frederica’s was the tiara she always wore, but in mechanical form. At the same time, the outlines behind them shrank and moved to their heads, assuming positions that made them look like angel’s halos.

Powered by the converted outer mana and the inner mana produced within each girl, thin layers of armor appeared and were deployed in quick succession over their arms and legs, forming the base that would allow them to control the massive parts still in storage. This was followed by the processing units for their main weapons. More and more parts surrounded them, their enormous weight offset by floating magic, joining together tightly as if to protect the girls’ slender forms. Lastly, nine mechanical shields and two mechanical arms completed each girl’s ensemble, fully transforming them from mere adventurers into anachronistic figures out of place in this age.

Reen’s Numbers armament, Number Nine: Type Kuzuryuu, had the same deep-blue color of her foundation suit as a base and white armor highlighted with glowing lines in the shade of her usual orange gear. It looked every inch a tank’s equipment.

Frederica’s Number Five: Type Hecatoncheires also had the color

of her foundation suit as a base, with the white accentuated with blue and gold at key points. Despite being armor, it also amplified her presence as a royal.

Both suits were a far cry from the common images of shield, armor, and gauntlet armis magicka. A more apt way to describe them would be "magical miracles in the form of power suits."

When it came to armis magicka, older was considered better, and the man-made angels had presumably been made during the age of the gods. But now, they were facing brand-new weapons made with parts harvested from the unique bosses that had reigned over territories deemed taboo for centuries.

Unfortunately, as monster regalia that bordered on being god regalia, the Numbers required staggering amounts of mana. Unlike during Era Gran Magicka, there simply wasn't enough outer mana in the air to keep them running indefinitely. Reen and Frederica could not produce enough inner mana to meet the demand either, despite having reached levels in the higher triple digits.

As a stopgap measure, Sol could add to the suits' operation time by charging up the large magic stones that served as their cores. Since MP Recovery only worked on living people—and this was indeed what he used to refill Reen's and Frederica's inner mana—he could only do so with Magicka Fonz, which had a cooldown timer of a day. In conclusion, the Numbers were extremely powerful but could only be used for short engagements.

Knowing that not a second was to be wasted, the very moment that Reen and Frederica deployed their Numbers, they also activated Thought Acceleration, a unique skill granted by Player that enabled them to think ten times faster than normal. While a normal person would feel like they were moving about submerged in molasses, the girls' bodies could keep up with their accelerated thoughts because their levels were a stone's throw away from the quadruple digits.

One problem with being in this state was that words spoken out loud sounded like unintelligible noises to those around them. This, too, had a solution thanks to Player, which allowed companions to use telepathy with each other—though every once in a while, Reen would forget to use it and hit people around her with supersonic

sounds from her mouth.

As their surroundings seemed to slow to one-tenth of normal speed, Frederica reached out to Reen to decide on their strategy. “Lady Reen, may I entrust you with protecting our soldiers?”

Though Frederica wasn’t a tank like Reen, she could easily deflect blows or avoid them. It would be harder against a superior enemy, but that wasn’t the case here.

“I’m pretty sure my shields can withstand the angels’ attacks, but to be honest, I’m a bit worried about the seven-to-thirteen odds.”

The shields of Number Nine: Type Kuzuryuu had successfully blocked an orbital strike. There was little doubt they could block the angels’ attacks. They probably also possessed ways to attack multiple targets simultaneously, but such moves could be thwarted at the source. That said, although the angels were moving slowly, their number was nearly double the number of shields Reen had. She was worried that if they coordinated well enough, they just might get something past her.

A tank misreading the situation or taking on more than they could handle put both themselves and their allies at risk. During her Black Tiger days, Reen had been constantly racked by the fear that Sol would die if she failed to do a perfect job. This feeling had alleviated somewhat, but what she was now facing could kill hundreds, if not thousands, of Emelian soldiers. It was understandable that she didn’t want to leave anything to chance.

“Lord Sol?” Frederica asked.

“I’m fine with whatever you two think is best. Go nuts.” Sol had no trouble participating in their conversation, as he was still connected through the windows and had also activated Thought Acceleration. He had heard what Reen said earlier, so he also understood right away that Frederica was asking him for permission to use her Numbers armament’s trump card right off the bat.

“In that case, Lady Reen, I will lower their numbers to where you can easily deal with them. Would one fewer than your defensive shields do?”

“I’ll do my best!”

Number Five had been created from the body of the territory

boss Hecatoncheires. True to its name, it had had a hundred arms, each of which had been turned into a giant mechanical arm that could mimic Frederica's movements. In other words, besides the two at her side at the moment, there were ninety-eight more still in dimensional storage, ready to appear when any moves she used called for them.

The greatest attack in Frederica's repertoire and her last resort was to use those arms as warheads. Needless to say, an arm used as a warhead wouldn't be coming back. The number of times she used this move equaled the number of arms she would be losing, and the armament as a whole would lose that much viability. To put it in extreme terms, if she fired a hundred warheads, Number Five: Type Hecatoncheires would lose its quintessence. In exchange for an attack of commensurable destructive power, of course.

Following the prompts that showed up on her screen, Frederica said out loud, "Summon additional arms. Number: six. After summoning, immediately transform into 'pair annihilation' warheads." She had the option to go through the activation sequence entirely in her head, but due to the heavy consequences, she had locked it to voice-only to avoid accidents.

Sol, Luna, and Reen understood Frederica just fine, but anyone else would have only heard a burst of high-pitched sounds. This ability to convey a large amount of information in a short span of time was also extremely useful for high-tier spells that required a long incantation. Most mages would drool if they learned there was a way to both quicken their thoughts and acquire the physical ability to keep up with that speed.

Six arms appeared with bursts of light around Frederica. Unlike the two at her side, these showed up in horizontal positions and promptly began changing shape. The actual process was quite fast, but Frederica and the others could see it clearly in their state. Even so, the warheads were primed and readied in what felt like thirty seconds to them.

"Completion confirmed. Activate multi-lock on. Set targets for each warhead. Set pair annihilation range."

When reticles appeared in Frederica's sight, she placed them on

six different angels, starting with those on the outermost edges and working inward. At the same time, she set each warhead's effective range as a sphere.

"Safety off. Usage of pair annihilation warheads approved."

The reticles and the blinking indicators on the warheads turned from red to green.

"All warheads commence tracing."

Frederica's gauntlets—not the giant mechanical pair, but the one with beautiful detailing covering her delicate and shapely fists—lit up with six lights. Along with the two that had been there from the start, that made eight in total.

"Completed."

Now, a total of eight giant arms were synchronized with the movements of her own arms. Six of them no longer looked like arms, having been transformed into warheads. Each had already been told which enemy to target and was just waiting to be launched. Frederica checked one last time that they were ready, then lowered her hips like a true pugilist winding up for an attack.

Normally, one would expect the warheads to be able to fly toward their targets on their own propulsion, like the missiles that Absolutus had blocked earlier. Also, since there was a targeting system, they would fly at high speed to close the distance, either automatically figuring out their path, chasing a heat signature, or perhaps being externally guided. However, the targets in this case were angels. Though they were man-made, there was a chance they couldn't be reached through normal means, considering that they were in the image of God's apostles. Automatic tracking could be foiled, and the more time there was between a warhead being fired and it reaching its target, the higher the chance that it would be dodged or intercepted.

Of course, the ultimate move of Number Five: Type Hecatoncheires, being an armament tailored for a pugilist, was not a simple flying projectile. What made the Numbers armaments so incredible was that they bolstered their wearers' skills.

The words "Attack Ready" flashed in blue in Frederica's vision. When she saw them, she used Entangled True Strike, a skill from the

Pugilist talent she had received from Sol, which wasn't particularly high-tier—relatively speaking, of course, as it came in the latter half of the double-digit levels. What "True Strike" did was ensure that an attack from the user landed on a target in view exactly as intended, regardless of distance. "Entangled" was an enhancement that enabled multiple casts of True Strike to be used simultaneously. Effectively an upgrade to the lower-leveled Distant Target by ensuring that the attack would land and could be used in parallel, Entangled True Strike was obtained in the late double digits because of its high versatility.

"Hah!"

Despite the somewhat silly cry, Frederica's exhalation and the punch she threw were far sharper than what one would expect from a princess who, up until recently, had never fought monsters, much less other people. What had enabled her to deliver such a masterful strike without any prior training was, of course, a skill associated with the Pugilist talent. Even without her gear, that one attack was more than enough to kill any run-of-the-mill adventurer or soldier, and a good number of monsters besides. And in this case, Number Five not only traced her moves, but amplified them too.

The arms closest to Frederica on either side perfectly reproduced her beautiful punch, with the right arm producing a supersonic boom. But that was it. The six that she had just synchronized with were different, though. The instant she threw her fist, they landed on the six man-made angels that they had been set to target. Since Entangled True Strike was in effect, they could not be evaded or defended against.

High-pitched metallic screeches split the air as pair annihilation spaces—put simply, black holes—expanded to a predetermined size and swallowed up the angels in the blink of an eye. Spherical magic formations appeared around these spaces to prevent them from expanding any further. A deep, pounding sound reverberated until both the magic formations and the black holes faded away.

The soldiers on the ground—both allies and enemies—were all looking up in a slack-jawed daze. Their reaction was all too understandable, as they had just witnessed colossal, seemingly

undefeatable humanoid weapons lose nearly half their number in an instant.

Since all the man-made angels were under Gregorio IX's direct control, their sensations were linked to his. In other words, the pain of instantaneous erasure from six different sources had flooded his mind all at once. Within his floating orb of light, the pope was convulsing furiously, unable to even scream. The sensation of dying, compounded six times, was too much for a human who had not undergone special alterations. Normally, when one died, one stopped feeling pain. However, Gregorio IX was feeling everything with no reprieve, therefore experiencing a contradiction that should have been impossible for any living being. No matter how much pain coursed through his mind, his physical body remained unharmed. He was feeling such agony that he could have died...yet he didn't.

There would have been no problem if he had been unilaterally doing the attacking and the resistance he received was so paltry as to be ignored entirely. Against an equal opponent—or a superior one—however, linking to all thirteen angels was suicide. And now that his mind was destroyed and he could do nothing other than roll around and froth at the mouth, manipulating the remaining seven angels was of course beyond him. In fact, he would probably never regain his sanity again.

However, since there was no way to see inside the orb of light that Gregorio IX was in, the Emelians still felt a touch of unease, and God's Army still held a sliver of hope. The attack that had swallowed up six angels at once was indeed devastating, and the black holes had looked exactly like what an enemy of God would unleash. The remaining seven angels and the seventy thousand members of God's Army would stand less of a chance against them than an ant did when being crushed underfoot. However, if the attacks could be fired any number of times, all thirteen angels should have been destroyed. Even if only six could be fired at once, it stood to reason that another volley should follow. Since neither of those things had happened, the Emelians worried while God's Army hoped that the attack had a limit of six shots. In the best or perhaps worst-case scenario, there might have been a long cooldown involved, during

which time the remaining seven angels could proceed to stomp the Emelian army as intended.

Neither side could have imagined that Frederica had intentionally limited the usage of her ultimate move to lower the number of angels to what Reen could confidently handle so that the two of them could put on a performance showing humans bringing down angels.

As if realizing both sides' predictions, no black holes appeared again and the seven remaining man-made angels resumed moving. The Emelian army cried out in consternation as God's Army cheered with relief. Even though Gregorio IX was out of commission, the angels were advanced enough to take autonomous action in the presence of enemy combatants.

When flashes of light with homing capabilities burst from their wings, however, seven shields greatly enlarged with magical light appeared right in their faces, absorbing and neutralizing all their attacks. This was the result of Reen giving it her all now that she could keep one shield for each angel. Furthermore, the two shield cannons floating at her side converted the energy from the angels' attacks and fired them back as extremely thick rotating lasers that seared the very air they passed through. The lasers punched through the barriers protecting the angels several times with the sound and visual effect of shattering glass but failed to penetrate the angels themselves.



"Guess it was too much to hope that they could be taken down with their own attacks," said Reen telepathically, sounding disappointed.

"Still, almost all their barriers are gone. Your Number Nine really is the greatest of all the Numbers armaments, Lady Reen," said Frederica, speaking from the heart more than merely consoling her friend.

It wasn't as if Frederica were dissatisfied with Number Five, which was the perfect companion for a Pugilist, the talent that she had told Sol she wanted. However, the ability to absorb all attacks and then shoot them back made Number Nine a standout among the series.

Just as people could easily die to their own swords and magic, monsters and weapons had no hope of victory against an opponent that could take their attacks and send them back even more powerful than before. Being impervious to one's own attacks was perhaps possible in video games but not in real life. The angels were already checkmated from the beginning since they had no way to get past Reen's shields.

"She really does live up to her alias of Iron Wall," Sol marveled. "The sense of security that the party feels when the tank's in control is something else."

"Oh, I totally get that," Julia agreed.

Through the windows, the two earnestly conveyed their shared appreciation for having a true iron wall in battle. Coming from the former shot-caller and healer of Black Tiger, two people who had stood behind Reen's back for years in dungeons and out in the wilds, their words carried extra weight.

"Awww, shucks, you guys..." Reen, who had once felt her limit as a tank and considered retiring, was overjoyed to hear such high praise from the person she most wanted to protect.

"I suppose I should now earn myself some praise by going on the attack!" cried Frederica, psyching herself up.

Though Sol's Black Tiger days were over, the newest attacker to join his party had the same duty as attackers in any other party: to lighten the load on the tank by dispatching the enemy as quickly as

possible. Frederica wanted to impress Sol as first princess of Emelia, as one of his close companions, and above all, as a girl in love. The effectiveness of a girl gaining her way to a boy's heart by showing off the power of her fist could be debated, but it would perhaps be most innocuous to note that the thought patterns and concerns that belonged to the fictional character Fist Princess Angelica were now slowly but surely becoming those of the real-life Fist Princess Frederica too.

With Entangled True Strike activated again, Frederica locked on to each angel thirteen times. The total, 91, was slightly lower than a tenth of 1056, the maximum number of targets she could set at the moment. This number, which included the two arms that she was still using, included all the ones she had at her disposal, including those still in dimensional storage, minus three. She then bent forward and with a *Hah!* began punching down repeatedly as fast as she could. Despite how adorable her cry was—it wasn't her natural cry, but an imitation of Fist Princess Angelica—the effects of the attack were devastating.

Unlike the first time, the two arms at her side disappeared too, then reappeared with the other eighty-nine and, in concert with her own movements, rained down on the angels as they futilely tried to assume defensive stances. At first, the high-pitched sound of a few remaining barriers being shattered rang out, but that didn't last long. Soon, the thunderous peals of the angels being turned into punching bags by giant arms filled the air. The power of each strike beggared imagination, as they all created explosive crashes the likes of which no one had heard before and then further generated sonic booms.

In no time at all, the colossal giants that had been hovering in the air came crashing down, resulting in one final, earsplitting clangor. It was as if an earthquake were happening out of the blue. So violent was the heaving and so terrible was the resulting shock wave that there were a not insignificant number of casualties from the Temple Knights and Istekarian soldiers near the very front of God's Army despite them being some distance away. Banners of the Church and the various nations were knocked down, horses and men were sent flying, and pandemonium ensued.

In contrast, the Emelian army remained unaffected even though it was closer to the action. Reen had lined up all seven defensive shields and maximized their output to create a perfect dome around all ten thousand men. Even she couldn't do anything about the shaking of the ground, but the shock waves and flying debris didn't touch a single hair on anyone's head.

And yet, those who had died just now—or had been at least robbed of their ability to comprehend what was happening—had been the most fortunate souls of God's Army.

"No, that can't be! No, it can't! It can't be!"

"AaaAAAhhHH, the great angels... Are they angels? *That?*"

Those who had retained enough of their faculties were exposed to a terrible truth. Frederica's barrage of strikes had destroyed the angels' beautifully sculpted masks, revealing their true faces. The way they were half buried in the ground, their limbs all askance like broken puppets, was indeed bizarre, but not enough to shake the faith of pious believers. Of course, they would be rattled seeing what were supposed to be avatars of God's might losing, but the fear that this generated was for their own lives and for God being defeated, which was fundamentally different from consternation that challenged their very faith. It would still have been better if the man-made angels had turned out to be machines. Instead, the forms that had been cast down and were undoubtedly dead were clearly human. Not particularly attractive or hideous, just plain old humans like those one might see walking the streets. Like one's own neighbors, but enlarged.

For some reason, a familiar thing being much larger than normal was unsettling just because of its size. And people processed that emotion as fear. That these were humans and not monsters or animals further evoked an instinctive sense of wrongness and disgust that welled up from the very depths of the soldiers' souls. No one had feared the angels—at least, not in this way—before despite their humanoid form precisely because they had been wearing the aloof and expressionless masks of angels. Now that it was revealed that they were normal people within, just made larger, the idea of offering them worship and reverence seemed perverse.

To make matters worse, the everyday faces of the angels had been turned into those of corpses that had been beaten to death. Though new to large-scale battles, the Temple Knights and Istekarian soldiers had been on more than a few battlefields and seen their fair share of those they knew being eaten by monsters. Normally, a head disfigured by a blunt weapon with its eyeballs falling out or a corpse with all four limbs twisted every which way wouldn't have fazed them. But the overwhelming normality and the size of those who were revealed to be inside what had been touted as the Church's incredible lost technology sapped their sanity.

If the man-made angels didn't get back up, the power that had killed them would be turned toward God's Army next. If they *did* get back up, looking like bizarre corpses the way they did, that in itself would become a nightmare for those who believed in God.

When the final angel breathed its last, the orb of light surrounding Gregorio IX disappeared, spilling its contents with a viscous, watery sound. This mush was the blood, flesh, bones, and organs that had once been the pope. As a result of feeling every blow that had shattered the angels' pristine white armor and smashed them to the ground like colossal objets d'art, Gregorio IX's body had lost all semblance of its original form, much like a human body that had been relentlessly pounded by a giant mortar and pestle.

The nearby high-ranking clergymen and Temple Knights didn't scream. They simply stared, their twitching faces dyed with insanity.

"What...is going to happen to us? What will be done to us?"

"We'll be squashed like bugs. It's too late to even run."

The Temple Knights and Istekarians at the very front had stopped thinking altogether. They despaired, because they knew that Emelia had no obligation to show them mercy. Any idiot could see what fate awaited them simply by recalling what they had been planning on doing to Emelia back when they'd thought they would win.

"Don't move! Don't take even a step. Lower our country's banners. The divine banners...can be left up. Get on your knees and bow your heads. Whatever you do, do not run!"

The soldiers of the Panhuman League armies that had merely

shown up and stayed back all this time spontaneously got on their knees even before their commanders screamed at them to do so. There was no outrunning an enemy that could fly. All they could do now was cling to the fact that they were in a better position than the Church and Istekario and, while sweating bullets, beg for mercy from beings they could never touch in a million years.

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As the battlefield abruptly quieted down, with the Temple Knights and Istekarians despairing and the soldiers of other countries holding their breath and praying for forgiveness, a gigantic display window appeared in the sky. Everyone reflexively looked up at it and found it showing the solemn face of a certain clergyman.

"Can you hear me, beloved children of God?" asked Ishli Duress, cardinal of the archdiocese of Garlaige.

The man whom the Church had tried to kill along with the entire city of Garlaige before branding him an apostate without due process now spoke to the believers of the true God with love in his eyes and tone.

"All of you...have made a terrible mistake."

