The Boy Who Ruled the Monsters

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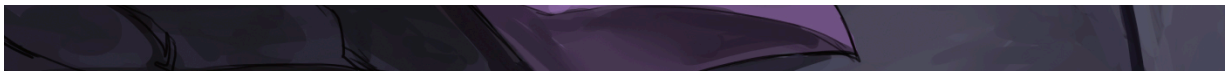
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“I am the consciousness of Demon Lord Alshunna. While I’m trapped inside this vessel, I call myself Little Alshunna.”
A small figure crawled out from the front of Creed’s cassock and, with much huffing and puffing, climbed to his shoulder and leaned back self-importantly.




Vacation on
a private
island!


“I’m starting now!
Rubedo
qualia!”
Sol was so
excited that he blurted out,
“This is incredible!”
His real lips only moved a little,
but because his senses were more
concentrated on the Astral,
it opened its jaws and
let out a deafening roar.



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Chapter 1: Biblioteca

Sol was visiting the cradle of the Holy Church's faith, the Holy City of Adrateio, for the first time in his life. It was a self-governed area within the borders of one of the four continental superpowers, the Amnesphia Sovereignty. Normally, a visit required a complicated application process and a hefty tourist charge under the guise of a donation. Under the current circumstances, however, Sol and his group were naturally exempt from both. By using the ley lines unlocked by the release of the Elven Queen, his group was able to teleport straight to a nearby ley line wellspring, then fly the rest of the way on the back of an Astral projection. The entire journey took less than an hour.

The sight of a massive dragon approaching from the sky and landing with her liege on her back caused a few scattered commotions even though great effort had gone into informing all of the city's residents ahead of time. This wasn't surprising, as dragons assaulting a settlement had always symbolized inescapable death and obliteration since the times of yore.

The purpose of this visit was to hear an explanation from the Holy Church brass regarding the recent uprising of the devinians that had been under their control. Sol was also obliging a fervent request from the former cardinal turned acting pope, Ishli Duress.

This was to be the first time that Sol Rock, now considered God incarnate, was officially visiting a country. Regardless of his reasons, the fact that this was happening carried enormous political meaning. Needless to say, whoever had gotten him to come and the manner in which he appeared before the normal citizenry mattered a lot. Consequently, Ishli was nearly beside himself with delight that Sol was riding the All Dragon's Astral and descending from a height that rendered the Holy City's impressive walls moot.

Every resident of the city, except for newborns, was looking up

with slack jaws, burning into their eyes the sight of the new ruler of the world who had been the talk of the town recently. They now understood to their very bones that all the rumors were true, that it had been no exaggeration that Sol had crushed the forces and the power of the former Holy Church, even though it once had the power to call down divine punishment from the sky at will. Against someone who commanded such overwhelming strength, everyone and everything that stood in opposition, be they an individual or an organization, would be wiped clean off the face of the planet. That included this city, Adrateio, any time he felt like it.

He had every reason to, as their former ruler had branded him an apostate, picked a fight with him, and been squashed like an ant. As citizens of the Holy City, everyone here had been complicit and therefore had no grounds to protest being subjected to the same fate. The strong, by right of their strength, had every right to impose anything they wished on the weak, no matter how unreasonable. If a person under someone else's thumb had a problem with it, it was simply a matter of getting stronger themselves.

The Holy City's residents had had their fair share of doubts regarding Ishli, the man who had assumed the position of acting pope in the blink of an eye. However, the higher-ups of the Church had fallen into line down to the last man. Everyone else therefore had passively accepted Ishli's nomination, restricting themselves to only the occasional word of dissatisfaction. And now, they were glad of their caution—or cowardice—from the bottom of their hearts. They were alive now. They were still allowed to live solely because Acting Pope Ishli Duress was a member of Sol's faction. And they understood why the brass had capitulated early, figuring that they had known the truth of things before the common man.

The knights who had returned alive from the Oratorio Tangram refused to talk about what they had seen on the battlefield even with their family members. If they wanted to stay alive, they had to keep mum, and everyone else understood that and therefore didn't press. Some of the knights had probably said too much already and expressed their doubt regarding Ishli and Sol too vocally during their brief moment of panic.

Ishli, on his knees and wearing a pope's white inner and outer cassock—often simply called cassock and ryasa, respectively—said sonorously, "Lord Sol, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for honoring my request. Welcome to the Holy City of Adrateio, the true heart of our faith. We believers have all been eagerly awaiting your blessed presence with bated breath!"

The garden here was massive and ornate, befitting a Holy See that looked more like a palace than anything. However, Ishli wasn't shouting so that he could be heard by Sol, who was deceptively close due to the overwhelming size of Luna's Astral. It was a performance to broadcast his current status to the citizens of Adrateio, the world's most devout believers, who were gathered around him.

Before Ishli's greeting was done, Sol, Luna, and Aina'noa teleported over to abruptly stand before his kneeling form. "Hi there, Cardinal—I mean, Acting Pope Ishli. It's been a while. Thank you for preparing everything on such short notice."

The All Dragon's Astral continued hanging in the sky, giant and looming, with no one having a clue that its true identity was the brown-skinned therianthrope girl clinging to the cuff of Sol's sleeve. Even Ishli, who thought he knew how powerful Sol was, was taken by surprise.

The reaction of those witnessing teleportation for the first time was far more dramatic. On top of surprise, they emanated fearful awe toward someone clearly loved by God.