Ishli had a face that could only be described as repulsive if he'd made a vulgar expression, but putting deep compassion in his eyes and using a voice overflowing with sympathy made a drastic difference. Similarly, he had a fleshy and overweight body thanks to a life of extravagance and zero headway with dieting, but when he put on the red robes of a cardinal and held up a crozier, he looked every inch an envoy of God who had come to bestow forgiveness. Having a big build was an advantage at times. In this situation, the defeated armies saw him as a literal godsend.

However, when Ishli spoke, his distraught words were those of condemnation. Everyone reflexively hung their heads, thinking that mercy was too much to hope for after all.

"But our God is magnanimous. Grace will be given to those who repent. Lay down your swords, and your transgressions will be pursued no longer. You will be permitted to return to your homes."

After a split second of desolation before everyone's hearts sank into hopelessness, the words that the Temple Knights and Istekarians were hoping for most rang out sonorously. Ishli had thought that he had learned just how powerful Sol was over the past month. And yet, he had been absolutely floored when Reen and Frederica had steamrolled the Church's trump card without a single casualty all by themselves, and without Sol or Luna having to make an appearance. The choice that he had thought a gamble up until moments ago now filled him with indescribable glee, making it child's play for him to show true kindness to the vanquished. Like all other peddlers of religion, a sense of security from being on the side with the biggest stick in the room was not only necessary but a crucial key to his ability to emanate composure and benevolence.

"Is that true? Will we Istekarians be spared too?"

"With the night-and-day gap in strength, maybe it just doesn't make a difference whether we live or die?"

"I understand the League nations being forgiven. The Temple Knights too, I suppose. But what reason is there to not make an example of Istekario?"

"Like hell I know! Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, idiot!"

Commotion and joy started spreading among the defeated armies. Since they were being spared, they had nothing to complain about. However, their commanders and the Istekarians still harbored doubts. It made sense for the League nations. Their troops had been sent only to show deference to the Church's authority, and it would be cruel to kill soldiers who had simply stood there and done nothing. Moreover, when they returned home, they would vehemently help spread the word that Sol Rock and Emelia were never to be defied.

It was a bit of a stretch for the Temple Knights, but a case could be made. If Sol still needed the authority of God going forward, or if he really was someone who had been ordained by God, he wouldn't double down and massacre his brothers simply because he had won a fight. In fact, it seemed safe to say he wouldn't based on how the clergymen who had defected and joined Cardinal Ishli in Garlaige were being treated. Ishli, given his position, would want to make

those who would be serving him in the future indebted and might therefore have petitioned Sol for leniency.

For the Istekarian soldiers, however, a full pardon was far too merciful. The offer bordered on naivety. True, when all cards had been revealed, it had turned out that Istekario's forces were laughably outmatched, but the fact remained that the empire had plotted to ruin Emelia. Emelia no doubt knew this; its intelligence network was not incompetent. And since the Istekarians couldn't understand why they would be let off the hook, they were still bracing themselves.

That reason was going to become crystal clear to every last soldier of Istekario at a later date: Their emperor had offered his own life in exchange for his country. And no one would suspect that it was a charade cooked up by Sol and Fritz.

Even if, while on the verge of death, Fritz made a distinction between those who were to be saved and those who were not, the latter had no right to blame the former. In light of so many being spared, not a single person would remark on how none of the big shots who called themselves the pro-war faction had failed to come home. To those who survived, it didn't matter if it was Fritz or the Wayside God who brought judgment on the fools who had led Istekario into the Oratorio Tangram.

Now, however, all that the Istekarian soldiers could do was wrestle down their clamoring reason and, with hearts slightly quickened by hope, lend their ears to Ishli's next words.

"Brothers and sisters, you are not the only ones who have erred. So, too, have I. It wasn't so long ago that I was so convinced that true righteousness lay in adhering to the old teachings that I condemned the Liberator as an apostate for unsealing taboo territories."

Upon confirming that everyone was listening intently, Ishli proceeded to co-opt the Church according to the script he had been given. His biggest goal had always been to become the pope. Though a puppet, depending on how he handled matters, he just might become the pope who left the biggest mark on the world in all of history. He didn't need more motivation than that.

"But as you yourselves have learned so poignantly, God has bestowed on us, his beloved children, the power to recreate Era Gran Magicka, that age of prosperity of a thousand years ago."

Though the delivery came across as a bit theatrical, people were easily moved when the logic being presented was the basis for why their lives would be saved. When Ishli pumped his right fist into the air and cheered, the soldiers naturally followed suit, overcome with emotion. His words carried that much more weight when backed by the power that had struck down the thirteen eerie angels that were still on the ground.

"It was God who granted the Liberator, Sol Rock, his power on the first day of his twelfth year. That is what I believe. I am therefore parting with the old teachings so that I can walk alongside him as part of a brand-new Holy Church. If anyone would join me, I will accept you no matter who you are."

On top of everything, Ishli was affirming the existence of God, declaring the establishment of a new Church, and proclaiming that he welcomed all like-minded individuals.

"Even so, the Liberator and the new Church will not repudiate the traditional Church. That is because we believe it surely has a reason for forcing humanity to suffer such hardship for a thousand years despite possessing such power. As a mere cardinal, I have no way of knowing what the Church's true intentions have been thus far."

Of course, consideration had to be shown to the old faction, and by no means were they to simply be painted as bad. Ishli wasn't being sarcastic. Sol and Frederica figured that there probably really was a reason humanity had been kept below a certain threshold of advancement and that finding it out was absolutely necessary. Sol had no intention of giving up his dream of clearing all dungeons and unsealing all territories, but he knew he might have to adapt his approach depending on what he discovered.

"I, on behalf of the New Holy Church, will work with the Liberator to free this world of the threat of monsters. At the same time, I acknowledge those who would seek that aforementioned reason as the True Holy Church and give you authority to use the Holy City of Adrateio as your base and release it to you."

There were always a certain number of radicals who went beyond mere piety. Those people would never bow to authority, preferring to martyr themselves for the sake of the dogma that they clung to. Most people called this fanaticism even though it seemed like true selflessness and unconditional devotion, because they instinctively could tell that, underneath everything, it was just a pretext to drag others into their self-destruction in God's name. If they did what they did without bothering anyone else, others would at least show them a measure of respect even if they struggled to understand them.

The problem was that, instead of Sol or his close companions, such people would target the powerless commoners living peaceful lives under his protection, calling them "traitors" and "apostates" and crowing about how they were carrying out divine punishment. Rather than letting them go unchecked and constantly keeping a lookout for radical action that they might take, Sol believed it would be more astute to give them the name of the "true" Church and supply them with funding and labor to immerse themselves in studying their teachings. Doing so would most certainly lower the number of those who went off the rails and, in turn, those who would attempt to benefit from instigating such radicals to extreme action.

Then, of course, there were the real clergymen who put service to the suffering and downtrodden, regardless of their righteousness, above all else. Those were easiest to handle. Sol planned on giving them his full support in every way, be they New or True. Reaching the masses through their faith was far more effective for seizing the hearts of the continent than enticing the head of each country. And in turn, the Churches would become a robust network reaching every corner of the land that he could tap into whenever he wanted.

If Ishli and his lackeys were to siphon away a fraction of the astronomical sums that would be involved, then so be it. They fully understood that someone who could deal true divine punishment walked among them and therefore would be shrewd enough not to go overboard.

Perhaps it wasn't some unattainable, noble pie in the sky based

on ideals, morals, or ethics that moved people as they were meant to, but tangible benefits that they could obtain. Humans liked to get on a high horse about how they were made in the likeness of God, but at the end of the day, they were but animals too.

"We are no longer enemies. We are fellow beloved children of God. Accordingly, we should join hands to create the paradise on earth that God wishes for and walk together toward the future."

Ishli was shaking with emotion, imagining how he would act like the most virtuous and high-minded pope in history and be remembered for generations to come. For their part, the Temple Knights and Istekarian soldiers, who had already been firm believers in a great age of expansion under the direction of a great authority, responded to his words with thunderous cheers.

This was a charade, but it was truly happening, and everybody would get to go home because of it. There was no reason not to play along. The Wayside God, the All Dragon, and the Emelians who stood with them had won a resounding victory. The Oratorio Tangram was over.

Or was it?

Chapter 5: God Regalia

"An actual God is needless. A paradise with no suffering is needless. In this world, humans are to simply be human."

The display window showing Ishli's face shattered in the blink of an eye as the dispassionate voice of the Old Rulers rang out, wholly repudiating the enthusiasm induced by the charade. The opening act was over, and the main act had come onto the stage.

A black dot appeared in the air. As the humans once again looked up in a daze, it expanded, spilling a torrent of black rays until it was large enough for a human to pass through. This was clearly something different from teleportation. It didn't only circumvent distance and time, it was a special phenomenon that connected this dimension to another.

Sure enough, a humanoid appeared from within, surrounded by ominous black crackling. Back when this figure had been human, his name had been Mark Ros. One of Sol's childhood friends and the former leader of Black Tiger, Mark had been consumed with envy over the position that Sol now held but which he himself had failed to obtain. His despair had been exploited to degrade him into a man-made Hero, and he was now all that remained of a pitiful Villager.

The Old Rulers had asked only one thing of the Holy Church: to buy enough time to complete Mark. And the Church had lived up to the task. Though Mark was a slapdash job, work on him had gone fast enough for him to be used now.

Since the Church had finished playing its part, the Old Rulers had no more need of it. They were now going to cull the human population to a mere fraction anyway and brainwash the thoroughly discombobulated survivors into believing a false account like they had done a thousand years ago. Being able to take out a hated enemy at the same time was just icing on the cake.

The black lightning flashing around Mark, as well as his nier organas—he had no wings but did have an enormous pair of horns and dragon eyes the color of dried blood—eloquently conveyed that he was no longer human. So drastic was his transformation that, in fact, no one he once knew would recognize him. Further equipped with several pieces of special-grade weapons from a different era, he now carried unbelievable battle power.

The price that he had been forced to pay, however, had been great. He was no longer capable of intelligent thought, and his lifespan had been compressed such that he had less than a hundred hours to live. He didn't know the latter but probably wouldn't have cared at this point even if he did. All that currently consumed him was an intense desire to kill Sol, fueled by amplified hatred.

After the procedure that had forcefully changed him into a Hero, Mark's originally handsome face now looked half-dragon and half-man. What was underneath still showed through enough to make him look tough in a masculine way, but the madness in his expression and his agitated mannerisms made everything creepy. Apparently, the more shapely the features, the more revulsion they induced when associated with aberrant behavior.

While floating effortlessly in the air, Mark looked around restlessly like a child, searching for Sol. "Where, where are you, Sol? I've become strong. Very, very strong. I don't need your power anymore. Where are you? I'll kill you. Hurry and show—" He spotted Frederica, and a smidgen of reason returned to his eyes. "Oh, hey, it's Her Highness."

Since Mark had appeared smack-dab in the middle of the battlefield, Frederica was closest, as she had just knocked down the man-made angels. Reen had fallen back to protect the Emelian army from the shock waves caused by her attacks.

"Are you...Mark Ros?" When Frederica met Mark's eyes, it took her all she had not to shudder. The two had never met in person, so she would have had a hard time recognizing him as one of Sol's childhood friends even had he retained his original appearance, though she knew of him.

Based on what he was saying, she figured he was the one who

still lived, but he looked so freakish that her statement naturally turned into a question. She couldn't laugh at him either for the garish amalgamation of man and dragon that he was—he cut a sharp contrast to Luna's human form—because his presence indicated that the enemy possessed a way to boost someone's strength far more effectively than what Sol had done for her in the past month.

I...stand no chance against him.

Frederica was one of only a handful who had reached the latter half of the triple-digit levels. It was because of this strength that she could tell that the jittery man floating before her was much more powerful than she was. When the difference in strength between two people exceeded a certain threshold, regardless of how much greater it got, the weaker person wouldn't be able to discern anything more than "Ah, he can kill me in the blink of an eye." Frederica was now afraid because, in spite of how much stronger she had gotten, she was feeling the same fathomless power from Mark that she felt from Luna.

Even so, she managed to keep a straight face.

"Y-Yes, Your Highness, I'm Mark Ros. I'm the one who-who was supposed to join the royal guards and catch your eye with my incredible achievements and become your prince consort one day, ha ha ha! We're still on if I kill Sol, right? Don't worry, I can still make it happen. Wait, but you... Why did you go and flirt with Sol when you're *my* woman, you whore?!"

Unable to remain cogent any longer, Mark started off being nervous, turned flippant halfway through, then suddenly became so enraged that spit came flying from his mouth. He was lit up with a cocktail of madness mixing reality with ambition, delusion, hope, despair, envy, aspiration, terror, and desire. Being drunk on it was the only way that he could keep going, crushed as he was by every negative emotion that existed.

"That's a rather terrible thing to say," said Frederica, trying to sound like her usual self despite being bathed in bloodlust from someone far stronger. "But then again, the most important role of a princess *is* to sell herself in a way that benefits her country most. So

I suppose the term ‘whore’ isn’t entirely inapt. But that is why I offer Lord Sol all of me and could never be your woman.”

Appearing weak here and now wasn’t an option. So Frederica chose to bite the bullet and further rile Mark up instead. What she was saying wasn’t wrong, anyway. Over the past month, she had carefully observed Sol while deepening her relationship with him. She knew that he didn’t entirely dislike ostensible kindness or flattery but wasn’t particularly fond of it. Instead, what made him happiest was when she, who always strove to be regal and graceful and beautiful, showed her real self and voiced pragmatism surpassing even that of her two brothers.

For all intents and purposes, Sol already had a harem going on. Reen was his conventional innocent childhood sweetheart. Luna, with her overwhelming strength, was his irreplaceable partner as well as pretend darling daughter. Julia was essentially his mistress, though neither she nor Sol had any intention of making it so. And Eliza was his “My Fair Lady” project.

Of course, princesses were a staple of harems too. It was a bad thing to have people covering the same roles in harems as much as in adventurer parties, so Frederica had decided to stick with a profile that actually rather suited her: the publicly perfect princess who had a shrewd side that put tangible benefits above all else. And her efforts had indeed made headway in the past month. That was why she had replied this way. She would have been able to say the exact same thing without hesitation even if she had never met Sol.

Unfortunately, things had gotten a bit more complicated. Sol was so dense that he wouldn’t get it, but it was getting harder and harder for Frederica to stay next to him, an absolute authority figure who didn’t throw his weight around, purely for pragmatic reasons. She was developing feelings, and there wasn’t much she could do about it. She was a princess and a high-minded person, but also just a girl. The way she sometimes let that disparity show made Reen and Eliza see her as a challenging rival, but she didn’t evaluate herself that highly.

“I’ll kill you! You! Die!”

Of course, Mark had no way of knowing the truth of how things

were and wouldn't have cared regardless. The anger of being looked down on by the girl he had adored was converted straight into hostility, and he instantly closed the distance to her, unleashing a rage-fueled strike that she had no way to deal with.

With a resounding boom, the attack was deflected by another that came from below.

"Well said, princess. You live up to being a member of my lord's harem indeed." Luna stood in front of Mark, the blazing aura around her indicating that she was fully ready for battle.

Sol, who was naturally right behind Luna, laughed. "That was a very you thing to say, Frederica, but you're putting yourself in danger going that far. I do admit you looked very dashing, though."

That's... You... That's what I'm talking about!

This was exactly the same behavior that had made Fist Princess Angelica fall in love in the story. It was how, even though she had become strong in her own eyes and the eyes of everyone else, she was still being protected. It was how, even though she was no longer a normal girl, she was still being treated like one. Frederica dearly wished that Sol would understand that she was a girl too and that she would fall hopelessly in love with him if he kept on reenacting her favorite scenes like this.

Regardless of Frederica's internal conflict, the moment Mark laid eyes on Sol, he howled with a blend of madness, elation, and fear. "Sol! SOOOOOL!"

"What's this, 'boss'? Your vibe has changed completely in the short time I haven't seen you!"

Understanding that he was facing the main act, Sol was calm. He had always believed that there were those controlling this world from the shadows, and Mark was likely the best trump card they could bring out for now. In other words, he was the last obvious obstacle in Sol's way. Knowing that, Sol's expression wasn't pity for what his friend had become but a fierce grin of joy that he would soon have a straight shot to his dream.

After a thousand years, the Hero was going to face off with the All Dragon once again, just like in the Kuzuifabra. What was different this time, however, was that the former was a slapdash replica and

the latter still had her Augoeides—her real body—sealed away. And that Player, a power that could overturn the underlying principles of all fights, was involved.

"Sol! I'm strong now! I got strong! Stronger than you!"

"Uh, you've *always* been stronger than me." Sol sighed, as if adding, *Why point out the obvious again?*

By leveling up his companions, his own level had indeed reached a ridiculous number. When he mentally readied himself for a fight, he would blaze with magical light, and he could kill any adventurer and soldier who had yet to be involved with him in a split second, no matter what talent they held. If the Mark who had led Black Tiger were to come at him, he could swat him like a fly.

But Sol possessed no combat skills, offensive spells, or fighting moves, and he could not give himself an HP barrier or enlarge his own MP pool. He was basically just a guy who had a really high level. If someone sent him flying, all he could do was look up while traveling through the air. He could easily be hurt if someone caught him by surprise with a blade or a spell, as he wasn't protected by an HP barrier. Of course, it was nigh impossible for a normal human to land a proper hit on him if he was ready for it, but a careless mistake could just as easily give him a fatal wound.

Bearing all that in mind, Sol had no chance of beating Mark now that the other man had grown so much stronger than even Frederica. There was no reversal in positions to announce like it was something momentous. Even now, he was here simply because he had decided to be present for all fights that Luna participated in, but he was relying on her even just to float. It was because of how weak he was that Luna never left his side. She couldn't risk letting him encounter an enemy when she was away. Consequently, she stayed with him to eliminate everything that would pose a danger to him, and if they met an opponent who could best even the All Dragon, the pair would simply fall together. In this case, since they weren't facing just one enemy, she couldn't leave him behind either, even though he would get in the way of her fighting.

Sol figured that Mark was being so antagonistic because the Church had told him that Sol had killed Alan. However, Sol saw what

he had done as merely having eliminated a threat that had targeted him first. Getting flak for it from Mark didn't hurt him all that much.

When Alan asserted that Mark had been uninvolved, Sol had taken him at his word and left Mark alone, but that was then. Mark was now here to kill him, and that was a problem that had to be dealt with. Mark was solely responsible for all the choices he had made after Black Tiger broke up. Whatever Mark's feelings were, Sol had no intention of entertaining them now that things had come to a head.

Sol wouldn't feign ignorance and claim he wasn't in the wrong at all, but at the very least, he had never sought to kill Alan or Mark before they'd come after him. They were the ones who had come for him first, so he was simply protecting himself. If he and Luna were to lose to Mark now...well, that, too, was a fitting end for someone who sought to use strength to bend others to his will.

Apparently taking Sol's reply as resignation, Mark gave a twisted smile and shrieked, "I'll start by showing you despair!"

He couldn't let Sol simply die now that Sol had given up. No, first he had to make Sol watch as everything he held dear was trampled underfoot. This was the only way to make him pay for that day at the Adventurer's Guild when he had left Mark unable to do anything but force an awkward smile onto his face.

Thirteen rays of pitch-black light appeared around Mark and shot into the thirteen man-made angels lying on the ground. Right away, the thoroughly wrecked giant human remains got up, limbs still twisted and necks still broken, and floated back up into the air, this time with black wings and black halos. The sight of them rising into the sky while bleeding profusely and dropping organs, eyeballs, and torn-off limbs was a nightmare come to life.

Now that the man-made angels were filled with the Hero's power, they were once again a menace that those still watching open-mouthed on the ground had no recourse against. This was the same of both the troops dubbed God's Army and the Emelian army. Everyone was going to be killed, regardless of whether they were on Sol's side or not.

The deranged smile on Mark's face deepened as he was about to

give the order to attack, but the All Dragon scoffed and said, "Fool, what do you expect a bunch of oversized failed Hero experimental subjects to accomplish before me?"

Thirteen spears larger than the man-made angels manifested and impaled the angels from the head down, nailing them to the ground. Sound and searing wind ravaged the area as the spears plunged deep into the earth, bearing what now looked like indescribable figures from the bad dreams that plagued people in the delirium of high fever.

It was truly ironic that the All Dragon's response to Mark's attempt to kill the humans he thought Sol felt obliged to protect was to prove that such power was useless against her. Why? Because the result was the same. All that had happened was that instead of being massacred by undead angels, the humans had been swallowed up by the effects of the colossal spears being driven into the ground. Of course, King Ethelweld had cast Absolutus to protect his people, and Reen had used her seven shields to protect the command center of the Istekarian army where Fritz was. Even so, this one exchange had caused the biggest number of deaths by far since the start of the Oratorio Tangram. The people caught up in this reproduction of the final battle from the Kuzuifabra had died just for being there without having been personally targeted, like ants who had the misfortune to be in the middle of a territorial struggle between dinosaurs.

The shock of seeing the pawns he had reanimated to dispense despair being taken out in an instant froze the smile on Mark's face, but then he jabbed a finger at Luna. "I-I know about you, All Dragon! No, Lunvemt Nachtfelia, *Evil* Dragon! Your Augoeides is still bound; you're just a fragment now!" Though a rushed job, he still was a Hero, and the Old Ones had imprinted the bare minimum of knowledge they thought he would need into his head.

Luna brushed his bravado aside. "And you're a cheap imitation. You won't get the better of me, fragment or not."

The All Dragon had known the original Hero. Unlike the hastily finished second generation, the real Hero had been born and raised to be one, grown up properly through a life of adventuring suitable

for her role, and met all the necessary conditions before becoming the Hero that the Old Rulers had wanted of her own will.

Having lost to her and consequently spent a thousand years in a living hell, it could be said that the All Dragon knew the Hero better than anyone else. That included how strong she truly had been and what had given her that strength. In comparison, the second generation had merely been reshaped to fit the mold and given the same specs. Luna knew beyond a doubt that she could wipe the floor with him even as she was now. A Hero without substance was no threat to a dragon.

Mark, however, could not help but protest the denial of the source of his current confidence. "No! I'm the real deal! And I'm better than the original! I'm the product of a millennium of evolution!"

It was his conviction that he was the second-generation Hero that had enabled him to appear before Sol to kill him. He could never have done so otherwise, not with all the fear coursing through his veins. The belief that he was the new and improved version of the Hero who had bound the Evil Dragon and saved the world a thousand years ago was the only thing keeping him together.

Luna replied, with a touch of self-deprecation, "The passage of time does not always lead to improvement, fake."

A thousand years had passed for her too, but never mind getting stronger, she had fallen into madness and lost sight of herself, ultimately ending up a husk of her past self. The thought of what would have happened had Sol not saved her made it hard for her to laugh at Mark.

Like a child, Mark whined, "Shut up! Shut up!"

"You're the one being noisy."

Luna closed in on him and kicked up with all her strength. Unsurprisingly, that alone wasn't enough to finish off a man-made Hero. Mark did get sent flying with an incredible bang and disappeared into a tiny dot in the sky, though, punching a hole through the clouds he passed. With Sol in tow, Luna gave chase using Teleport to hit him again and again. He sprayed blood and gastric juices everywhere as his body filled the sky with contrails and sonic booms, further stunning those watching from below.

“Got any more tricks up your sleeve?” Luna asked mockingly. “If not, I’ll just end this.” The truth was that she could have erased Mark the moment they first made contact. She was basically telling him that she was waiting for him to play his damn trump card already.

“Youuuuu! Fine! Let’s see if you can keep a straight face seeing this, Evil Dragon! This is what beat your Augoeides a thousand years ago when you were the All Dragon minus one!”

No more goading was needed. Mark promptly cast several gigantic magic formations. Even without being provoked, the drubbing he had just received had got it through his addled mind that he couldn’t beat the All Dragon’s fragment as he was. His only recourse was to go all out.

“I’m *telling* you to get it out already, sprat. I have to become the true All Dragon for my lord’s sake. Hurry. I’ll be the mackerel that eats you.”

It would be child’s play for Luna to devour Mark now, as he was still busy setting up magic formations while expressing his fighting spirit through passionate cries. What she actually wanted, however, was for him to summon that which made a Hero truly powerful. She could defeat it now, despite being a fragment.

Mark’s appearance had been accompanied by a black portal hundreds of times larger than his own. And now, through the power of the giant magic circles placed around its perimeter, the being that Mark and Luna had alluded to with “All Dragon minus one” and “true All Dragon” appeared from within. Boasting the size of a castle—a *floating* castle—the being had command over the weather with dragon magic and a breath that could annihilate armies. Its scales were so tough that they could not be harmed by sword, arrow, or magic; before its fangs and claws, humans, beasts, and monsters were equal prey. Twisted, towering horns adorned its head, and an imposing pair of wings its back. Thanks to its four powerful limbs and long, muscular tail, it stood upright on its hind legs, revealing itself as the colossal form of a dragon.

This was a god regalia, the Old Rulers’ ace of aces. Created by forcibly infusing the power of the Wayside God into the only

Augoeides still in existence other than Luna's and decked out from snout to tail with all manner of lost technology, it was an invincible armor as much as an aberrant guardian deity. It could only be worn by a Hero, and indeed, it was this very power that had allowed the Hero of a thousand years ago to defeat the All Dragon and bury all other beings that threatened humankind, ensuring that other humans remained human despite her having sacrificed her own humanity.

It also was what Sol and Luna had wanted him to summon. Several display windows popped up around Mark, who was enveloped in a half-transparent orb floating before the god regalia's chest. Behind him appeared a depiction of Qlippoth, the Tree of Evil. At each of his four limbs was a spinning magic formation written with symbols, and above his head rotated an undulating halo. Several strands of light connected the top of the god regalia to the heavens, forming the pathway through which it could be controlled by its linker. For a control room, the linker was given a space outside protected by a powerful barrier as opposed to being taken inside because it was the most reasonable design, given that the regalia was made from the actual flesh-and-blood body of a dragon.

The whole process of the god regalia emerging from the portal and Mark linking up with it was so showy that Sol couldn't help but exclaim, "That. Is. So. Cool!"

Any boy's heart would quicken at bearing witness to such an illustrative embodiment of strength. Using the god regalia basically meant freely manipulating the body of a dragon, that pinnacle of all magical beings. No one could argue against calling it the most powerful armor ever. Add in all the lost technology that it was outfitted with, and it just seemed right to attribute the adjective "invincible" to it.

Assistance was offered to control the parts that human minds weren't used to—the dragon eyes, horns, wings, and tail—through the display windows before the linker. Very few people would balk at becoming a man-made Hero if told the role came with the ability to wield the power of a dragon at will...until they learned what it would cost, of course.

"Does that excite you too, my lord?" Luna asked, her eyes sparkling for some reason.

"It would any guy," Sol replied, then shrugged. "I'll give it a pass, though."

Visibly deflating, Luna said, "I...see."

The idea of controlling a dragon did indeed appeal to Sol. However, he had a realistic understanding of his role as Player. Personally participating in a fight would sap mental resources that he could be using to give orders and use his abilities. He should leave the fighting to those who specialized in it and maintain an overhead view, just like a player of a game. That was the way to get the most out of his forces as a whole.

If Sol wanted to use Luna as an extension of himself, there was no need to go so far as to commandeer her body—he simply had to do a good job instructing her and backing her up. Plus, she wasn't the only one he had to worry about now. He had countless allies whom he had to simultaneously monitor and control. The right way to be Player was to, well, be Player. That was what it meant to be something.

All that said, if the situation was right and it was a valid option, Sol very much wanted to try controlling a dragon.

Slightly amused by how obviously downcast Luna was, he asked curiously, "Why do you look so disappointed?"

"Well...a god regalia's real worth only shows when linker and dragon become one. If there is ever an opponent that I can't defeat even with your instructions, linking up might give us the strength to surpass them."

Oh, that changes everything, Sol thought. "In that case, we'd be better off knowing how to do it. Let's practice when we get your Augoeides back."

If usage of god regalia was a last resort that could provide the strength to overcome an opponent who couldn't be defeated by numbers, even with Player in command, then it definitely was an ability that should be picked up. It could even be considered a priority after reclaiming Luna's body in the future.

"Yes, please!"

At the moment, Sol had no way of understanding the emotions behind Luna's dazzling smile. The process he had just watched, the process that had made him think, *So cool!* was but a pale imitation. What Luna had referred to when she said "become one" was a true union that involved actually taking him into her body. What she was feeling now, in a human context, was akin to having been told, "Let's have sex when you grow a little older!" It wasn't entirely Sol's fault that he didn't understand how Luna had taken his words, but after the way he had treated her true name, one could only hope that he didn't end up trampling over a dragon's innocence once again.

From Luna's perspective, with her offers of nightly service having been firmly rebuffed all this time, she had finally obtained the promise she had always coveted. Given that, she simply had to do something about how she called herself the All Dragon despite actually being "minus one." Joining with her master while being such an embarrassment was out of the question. Therefore, she was now charged with extra motivation to finally become the All Dragon in truth.

During Sol and Luna's happy-go-lucky exchange, the god regalia started moving.

"You haven't changed at all in a thousand years," Luna scoffed.

Upon finishing the linking process, the first thing that the god regalia did wasn't to attack Sol and the All Dragon, but to carpet bomb the land with bullets of light firing from all over its body. Its goal was to engulf the continent in flames and cull the human population to the verge of extinction.

However, Luna had seen it coming and was ready. It was in preparation for this that she had kicked the Hero high up and then encased him and herself together in a barrier. Blinding light filled this barrier, which measured several kilometers in diameter, when the bullets made contact, with the subsequent explosions shredding the cloud cover and forming a fireworks show reaching the stratosphere that was visible the entire continent over. For a long moment, it was as though a second sun had been created in the atmosphere.

And yet, not a single bullet of light made it through the All Dragon's barrier. Its durability came directly from her HP, which

meant she had just tanked a saturation attack intended to incinerate the whole continent.

"You okay?"

"It was hard casting Astral, my ultimate move, in this body at first. But that is no longer the case thanks to you, my lord."

Luna looked entirely fine, and according to Sol's display, her HP had gone down by less than ten percent. What he was asking, therefore, was whether she could defeat the god regalia while weathering every one of its attacks. It was going to be a handicapped slugfest where she alone was forbidden from dodging. Those conditions were part of why she had lost a thousand years ago.

Though the second-generation Hero was a rushed job and his god regalia was a husk without a soul, the All Dragon's Augoeides was bound. If her fragment had been just freed, she would doubtless have been erased without being able to lift a finger. She herself had told Sol at the time that her strength was only 0.1% that of her Augoeides. However, through the blessing of Player, her level was now in the quadruple digits. She had surpassed the strength she had wielded a thousand years ago in her real body. Moreover, Sol had given her every useful skill, technique, and spell he could, as well as every last point of HP and MP he had left over after maxing out his now hundreds-strong band of companions. As if that wasn't enough, now that his level was also in the quadruple digits, he could use Total MP Recovery and Cancel Cooldown, miracles that upset the whole underpinnings of battle, practically without limit within the course of a single fight.

In short, they were going to crush the god regalia. As long as Luna's HP wasn't wiped out in one blow, she could restore it as many times as needed with high-tier magic, thanks to having bottomless MP. Unless the god regalia could attack without respite, Luna's HP and MP would naturally recover even without Sol's help. And sure enough, her HP was already nearly back to full.

Once a dragon, with its massive organas constantly taking in outer mana and its extraordinary ability to generate inner mana, became Player's companion, the pair were nigh unstoppable. Neither

Sol nor Luna cared for drawing out a fight that they already had in the bag. They were going to finish the god regalia with a single blow that would do the job. The duo had mentally trained for this in secret again and again over the past month.

"As planned, I will use multiple casts of Astral."

"How many?"

"Ten, just in case."

"Sure thing."

After an exchange on the level of "How many cookies do you want with your tea?" Luna invoked Astral, the ultimate move available to her fragment body. Her MP plummeted, and a perfect copy of her Augoeides—better, even, as it had all its horns, eyes, and wings—formed entirely from mana appeared, towering just as tall as the god regalia.

Normally, this was when a timer would begin, with Luna racing against the clock to finish the fight before her rapidly decreasing MP bottomed out. Every skill and spell she fought with would also cost MP, making Astral a true do-or-die last resort. Using it was a double-edged sword that would leave her entirely defenseless should she run out of time.

With Player at her side, however, all those concerns became moot. After Luna cast Astral, Sol used Full MP Recovery and Cancel Cooldown on her. They repeated that ten times in quick succession, and in the blink of an eye, the god regalia was surrounded by ten Astrals linked to the petite form of Luna's fragment body. She was burning through an absurd amount of MP each second, but it wasn't a problem because Sol could just top it up again every once in a while.

One-on-one, the imperfect god regalia and an Astral would have had an even fight. The outcome of one against ten was plain as day. After Sol cast Full MP Recovery for the eleventh time, breath cannons burst from the mouths of all ten Astrals. The god regalia's barrier was shredded like cheese, and its giant form turned into a beehive. The final trump card of the Old Rulers had been completely quashed without having the opportunity to do a single thing.



“Huh? You can eat through your Astrals?” Sol asked.

Nine Astrals had disappeared, with the remaining one proceeding to devour the misshapen mass that the god regalia had been reduced to after being hit with ten breath cannons. Luna—her little-girl form—simply floated there with her arms crossed like she wasn’t doing anything, but it was entirely under her control that the Astral was working its way down from the god regalia’s head, adroitly avoiding the parts embedded with lost technology. Though made of mana, it looked just like the All Dragon’s Augoeides. The scene of it chewing its way through another Augoeides of equally humongous dimensions was very impactful indeed.

The pieces of lost technology that it occasionally spat out crashed down to the ground, raising booms that put into context just how massive the god regalia and the Astral were. Though the tech had had no time to demonstrate what it could do, the Adventurer’s Guild was going to retrieve it and use it to further human progress.

Luna tilted her head quizzically. “This body is just a projection too.”

“Oh, right. I’d forgotten.”

Luna was apparently still unused to controlling each body separately. When she answered, her Astral tilted its head too, but whether it looked cute or not was a toss-up in Sol’s mind. For him, the little girl before his eyes was the real Luna, and he couldn’t quite perceive the gigantic Augoeides with one eye, one horn, no wings, and suspended by chains that he had seen when using Summoning as “Luna.”

Realizing that Sol’s question was based on when he had last seen her devouring an opponent, she explained, “I did it that way that time to show the succubus more despair.”

Sol recoiled a little at the reminder of how merciless dragons could be to their enemies. “I...see.”

To be fair, it was a bit of a tall order for the diminutive form to entirely devour the god regalia. It was by using the Astral that she had already gone through two-thirds of it by now.

As Sol stared at the feeding with wonder, Mark spoke up. “Say, Sol...”

The way he was hanging motionless like a puppet with its strings cut had made Sol think that he was already dead, but it seemed he still had a sliver of breath in him. The madness that had been caused by his Hero transformation was gone thanks to most of his nier organas having been destroyed by the feedback of the god regalia getting hit by breath cannons. The dragon-like mask on his face was shattered, revealing his original face, covered in blood.

Though the god regalia was being devoured, perhaps its protection was still in effect. That seemed the only way to explain how Mark could still talk while bearing multiple wounds that would have killed any normal person.

Seeing no particular reason not to engage, Sol asked, "What is it?"

Mark was the one who had come back for Sol's life despite having been let go once. Sol had no intention of saving him after everything that had happened, but he wasn't against answering if his former childhood friend had a question.

"Why... Why did you kill Alan?"

"Because he tried to kill me first."

"Ah..."

The question that Mark had wanted to ask most had come back with the answer he'd least wanted to hear. He hadn't the faintest idea why Alan had been so far gone as trying to kill Sol. Of course, that was because he didn't know that Alan had been incited to do so by a succubus who had taken Fiona's place. What he did know, however, was Sol's personality. He knew that Sol was absolutely ruthless to all who revealed themselves to be his enemy, even if it was a childhood friend.

Mark could tell that Sol wasn't lying right now. If Sol had wanted to get revenge for being expelled from Black Tiger or had wanted to kill Alan from the start, he'd had plenty of opportunities when they'd run into each other at the Guild, and probably before too. Having obtained absolute strength through the All Dragon by then, he could have just as easily finished Alan off along with the group from Hecatoncheires. In other words, both Mark and Alan had, of their own volition, taken action to make Sol decide to kill them when he'd

had no intention of doing so in the first place.

"Why...didn't you tell us from the start? I'm sure we..."

It now made sense why Reen and Julia had immediately abandoned Black Tiger when Sol was fired. Mark knew that he should feel ashamed for not noticing it himself. However, he inadvertently blurted the complaint that things wouldn't have ended this way had Sol been up-front about everything.

"I determined that it was too risky. But I admit I went about things wrong."

"Ha ha...ha..."

Mark had to concede that Sol's concern was valid. Black Tiger had been far from invincible. If Sol's true abilities had gotten out from any of them, there was no telling what danger he might have been in, especially because he'd had yet to obtain the All Dragon at the time.

The words "You couldn't trust us?" couldn't get past Mark's lips. He had no right to ask that after choosing to fire Sol of his own free will. And it wasn't like Sol had secretly told Reen and Julia. The girls had figured it out themselves while Mark and Alan had been busy letting the power go to their heads. Framed differently, it could be said that Sol hadn't trusted Reen and Julia either.

Mark also found himself wondering what would have happened had Sol obtained Luna when younger and openly stood over the rest of them as the absolute authority who gave them powers. In that scenario, they would have felt inferior to him, but at least they wouldn't have died the wretched way they had.

There was no way for Mark to know that Sol had been naively clinging to the dream of becoming "super famous adventurers as a group of five" that they had discussed in their youth and therefore had held off on obtaining the All Dragon until the night after they had disbanded. What *was* the correct way to weigh the use of power against upholding faith in one's friends, or the sharing of truth against adherence to secrecy? Perhaps it was all a question of whether the chicken or the egg came first.

In any case, there was no longer any point in all this deliberation. Mark summoned the last of his pride and, instead of cursing his

friend, chose to be honest like he had been so long ago. “I sure hope...your dream comes true.”

Mark now painfully understood that he and the rest of Black Tiger had been the shackles instead. In trying to fulfill the promise they had made when young, Sol had ended up standing still for two whole years. Mark and Alan had ruined everything by banishing him from the party, but at the same time, that decision had freed him to finally realize his full potential. And now, Mark sincerely wished that at least Sol, Reen, and Julia could reach the furthest depths of all dungeons, unseal all the territories, and see what lay beyond the Tower like they had all once dreamed of.

“My own dream...ha ha...was impossible from the start. Say, Sol...what if...just what if we could start all over again? Would we...”

Knowing that he was beyond saving, Mark wanted to die posing as the leader of Black Tiger even though it was no longer true. But sadly, his head and his heart didn’t agree. His very soul cried out that he didn’t want to die, screamed at him to prostrate himself and beg for his life before Sol, who could probably save him still. He started talking faster and faster but then suddenly stopped. Regardless of what his soul wanted, the flickering flame of his life had been snuffed out. The light in his eyes faded away, reducing him to a corpse.