"I am unworthy of such words." Ishli roused himself, remembering that he shouldn't be wasting time with his jaw on the ground like the masses. This was a precious opportunity to show off the fact that he was in a position to be addressed casually by Sol.

He hadn't assumed the position of acting pope only because those above him had ruined themselves and left the spot vacant. He was there because Sol wanted him to be, wanted *him* to lead the Church in its moment of crisis and protect its long-standing faith. The reason he still called himself "acting pope" was to broadcast that only Sol had the authority to officially appoint a new pope. He believed that it was important to maintain these public displays

precisely because he was backed by such great authority.

Ishli wanted to make sure that his name went down in history and, if possible, also wanted stability for the rest of his life. These were self-serving desires, but if a ton of people benefited too, then no one could complain. And there was no benefit more effective than that tied to Ishli being pope. Before coming here, Sol had heard all about Ishli's intentions from Frederica and was ready to play along. If he was to challenge dungeons with peace of mind, he needed the world to be peaceful and stable. The Church was a large concern, so if Ishli could help keep it under control, then Sol was all for helping him.

"Let's get right to it. May I speak to those who were overseeing the devinians?"

"Of course, my lord. Right away!"

Ishli had done his homework. By initiating contact with Frederica and other members of the Emelian royal family as often as possible, he had been doing his best to understand Sol's character. By now, he knew that bringing up a fancy welcoming banquet or an ostentatious ceremony while standing in this ornate plaza would only earn Sol's displeasure.

Ishli had clawed his way up to the position of cardinal alone. He was by no means incapable—in fact, he was quite a man of talent. He understood more than anyone that, as a being of absolute power now lived on this planet, dedicating all his efforts toward realizing that being's wishes was the most surefire way to obtain the fame he wished for. If he wanted to flaunt his authority, he wasn't to do it to his master, Sol, but those his master allowed him to stand over. He had already gotten a more impactful show than he had expected, so it was time to swiftly move on and do what would please Sol most.

Sol's primary goal this visit was to deal with the devinians' uprising, and he was playing along with Ishli's little charade merely as a side objective. Understandably, he would get annoyed if more time than necessary was being spent on that.

When Sol's group reached a line of pale-faced former brass of the Church, Ishli said apologetically, "To clarify, however, the overseer was the previous pope himself, and these people were his aides.

They know more than me, but I cannot guarantee that they would be able to answer your questions to your liking."

Ishli's caveat wasn't to protect these people, nor was he lying. He was simply conveying the truth. They possessed a certain degree of knowledge regarding how the surviving devinians had been stored, activated, and employed, but despite their positions, they had never known enough or been granted the authority to actually do so. And Ishli, having been a mere rural cardinal until recently, knew even less. In other words, authority had been very heavily centralized in the Church. This was why all members of the clergy with ambition wanted to become the pope so badly.

The number of devinians under the Church's "protection" had been around a thousand, give or take. The pope had worked his miracles—most likely lost technology—on them so that they were always unconscious, with no ability to wake up on their own. And yet, they had somehow woken up all at once, then blown away the magic-sealing devices meant to control their powers. Upon gathering at some ruins north of the Amnesphia Sovereignty said to be a part of a continent that had once floated in the sky, they had then declared the resurrection of the Demon Lord and war on all of humanity.

As it turned out, the rather sizable group of former aides who had once wielded authority and influence in spades did not know anything more than what Sol had already heard through Ishli. They had already acknowledged Ishli as their master and were not stupid enough to withhold information that their master's master was seeking. Ishli looked happy about this. If any new information that he did not already know had been brought up on this occasion, his management ability would have been called into question. His satisfaction was only natural.

"Hmm...I see. Everything is as I've heard from Acting Pope Ishli." Sol sighed, but he didn't look all that disappointed.

"I deeply apologize that they couldn't be of more help, my lord," said Ishli, relieved.

"No, don't worry about it."

Based on past interactions, Ishli understood Sol to be a highly

rational person and therefore quite callous toward those who did not bring him any direct benefit. Those who had obtained the position of aide to the former pope were highly capable, so Ishli wanted to continue using them as his arms and legs. That Sol wasn't immediately asking for their heads because they didn't have any new contributions was a blessing.

"Oh, one last question," said Sol in an almost friendly tone. "Has anyone here done anything to earn the ire of the devinians?"

There was no censure in his voice. It was almost like he was asking just in case. However, no one could give him a straight answer. The former brass merely exchanged uncomfortable glances.

With his suspicions confirmed, Sol said quietly to the acting pope at his side, "That...looks like a yes to me. Ishli, I want you to look into them. Not only them but also everyone who might have done so, including these clergymen's families. If needed, I can send you specialists who have skill sets suitable for such work."

In the past millennium, due to the scarcity of outer mana in the air, the devinians had been weaker than humans, yet temporarily capable of wielding their original strength thanks to lost technology. When unconscious, however, they had been kept that way with necklaces that sealed their magic. How humans, a race that discriminated against and persecuted other demihumans so terribly, had treated a race under such unique circumstances was obvious. Some had been coerced into carrying out demanding missions, like the succubus charged with monitoring Sol. Without a doubt, others had been made victims of even worse atrocities. It certainly didn't help that, though they had physical differences, they were all beautiful, both men and women.

"As you wish. There is no need to send us the specialists, however. The Church is the world's largest organization. Very few are our equal at getting people to confess the truth, especially when we are free to choose our methods."