Luna’s Astral was done devouring the god regalia. The source of strength that had kept Mark going when his bodily systems had failed long ago was no more. How chagrined he surely would have been that he couldn’t even finish his last sentence before he died. But that was what death was like. It was an inescapable conclusion that came to all living beings, even without being hastened by the actions of another.

“Goodbye, Mark.”

As Sol bade farewell to his now departed friend, he was reminded once more that someone who attempted to compel this end on another, even once, had no right to be saved from the selfsame compulsion, no matter how unreasonable it was. For upholding this law against Mark and Alan, he himself was equally subject to it, his reasons notwithstanding.

Chapter 6: Releasing the Elven Queen

Sol had no time to dwell on his emotions, as the situation was developing apace. The moment Mark died and Sol felt the power he had given him coming back, several windows popped up, flashing red.

Despite having expected this, Sol couldn't help exclaiming, "They actually did it!" However, his voice was drowned out by Luna's Astral suddenly roaring in obvious pain as its gigantic black form was run through by rays of crimson light.

Red began encroaching on the green bars in the windows surrounding Sol, and alarms that only he could hear started blaring insistently. Clearly, Player was under attack by some foreign influence. As Sol and his group had predicted, the Old Rulers' most devastating attack had been triggered.

If Mark and his god regalia managed to get rid of the Wayside God and the All Dragon, then that was well and good. If they failed and were defeated, however, the various powers granted through Player would return to Player, and Luna would surely devour the god regalia to become the All Dragon in truth. So booby-trapping both of those things made sense.

There were any number of measures that could be taken besides winning a head-on confrontation. The evidence suggested that the Old Rulers had the ability to manipulate Player's power, so they simply had to bend it to their will. They had already done so before to maintain their pride as humans, tenuous though it was.

The Wayside God had been born only recently, and the All Dragon had been bound for a thousand years. Neither had any way of resisting an attack that had worked against even their true enemy.

Or so logic dictated.

"As expected, Mark and the god regalia were both poisoned bait." Sol stared intently at his display windows, the surprise gone from his face. In buying time to set up this surefire stratagem, the Old Rulers had given Sol and Luna just as much time to prepare. On top of the brilliant minds of the Emelian royal family, Sol also had on his side Gawain's and Saelmia's exceptional knowledge and ingenuity regarding all magic tools. Thanks to them, he had gained a general idea of how an enemy familiar with lost technology might attack Player and the All Dragon.

Consequently, he had conducted a series of experiments with all the curse spells in Luna's repertoire and confirmed that Player did indeed have a way of resisting such an attack. It was also made clear to Luna that she could be poisoned through something she devoured. The final outcome was still up in the air, but the two of them had expected this development and prepared for it.

As Frederica's group had predicted, a little after more than half the windows were stained red, green slowly but surely started regaining ground. The protective measures they had set up to fight off an external invasion were doing their job. In fact, it seemed like they could even trace the incursions back to where they were coming from. It had been a dangerous gamble, but it had paid off.

"My lord!" Leaving her own Astral to writhe and moan in agony, Luna promptly rushed over, concerned about her liege. Given how likely it was that she would be sent back to her prison if Sol died, she feared losing him more than anything else. If her current situation was the best-case scenario, dying in battle was a good second. Anything at all was better than being confined in that empty void again. To ensure it never came to that, she wouldn't hesitate for a fraction of a second to destroy the planet, wiping out the entire human race along with Sol's enemies if doing so would keep him safe.

"I'm fine," Sol replied calmly. "And look, our countermeasures are kicking into gear one by one."

Sure enough, in the windows he pointed to, the red was disappearing and the green was returning at an exponential rate. The countermeasures set up to deal with attacks on Player were

working as intended. More than that, processes had been put in place to use the enemy's entry pathways to launch a counteroffensive. At some point, the dwindling red became less an indication of normalcy being restored but rather efforts to pursue and apprehend the fleeing invaders.

"That's incredible," said Luna. She looked so impressed that Sol couldn't help laughing out loud. The way he saw it, all the credit belonged to her and Frederica.

Though Sol had had his reasons for not having divulged the details of Player to the rest of Black Tiger, he regretted how it had led to the party's breakup. Things had ended pretty much the worst way possible with Mark and Alan, and Sol was aware that he was the one who had made many of the choices that had led there.

If he had been so concerned about the weakness of his role that he felt it necessary to keep it under wraps for self-preservation, he shouldn't have gotten his childhood friends involved in the first place. If he truly wanted to work with them to chase the dream they shared, he should have accepted the risks that came with telling them the truth. If neither was acceptable, he should have used Summoning from the get-go instead of insisting on limiting the endeavor to just the five of them.

To avoid repeating that mistake, Sol had decided to trust in the protection of the All Dragon and share everything he knew about Player with a select few. That group naturally included Luna, as well as Reen, Julia, Frederica, and Eliza. He'd also chosen Gawain and Saelmia, the pair from Baccus Arms, and Steve from the Adventurer's Guild, which brought the total to eight. Unexpectedly, an incredible synergy was born through open and unfettered discussion between the dragon who possessed the singular ability to absorb the powers of those she devoured and the princess who was well-versed in all fields of history.

Through experiments that had been possible only after obtaining Luna and her incredible strength, Sol had learned new things about Player. First, he gained experience points from everyone he bestowed power on, not only those he personally partied up with. Experience points gained this way could be set aside and used to

level up companions of his choice without having to involve them in battle. Second, he could establish parties of up to six people and give them the ability to communicate within their group, as well as between party leaders, using display windows. Sol could participate in those communications too—and save records. Third, skills used a certain number of times by those registered as companions would become available to Player too, after which Sol could then give them to other people as he wished. Fourth, he could look up a log of all actions taken by a target. It would take too long to go into detail, but he had acquired most of these abilities after his level had reached the quadruple digits.

However, what Luna and Frederica first focused on was how Player's abilities could be used against itself rather than how those abilities could be used most effectively. It seemed safe to assume that the Church knew about Sol's power, considering the breadth of its knowledge, starting with lost technology, with orbital satellites being a prime example. There was no way it wouldn't try to capitalize on that knowledge.

For example, as Sol had learned from killing Alan, Player automatically retrieved the skills, stats, HP, and MP that had been granted to someone when they died. That was reasonable, and all Sol had thought about it was, *Oh, then I don't have to worry when registering more companions.* However, Luna, who had experience devouring a target that possessed a self-harming trait, and Frederica, who considered how she would combat Player as an outsider who knew about it, felt that the mechanism could be exploited.

Based on that hypothesis, they conducted experiments where Luna cast curses on someone who had received powers from Player, then had Sol retrieve those powers. After doing it numerous times with a variety of spells, they found out that curses affecting a target's fate or connections with others did indeed transfer to him. It had sent Luna and Reen, who had volunteered to be cursed, into a huge panic.

As it turned out, the experiments did more than prove that Sol could be attacked in this way. They also revealed that Player could

inoculate itself against them. While Sol received the full effects of a curse the first time, it didn't do much the second time and was entirely ineffective from the third time onward. This didn't only apply to one curse, but to the entire concept of using Player's feedback function to attack itself. Eventually, Player had become impervious to every single curse in the All Dragon's arsenal. Besides leveling up by killing monsters, it also could evolve and perfect itself by being used under different conditions.

In the end, Player had even attempted to counterattack and curse the All Dragon. It was in light of this ability that Sol had decided to allow the attack from the Holy Church and its puppet masters. The lost technology used by the Church was presumably inspired by the skills used by the All Dragon and other monsters, as well as the talents that God gave people. Sol had been willing to bet that Player could turn such attacks to its own advantage. Clearly, he was winning that bet.

Aside from Luna's Astral, her fragment body didn't appear to be in any pain, so Sol wasn't too worried. Just in case, however, he asked, "You doing okay, Luna?"

"I'm fine. A control override function was concealed in my older brother's dragon aspect, but it was ridiculously easy to spot and is no longer a threat. If those old coots seriously thought Kin Devourer wouldn't notice when consuming poison, they must have gone senile."

"Um...'older brother'?" Her answer diverted his attention in a completely unexpected way.

"Ah, yes, that god regalia just now was my older brother's remains. I lost a thousand years ago because he had been alive and in a true union with sister-in-law. As a mere corpse, however, he was nothing to be reckoned with. And now, I'm the All Dragon in name and in truth." Luna proudly puffed out her chest, but Sol wasn't sure how he should respond.

"I, uh, should probably ask you for a thorough account of what happened a thousand years ago sometime."

Thanks to the facts that Luna had occasionally mentioned over the past month, Sol and his inner circle had a general gist of the true

events behind the Kuzuifabra, albeit only from her perspective. Even so, he was surprised to learn the nature of the relationship between the first-generation Hero and her god regalia.

He was *just a corpse, but she sure didn't hesitate before shooting him full of holes and eating him with gusto,* thought Sol, having some trouble understanding dragons' mindsets. Not that he had a right to judge after killing his childhood friends without raising an eyebrow.

A distracted "ah" suddenly left Sol's mouth, prompting Luna, ever the devoted servant, to ask with concern, "What is the matter, my lord?"

"Player caught our attackers. It's showing the locations of the Four Great Labyrinths."

What Sol had wasn't news of trouble but results. Player's efforts to hack back had proven successful. Whether it could take over the other side's systems remained to be seen, but it had at least managed to pinpoint where they were lurking. And it turned out to be the same places that Sol had dreamed of exploring for as long as he could remember *and* where Luna's stolen organas—her one horn, one eye, and both wings—were bound.

"Are they in the farthest depths of each dungeon, then?" Luna asked.

"Seems like it."

"In that case, we need to make preparations."

"Thankfully, there's nothing stopping us from doing that anymore."

These were places that Sol had planned on visiting anyway. It didn't matter to him whether there were big scary bosses lying in wait or Luna's organas could be found there. Simply reaching the end of those dungeons was part of his dream. Even if this new information revealed by Player was a counter-counterintelligence trap, he would still go.

Of course, to do so would require preparations, but as Sol had said, all of the conditions required to make those preparations were now lined up. If those who fancied themselves rulers of the world were holed up deep inside dungeons and had no power to interfere,

then Sol's group was free to first ensure that everything was in order on the surface and then take their time going after the dungeons. Sol would spare no effort or expenses to make that happen. If he needed to conquer the world to realize his dream, he would do so with no hesitation.

In fact, whatever his manner of rule was, the entire continent had succumbed to him the moment he'd won the Oratorio Tangram. It was now up to Frederica and those under her to dictate whether his reign would be one that benefited the masses or not. It wasn't in Sol's nature to actively seek the destruction of the world, but if he found the world to be in his way, he wasn't beyond erasing everything and leaving only the city of Garlaige. Frankly, his way of thinking was less like that of a Hero or champion and more like that of a Demon Lord.

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The Old Rulers, who had fallen silent after sending in their new Hero and his god regalia, spoke up again as Player encroached deeper and deeper into the lost technology that allowed them to continue interfering with the world in spite of what they had become.

"We will not allow this. If man cannot be as man should be, we have no recourse but to start the world anew. It seems that our attack has indeed proven ineffective. However, even the All Dragon has no options in the face of obliteration beyond straightforward violence."

"They're surprisingly talkative," Sol noted.

"They were like this a thousand years ago too," Luna said. "They like playing at being masterminds despite being puppets themselves."

The observations from the pair were more curt than scathing. Sol thought that masterminds who stayed silent, making it hard to determine whether communication was even possible with them, were far scarier. The Old Rulers addressing Sol directly like this made him feel like he could do something about the situation, given his

and Luna's powers. Regardless of whether he actually could, making him think he could was a bad move, in his opinion.

In the first place, Luna, who knew what had happened a thousand years ago, saw the Old Rulers as little more than lead-ins who fancied themselves the big bad. As she had told Sol, their true enemies were likely in the farthest depths of the dungeons and at the very top of the Tower.

Realizing that the time for words had passed, the Old Rulers simply said, "All shall perish."

This wasn't just a parting line from a defeated enemy. The Old Rulers' lost technology gave them control of the world's ley lines and ley line wellsprings, where outer mana flowed from. As a last resort, they were now going to wipe out all life on the planet's surface to begin anew, all in service of their directive to protect the way the world should be.

The water in all oceans, lakes, and rivers suddenly grew turbid and turned bloodred, vegetation and trees withered and died, the air became stale, the ground cracked open, and volcanoes spewed fire.

"I see."

Player and the All Dragon could deal with a giant meteor falling from the sky or a monster large enough to break through the cloud layer. In the domain of combat, nothing currently on the surface of this planet could be a match for the pairing of Sol and the first card he had drawn.

"Um...my lord, when it comes to things like this, I'm, uh..."

No matter how powerful the All Dragon's attacks were, she had no way of stopping the ley lines from going berserk and destroying the world. She could probably pulverize the planet if asked to, but that strength was useless for saving a world that was falling apart. She was at her best when there was a clear enemy to face.

"Mm-hm, don't worry, I know. But for some reason, I can't shake the feeling that this is all a setup."

"A setup, my lord?"

After all, the power Sol now needed belonged to another card, and that card was already in his hand. Therefore, he had the nagging suspicion that this scenario had been arranged by someone

who had foreseen everything that was happening. A thousand years ago, that someone had led humanity, a race greatly inferior in strength, to victory, creating the Bound Evil Dragon, the Captive Elven Queen, the Lifeless Divine Beast, the Vacant Demon Lord, and the Cursed Hero in the process. And now, that entity was using Player as a pawn to destroy the anemic status quo.

Or perhaps it was something else entirely. Sol was beginning to realize that it might be a mistake to think there was only one "true enemy." Maybe the Old Rulers and those behind them weren't all in cahoots; maybe they were even at odds with each other. If so, there could be an opportunity to form an "enemy of my enemy" kind of alliance.

"In any case, we can only address what we can for now," he murmured to himself. Failing to use the card in his hand wasn't an option, as he couldn't think of any other way to resolve the current crisis. Through the windows, he called out, "Fritz."

Sol was, of course, addressing the sitting emperor of the Istekario Empire, the boy whose life and nier organa served as the final seal for the Captive Elven Queen.

"As you wish, my lord."

Fritz's reply was prompt but understandably tinged with apprehension. Though it was to save the world, he had just been ordered to release the Elven Queen by dying himself.

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After receiving Sol's order through a window that only he and Kurt could see, Fritz stood up from his seat of command and cried out toward the sky, "Your Holiness Cardinal Ishli Duress!"

"What is it, Your Majesty Emperor Fritz Leifelden Istekario?" Ishli replied, with the giant display window showing him in the sky appearing once again. This time, his window was joined by another showing Fritz looking up.

Upon confirming that everyone still alive on the battlefield could watch his conversation with Ishli, Fritz proceeded to carry out the role that Sol had assigned him. "Can the world's destruction be

stopped by releasing the Elven Queen?”

When the ley lines had started going out of control, display windows showing the natural disasters they were causing had popped up in the sky, plunging the soldiers into despair for the third time. Now, however, they were reminded that the legends did indeed say that the Elven Queen ruled over nature, which meant she just might have the power to stop the world from marching to its doom. Hope blossomed in their hearts.

“That is what I’ve heard,” Ishli confirmed. Having already learned from Sol that the boy he was currently talking to needed to die for that to happen, he seemed to struggle with what to say next. “However, that requires...”

“There is no other recourse. I will end my life right here, right now, and release the Elven Queen.”

“You... You do your position as emperor of a great nation justice. Your sacrifice for the sake of the world moves me deeply.”

Of course, this entire conversation was a charade written out by Sol. That was how Ishli had been able to respond to Fritz right away. Having been told that the exchange must remain deeply ingrained in the hearts, eyes, and ears of the soldiers who would be going home, Ishli had every intention of pulling off a truly perfect performance. That said, he couldn’t help but be astonished by the quiet acceptance in Fritz’s eyes. It was for a great cause, and the emperor did bear responsibility as the head of his country, and he would die after the war anyway, as Sol planned to release the Elven Queen regardless. Even so, such conviction was impressive to see in one barely in his teens.

With a bitter smile, Fritz said bluntly, “The word ‘sacrifice’ is too noble for me. I was a fool of an emperor, but I love my country in my own way. Regarding Lord Sol and Emelia as apostates and rallying the nations to eliminate them was folly in the extreme. What I am doing is but a wretched attempt to atone with my life.”

“Unfortunately, it is not up to me to say whether it is enough. However, I promise to do all I can in my position to ensure that Istekario is shown compassion. I believe that every country currently watching this display will oblige as well.”

"I thank you deeply."

What Fritz said made sense to Ishli. Selling his life now would get him the best price he would ever receive for it, what with him now shouldering the greatest responsibility for this war and fated to die all the same. Ishli, who already knew that Fritz had joined Sol's side, understood that the young emperor didn't have much time left and thought that he had submitted to Sol for the sake of exchanging his life for as much as he could. Still, no matter how well he had negotiated, he was going to cease to exist.

Ishli wasn't proud of it, but if he had been in Fritz's shoes, he probably would have chosen to bring the world down with him instead of trying to save it. He fully believed that humans—or at least, he himself—couldn't thoroughly embrace self-sacrifice. He wouldn't be able to keep himself from thinking that it was all pointless if his existence was to be erased, even if it was for a grand reason like saving his beloved homeland. This was why he truly respected Fritz, who clearly felt differently. The words Ishli was saying had indeed been prepared by Sol, but the emotion behind them was real and heartfelt.

Equally pointless was the soldiers—who had breathed a sigh of relief at being shown mercy despite losing the war—getting to go home if the world was ending anyway. Therefore, they watched the exchange with bated breath, respect and gratitude welling up in their hearts at the Istekarian emperor's offer to lay down his life for everyone else's.

To those who didn't know that Fritz's death was a ploy, the fact that Sol wasn't killing him right away despite being able to do so at any time made it seem like he, too, was showing respect for his valor. After all, it was child's play for even the current king of Emelia, much less Reen and Frederica in their Numbers armament or the All Dragon, to wipe out all twenty thousand Istekarian soldiers along with their emperor.

Speaking of Reen and Frederica, the two were currently floating in the sky close enough to be seen with the naked eye. It made the Istekarian soldiers wonder if they were standing by to mercilessly cut Fritz down if he was to change his mind.

However, without getting worked up or dragging things out any longer, Fritz calmly said, “Kurt, go ahead.”

His second-in-command paused for a few seconds, noting sadly that no one was stopping him from carrying out the command he had been given, then ran his blade through Fritz’s heart in one swift motion.

“I...entrust the world...and Istekario...to your...”

With his face twisted in pain, tears streaming down his face, blood dribbling from the corner of his mouth, and unable to finish his last sentence, Emperor Fritz Leifelden Istekario breathed his last.

His death was so quick and his executioner’s hand so sure that those who did not have to dirty their hands couldn’t help feeling a little accusatory even though their lives were being saved by the act. It was perhaps a form of self-protection born from the guilt of knowing that they lived thanks to someone else’s sacrifice. However, Fritz’s final words rang in their ears. Almost unconsciously, they felt the conviction to act like better men—not for the dead emperor’s sake but for their own sake, so that they could lead lives they would be proud of. To blame the person who had committed the ultimate offense on their behalf and shouldered the onus for it when they themselves couldn’t do a thing would be the very example of shamelessness.

The moment all life left Fritz’s body, the Imperial Seal, a nier organa on his forehead that looked like a third eye and could only be inherited by Istekarian emperors, detached itself and floated up into the air. Normally, the next emperor in line would immediately perform the ceremony that would embed it into their forehead, but no such person had been determined this time. The seal naturally moved toward Kurt, who carried royal blood in his veins, but he had no intention of accepting it.

The surrounding Istekarian soldiers watched in suspense for the destruction of the Imperial Seal, an act that would be too reprehensible to even consider under normal circumstances. If the pro-war nobles had still been alive, they probably would have at least raised a token protest, but every last one of them had been killed by Circulus during the earlier commotion.

And so, no one offered any resistance as Kurt swung his blade again, cleanly bisecting the nier organa that had been protecting—or perhaps plaguing—the Istekarian imperial family for a thousand years. The two halves hit the ground with imperceptible thuds that seemed louder than all the cacophony from before.

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The Elven Queen was free.

Magical light filled the hollow that was all that remained of the World Tree after it had been struck down a thousand years ago, pushing it to regrow at an astounding rate. The Elven Queen, from where she was floating inside the hollow, opened her eyes a little, and gusts of wind scattered countless flower petals through the sky.

After a thousand years, the ruler of nature was finally being freed.

"Inconceivable!"

After dropping a hardcore line like "All shall perish" and disappearing, the Old Rulers showed up again as if they were going the extra mile to convey that what was happening betrayed their expectations.

Seriously, these jokesters would be so much more intimidating if they kept their mouths shut.

Sol's group had anticipated their opponents overturning the board once they realized they couldn't win the game. That was why they had readied the Elven Queen's revival as a countermeasure. Even so, they couldn't help feeling the pressure from seeing the world actually being destroyed. If the Old Rulers had stayed quiet, Sol would have had no idea whether calling on Aina'noa was the right solution or if the Old Rulers still had something else up their sleeves. Panicking out loud was practically telling him that he had found the perfect answer.

Almost feeling tickled, Sol asked for the heck of it, "What is so inconceivable?"

"The revival of the withered World Tree indicates the Elven Queen's revival! She was bound in layers of curses besides the one

tied to Istekario's imperial line! It is inconceivable that they were all undone!"

Wow, they actually answered.

Or perhaps the Old Rulers couldn't resist Sol's questioning anymore due to the progress that Player was making into their systems.

"Ah, that's what you meant. As it turned out, Player could dispel them."

"What?!"

When Sol first met the Captive Elven Queen, Uncurse had made short work of the cursed visor sealing her Glam Sight and the blighted threads binding her body. Apparently, those were the more powerful curses in the Old Rulers' eyes, and the Imperial Seal was just insurance.

Now that I think about it, I guess that tracks.

Though the Imperial Seal gave Istekarian emperors such power that they were sometimes referred to as Emperors of Magic, at the end of the day, they were still human. If word about the nier organa's connection to the Elven Queen got out, there were any number of ways that the emperors could be killed. The Old Rulers would never trust them to be the final key. It actually made more sense for the Istekarian emperors to be a trap—if the elves assassinated one, they would find their queen still bound and themselves hunted to extinction in reprisal.

Without Uncurse, Sol wouldn't have had the faintest idea how to go about undoing the cursed visor and blighted threads either. Perhaps there wasn't actually any way to undo them and they were meant to be locks without keys. Regardless, he did have Uncurse thanks to Player, which voided the checkmate that the Old Rulers thought they had secured. In that respect, Sol's talent could probably be considered a cheat for its ability to subvert the very basis of the game. Cheating was something that only a player could do, after all.

Flipped on its head, it could also be said that the developer—God, in this case—was imposing on the player an atrocious storyline that they would definitely rewrite given the chance. If that atrocious

storyline was fate, then one could wonder what the cheat that could overturn it should be called. Perhaps "human will" was apt, if upsetting divine providence was considered cheating.

Sol grinned broadly. "So, just to make sure, we have confirmation from the ones responsible for the world's impending doom that it can be stopped with the revival of the Elven Queen, Aina'noa la Avalil?"

The Old Rulers' last resort had been to trigger the destruction of the planet, something the Wayside God and the All Dragon could do nothing about. This was based on the assumption that even if the pair had the Elven Queen in their hands, there was no way they would be able to undo her curses. In other words, the Old Rulers themselves proved that if the assumption was undermined, the entire premise would fall apart.

"Ugh..."

With a final frustrated grunt that was effectively a "yes," the Old Rulers' presence receded for good this time. Since everything they tried had been foiled, they were now mustering their strength to resist Player's as yet ongoing invasion.

With no more hindrances, the Elven Queen's release and the World Tree's regrowth continued apace. These seemed like two separate phenomena but were intricately linked. Back in the Elven Forest, thick tendrils that wound together to form a colossal trunk rose higher and higher until they pierced the cloud layer. But what could be seen with the naked eye was nowhere as important as what was happening underground. The Tree's roots extended along the ley lines near the earth's surface, seizing control of the ley line wellsprings. Right underneath the elves' village, roots burrowed deeper than any dungeon, eventually reaching the core of the planet and proceeding to pump up staggering amounts of pure mana. To release that mana over as large an area as possible, the Tree's foliage spread to an astonishing size, surrounding the half-awake Elven Queen and forming a stage in the sky for her.

To those watching from the ground, this whole series of events looked like a myth brought to life. A giant tree rising higher than the sky in the direction of the Elven Forest was impressive enough, but

the next thing they knew, branches and foliage stretching from the tree covered their own heads. As people who had been born in the current age, they couldn't comprehend what was going on. They had heard stories that claimed the World Tree had once "reached space and covered the world," but they had never believed them, and it blew their minds that the description had been literal and not an exaggeration. Some even wondered if the Tower mentioned in the Kuzuifabra, which had also supposedly once reached the sky, had been man's attempt to imitate the World Tree.

On her stage in the sky, the Elven Queen's awakening continued as the torrent of pure mana drawn from the core of the earth poured into her slender frame through the foliage. A giant illustration of Sephiroth, the Tree of Life, drawn with light appeared behind her back, showing each sephira and path—nodes and pathways—being filled with mana through Yesod at the base with a pulsing that seemed to resonate with the planet itself. The Elven Queen's blackened skin and hair respectively regained their natural porcelain white and emerald green, while the fanciful letters embroidered with gold on her white outfit began shining. Her hair, tied into double ponytails and stretching much longer than her height, spiraled skyward around her body protectively. When her skin's whiteness was fully restored, her whole body started to glow with all the mana she was absorbing, and colors splashed across the sky in the form of countless petals.

Before long, all ten sephira and twenty-two paths on the Sephiroth behind her back were filled, and the brightness of her glow reached its apex. At that moment, her beautiful, emerald-green eyes with a golden glow opened fully for the first time in a thousand years. When her gaze fell on the world, all destruction abruptly stopped. Devastation had no place in the reality reflected in the eyes of the Elven Queen, Aina'noa la Avalil.

The awakened Elven Queen opened her mouth, and out came an entirely emotionless yet soul-stirring "AHHHHH!" The limpid sound pulsed with the waves of pure mana that the World Tree was drawing from the planet's core, weaving not words, but a melody.



Slowly and gracefully, she began dancing as well. Without any choreography, her slender body was carried by the beating and the melody, interspersed by innocent little twirls. In time with the tempo, countless rays of light burst from her fingertips and the ends of her ponytails, spreading across the world. The light connected with ley line wellsprings all over the planet, circulating through the extensive web of World Tree roots now running underground. The handful of wellsprings that the Old Rulers had set off to bring ruin to the world settled back down, allowing the red seas, the withered vegetation, the gaping ground, and the rumbling mountains to revert to their former states.

That wasn't all. With the Elven Queen at the center, the streams of mana now covering the planet boosted each other with a synergistic effect, inducing green growth even in wilderness that had wasted away and regions claimed by deserts over the past millennium. The expansive area that had turned to barren land after Country Eater's rampage two hundred years ago was no exception, and what was left of the capitals of the seven fallen countries quickly turned into ancient ruins covered with trees and moss.

The outer mana that had been running dry for the past thousand years once again filled the atmosphere, kicking the planet's natural regenerative functions back into high gear. In the blink of an eye, everything was restored to its appropriate state.

The Elven Queen indeed lived up to her title as the ruler of all nature. Every single person on the planet was enchanted as her simple dance and wordless but hauntingly beautiful voice summoned an endless stream of mana, healing everything that was wrong with the world. Petals and light rained down on uninhabited lands beyond the continent, filling them, too, with mana in a miracle that drew the eyes of all living beings to the sky.

"Uh...what is going on?" Words failed Sol, who was at the center of what was happening. He understood that the Elven Queen had stopped the world ending as hoped, but the storm of light and the spectacle of the world's rejuvenation was so sublime that his breath, like everyone else's, was taken away. The events of the battle that had just ended had been more than worthy of legend on their own,

but they paled in comparison to the phenomenon currently taking place.

"That's the Elven Queen's song," said Luna. "It's a near miraculous power that tunes and harmonizes everything in the world. By now, the end that those clowns orchestrated has been completely reversed."

There were no lyrics that held any meaning. It was the Elven Queen's very voice that restored things to the way they ought to be. Having already known this for a thousand years, Luna was unfazed. This power that was now being used to heal the world had once been directed against her. That was another reason she had lost and ended up being bound despite having gotten so close to being the All Dragon. After having experienced the world quite literally turning against her, the current scene even seemed relaxing.

"And she can manipulate all this at will?"

In Sol's eyes, the power to change the environment on a planetary scale clearly exceeded anything that Player could do. It would be great if she was willing to join him, but if by some chance she were to become hostile, he wasn't sure he could win even with the full strength of the All Dragon behind him.

Picking up on Sol's apprehension, Luna explained, "Aina'noa is a vessel without equal, but even she cannot use Elven Queen at will. She is entirely automatic."

In so many words, "Elven Queen" was the name of the system that regulated the planet's mana. The mechanism carrying out the miracle that every living being on the planet was bearing witness to was itself called Elven Queen, and the vessel that carried it was always born among the race of elves. The current host was Aina'noa la Avalil, the dainty girl who now had Sol's full attention. This was the truth of the Elven Queen and was why the Old Rulers had opted to capture her. If they simply destroyed the host, the system would be reborn in another, and there was no guarantee they could contain the next one. Therefore, capturing her made more sense.

Luna had been bound for a very similar reason. With her being the last of her race, killing her could lead to dragons popping up all over the land. It was much simpler to lock her and her dead

brother's corpse away, keeping them separate. Sure enough, until Sol freed Luna, the world hadn't seen any dragons for a thousand years.

But since Aina'noa was just a vessel, she had no established personality. Elven Queen had been working through her ever since she was born, and she had therefore had no time or space to form her own sense of self. It was her lot to live a long life, keeping the world fine-tuned while sitting above all elves as their symbol and queen. That was why, unlike Luna, she had not lost her mind being held captive for a millennium and could immediately do what she was supposed to the moment she was freed.

I see. That explains the attitude of the two elves from before and why Luna isn't hostile toward Aina'noa.

A lot of things were falling into place in Sol's mind with the revelation that Elven Queen was an automatic homeostatic mechanism for the world and that Aina'noa la Avalil was a vessel with no will of her own.

"Hmm, but what would happen if Aina'noa was given a massive power-up that normally wouldn't be possible?"

In trying to maintain the state of the world, she had ended up opposing Luna and then bared her fangs at the humans she was supposed to protect. The part about her leading the demihumans in the Kuzuifabra was most likely a fabrication. In any case, as Sol went on to conquer dungeons, unseal territories, and climb the Tower, there was no telling what could trigger another response from her. Instead of constantly being afraid, it seemed more practical to make Aina'noa strong enough to control the system within her and secure her as an ally. The idea would merely be wishful thinking for anyone else, but thanks to the new powers that Sol had picked up when Player surpassed the four-digit threshold, it didn't seem so far-fetched.

"Hmm, a companion who hosts Elven Queen and can control it at will," Sol said, mulling over the idea. "Along with Luna, I would have command over both destruction and rejuvenation."

The smile that rose unbidden to his face seemed almost evil. Being able to brandish destruction and rejuvenation as he desired

would make it extremely easy to rule the world. There were likely those spurred by unbelievable egos who would resist what they saw as unreasonable destruction. If they believed their world was ending anyway, they would rather go down fighting, consequences be damned. However, their resolve would be greatly shaken if it was clear to all that rejuvenation would follow—that the world *wasn't* ending. If they were made aware that the world was to be remade into one where those in the way were weeded out, leaving only a chosen populace, wanting to be among those who remained was in their very nature as living beings.

"Looks like I can register her as a companion just fine. I'll start by raising her level to the triple digits. Luna, be ready for anything that happens."

"Yes, my lord."

Sol now had access to a pool of experience points that he could give to any companion of his choosing. After some experimentation, he had confirmed that a portion of the experience points earned by those outside the party he was personally in were collected and stored with Player. The amount accrued over the past month was enough to bring someone up to the same level of power as Sol himself, so that was what he was considering doing to Aina'noa.

Having finished repairing the world, the Elven Queen floated motionless on her stage. Her beautiful eyes reflected no emotion, only blinking every now and then as a physiological reflex. The world was still reflected in those eyes, but she no longer saw it. According to Luna, the Elven Queen's role going forward was to stay inside the hollow at the heart of the World Tree that had achieved the growth of millennia in the blink of an eye, serving as the core that kept the overflowing mana in the world circulating. When needed, she would take action, fixing what needed to be fixed and eliminating what needed to be eliminated.

At the moment, however, she was enveloped in a torrent of magical light ensuing from the level-ups imposed by Player. Based on Luna's explanation, this wasn't happening to Elven Queen, but to Aina'noa la Avalil, the elven girl who served as its host. The power and authority of Elven Queen was so great that it left no room in its

vessel, no matter how exemplary it was, for a sense of self to develop. Thus Aina'noa la Avalil was but an automatic operator.

When Sol had learned this, he had instinctively felt that the vessel, Aina'noa, could develop a sense of self and seize control if she was sufficiently strengthened. "That's three digits...and there's no change."

Sol had cautiously raised her level in increments of ten until she reached a hundred, but she still floated in place, detached and unresponsive.

"My lord, I'm ready to incapacitate her right away if she goes on a rampage," said Luna as a giant Astral braced for action behind her back, indicating that she was on high alert. The Elven Queen had beaten her once before, even if it was by working with the Hero and her god regalia, so Luna wasn't going to underestimate her. At the same time, she was feeling confident, having not only devoured the last Augoeides and become the All Dragon in truth, but also possessing a level overwhelmingly higher than the rest of the world —with the exception of Sol—thanks to Player.

All the points in the experience pool at the moment weren't enough to bring Aina'noa to Sol and Luna's level. Even if giving the elf all the points wasn't enough to create a sense of self in her, the level-ups should have no effect on the power of Elven Queen. Given that, the All Dragon, with Player's support, would still be superior in strength. Obtaining Elven Queen as an asset that could be wielded freely would be a huge boon, but disarming it if it proved uncontrollable was important too.

Sol nodded. "In that case, I'm going to give her all the rest in one go." He couldn't very well leave Aina'noa alone after powering her up halfway, so he decided to trust his instincts and go all in.

Then again, I imagine if Luna sends her flying with a punch, we'll make enemies of all the elves. Let's hope it doesn't come to that.

While praying that his hunch would hold up and that what he was doing wouldn't trigger Elven Queen into reacting and marking him as an enemy, Sol poured the rest of the experience points into Aina'noa. If that still didn't do anything, his only options were to have Luna kill her now or leave her be, always being afraid of her

coming to life.

"Ah."

Both Sol and Luna made similar sounds as awareness entered the beautiful eyes of the Elven Queen and expression bloomed on her face, signifying her change from an emotionless, automatic doll to an elven girl named Aina'noa la Avalil. She examined herself with puzzlement, then shivered and curled up, clutching her knees to her chest. Apparently, that was her instinctual response to the strange sensation of leveling up that was unique to girls.

"I think it worked...though she's acting a little odd."

"Uh-oh..."

Now in the high triple digits, Aina'noa's level was just a little higher than those of Reen, Julia, and Frederica, which meant Sol and Luna were the only two who significantly out-leveled her. When the storm of sensations subsided, she started looking around timidly, but less like a baby and more like a wild animal that had woken up in a strange new place.

This was what Sol found odd and what gave Luna a sense of foreboding. And that foreboding proved true. Seemingly having identified the pair using her heightened ability to detect mana, Aina'noa flew straight toward them, her face beaming. Instead of decelerating, she tackled Sol with almost enough force to knock him onto his back, then wrapped herself around his neck. Her mannerisms could be described as those of an innocent playful child at a stretch but were more aptly those of a pet frolicking with its owner.

Though slim of build, Aina'noa was a full-grown elven woman. Her facial features were so stunning that they entranced even Frederica, Reen, and Julia, and the outfit she was wearing gave her a pure and chaste air but was surprisingly risqué up close. Being embraced by a girl with all these features would leave any boy at a loss. At this point, the fact that she wasn't too curvaceous was little consolation.

"Um, what is this?" Sol turned to Luna for help and answers while trying to extricate himself.

"I believe the girl Aina'noa la Avalil—though physically, she isn't

really just a girl anymore—has developed the beginnings of a sense of self. Even among demihumans, elves are exceptionally gifted in magic. She is fully aware that you poured immense power into her."

The explanation, delivered fast and with a sour face in a manner rarely adopted by Luna, somewhat flew over Sol's head. "So...what does that mean?"

"It's basically imprinting. She's a baby—no, a puppy who thinks of you as her parent or owner."

"That's so not what I was expecting!"

In short, she was acting more like a puppy or a chick instead of a child. With a full-grown body, her actions were that much less ambiguous, and the way she expressed affection through hugging and cuddling was much more embarrassing. Sol had expected her to start with the mind of a young girl with no emotions and was therefore very taken aback. As things stood, it was like he had obtained a puppy with the body of an adult woman who loved him very much. That would have been fine if she looked like a puppy, but he had no idea how to deal with an adult elven girl licking his face and rubbing her own face on his chest.

"You look a little happy about it, my lord," said Luna in a cold voice that Sol was hearing for the first time as she looked at him askance instead of helping him to push Aina'noa off. She had never acted like that when other humans were involved, but maybe things were different with a fellow being of exceptional power.

"Luna!" Sol exclaimed in a fluster.

Luna sniffed and grinned mockingly. "This is what you wanted, isn't it? You will have to teach her how to talk from scratch, but as long as Aina'noa is in control of Elven Queen, you'll be able to use it however you wish."

Sol looked at her in a daze, which somehow prompted Aina'noa to stop burying her face in his chest and look at the pouting All Dragon. She voiced an inquisitive musical note, then charged at the smaller girl and began licking her face and nuzzling her chest like she had with Sol.

"Stop it."

Evidently, Aina'noa saw Sol and Luna as beings who were

absolutely safe to be with. Luna's small hands worked hard to pull Aina'noa off, but the elven girl radiated wholehearted happiness.

Sol chuckled. "I bet she thinks of you as her mother."

"Don't even joke about it."

"You look a little happy about it."

"Ugh!"

Hearing her own words being used against her turned Luna's face red in a rare display of embarrassment. Just like when Sol treated her as someone to be protected, she was equally thrown off by being accepted as an ally so unconditionally and being cuddled with such absolute trust. In a way, these were weaknesses she possessed precisely because of her identity as a dragon, the lonely apex of all magical beasts.

Truthfully, Sol preferred watching two beauties snuggling together to having one cling to him. But in the end, he landed back on the ground with Aina'noa hanging from around his neck and Luna tightly hugging his left arm as if in competition. When Frederica picked up on the grave air surrounding him, she couldn't help getting a faraway look, thinking about the pressure that future candidates for his harem would be under.

In any case, Sol now had the second of the cards he had seen when using Summoning, the power he'd determined would be required to conquer all dungeons, unseal all territories, and at the end of it all, climb to the top of the Tower. In both meanings of the name "Elven Queen," he had command over Aina'noa la Avalil, the monster who could fix a breaking world and change any battlefield to his advantage through powers of healing, support, and debuffs.