Aina'noa voiced a puzzled note, but Luna snorted and said, "A merchant of religion indeed."

Ishli's reply was perhaps a little on the nose for someone in his position, but it wasn't wrong. The job description of one who sold

religion was to take advantage of people's weaknesses to bend their wills. Extracting information from someone determined not to speak was child's play.

"I am much ashamed," said Ishli. "What would you like us to do after looking into everyone, my lord?"

"Hmm..." Sol paused for a moment to think, then said calmly, "Please protect them so that they don't accidentally drop dead. How you protect them, I'll leave up to you."

Ishli's face froze. "Very well. I will have them investigated quickly and take measures to ensure that not one of them dies."

"Please and thank you."

"You're pretty scary sometimes, my lord," said Luna, looking a little happy in spite of her words.

Sol scowled uncharacteristically. "Uh, I am not."

He didn't think he was doing anything that warranted being called scary. The devinians' declaration of war indicated that they considered all of humanity an enemy, not simply individual humans, and they wanted revenge for what had been done to them. To Sol, it was a matter of course for the offenders who were still alive to shoulder that blame for everyone else. If the devinians asked for them, Sol would hand them over without batting an eye, along with a reassurance that he couldn't care less about their fate.

Of course, if the devinians still insisted on going after all of humanity, Sol would stop them, even though he could see the logic of them redirecting their anger at the entire race due to their actual assailants having lived out their lifespans and being long gone.

The moment Ishli had picked up on Sol's intention and his face froze, it had been less a reaction to the ruthlessness of Sol's plan and more an indication of relief that he had no prior involvement with devinians. He didn't have the confidence to say that he wouldn't have been among the group of currently very flustered clergymen if he had climbed high enough before meeting Sol. However, true to his position as the man who now stood above them all, he gave the former aides a smile to reassure them that their positions were still secure.

"Now, given the situation, we should prepare as best we can,"

said Sol. “Ishli, have you found the place?”

“Yes, but we haven’t been able to do much more.”

“Then take me there.”

“Of course, my lord.”

The place that Sol was referring to was known by all to be located inside the Holy City, even though no one had ever set foot inside. It was supposedly a repository for all of humanity’s knowledge. Some referred to it as an altar to knowledge, while others called it Biblioteca, the Hidden Church Library. There, Sol was not only hoping to find information on the devinians that he would soon be clashing with and the Demon Lord who led them but also to grasp a sliver of truth regarding this world that seemed so filled with secrets. That was his biggest objective for the visit.

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“It’s this way.”

Under Ishli’s guidance, Sol’s group was making its way deep into a restricted area in the Holy See. A brief while earlier, they had made a detour to pick up a few Church-affiliated archeologists and, as made clear by their cassocks and ryasas, a few clergymen of status too.

After Ishli had seized power with the speed of a lightning bolt, he had left everyone else in the positions they had held during Gregorio IX’s era. They had demonstrated their ability in obtaining those positions, so it didn’t make sense to depose them. Moreover, Gregorio IX and all those who actually had the potential to go after the pope’s seat had already been eliminated. The majority of those left were either of Ishli’s cohort or younger.

In other words, there was almost no one left who had sworn allegiance to Gregorio IX, and those who remained were capable and quick on the uptake. Gregorio IX had held so much power that these clergymen had been unable to do anything despite the positions they held. Now that he had been physically taken out of the picture, and as long as Sol Rock was present as the Church’s backer, these clergymen immediately understood that the right call—

or, indeed, the only path to survival—was to dedicate their service to Ishli, working harder than they had been able to while suppressed under Gregorio IX's reign. It was thanks to them that Ishli, who hadn't a clue because he wasn't from the Holy City, had found the fabled Biblioteca.

Ishli never had any intention of restructuring the Church's personnel for self-serving reasons in the first place. Any attempt to do so would immediately be seen through by Frederica, and word would reach Sol, who would become disappointed. Ishli's biggest priority was keeping Sol happy, because the most effective way to keep everyone else in line, including those who had once competed with him or had stood above him in status, was to make them understand that he was in Sol's good graces.

To his own surprise, Ishli was also finding himself possessed of at least a slight desire to contribute to realizing the dream that Sol and his companions were chasing. Of course, his intentions weren't entirely pure. There was no denying that Ishli's own dream of being pope was being kept alive only thanks to Sol's support. And although Ishli's name was already guaranteed to go down in history, there was a part of him that wanted more, that wanted to be remembered as one of Sol's companions.

Sol made an appreciative noise. "I like this place better, to be honest."

"I do too," said Ishli.

In the very heart of the ornately decorated Holy See, beyond a hidden door whose existence only popes were privy to, was the Old Temple, a grand yet peaceful structure surrounded by large, rugged stone that cut a sharp contrast to the modern, resplendent style of the Holy City at large. The first impression that Sol had upon seeing it was the same as Ishli's when he had first laid eyes on it. Namely, that *this* was a place fitting for God to reside in.

Despite being deep inside the Holy See, this place did not have a roof and was fully exposed to the sky, like a courtyard. There wasn't a single opening or window in the surrounding wall, making it impossible to see in from the outside.

There was no doubt that this temple made of stone was the real

reason for Adrateio being the Holy City. That, and the remains of the Tower said to have once reached the heavens before being shattered by Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon a millennium ago floating in the sky high above this spot.

"Though we managed to find this place thanks to the scholars going through their records, unfortunately..."