With destruction and rejuvenation in the form of the All Dragon and the Elven Queen in hand, Player was now going to remake the world.

Chapter 7: The New Normal

Not only had Sol's group secured a stunning victory in the Oratorio Tangram, in which the Holy Church had involved every country on the continent, but they had also fended off the Hero sent by the Old Rulers, god regalia and all, and then, in releasing the Elven Queen, stopped the destruction of the world that had been set off as a desperate last resort.

All this had happened in one day. Calling this day the Day of Turmoil would be by no means an overstatement. At the very least, the history books were definitely going to refer to it as something similar. That was, unless future generations considered it ridiculous that so much had happened in just one day that they altered the records to say something like "the Seven Days of Salvation."

In any case, the fact remained that nearly a hundred thousand soldiers had been involved, the Church had pitched in all manners of lost technology, and the Old Rulers had interfered on a global scale. The amount of human capital, funds, and resources that had been consumed in this one day was astronomical. Consequently, dealing with the aftermath was going to be a herculean task for both the winners and the losers.

As the war had involved the entire continent, there were a plethora of things that had to be resolved afterward, and it would probably take years to fully hammer everything out. However, the MVPs who had won the war were thankfully exempted from that troublesome task. It was going to be a lot of work, but that work was for the civil servants to do, and Sol's group was just going to get reports and rubber stamp everything later. For now, they deserved a rest. The nobles and high-ranking officials of the kingdom enveloped in celebration agreed, so Sol and his companions were given leave to return to Magnamelia that day. By riding one of Luna's Astrals, a journey that would normally take a few days by carriage could be

shortened to less than an hour.

After bidding King Ethelweld and his men farewell with a casual "All right, we'll take you up on your offer and head back first," Sol set off on the back of the All Dragon surrounded by his beautiful companions. Seeing that, the Emelian soldiers watching from up close—and the soldiers of the defeated nations watching from afar—all thought the same thing: *We're witnessing a scene from a myth.*

Eliza, who had been managing the criminal underworld of Emelia to ensure that it did not take advantage of the commotion to create chaos within the country, received news of the victory and came back too. For the first time in a while, all the girls in Sol's inner circle were together again. And now, there were two new additions: Aina'noa, another monster on Luna's level, and Fritz, the former emperor of Istekario and someone who definitely wasn't a girl.

Speaking of Fritz, Julia had been ready nearby to bring him back to life right after he'd died to release Aina'noa. The sight, which could only be described as a miracle, had sapped the nearby Istekarian officers of all will to fight. Even when Julia had proceeded to take Fritz away, they'd seen no choice but to tacitly allow it. If they had resisted, she would have simply wiped the floor with them.

It was Kurt's job to hold the reins of the empire going forward and carry out the scenario written by Sol. Fritz was beginning a new life as simply one of Sol's companions. Understandably, Steve couldn't leave the Adventurer's Guild, being the person in charge. Neither could Gawain nor Saelmia, the elven elder who served as his assistant, given their obligations at Baccus Arms. King Ethelweld, Prince Franz, and Prince Maximillian were in similar situations too. The only exception was Frederica, for whom carrying out royal duties took a backseat to staying at Sol's side.

Then again, Gawain and Saelmia were not so much busy as they were absorbed. After successfully retrieving the remains of the man-made angels that turned out to be failed Hero experimental subjects, they had locked themselves up in their workshop. It was likely they would eventually emerge with Numbers armaments of the same tier as the angels, but Sol's group felt a little loath to put them on knowing their true identity.

"Uh..."

At the moment, Sol was at a loss for words. Having accepted King Ethelweld's offer, he had been making his way back to his personal quarters in the royal palace when Frederica had told him to have Luna circle around back and land behind the towering form of the main building. Eliza, who had arrived first according to the instructions she had received via display window, was in as much a daze as he was. The same was true for Reen and Julia, who were standing behind Sol after having been teleported from the back of the disappearing Astral.

It wasn't as though Fritz and Luna were at ease, however. Rather, they looked confused about why the others seemed to have frozen all of a sudden. And unaffected by how everyone else was acting, Aina'noa was happily hugging Luna from behind and floating in the air like she always did.

"Um, Frederica...we landed where you said, and...I guess I sort of saw this coming, but just in case: What is this?" asked Sol.

Starting to get a little flustered, Frederica replied, "It's your...well, temporary palace. Um, would you have preferred a newly built one after all? No, of course you would have, but a month simply wasn't enough time, so what we did was reopen the rear palace and quickly prepare it for your use, but that's...not...good enough...is it?"

The truth was that the commoners of Sol's inner circle, which included Sol himself, were blown away by the scale, the extravagance, and the opulence of what they were seeing. As a former emperor, Fritz found the lodgings acceptable, given that they were temporary, and Luna and Aina'noa were unconcerned either way.

Somewhat boxed into how a royal would think, Frederica mistakenly believed that Sol was displeased that, after everything he had done for Emelia's sake, he was getting a hand-me-down. The disparity in perception was great, but it made sense that Frederica thought the way she did. Not only had Sol secured the right to rule over the entire continent by winning the Oratorio Tangram, he had also saved all its residents from certain doom. Although this wasn't how he saw it, he had then practically handed the continent to the

Kingdom of Emelia on a silver platter. In exchange, all he had received from Emelia so far was the first princess. Adding a palace to that equation, though it had been constructed with every imaginable luxury by a decadent Emelian king several generations ago, hardly made a difference. Sol himself would never do so, but if Istekario, Amnesphia, or Poseinia questioned Frederica about how she was recompensing Sol for everything, she wouldn't have had a good answer.

That was why Frederica unconsciously started speaking faster and faster to justify herself. The longer she went on, however, the more Sol's eyebrows bunched together. This naturally made her increasingly flustered until she reached the point where she fell silent, her mouth opening and closing like a fish. This was probably the most shaken Sol had ever seen her. The fact that the former emperor of Emelia's bitter enemy was present, making it seem like Istekario was witnessing the kingdom's failure, certainly didn't help things.

When she started quivering, with despair flooding her face, Sol came to and hurriedly said, "No, it's the opposite! The opposite! This is so fancy and so huge that I'm having trouble taking it in!"

The sensation of having narrowly escaped disaster rushed through Frederica. Ironically, Fritz was the one who could best understand her at the moment. He was pretty sure he would have reacted the same way had he been in her shoes. In contrast, all that the commoners born in Ros Village and the girl from the slums of Garlaige thought was *Wow, those royals really do see money very differently from us.*

In any case, after winning the Oratorio Tangram, this level of luxury was no longer "luxury" for Sol. This extraordinary standard of living was going to be his new normal going forward. Or actually, not even that. As Frederica had said, this place was meant as temporary accommodation. A new country was going to be founded for him, which meant building a brand-new capital city. The exorbitance was going to eclipse this palace by far. After all, every country on the continent was going to fight for the opportunity to contribute to the project and leave their mark on it. That was a natural result of

reigning as an absolute ruler.

For now, Sol was to stay in the refurbished rear palace so that he could get used to living according to his station.

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The king of Emelia six generations before the sitting one was famous for having been a profligate and degenerate king who had dedicated the kingdom's vast wealth and resources—his direct predecessor had raised Emelia to become the greatest of the four superpowers and greatly expanded its economy—solely to his own gratification. Sparing no expense, he had enjoyed the most lavish dishes and delicacies and the finest wines. His greatest indulgence, however, had been women. All Emelians today knew the story of how he had selected the most beautiful girls from all corners of the continent and expanded the existing rear palace several times in magnitude so he could "appreciate" them all.

The back garden had been converted into what became known as the Great Bath Palace in the history books. As its name indicated, it featured a staggering variety of baths harkening from various cultures on the continent, with the main one in the center being so magnificent that it was described as heaven on earth. According to accounts, the king at the time spent every day there being waited on by a host of drop-dead beauties and drinking from sunrise to sunset. This was one of the top three stories that everyone, both Emelians and non-Emelians, immediately thought of when Emelia was brought up, much to the Emelian royal family's embarrassment.

"And so, the main residence here is now your home," said Frederica after explaining everything with a faint blush on her cheeks. Being royalty herself meant the king in question was her ancestor, and her family's shame was her own shame.

After the misunderstanding had been cleared up, everyone had sighed with relief, then walked through the oversized gate and into the rear palace. They were now listening to Frederica's history lesson over tea in the parlor of the large mansion that was to become Sol's residence. There was already a full roster of staff in the building,

ready to prepare tea, cook meals, and take care of everything else that Sol would need.

Building something of this scale from the ground up was impossible in a month, but Frederica, knowing there was a high chance that Sol would win the Oratorio Tangram in a day, had pressured all related departments to finish preparing this place in time no matter the cost. The structure was polished to where it looked brand-new, and every piece of furniture and ornamentation was arranged with perfection.

Sol couldn't help sighing while looking around at all the extravagance on display. "All this for me? Really?" It completely eclipsed the reception parlor in the main royal palace that had been given to him as his personal quarters, and he had already felt a little overwhelmed by that.

The way Frederica and her family saw things was that it was unacceptable for Sol's living arrangements to be more modest than their own. It was taking Sol a while to understand such considerations, though.

"Isn't it funny how the place looks lewd after hearing all that?" Julia said, grinning teasingly.

"Julia!" cried Reen in protest, as Frederica and Eliza reflexively blushed and looked down.

Indeed, this palace was where the past king had indulged in every pleasure of the flesh. As citizens of Emelia, Sol, Reen, Julia, and Eliza had all heard the stories and knew of the Great Bath Palace by name. There were countless racy ones with a bath as the stage, and needless to say, given that they involved someone whose alias was actually "King of Debauchery," each was steamier than the one before. The thought that they were in the very place where those stories had happened was bringing certain imaginations to life, mainly with Sol and the girls in the characters' places.

To prevent her mind from running any further into the gutter, Frederica changed gears and cleared her throat. "*Ahem.* So, construction of your city will begin as soon as possible. Unfortunately, it will take at least a full year to make it habitable. During that time, would you kindly consider putting up with this as

your temporary place of residence?”

“I mean, I don’t mind, but doesn’t it cost a lot to maintain?”

If Emelia was willing to do so much for him, Sol wasn’t going to turn it down. His only concern was that keeping the rear palace running was going to cost an amount that even he, an adventurer who had obtained enough success to allow himself some modicum of luxury, would consider preposterous.

“Most of the work is simply an extension of what is being done for the main palace, so it isn’t that big of a burden. The more important consideration is that, since you won the Oratorio Tangram, a certain standard will now be expected from you going forward.”

“Ah... Well, I guess there’s no helping it, then. It’s not like I’m actually opposed to the arrangement.”

“Thank you very much, my lord.”

After having accepted Frederica’s suggestion and agreeing to take an active role in continental politics, Sol understood that he needed to look the part. His position was going to require a certain level of quality when it came to his clothes, mannerisms, speech, and living style. It wasn’t like he was sworn to a life of destitution—he had treated himself every now and then in between jobs back when he was an adventurer. If the royal family considered the cost of maintaining the rear palace a drop in the bucket, then he would gratefully accept their offer.

Frederica continued. “As Fritz said earlier, this place is to serve as both your temporary residence and your rear palace. You can make whatever changes you wish, but may I first go over the current arrangements?”

Seeing no other choice, Sol said, “Um...sure, go ahead.”

As expected of a former emperor, Fritz had immediately understood what this place was. Being a guy himself, he had firmly refused to set foot inside. When Sol looked confused, Fritz had whispered, “This is meant to be your rear palace” in a voice loud enough for others to hear, then jauntily walked off with a straight face toward the quarters that Frederica had prepared for him inside the royal palace. Therefore, he was no longer present.

Now that they were getting into the nitty-gritty of the rear palace,

Reen and Eliza, who were going to enter it, couldn't help blushing too. Julia had another one of her usual teasing grins on her face, while Luna and Aina'noa were fully occupied with devouring the endless supply of top-grade tea and snacks.

The first thing Frederica explained was that not only did the Great Bath Palace have an enormous number of baths, it also had nearly the same number of residences in a variety of sizes. The number wasn't quite the same because some baths were open-air and installed inside large gardens and the like. In the past, all the residences had been occupied by members of the royal harem, and the king had chosen which bath to enter and which beauties to bring with him based on his whims of the day. When he felt like it, he had also gathered the entire harem in the great bath in the main residence. It took Sol and the girls all the self-control they had not to gulp at the thought of developing a similar relationship one day, albeit with fewer numbers.

Entering the main residence required express permission from Sol, and this applied even to his wives and official concubines. Conversely, he held the keys to all the residences, and no one and nothing could stop him from entering them any time he chose. New residences had been built for each new girl entering the rear palace in the past, but Reen, Frederica, and Eliza were going to live in existing ones of Sol's choosing. He was going to visit the options with the three of them later and decide based on their feedback.

As Fritz had presumed, and in line with pretty much all other rear palaces, males were forbidden from entering the grounds. This included guests, though if Sol said otherwise, then that was that. Naturally, all the servants were women. Their backgrounds had been fully vetted, and—Sol spat out his tea when he heard this—they were all fully aware that being here meant Sol could lay hands on them anytime he wished.

Lastly, once the postwar conference was over, interviews would begin for beauties from various countries wishing to be granted a place in this rear palace.

"And well, that's about everything."

"That's...more intense than I'd expected," said Julia, looking a

little taken aback.

Up until now, everyone had had a general sense that this was going to be Sol's position in the future. However, hearing all these details laid out so clearly made everything a lot more graphic. It also drove home that, since not accepting more girls wasn't an option, those already in Sol's harem had to get on with developing their relationships with him. Otherwise, they would be taken lightly by the newcomers.

In an attempt to banish the awkwardness in the air, Sol asked, "By the way, why has this place remained closed all this time?"

"That's, well...the wing that serves the same purpose in the main palace is large enough to accommodate up to ten people, so, um..."

In short, the assumption was that Sol's harem would eventually grow into at least the double digits. Until he showed up, the kings of Emelia had been sensible enough that they'd had no need for this place. Even a superpower didn't have bottomless pockets, so if the sitting king didn't care to use it, there was no need to open it.

Sensing that the air had grown even more awkward than before, Sol's face flushed red and he kicked himself inside his head. "I... I see. Right, that, uh...of course." *I've got to stop putting my foot in my mouth.*

"Also, the part not included in the 'most' that I mentioned earlier has been a bit beyond the means of our kingdom's finances these past few years."

"Really! That's unexpected," said Sol, his interest genuinely piqued. The same appeared true for Reen, Julia, and Eliza.

The rear palace being closed because even a great nation like Emelia wanted to avoid needless expenditure made sense, but its operation shouldn't have been a significant burden. Like most other enterprises, labor was probably the highest expense—the staff here were probably paid even more than usual, as being sexually available was a requirement. Even so, the total amount of their wages should have been a pittance compared to Emelia's entire economy. Therefore, it was indeed curious what cost so much to keep the Great Bath Palace running.

"In fact, we kind of want to borrow your aid in this aspect, Lord

Sol."

"What do you mean?"

Emelia had already made the decision to open the place to serve as Sol's residence and rear palace, fully aware of the burden it would be. Whatever it was that Sol's help was needed for was likely something only he could do. It surely wouldn't be as straightforward as needing money from him.

"The biggest problem is securing mana. You see, the water in all the baths here is supplied by a single magic tool."

"That's...one incredible magic tool." Understanding quickly dawned in Sol's eyes. "Ah, now I get it. You want me to fill up the magic stone powering it. Sure thing. Let's do it right now!"

"Thank you very much."

In a way, mana was indeed the most expensive product in the world, as it could only be traded in the form of magic stones dropped by monsters, which could only be killed by adventurers or soldiers. So much money was moved by dealing in magic stones that doing so was what had made it possible for the Adventurer's Guild to become a worldwide organization.

Filling the baths of the Great Bath Palace with normal water wasn't much of a challenge, as Emelia was a country with an abundance of water sources. Insisting on only using water created by magic, however, would indeed drive operational costs through the roof. That the country had actually had such resources and money for the King of Debauchery to squander in this way truly put into perspective how great a power Emelia was.

With Player in the picture, all this was practically free. Sol felt like he was being reminded again how incredible his talent was from a different angle, given its ability to so easily do something that was difficult for even a superpower nation or worldwide organization.

In any case, if mana was all that was needed, he was all for getting the Great Bath Palace fully up and running right away. There weren't only medicinal baths and hot springs here. According to accounts, there were also baths that rejuvenated the skin, lessened fatigue, and—if legends were to be believed—even made those who entered them younger. Both Sol and the girls were already brimming

with interest. This was especially true of Frederica, who had known about them from a young age while perusing royal records and had dreamed of entering all the baths despite knowing it would never happen.

When the group reached the great bath, their jaws dropped at how massive it was. Sol promptly filled the magic stone in question with mana, and water flooded the bath and burst from the fountains. The sight of the sheer volume of water overflowing in waterfalls of all designs and sizes lived up to every fanciful description of this place.

Sol's eyes widened. "Now, this is just..."

"Incredible," breathed Reen.

"Royals sure do things on a completely different scale," said Julia, stunned at the thought of how much money the King of Debauchery must have spent to keep this magic tool running every night without Sol's power.

There was no comment from Eliza, who was so shocked at the drastic difference between what she was seeing and the life she had been living until recently that she looked like her soul had left her body. Frederica was silent too, but out of uncontrollable excitement. She was so moved by being able to see with her own two eyes what she had only read about before that she was shaking with her hands clasped together.

In contrast, the All Dragon and the Elven Queen frolicked like children, one whooping and one singing a joyful note, their pride as a dragon and an elf thrown out the window. It seemed like the large amount of mana-rich water was affecting their base instincts. Someone who only saw them now and when they had been stuffing their faces with tea and snacks a little earlier would never have imagined them as monsters who ruled over destruction and rejuvenation.

When the pair innocently jumped into the main bath, Sol shouted, "Hey! Luna and Aina'noa, no getting in with your clothes on!"

Despite how ecstatic the All Dragon was, her master's words were absolute, even if they were somewhat off-point, so she immediately

replied, “Okay!” and erased her clothes. Seeing that, the Elven Queen chortled with mirth and followed suit with zero hesitation. Though they looked like girls, given their true identities, they didn’t have a shred of misgiving about being naked.

“Riiiight... I see. So that’s how you take it.” Sol couldn’t find it in himself to scold the two any further, as they had actually listened to him...in a way. He saw the two as little girls—the elf was a bit borderline, but still—and therefore wasn’t all that bothered about seeing them naked as long as they weren’t directly clinging to him. Still, the situation left him clutching his head in consternation.

Reen walked up with crimson cheeks and shored up her courage. “Um...Sol, may we get in too?”

The looks of pure gratitude on Frederica’s and Eliza’s faces sent Julia into a fit of giggles that she desperately fought to keep down. Having determined that her position didn’t allow her to make the same request, she had had to leave the task up to her dear friend.

“Based on what Frederica said earlier, I would have to join you, though...” Sol said, aware that he was being a bit mean.

Flushing an even deeper shade of red, Reen snapped, “You think I don’t know?!”

Of course, even Sol understood that Reen’s request didn’t carry any sexual meaning and was coming purely from the desire to enter a magical bath touted by Emelia’s history books. If half the effects that it was claimed to give were real, any girl would want to dive in. Even Sol did, and he was a guy.

“Well, as long as you don’t act like Luna or Aina’noa, I guess it’s fine.”

Of course, getting naked as a group all of a sudden was too tall an order. But thankfully, they had the foundation suits made by Gawain. Thinking that these would make perfect attire for baths, Sol gave his permission for all of them to bathe together.

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“Oh no, I totally underestimated this...”

Being a guy, it had taken Sol no time to shrug out of everything

besides his foundation suit and slip into the water. However, he had so badly underestimated what was going to happen that he couldn't help but admit it out loud.

Almost right after he got in, Luna and Aina'noa had come over to cling to him, as expected. However, the fact that he himself wasn't naked and the steam that already filled the spacious room allowed him to enjoy himself without being too bothered. He even felt relaxed enough to think, *This sure is a great soak.*

Just as enough time had passed that he was starting to wonder why it was taking the girls so long to simply take off their clothes, they appeared and blew his expectations out of the water. After all the experiments and training that he had done with them, not to mention today's battle, he'd thought he had gotten somewhat used to seeing them in their foundation suits. Unfortunately, that assumption had led him to let his guard down, though not from overconfidence. The suits did look like mere body paint, but the fact was that the wearer wasn't actually naked. They covered all the important bits, and though they were glossy and revealed the wearer's silhouette, they did a pretty good job of obfuscating curves and lines in the absence of vigorous movement.

What Sol did not expect was for the suits to react to the mana in the water. As a result, the suits had assumed the respective colors of the girls' magical signatures as if they were in battle—blue for Reen, white for Frederica, pink for Julia, and scarlet for Eliza. The range of color alongside the original glossiness of the material conveyed a three-dimensionality so bold as to be almost a punch in the face. Lamentably, what had been obscured when the suits were black was now visible down to the smallest detail.

To make matters worse, the steam and the girls' own sweat were beading on their skin and suits alike. The beads of water occasionally sliding down or dripping off them made the sight incredibly arousing. Needless to say, Sol was instantly rendered unable to leave the water.

"Lord Sol? I'm sorry, d-did you say something?" asked Frederica as the others groaned in embarrassment.

Though the girls had gotten in, they were keeping their distance,

clearly feeling just as abashed as Sol was. Perhaps they wanted to get as close as Luna and Aina'noa were, but they didn't have the courage. Like him, they lowered themselves until the water reached their necks and didn't move an inch afterward. The combined effect of knowing that they were being looked at and clearly seeing the lines of Sol's body through his suit was proving very stimulating.

Like most guys, Sol didn't feel particularly embarrassed about his upper body being seen. However, due to being an adventurer, he had a well-toned form. The foundation suit was doing to his silhouette the same thing that it was doing to the girls', and they were having the same difficulty keeping themselves from staring at the way the sweat and condensation was dripping off it.

No matter how spacious the bath was, the awareness that they were sharing it affected both Sol and the girls greatly. Seeing each other being embarrassed made them feel even more embarrassed in a feedback loop, further amplifying their emotions.

"Still, what a place, right? I won't be able to live here, but would it be fine if I come to visit Reen?"

Having had her fill of fun, Julia was now offering a helping hand. She was in high spirits, seeing that the others were fully aware that living here meant they could enter a physical relationship any day. She didn't feel all that bothered about revealing her form, as she understood that Sol no longer had any romantic interest in her, and she wasn't really naked. In fact, she was so unfazed that she could even tease Sol for being embarrassed about reacting to her appearance despite not seeing her in that way.

As the one with the most devastating silhouette and three-dimensionality in present company, however, her calling Sol out for his natural reaction as a guy was a bit unreasonable.

Eager to accept the timely help to save the atmosphere from falling into awkward silence but unable to make a call herself, Reen turned to Frederica. "Umm..."

"If you receive permission from Lord Sol, of course," said Frederica, making sure that everyone understood it was the master of the rear palace who held ultimate authority here.

"Pretty please, Sol?" Julia begged.

Quite sensibly, Sol replied, “Get permission from your own boyfriend first!”

“Booo.”

Though Sol had no designs on Julia, frequenting the rear palace would give her a bad reputation. It was already bad enough that she was seen by the public as one of his women. As such, her getting permission from the boyfriend she had gone so far as to consider marrying, Viscount Sephiras Howard Walden, was an absolute condition in Sol’s mind. If the man did say yes, though, Sol wouldn’t mind letting her tour the baths with Reen. Today was the first and last time he would enter with her.



While laughing inwardly at how Sol's answer was so characteristically him, Julia turned to Reen, Frederica, and Eliza. "So, it's suddenly become a lot easier to close that distance, girls. For all you know, Sol might come visit you of his own accord tonight." The three sank deeper into the water to hide the embarrassment of having what they were already thinking said out loud.

"You purposely said that loud enough for me to hear, didn't you?!" wailed the coward who still didn't have the nerve to get closer.

Julia brushed off the protest with a mischievous chuckle before settling in to enjoy the endurance contest that was about to begin.

Obviously, Sol wasn't going to be getting up anytime soon. On the other hand, the girls weren't bold enough to stand up either, as doing so would reveal their forms with a large amount of water dripping off their every curve. Julia readied herself mentally for a long soak and to help drag out each person who passed out in turn.

Chapter 8: The Continental Conference

In a day, the state of the world had completely crumbled, leaving a blank landscape that had to be rebuilt from the very first brick. The Holy Church, which used to hold the most power both in the open and behind the scenes, had lost all its authority in a way that couldn't be clearer. The organization and its members were both left in a situation where they had no choice but to obey every word from the Kingdom of Emelia—or rather, Sol and the Libertadores backing the country.

The whole "New Holy Church" and "True Holy Church" thing that Cardinal Ishli Duress had talked about after the Oratorio Tangram was no longer on anyone's mind, swept away by the appearance of the False Hero and his god regalia and the failed attempt to destroy the world. Regardless of the distinction, the Church had no more authority and was now just an empty name. The fanatics would be purged soon enough, while the truly devout adherents were champing at the bit to begin their pursuit of the truth about the history of the Holy Church and humanity under the auspices of and with the bottomless coffers of an absolute ruler. Those who peddled religion, desperate to regain their lost status and its associated benefits, were dedicating all their efforts to creating ties with Cardinal Ishli. By intercepting that process, Frederica was steadily separating the wheat from the chaff and reshaping the Church to her liking.

The lost technology that the Old Rulers had used in their attempt to destroy the world had seemed truly unstoppable, but that hopeless situation had been handily overturned by even greater powers: the All Dragon, wielding destruction; and the Elven Queen, wielding rejuvenation. However, the credit for saving the world went

not to that pair but to their master, Sol Rock.

By now, all individuals, organizations, and nations had no choice but to accept that they were candles in a wind before his power. Considering that the Church—which had accused him of being an apostate and started a holy war only to get pummeled—and Istekario—which had walked in lockstep with the Church—had earned his ire the most, it seemed obvious that they would be shunned in the new world being built. To make matters worse, Pope Gregorio IX and Emperor Fritz Leifelden Istekario had both died in the Oratorio Tangram, leaving their respective organizations without a leader.

Be that as it may, neither the Church nor Istekario were entirely doomed. Cardinal Ishli had quite a bit of pull within Sol's camp, and Emperor Fritz had sacrificed himself so that the Elven Queen could be released, indirectly saving the world. For those reasons, despite being the greatest culprits for the war, these two institutions had avoided being dismantled by the skin of their teeth.

In a way, those in the worst positions were the countries that had tried to take advantage of the commotion of the Oratorio Tangram to invade Emelia. Emelia had a total of eight neighbors besides Istekario, and four of them had marched over the border the moment the war began. Consequently, the winning side was now renaming the event the "Invasion of Emelia," and no one could say anything about it.

Of course, the countries in question hadn't done any actual marching. Individuals blessed by Player had effortlessly cleaned up their forces beforehand and massacred the Temple Knights accompanying them. But dead men told no tales, and the mountains of fully armored soldiers from each country, alongside the confiscated lost technology weapons, served as evidence, leaving no room for rebuttal.

Then again, it didn't really matter anymore to the four countries or the other members of the Panhuman League whether they had or had not invaded. There was no changing that they had chosen to dance to the Church's tune and pick a fight with someone who had the power to lay waste to their world in a night. In that respect, the

countries with armies that had stood underneath the Church's banner in the Invasion of Emelia were in pretty much the same situation, with the difference merely being one of degrees. They, too, had no grounds to protest the power they had witnessed in the war being turned against their homelands. Even if concrete action wasn't taken to obliterate them, they would be just as dead by simply being excluded from the Elven Queen's protection the next time another planetary upheaval occurred.

It was important to bear in mind, however, that being held responsible for the war and being made to pay reparations was only a prelude. The continent was soon going to be caught up in a surge of development fueled by the unsealing of territories and conquering of dungeons. It didn't take a genius to imagine what would happen to a country that was purposely left behind.

So, Sol was a god incarnate, and he commanded destruction in the form of the All Dragon and rejuvenation in the form of the Elven Queen. That was fine. Given his absolute power, it made sense for the rest of humanity to accept that they were powerless before him. However, the two girls who had struck down the man-made angels that had given the Church such certainty in its victory had been, until receiving Sol's blessing, mere humans. And before they'd come onto the scene, it had been the current king of Emelia and three old-timers he was close to who had fended off a bombardment meant to erase everyone but Sol and Luna before proceeding to make short work of the Temple Knights.

King Ethelweld was famous as a wielder of Absolutus, a unique skill that everyone in the world knew of, and his three companions were famous in their own ways. It wasn't a stretch to call them special. In contrast, though Frederica had a degree of popularity among Emelia's army and could think fast on her feet, the top brass of each country had always known her as a normal princess whose greatest asset was her looks.

In a month, that normal princess had grown strong enough to zip through the sky and instantaneously take out several man-made angels that outclassed territory bosses. The sight was proof that anyone who earned Sol's favor could benefit just the same.

Therefore, countries should have known better than to waste time and effort negotiating for better terms. All the more so for the four that had screwed up big-time. Rather than saying "We did prepare to invade but didn't actually do it. In fact, Emelia was the one who stepped over our border and massacred our army, so they're the ones in the wrong" and making other excuses worth less than the air used to speak them, the kings in question would have gotten more by grinding their foreheads into the ground and begging for mercy.

To be clear, this was the lowest bar, and rulers who couldn't bring themselves to do it after everything that had happened had no right to continue sitting in their seats. Their only fate was to be ousted by a mob of military personnel, financial powerhouses, and common citizens, and hung so that their countries could submit to Sol. Wiser rulers would have done whatever it took to forge an amicable relationship with him while he still acknowledged them as the representatives of their respective countries. Sure enough, many countries had already reached out to Emelia and asked to be made into vassal states in exchange for a guarantee that the ruling families and nobles could keep their positions.

The three so-called superpowers were hardly any better off. Plenty had already been said about the Istekario Empire, which had openly stood against Emelia. The Amnesphia Sovereignty, within whose borders lay the Holy City of Adrateio, that sanctuary and heart of the Holy Church, was in a precarious position for fielding the third most soldiers in the Invasion of Emelia and for having brandished "the glory of God" to further its interests far too many times. Sol would be entirely justified should he feel inclined to judge Amnesphia and the Church as a single entity.

The Poseinia Eastern Seaboard Federation was not in the clear either. On top of sending the fourth-largest army—being second to Amnesphia—it had also applied all sorts of economic sanctions to Emelia when the Holy Church had declared the kingdom an enemy of God. But now it understood why the crafty and world-wise Prince Franz had quietly accepted the high-handed measures without retaliation and therefore had no choice but to admit it had been outdone.

Contrary to Poseinia's expectations, Franz had come out on top. The Federation would have no good answer if he were to say, "I can't continue doing business with someone who reneges on their promises when we're in the lurch." In fact, if Sol ordered the Federation to be dismantled, it would fall apart in the blink of an eye. At the end of the day, it was just a gathering of medium and small countries, and self-preservation was far more important than loyalty to the Federation.

In light of all this, the entire continent, including the former superpowers, was plying Emelia with all sorts of benefits and desperately trying to curry favor with the kingdom. The global world of finance, which revolved around Poseinia, approached Franz, the first prince. The historic Amnesphia, along with the imperial office and great nobles of Istekario, the undisputed loser in the war, sought out Maximillian, the second prince, to whom they had a pipeline. The militaries of each country and various government-sponsored mercenary groups reached out to Frederica, who by now was seen as the representative of Emelia's army.

What was going on was no longer a negotiation, but simply petitions for clemency asking what it would take for Sol to spare their lives and leave them a modicum of social standing. It was indeed a good question, as he could kill any emperor and king whenever he wanted—not by assassination, but by erasing the ruler along with their entire country. There wasn't a shred of doubt in anyone's mind that he could, not after everything they had seen during the Oratorio Tangram and when the planet had been on the verge of destruction. Having a sword constantly hanging over their heads was very good motivation to be as accommodating as possible.

Furthermore, those with ties to the Church went to Cardinal Ishli, and the biggest players in each country's criminal underworld applied themselves to making contact with the newly established Eliza Syndicate, which was said to be directly under Sol. At the same time, it was all but certain that Steve Naiman would soon be installed as the general director of the worldwide Adventurer's Guild. Put simply, those with ties to Sol were now seen as the most

important people on the continent.

The most important of them all, Sol the Liberator, was no longer directly approachable. The monsters who served as his arms, the All Dragon and the Elven Queen, obviously could not be reached at will either. At first blush, Sol's childhood friends, Reen Faukner and Julia Miller, seemed much more viable, but further consideration revealed how hard it would be to make moves on them, as there was no telling what might trigger someone who had come from a backwoods village and then lived as an adventurer. The two were also fast becoming seen as Sol's mistresses, which led to distinguished persons being hesitant to get close to them.

The process of elimination left only a small handful of agents with whom negotiation could be reliably conducted: Steve Naiman, head of the Adventurer's Guild; Eliza Chantal, who controlled the underworld on Sol's orders; and the four members of Emelia's royal family, who were expected to lead the world at large going forward. In this way, it could be said that there was a dedicated channel for each class. As a result, Emelia's central government became absolutely swamped, the royal audience hall converted into a headquarters for coordination. Everyone, be they royalty, nobility, or civil servant, worked to the bone day and night alongside each other. And yet, despite being so busy that they could keel over at any moment, no one voiced anything more than lighthearted grumblings because they understood that they were living smack-dab in the middle of a major crossroads in human history.

Thanks to their efforts, all negotiations were going extremely smoothly, and it was becoming clear to the rest of the world that Sol wasn't a tyrannical ruler. Unfortunately, it was human nature to let down one's guard and grow impudent under such conditions. While Sol's side generally remained respectful and rational, the counterparties started letting hubris inform their behavior. The period between the war ending and the upcoming Continental Conference was long enough for countries to relax more than they should, and the terms that Frederica were asking for, being her ever-pragmatic self, were creating the misconception that Sol Rock was some sort of noble paragon who sought to always act righteously

and wanted to guide humanity to prosperity and greatness.

Of course, the nations readily accepted becoming vassalized and nodded to all the terms that would directly benefit Sol and Emelia. When it came to the coordination between each other, however, they got it in their heads that they had wiggle room and that it simply couldn't be helped that such deliberations took time.

Soon, the world would learn what a big mistake this was. In the international landscape of a world ruled by Sol Rock, this was very much not how he wanted countries to conduct themselves.

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Nearly a month had passed since the Invasion of Emelia. For days on end, the world's first-ever Continental Conference, attended by representatives from all over the continent, had been taking place in a large conference room in the royal palace of Emelia. In response to the "call"—in truth, a command—of the Kingdom of Emelia, foremost of the four superpowers, and the Holy Church, which was still acknowledged as the world's religious leader despite having lost the Oratorio Tangram, every country had shown up, down to the smallest dictatorships and even the self-styled ones who were little more than rulers laying claim to pieces of land.

Regardless of how they viewed it, a summons from the kingdom backed by Sol's overwhelming power could not be ignored. It was obviously a postwar conference, and Emelia was the sole winner here. This was where reparations that each country was expected to pay would be decided. Those that had sent soldiers to join God's Army had shown up as a matter of course, but the small countries without much ability to gather information, the dictatorships, and the self-styled nations had reluctantly attended after having their arms twisted by the bigger movers and shakers that they were effectively beholden to.

Istekario, Amnesphia, and Poseinia knew better than to directly protest any of the proposed terms. The same was true of other large countries only slightly weaker than the four superpowers. The current terms already promised more than enough benefits, plus

basically let everyone off the hook for participating in the Oratorio Tangram. That was clearly black in the ledgers.

With its throne empty, and branded with the reputation of having once stood in direct opposition to Sol, Istekario had the wisdom to stay quiet and accept its fate. The top brass and diplomats of other countries, however, were misinterpreting the intention of the peaceful—one could even call it overly generous—restructuring that Emelia's governing body had come up with based on Sol's wishes and had decided to push their luck. In a way, it made sense. They thought their safety was guaranteed, so they wanted to secure as much as they could without affecting that guarantee. Doing so was literally the diplomats' job profile. So when those diplomats offered to do their utmost to walk right up to the line in drawing out concessions from Emelia, their own kings and emperors, who appreciated the results they had produced to date, nodded and gave them the go-ahead.

Unfortunately, what had been the right thing to do in the past was now a fatal mistake. Now that this world had a being who was a god incarnate for all intents and purposes, what had been a given until now was no longer worth a damn. However, no one—including Emelia—truly understood what that meant. And so the conference dragged on and on, never getting close to the end result that Sol wanted.

It wasn't as if Frederica, who served as chairperson, was incapable. A conference of this scale had simply never been conducted before, plus she was too caught up in trying to remain a fair and impartial winner. As the discussion inexorably spiraled out of her control, however, the doors opened without warning. The stagnant air in the room was replaced by a fresh gust of wind as the man whom the entire continent now had no choice but to acknowledge as an absolute authority, Sol Rock, strode in.

The All Dragon was on his left arm, the Elven Queen was floating behind him with her arms wrapped around his neck, and in a sight that was fast becoming commonplace, he was followed by Reen, Julia, and Eliza, the three the world were coming to see as his lovers.

"Oh, don't worry about me. Keep talking."

Despite Sol's light tone, no one said a word. No one even tried to take advantage of the silence to push through what had been deadlocked so far. The fact that Sol was showing up out of the blue and casually dropping in on the Continental Conference—bringing his harem, no less!—spoke volumes. It indicated that not a single one of the soldiers lining the hallway outside, nor the two standing guard at the door, had been able to stop him. Everyone in the palace, from the most esteemed delegate to the lowest footman, fully understood that Sol's will was now law on this continent. And they watched with bated breath to see what he had come to do.

Without the slightest hesitation, Sol made his way to one of the lowest seats and approached a young man in loud clothing who was sipping the fruit juice he had been served and looking bored.

"Are you Prince Aul from the Septetrio Empire?"

This was the heir of the Septetrio Empire, a highly notorious dictatorship. Though Septetrio was under Poseinia's thumb and had therefore been unable to refuse the Federation's order to attend this conference, unsurprisingly, it wasn't the emperor himself who had shown up. Regardless, even the profligate prince of Septetrio knew Sol's face and power. He was also aware that he himself was just a puppet, no matter how much posturing he did, and therefore quite surprised that Sol was addressing him directly.

"Y-Yes I am," the prince confirmed with a frown, "but whaaAHHHHH!"

The moment he answered Sol's question, all four of his limbs were snapped, and he slid off his chair and began writhing on the floor, splashing tears of blood and saliva everywhere. Then Luna's left eye glowed red, and the fat prince who now looked like a beached whale sank into her shadow.