"It looks like just a ruin?"

"As you can see. I deeply apologize."

One way or another, they had managed to reach this place that had been forbidden to all but popes for generations. The temple here indeed had an appearance that made beholders feel the presence of God, but there wasn't a single thing hinting at Biblioteca or the lost technology that the old Holy Church had been so proud of.

Massive stone pillars stood in a circle, topped by a slab of stone opened up in the middle so gigantic that it boggled the mind to think how it had been cut so large and lifted so high. In contrast to the vines and moss covering the pillars and top stone, the floor was an immaculate and gleaming black surface without a single seam or scratch save an enormous magic formation carved in long-lost script.

This place doubtlessly held great value to archeologists. Much of it bore great resemblance to the description of Biblioteca in old records. However, Sol was searching for an actual library that he could peruse. Ishli didn't think Sol would be satisfied just staring at the stones, so he'd had people searching for an opening mechanism ever since this place was found. Unfortunately, it had all been to no avail.

"No, this is the right place. I'll open it now," said Sol.

"I'm sorry?"

Smiling brightly, Sol thrust his right hand toward the ruins. Immediately, countless display windows sprang up around him, and as if in response, the magic formation on the ground started spilling out dazzling light. Light also glowed through the vines and moss covering the pillars and top rock, revealing the ancient script that had been engraved on them too.

As a result of Player fending off the Old Rulers' intrusion and

consequently taking over more than half of their system, Sol now had full authority over all of the Church's lost technology systems that were still active.

Even Luna and Aina'noa looked astonished, let alone Ishli.

"Th-This is..."

Sol nodded. "This is Biblioteca, the great library touted in the scriptures as the repository of all of humanity's knowledge. It definitely deserves the 'hidden' in its name, considering how it opens."

When the light faded away, a giant hole had opened up in the jet-black stone floor, revealing a vertical hole that went far deeper than the eye could see. The walls of the hole were covered with countless bookcases packed with books, making it obvious at a glance that this was indeed a library.

Looking as dazed as the archeologists, Ishli mumbled, "But how does one...?"

It was bad enough that there were no staircases or pathways in the hole. A bigger problem, however, was that the space was filled with something that seemed entirely out of place here: pristine, crystal clear water.

"That's not normal water, looks like," said Sol. "I would say it serves the dual purpose of preserving the books and preventing them from being stolen. If the water is drained by normal means, the books will turn to dust. If a book is taken out of the water, its contents will fade away and become unreadable."

"What are we supposed to do, then?"

The sight seemed almost taunting, like a mirage that could be seen but never touched. However, there surely was some way for those with the qualifications to read the books.

"I'd venture a guess that if you ride *those*, you can pick up any book you like. However, even at first glance, it's clear there's a staggering number of books here. We don't have time to look through them all."

Above the water floated several stone cubes absolutely covered with engravings in ancient script. The letters glowed with a soft and gentle pulsing, and it seemed obvious that the cubes were meant to

be ridden. Sol loved showy setups like this. Being able to breathe underwater and looking for some book in particular at a spot so deep that the only available illumination was from the cube that one was riding would make for a rare experience indeed. But unfortunately, time was not on his side at the moment. He needed a far more effective way to tap into the knowledge that the Church had been keeping hidden away all this time.

"Oh." Suddenly, a brilliant idea occurred to Sol, as if someone had led him to it.

"Have you come up with a solution?" asked Ishli, expectation gleaming in his eyes.

"I think so. I'm pretty sure it'd work, but I want to test it out first. Luna, a little help."

"Yes, my lord."

Instead of using the floating cubes, Sol had Luna float him to the center of the circular body of water. Then he chose a random book and, in the same way he would store away monsters he'd killed, pulled it into an extradimensional pocket. The book disappeared. At the same time, its title, author, and other details appeared in a display window. When Sol mentally wished to read it, its first page came up.

"Yay, it worked. But, hmm, is there any way I can share this? Maybe Frederica can come up with something."

Since Sol wasn't going through the proper process, there was a good chance the book would vanish if he took it out somewhere. Finding a different way was going to be a priority. But in the meantime, he planned on fully copying a book before experimenting with taking it out. If it really did vanish, the scholars would cry, but as long as its contents were preserved, they didn't have enough resources to be caring about the value of the books themselves at this point in time.

"All right, I'm going to grab as many as I can. No idea how far down this goes, though," said Sol. He then proceeded to sink into the water, accompanied by Luna and Aina'noa and seen off by the