Shocked silence filled the conference room, save for the sound of Sol's footsteps as he walked to the next person. He performed the same confirmation repeatedly, gradually going through the representatives of all the dictatorships and self-styled countries. Some tried to run, others had their legs give out on them, but every last one was eventually swallowed by Luna's shadow. This included

Hykalion and the three other countries said to have attacked Emelia during the Oratorio Tangram.

Though Luna looked like little more than an adorable therianthrope child, those present understood with every fiber of their being that she could snuff out their lives as easily as stomping on an ant. Despite her appearance, she had handily defeated the god regalia used by the Hero sent by the Old Rulers as a trump card in their quest to end the world. Dragons had always been in an entirely different realm than humans on the natural totem pole.

After the last person sank into oblivion, Sol turned to those remaining with a bright smile. "Well then, that should be everyone we didn't need to listen to all taken care of. Oh? Why did the discussion stop?" There wasn't much time left, and he was genuinely puzzled about why people weren't making the most of it.

In a matter of minutes, everyone realized that Sol was not a worldly person looking to be seen as a hero, but something beyond human understanding. That was the only way to explain his absolute lack of hesitation in killing those who, all other considerations aside, were there as representatives of their countries. The problem wasn't that he had the ability to do so but that the act was so barbaric that it was unthinkable for someone with whom intelligent conversation was possible. That he hadn't even blinked conveyed beyond words that he was a real monster and the world had completely misunderstood him all this time.

As a natural result, silence continued hanging in the room. Sol shrugged and turned to the person chairing the conference. "Frederica, may I say a few words?"

"I deeply apologize for failing to live up to your expectations, Lord Sol," said Frederica with a pale face, understanding that Sol had shown up because he had run out of patience. The fear that her inability to lead a simple meeting would lead to him tiring of her was burning a hole through her stomach.

A small handful of representatives seemed to have reached the same conclusion and smiled inwardly. Sol's power might be unshakable, but Emelia's dominant position wasn't.

"No worries. I know you did your best, and I'm thankful. It's just

that I heard you're not the only one being held up by this conference. Apparently, General Director Steve and Pope Ishli are also being asked to attend. In that case, I thought I should come too."

Sol's flustered reaction and smile instantly allayed Frederica's concerns and assured her that she had been reading too much into his question. His attitude made it clear that he still had full trust in her and that Emelia's position hadn't shifted in the slightest. That said, the conference being delayed so much was indeed a problem. By clarifying that he wasn't holding Frederica responsible, he was indirectly shining a spotlight on the fools who had been driving the discussion in circles to further their own agendas.

The truth was that Sol had had enough of seeing Frederica sighing in their new quarters and therefore decided to make a brief appearance. And since he was here, he thought he might as well also check off something that he had been meaning to do.

He turned to the rest of the room with a bright smile. "Now, can someone tell me why nothing's been decided after almost a month of discussion?"

The air froze. Sol had said in no uncertain terms that he wasn't going to blame Frederica, which meant the blame fell on the representatives instead.

"Um, Lord Sol...m-may we ask what happened to those who just disappeared?" asked the head delegate of Poseinia, which actually controlled many of the dictatorships and self-styled countries by providing them with military and financial support. From the very first day, Poseinia had assumed the stance of being in full agreement with the proposed terms while having its unofficial vassals make fools of themselves by arguing for all manner of concessions. Unfortunately, the security that the country felt in employing this strategy was making it overconfident. Under normal circumstances, it would have known better than to pose a question in response to a question from someone who could squash it like a bug at any time.

"That's a secret," Sol said cheerfully. "Those Luna just got rid—ahem, showed out—are representatives of countries who can't abide by the most basic rules of humanity. Those countries, as well as their

armies, ruling families, and nobles, have already been subjugated. No harm will come to their people, if that's what you're worried about. For the foreseeable future, their territories will be managed as Emelian exclaves."

The puppet masters of the countries in question felt their blood run cold. They did not know it yet, but their nations had been taken over by operatives from the Eliza Syndicate a short while ago under Sol and Frederica's orders. Everything had been conducted in secret to prevent confusion among the citizenry, and as soon as staff from Emelia arrived to set up a Government-General, the countries would indeed be ruled as Emelian exclaves going forward. Given that the citizens had been living in fear of their tyrants until now, they weren't expected to put up any significant resistance when provided with a large number of supplies and being overseen by powerful peacekeeping corps. After all, tyrannical rule based on simple strength as opposed to deeply held beliefs was brittle in the face of even greater strength. That was why Sol and Frederica had seen the Church and not the numerous countries of great national power as the biggest threat.

"If those who hold the leash of these countries have anything to say, now would be the time."

Apparently, Sol was pretending not to know which countries had been pulling the strings of those he had erased. Therefore, he was inviting them to voice any complaints they had.

"Looks like we're all good. In that case, this matter is now closed."

All the countries, no matter how great they were, had no choice but to stay silent. Outwardly, they maintained a stance of caring about human rights, respecting each other's sovereignty, and sharing the international community's value system. If they wanted to maintain that image, there was nothing they could say about the lawless countries they had funded to do their dirty work and fight their proxy wars being put down like wild dogs.

Conversely, by staying silent, they were indirectly getting a guarantee from Sol that he was letting them off the hook. It was safe to assume that "this matter is closed" meant he wasn't planning

on making the puppet masters also take responsibility for the atrocities committed by their proxies. In that case, it was no business of theirs that the despots and self-styled rulers were being purged. A lizard's tail existed to be cut off, after all.

Of course, the conference was still far from being over.

"All right, let's bring the conversation back. Frederica, have the terms we finalized been presented already?"

"Yes, my lord. On day one."

The main reason the Continental Conference had dragged on for so long was the squabbling between the countless puppet nations, with some of them intentionally pretending to be idiots who couldn't read the room. Despite knowing which country was behind each of them, Frederica had tried to deal with them respectfully and therefore lost control of the proceedings. The naivety of thinking that everyone wished for human development, as well as guilt from the thought that she—and Emelia by association—had obtained her overwhelmingly superior position through sheer luck, had dulled her usually keen senses.

"Put another way, there are countries that are unhappy about what we've already decided on. Is that correct?"

The situation could indeed be framed as one in which idiots were taking a mile when Frederica had given them an inch. To their great detriment, the attendees were hopelessly lacking in the ability to imagine how they came across an omnipotent being who could erase them at will when they kept on clamoring for rights and whatnot. They had lost a war. Their position was one in which all they could do was nod and accept the terms they were given, even if it meant handing over their countries. That was the only way for the weak to survive.

Those who held their pride and rights higher than their lives were free to fight for them and die. However, those present did not have the resolve to do so and were solely presuming on Emelia's mercy and magnanimity. Sol wasn't all that angry with or repulsed by them; he had simply tired of dealing with them.

Understanding that an ice-cold blade lurked within Sol's disregard, Frederica hesitated a little to reply. The Liberator was not

a terrifying man, but he was one who could make appalling decisions without batting an eye.

"That's...correct."

Saying "everything will be finalized soon" would have brought about the best outcome, but Frederica couldn't bring herself to do it. The moment Sol had shown up, the authority to make calls had returned to him. Judging by the representatives' pale faces, they understood this too.

"I see. I admit that I don't know much about politics, so there's not much I can say about our terms." Instead of being angry, Sol heaved a deep sigh that fully expressed that he had stopped caring. "Never mind, then. We have no more need of the countries that don't agree with us."

That simple line, said quietly and dispassionately, left the puny humans present feeling death so keenly that they forgot to breathe. The same was true even of Frederica, Reen, Julia, and Eliza. The torrent of bloodlust that promptly began rolling off the All Dragon and the Elven Queen in waves eloquently conveyed that they saw humans as little more than ants, and that they would not hesitate to eliminate everything and everyone that their liege deemed worthless. This demonstration of strength was far more persuasive than any well-worded speech. The representatives understood with their souls, not just their heads, how lowly their race was in this world.

Luna turned her blazing red eye on the petrified humans. "My lord controls me, the All Dragon, and has freed Aina'noa, the Elven Queen. As a result, the demihumans now follow him, and the therianthropes are under his protection. Through that which you call the Oratorio Tangram, he brought those peddling your religion to their knees, and they now worship him as God incarnate. The World Tree has been revived, once again filling the planet with outer mana. Your people extol my lord, as they should, and look forward to the coming of a new age of peace and abundance."

Without tempering her bloodlust in the slightest, Luna continued in a cold voice.

"You politicians are the only ones who still do not see. Where you

should be prostrating yourselves, here you are endlessly harping on about your countries and individual rights without a care, keeping one of my lord's beloved fettered through this nonsensical 'conference' as if it's a matter of course. You don't seem to understand how dire your positions are, so I shall lay it out for you. Now that the world is once again filled with outer mana, your race, the human race, has returned to being the weakest race. All demihuman races can raze your great cities to the ground without breaking a sweat. They haven't done so—*can't* do so—only because my lord sits above them and has expressly forbidden it."

Having the truth that everyone present had already understood on an instinctual level put into words was a powerful slap in the face. Humans were no longer the dominant race. Besides Sol Rock, who just happened to be a human, all others were pitiful weaklings. The demihumans now had the strength to make them pay for the millennium of disgrace they had suffered, but they were holding themselves back. Not because they were choosing to take the high road, but because Sol, who still outclassed them in every way, refused to sanction it.

Truthfully, Luna believed that after mistreating other races solely for being different, humanity ought to accept the same treatment when the shoe was on the other foot. However, since her liege, to whom she had sworn absolute obedience, wished otherwise, it wasn't her place to do anything about it.

Still, that was why she felt the need to spell things out: The moment Sol withdrew his protection from the humans, they would be forced to atone for the cruelties they had inflicted the past thousand years. They had earned the ire of countless races, every single one powerful enough to crush them into dust regardless of their needlessly vast numbers. They would be made to regret being born human, with the sweet release of death being a mercy they could not hope to receive. They were on very thin ice with Sol, who just might forsake them at any moment.

Luna wasn't fond of generalizing more than necessary, but her audience represented the various countries on the continent. As such, it seemed appropriate to threaten all of them as a single

entity. And if her liege had no intention of taking back his statement about certain countries being of no use to him, she thought she might as well start with the members who were presently in her company. Thus the bloodlust.

"Luna."

"I apologize, my lord."

The way that the air, which had seemed so thick that no one could move or breathe in it, dissipated with a single word from Sol definitely proved that he did indeed rule the monsters. As oxygen reached the representatives' brains again, they realized that the words that had set Luna off implied that Sol was seriously willing to give up on every country other than Emelia in the worst-case scenario. That meant him withdrawing his protection from all of them, leaving them entirely at the mercy of the demihumans they had stepped on and persecuted for a thousand years. Worse, if an Astral of the All Dragon—the same one that had defeated the Church's ultimate trump card in an instant—showed up above their countries and burned their capitals to the ground, no one would be able to save them. They had been playing with fire while standing on top of enough gunpowder to vaporize their domains a thousand times over, and they were cognizant of it only now.

"Um, just to clarify, I didn't mean anything deeper when I said I don't need your countries. Luna painted a pretty violent picture, talking about leveling your cities and whatnot, but don't worry, we won't go that far. We'll just permanently break off relations with you here and now."

Many of those listening felt cracks appearing in the expressions they were trying to maintain. In contrast, the rueful look on Luna's face relaxed as she realized Sol wasn't chastising her for misreading his intentions and needlessly throwing bloodlust around.

Of the terms that Frederica was asking for, many set a minimum standard for building an international community. They were a bit strict, perhaps even idealistic, and frankly unrealistic under the old state of affairs. However, they were logical and by no means impossible to abide by, nor were they unreasonable impositions for authority's sake.

Those who chose to break off relations with Sol would not get to enjoy the protections offered by these international rules. Assuming they were making their decision after talking things out, attempting to negotiate, and ultimately realizing that there were differences that could not be bridged, there was no further need for either side to respect the other. It would become more of a "live and let live" dynamic where they both did their own thing and avoided interfering with each other. But this was much more of a threat than a choice. Those present were all smart enough to see that, thus the drop in temperature.

Seeing that his message had been received loud and clear, Sol added, "Frankly, all I really want is the freedom to conquer dungeons and unseal territories with my companions. I don't care much about anything else. Frederica, however, is trying to make this happen in a way that also benefits everyone else as much as possible. She and I will not waste energy on those who don't need her consideration."

Sol sounded mild-mannered, but his words conveyed heartfelt loathing for those who sought to take advantage of Frederica's civility. In other words, he was threatening to get rid of all the uppity scumbags in the room and place the entire continent under Emelia's direct control. He had no need to respect the sovereignty of their countries, and since it would be too much trouble to massacre all their citizens, he simply had to work his way down from the top until he reached someone who wouldn't cause trouble for her. He wouldn't even break a sweat doing so, given how much power he had now.

In less than an hour, all the terms that had been proposed on the first day were passed unanimously, bringing the first-ever Continental Conference to a close. And thus, the new Era Gran Magicka began with those who had thought they controlled the world getting an unforgettable lesson on how their race was now the weakest on the planet.

Side Story: Demon Lord Alshunna

The curtains fell on the Continental Conference without any further disruptions. That night, Sol and his inner circle were gathered in his residence at the Great Bath Palace. Naturally, the topic of conversation was the day's proceedings.

With Sephiras's readily given permission, Julia was dropping by almost every day. As a general rule, however, she returned home to the Waldens' every night and stayed over at Reen's place only once in a while, so Sol didn't see it as much of a problem. Since Julia's social standing was now much higher than Sephiras's, his family had opted to prioritize maintaining an amicable relationship with Sol as long as nothing untoward was happening. Since the arrangement worked for the couple in question, neither Sol nor Frederica had any intention of chastising Julia for frequenting the rear palace.

"Goodness, I swear I felt my heart literally jumping into my mouth!" Although she had only had her usual digestif, Frederica was rambling more than the others for once. The terror that Sol had instilled in her that day was still raw in her mind.

Sol, whose intention had been to lend a helping hand, smiled awkwardly. "It wasn't *that* bad, was it?"

If he acted like a tyrant on a rampage, Frederica would gain influence by reining him in. In that respect, he had indeed helped her. And the conference had wrapped up pretty quickly after his visit.

"I don't know..." said Julia pensively. "I think you need to better understand how terrifying Lu's bloodlust is."

"That's... Yeah, I think so too," Reen agreed.

This was feedback that could only be given by Sol's two childhood friends. As they said, all good things should be in moderation. He deserved a little criticism after going so far that even those on his side had gotten scared for real.

Seeing Sol looking crestfallen, Eliza blurted, "But it gave me the

chills! In a good way!”

“Yes. That I don’t deny,” said Frederica promptly.

They both loved Sol’s scary side too. To elaborate, they felt a somewhat perverted delight at being on the receiving end of his frightfulness and unreasonableness. The way he wasn’t fazed in the least when Luna was angry made him that much more terrifying, and for some reason, thinking about it thrilled them.

Julia recoiled visibly. “Whoa...”

“I-I was plain scared! Just saying!” Reen asserted.

Sol was actually the one most weirded out by this side of Frederica and Eliza, so Reen was making sure that he knew she wasn’t like them in that way. The four girls were actually quite well-balanced in terms of personality.

“I would never harm those my lord holds dear,” said Luna indignantly. She didn’t like hearing that those from Sol’s inner circle had been scared of her, as it meant that she was a failure of a dragon who had done something against her liege’s will, which in turn meant her liege was a master who had failed to keep his servant in line. If the evaluation had come from someone other than Reen and Julia, she would have done a lot more than protest verbally.

“Oh, we know, Lu dear,” Julia replied. “It’s just that we naturally feel fear when a great, powerful dragon lets out her aura, even if it’s not directed at us.”

“Is that how it is?”

Sol inclined his head. “Is she really that scary?”

“That’s right, it wouldn’t make sense for my lord to fear me!” cried Luna, and Aina’noa echoed her with a cheerful note.

The sight of Luna’s Astral or Augoeides roaring was one thing, but Sol couldn’t really see her young girl form as scary. His honest response was “But she’s so adorable!” This was because he had been the first to call Lunvemt Nachtfelia’s true name, and she had wanted him to do so from the bottom of her heart. For all other living beings, however, even her fragment was more than enough to evoke true fear.

One of the few exceptions was the Elven Queen, who had

similarly accepted Sol as her master. She had caught her good mood from Luna, who was brimming with gratification after Sol had made it clear he didn't fear her.

Since the Elven Queen had been freed, she and the All Dragon had been clinging to Sol almost every waking moment. Since Luna didn't seem to take issue with her presence, the two were turning out to be rather compatible. They were perfect the way they were, as avatars of destruction and rejuvenation always at Sol's fingertips —avatars who were acting like little pets in the form of young girls, that was. At the moment, they were practically purring with contentment, one from having her head petted and one from being tickled under the chin.

Suddenly, a display window from Ishli appeared, instantly sweeping away the carefree atmosphere. "Lord Sol, I apologize for interrupting your personal time, but we have an urgent situation."

Apparently, the devinians the Church had kept locked up to dispatch at will had escaped and fled north to a fallen island that had been part of the Floating Continent a thousand years ago. Once there, they had declared that Demon Lord Alshunna, whom they all served, had been resurrected and that they were declaring war on humanity in her name.

When word of this spread later, it would throw the Holy Church, Emelia's top brass, and every other country into mayhem. This was also true of Sol's group now, who were peering into the same display window with him. Sol himself, however, felt a grin come over his face, while at the same time, a warlike glint shone in the All Dragon's and Elven Queen's eyes. The third card had come knocking of its own accord. For the boy who wanted to rule all the monsters, this was cause for celebration.



Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up volume three 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 third volume. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

It's my first time ever putting out a third volume in a series. I truly have no words. Just one more time, thank you.

This volume is mainly about Sol getting rid of all the obstacles in human society that lie in the way of him taking on the world's dungeons and territories, a large part of which is the clash with the Holy Church. Consequently, it's quite action-packed. I had fun writing it, so I hope you had fun reading it. Like volume two, I once again got to include content here that I couldn't fit into the version on *Syosetsuka ni Narou* that I'm updating daily. My pen practically flew of its own accord.

I'm particularly happy that I managed to flesh out the two royal guards, Sol's new residence, and the emperor of Istekario. This is especially true of the emperor, whom I feel I rather wasted in the *Syosetsuka ni Narou* version. Now that he's a proper character, you can look forward to his story being developed more in the future.

Having NAKAMURA 8 draw the man-made Hero, his god regalia, and Frederica's Numbers armament makes me happier than anything. This is definitely one of the best parts of a novelization. It's so moving seeing the characters I created being given shape by a pro. After volumes one and two, he's once again delivered an unbelievably cool cover, colored frontispiece, and various scene illustrations. I'm so glad that I get to enjoy them all with the readers. I'll do my very best so that Sol and his companions' story will continue being blessed by NAKAMURA 8's brush. If it happens, I'll be counting on your support.

Going forward, this version is going to deviate significantly from the version on *Syosetsuka ni Narou*. As is obvious to those who have read ahead there, the next monster to appear is the Vacant Demon Lord, not the Lifeless Divine Beast. Due to outer mana once again filling the world, the devinians, who have long been enemies of humanity, have regained their strength and will be squaring off against Sol. More than a few countries decide to side with the devinians, once again throwing the international community into great upheaval. And as promised, you will also get to see Sol's group obtain a more permanent home. With the fourth volume on *Syosetsuka ni Narou* as a base, I will show you Sol and the devinians developing a very different relationship.

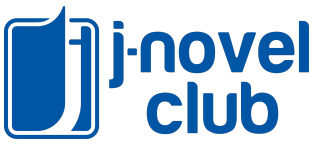
To wrap up this afterword, I promise you, dear reader, that I will give it my all to get volume four into your hands.











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by Sin Guilty

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