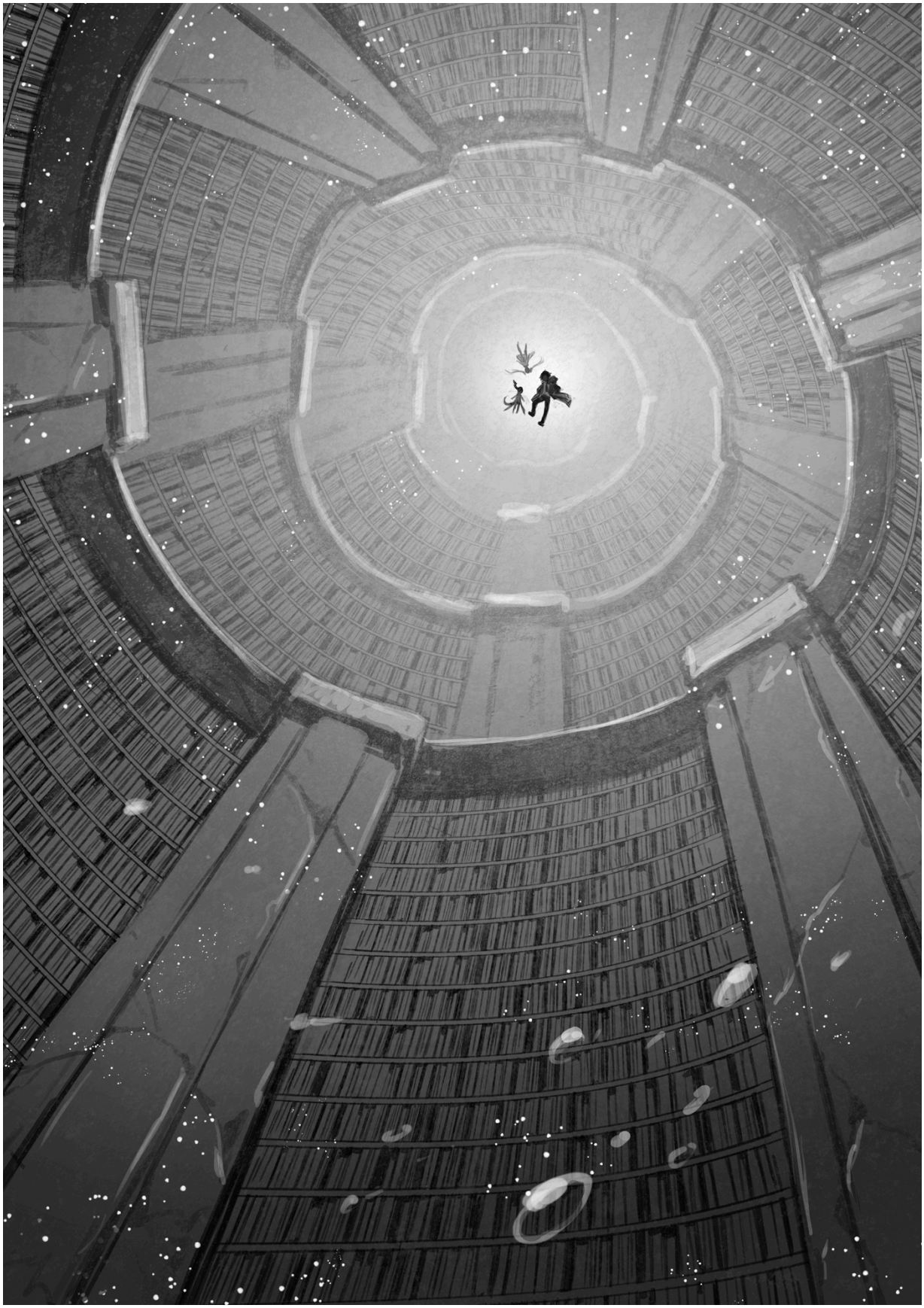
archeologists with the most envious looks he'd ever seen.

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Looking around underwater, Sol couldn't help but murmur, "This is incredible."

"It's beautiful," agreed Luna as Aina'noa hummed a happy note.

The sight was a marvel to behold. At a shallow enough depth, sunlight shone down through the water, wavering and glittering in a resplendent display. At depths beyond the reach of sunlight, cubes like those from the surface could be found here and there, giving off a magical blue light that wove together with the blue of the water, ensuring that it never got completely dark.



There was a certain beauty in the surrealism of seeing countless books lining stone shelves submerged in water and illuminated by a wavy light. It brought to mind the idea that this was a separate world that had once been connected to the world above but had since been cut off, leaving behind through some miracle all its accrued knowledge here at the bottom of a well, unbeknownst to anyone.

Being creatures of the sky and the land, the All Dragon and the Elven Queen were as excited as kids visiting an aquarium for the first time.

"If Lady Frederica were to see this, I bet she would lose her mind," said Luna.

Sol chuckled. "I can see it."

It was rare for Luna to bring up their companions of her own volition, but as she said, if Frederica had been there, her usual efforts to act like a princess would crumble in the blink of an eye and she would go full-on history nerd. The impact of having so many books lined up and the sight of how they were disappearing like magic at a simple glance from Sol were both stimulating enough to cause what Luna was imagining.

The princess knew about Storage and would therefore understand that these books, which contained knowledge accumulated over an unfathomable amount of time and sealed away where no human hand could pick up a single volume, were falling into Sol's hands—and by extension, her own hands. There was a certain intellectual satisfaction in sitting down and letting oneself imagine what had happened in the distant past, building on that picture one discovery at a time. As someone who knew the luxury of such sophisticated entertainment, Frederica would have been overwhelmed in a moment if she had been here.

Since Sol was laughing cheerfully, Luna did the same. With the two people she was most attached to being happy, Aina'noa made the clear, high-pitched note that she always made when she was happy. In place of the fish that would've colored their vision at the bottom of a normal ocean, the vigorous motion of the rapidly disappearing books entertained the three as they continued their

underwater journey.

Sol gasped. “Well, now, this is just...”

When they passed a certain depth, the space suddenly grew much larger, as if the way so far had been a cylinder connected to a giant sphere at the bottom. Sensing the first-ever visitor in probably a thousand years, all stone cubes in the space came to life, revealing walls much farther away than what a normal human would have been able to see with the naked eye.

A massive white whale that was likely there to fend off unauthorized trespassers slowly drew near, saw Luna’s eyes, and promptly swam away. Sol figured that there was a possibility it could understand humans or was the boss of this place. If not for his desire to speak with the whale afterward, he would have killed it in one blow and reduced it to materials. At the very least, that was what Luna had intended. If Gawain knew about this, he would probably have been greatly disappointed.

The outer walls of the sphere, like those of the passage above, were also covered with countless books. At the center floated bookshelves clumped together like little islands. Closer inspection revealed that each clump was dedicated to a single subject, indicating that it was some type of sorting system. These shelves alone contained more books than Sol thought he could read in his entire lifetime.

“Does your Storage have enough space for all this, my lord?”

“That’s not a problem...though the total number of volumes has already passed three hundred million at this point.”

The number was so astronomical that Sol had trouble wrapping his mind around it. If he read one book a day, it would take him 300 million days, or 820,000 years, to get through them all. Plus, they were written in all sorts of languages. If one was to not simply read them but understand them, even the pace of a book a day would be unrealistic to meet. In other words, he had already gathered far more knowledge than a single human could ever learn in their life. And now, he realized he still had a few dozen times more than that number to pick up. It was little wonder he was at a loss for words.

“The tenacity of humanity’s desire to pass on fragments of

themselves to future generations is a terrifying thing indeed," said Luna, the dragon who herself had a lifespan nearly as long as eternity, in wonder.

"It sure is..." Sol sighed.

Of course, the All Dragon and the Elven Queen probably *could* read all the books here and make the knowledge theirs. However, the intended audience was humans, not monsters who could live forever. Despite knowing how limited human lifespans were, the brilliant minds who had written them still desperately wanted the conclusions they had dedicated their lives to forming—or perhaps the work they had only finished halfway—to become building blocks for future generations. Thus they'd left behind pieces of themselves in the form of books.

It didn't matter if no one actually picked them up and used the knowledge within. The accumulation of that desire was itself the purpose of Biblioteca.

"But if I do this..."

As it turned out, the library's first visitor in a long while was not a normal human. He was an anomaly possessing Player, a talent that gave him near godlike powers, among which was a capability for analysis beyond even dragons, elves, and other long-lived races, let alone other humans.

Countless windows were floating around him, not only displaying the books that he had thrown into Storage but also rapidly sorting them by categories such as heading, field, and author. As most of the books were written in languages that Sol didn't know, the contents were also being translated and reedited while leaving the original text intact. It was as if Biblioteca were an archive of knowledge that existed solely for the benefit of the person who served as Player's host.

Despite being translated, however, there were many titles that Sol still couldn't comprehend. *Development Log of the Avrio Galaxy Star System*. *Memorandum on the Theory of Space-Time Travel*. *Milky Way Space Records AD 3487*. *Until Earth Became Inhospitable to Man*. *The Pioneering of Mars*. And so on and so forth.

Sol didn't understand them, but he got the nagging feeling that

some of these books shouldn't exist in his world. The fact that they did gave him a strange blend of apprehension and elation.

Luna cocked her head quizzically. "Is something the matter, my lord?"

Managing an awkward smile, Sol replied, "Nah, it's nothing. Let's get to gathering all these books."

"Yes, my lord."

Sol figured that the best course of action was to simply grab everything now, then go back and get help from Frederica, who probably knew more than he did about this kind of thing due to being a princess. There was also Fritz, a former emperor; Ishli, the next pope in line; elves, who'd lived so much longer; and perhaps even the Emelian royal family. It was clear that he wasn't going to get any answers thinking about this now, given his own meager knowledge and experience, so there was no point in doing so.

Having decided on his course of action, Sol continued diving deeper and deeper, collecting books nonstop along the way.

"Guess this is the very bottom," said Sol.

"Which makes this part of Biblioteca almost a perfect sphere," said Luna.

"Yep. And...there are no more bookshelves down here."

The walls had started getting narrower again after a certain point, confirming the hypothesis that this space was a sphere. When they neared the bottom, the bookshelves had petered out, leaving the walls smooth and featureless. The clumps of bookshelf islands had also faded from view. There was nothing else in the tranquil water save a spot in the center illuminated by magical light.

"What's that over there?" asked Luna.

"A...reading stand, it seems," replied Sol. "But there's no book on it."

The stand, more correctly called a lectern, was undoubtedly supposed to hold the Holy Scripture that served as the core of the Holy Church's doctrines. It was the only thing that made sense, given that this was a sacred place at the very heart of the Church's faith, all the contrivances involved, and how it seemed like every book from every world in existence had been here. However, as Sol

was pointing out, that Holy Scripture was nowhere to be seen. All that was left was its stand. And around that stand, connected to the surrounding wall, were countless torn chains floating aimlessly in the water. Though these were much smaller, they bore a great resemblance to the chains tied around the All Dragon's Augoeides that Sol had seen when using Summoning.

"What on earth happened here?"

To the best of Sol's knowledge, no one had visited Biblioteca in a thousand years. That meant the Holy Scripture had already been lost when the events reported by the Kuzuifabra happened, involving the Bound All Dragon, the Captive Elven Queen, the Lifeless Divine Beast, the Vacant Demon Lord, and the Cursed Hero.

Who had stolen it?

There was as yet no way for Sol to know.

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Bubbles started appearing on the surface of the water that served as the entrance to Biblioteca. Of course, after Sol's group had dove inside, Ishli's group couldn't just disperse and all go home. So, they had been simply standing in a daze before the transfigured stone temple, patiently awaiting Sol's return.

The bubbles gradually grew larger and larger until they started creating ripples. There was no doubt that something had happened inside. This became even clearer when a red liquid joined the bubbles. Fearing that it was blood, Ishli and his men, who had been standing a distance from the edge of the water, rushed over to peer into the surface that was now bubbling as furiously as boiling water.

Suddenly, a geyser burst up with a boom that reverberated in the pit of everyone's stomachs, and an Astral that had been kept barely small enough to fit through the circular entrance shot into the sky at an incredible speed. Upon clearing the height of the Holy See's buildings, the Astral resumed its normal form, creating the visual contradiction of growing larger despite moving farther away. As Ishli's group watched with slack jaws, the gigantic dragon form abruptly changed direction at an almost right angle, then sped out of

view in the blink of an eye. Just then, the large amount of water that had come up fell back down, needlessly drenching the group from the Church as thoroughly as if they had walked out into a heavy rain.

A window appeared before Ishli's bewildered eyes.

"Acting Pope Ishli, I've obtained all of Biblioteca's books! I want to analyze them right away, so I'm sorry, but I'm heading straight back! I want to borrow the wisdom of your scholars, so it'd be a great help if you'd send them to Magnamelia! Sorry that I keep asking so much from you!"

"It is my honor to carry out your will. Everything will be arranged per your instructions."

"Thank you!"

From the look of things, Sol had determined it necessary to quickly go over the information he had obtained with his inner circle. Ishli didn't consider it a problem that he and his men had been drenched in water. In fact, he cared much more that Sol had gone out of his way to apologize publicly where his men could hear. The price of that being a cassock or two was an absolute steal.

Since Sol had clearly conveyed what he wanted, all Ishli had to do was hop to it right away. Ishli did not think himself stupid, but he had the presence of mind to accept that he was no match for Frederica and the other brainiacs around Sol. In light of his position, he appreciated being told "do this" much more than a vague "do what you think is best."

Chapter 2: R&R

Long story short, the staggering number of books that Sol had obtained from Biblioteca turned out to be largely useless. The majority of them pertained to another world not physically connected to this one—from the context, it seemed likely to be an old world that the Old Rulers had tried and failed to protect. What they detailed had happened way, way before the events of a thousand years ago that became recorded in the Kuzuifabra, and therefore it meant nothing to those living in this age, including even the long-lived elves.

Gawain and one of the oldest elves still alive, Saelmia, were over the moon regarding the lost technology used by the Old Rulers to create the man-made angels and god regalia, whereas Frederica went wild with joy at the records of an ancient human race that had seemingly expanded to the stars. However, both sides understood that these topics were not directly helpful at the moment. The whereabouts of the original Holy Scripture that Sol's group had now taken to calling Origin was also a matter of great interest, but its search was similarly relegated to the back burner.

Of course, "most" being useless meant there were still some that were pertinent to the current world. Among them were objective records penned before the false narrative of the Kuzuifabra had been propagated. Unfortunately, they were quite heavily "worm-ridden." It was as though someone or something had, in case these records were actually retrieved, intentionally redacted important parts or included parts that they wanted to portray as more important than they really were. That said, having some information was better than none, and if there was a trap lying in wait, Sol and his group had the confidence to jump straight in and destroy it head-on. Thus, they decided to make studying and analyzing the books a priority. In doing so, they learned a few things about the devinians.

First, upon being defeated by the Hero a thousand years ago, the Demon Lord had sunk into the ocean along with the Floating Continent that had been her home. Second, when that happened, the largest floating island had fallen down in the north of the Amnesphia Sovereignty, while countless smaller islands had become the Fol Mentera Archipelago in the Santeshesel Sea facing San Jeluk, a tourist city belonging to the Poseinia Eastern Seaboard Federation.

In other words, when the Floating Continent was restored, it wasn't just the fallen island currently occupied by the devinians that would float back up; chances were high that the Fol Mentera Archipelago would too. Given that, the devinians were likely going to mess with the archipelago too in some way. Sol therefore decided to bring the islands under his control first.

At the moment, he had no intention of wiping out the devinians. In fact, he wanted them as allies. If needed, he wasn't above going to the fallen floating island to negotiate with them in person. They would probably be surprised to learn that he was supportive of their desire to bring back the Demon Lord and the Floating Continent. As long as they didn't do anything rash and cause unnecessary casualties among the humans, he was willing to play along with their strategy of buying time—while taking precautions, of course.

It was in light of all this that, after Amnesphia, Sol was now visiting Poseinia. Specifically, he was in the tourist city of San Jeluk.

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"Giving you a whole island sure is generous," Julia laughed.

"Would the name of this island be changed to Sol Island, you think?" Reen mused.

"I still can't believe it..." Eliza mumbled.

The three girls looked around in wonder at the white sand and the perfectly clear blue sea under the intense glare of the summer sun in a cloudless blue sky. The air was filled with the clamor of cicadas and the calming cadence of waves approaching and receding. The midsummer heat would have been nigh unbearable in normal clothing, but not only did it not cause the girls discomfort, it

actually invigorated them and elevated their spirits. Such was the effect of an exceptional island resort.

"Come on, that's going a bit too far. We're not going to the trouble of changing the island's original name," said Sol from his high-quality sun lounger under a classy parasol. He suppressed the urge to sigh while thinking, *How badly do they think I crave the limelight?*

Of course, it wasn't like he didn't care for attention at all. He just didn't feel the need to compensate by slapping his own name onto a whole island. He was constantly being praised by two friends he had admired since childhood, Reen and Julia; by the Lily of the Kingdom, Frederica; and by the Rose of the Underworld, Eliza. As if that wasn't enough, the All Dragon and the Elven Queen were extremely attached to him. With one exception, all of those mentioned would happily come to his room alone that very night if asked. In fact, they might even come all at once if he truly wanted them to. It was safe to say that his need for approval was being met quite adequately.

The island that Sol and his group were on was one of the uninhabited ones that made up the Fol Mentera Archipelago in the Santeshesel Sea, a location famous for its beauty on the eastern coastline. The original name of this particular island was San Jeluk's Tear, and it was one of the best island resorts inside the territorial waters of the city of San Jeluk. It was normally uninhabited, but big names from all over the continent always came here in the summer to escape the heat back home. Therefore, the facilities here and all associated infrastructure were equal to what could be found in capital cities and constantly kept in tip-top condition.

Relatively speaking, San Jeluk was small—it didn't count in the middle tier of cities belonging to Poseinia, let alone come close to the five executive director cities at the top. However, it had been specially developed with its expansive, beautiful coastline and the numerous offshore islands used as summer resorts in mind, making it the top vacation destination on the continent. The influx of summer tourists basically ran its entire economy.

If the wealthy wanted to go to a resort in the summer, San Jeluk was the go-to. Conversely, commoners could only really come when

they wanted to truly splurge for some momentous occasion. Even for Reen and Julia, who had climbed rather high on the ladder for adventurers, San Jeluk was a place they *wished* they could go for, say, their honeymoon. Needless to say, Eliza, who had been living in a slum until recently, felt like a fish out of water.

Frederica laughed. "Even if you don't push for it, I feel like this place will eventually be called Sol Island."

Sol groaned. "You think?"

The only person who looked at ease was, of course, Frederica. No matter how high-class the place was, she was the first princess of Emelia, one of the four superpowers on the continent. There wasn't anything here that she'd never seen before. Sure, the place looked well maintained and it was clear that great effort had gone into creating the whole "summer paradise" vibe, but there weren't any significant differences from the island that *her* family owned in the Santeshesel Sea.

At this point, everyone on the continent capable of speech knew Sol's name. There was no doubt the official name of the island would eventually be forgotten as everyone started calling it "Lord Sol's Island." It wouldn't be surprising if San Jeluk started changing the name on maps. In fact, that seemed like the kind of thing they very much would do.

What Frederica was more concerned with, rather than the trivial matter of the island's name, was that San Jeluk's value in the international community had skyrocketed from—at least, the way she saw it—simply handing over an island.

"That said, I do have to concede that angling to have territory that belongs to you within their borders is a good move. I think it's safe to say other countries are already making moves to do the same."

If a country had an area that belonged to Sol, other countries wouldn't be able to lay hands on it easily. If Sol accepted the offered land, it would protect the country more effectively than an army of millions. After all, if invaded, they would be able to call Sol to their aid. By offering up a scenic location, they would earn Sol's favor *and* gain influence among the international community. Not making an

attempt to imitate what San Jeluk had achieved could even be seen as a failure on the part of those who could make such calls.

Picking up on the nuance of "just an island" from Frederica, Reen grimaced a little. "That in itself is a bit...y'know."

The two had naturally gotten much closer as of late, but there were times like this when Reen was reminded that Frederica really was a princess. From the point of view of normal citizens from Garlaige, Reen was quite wealthy. Because of that, she understood that the value system of a royal was nowhere even near that which could be extrapolated from those who lived ordinary lives. The fact that Frederica wasn't putting on airs and sincerely thought of it as "just an island" really put into perspective what it was like being her.

If asked, however, Frederica would say that at this point, the title of "princess of a major nation" was worth much less than "Sol's childhood friend." Those who could say "just an island" without batting an eye were all trying to suck up to the world's new absolute ruler. Being that ruler's childhood friend—or even better, lover—was undeniably the most powerful position imaginable.

Sensing how fed up her liege was feeling, Luna said, "How about telling them to stop acting like they're doing you a favor when you can simply seize whatever you want?"

Aina'noa, the other member of the pair that always remained floating, hummed a cheerful note from behind her.

As a loyal servant, the All Dragon considered all efforts to tie down her liege, along with the ulterior motives that drove the humans who attempted to do so, troublesome and unpleasant. This was something that Frederica took great care not to trigger while with Sol.

Although Frederica and Luna both considered San Jeluk's Tear "just an island," their reasoning could not have been more different. Luna's suggestion came from the place of one who could and would use strength and violence to take what they wanted. Such a barbaric way of thinking was at odds with modern human society, which at least fancied itself civilized through observance of laws.

Then again, this extreme logic voiced by Luna, a true monster capable of using brute force to crush the military might and

economic systems that propped up human laws, could be said to be an absolute truth in the real world. Humans were the only race that touted nonsense like "rights" and "equality" in a world ruled by the law of the jungle. Such concepts carried meaning only inside their minds. To point at their treatment of demihumans as proof would be too easy. Even when keeping it among humans, those who lived day to day wiping sweat off their foreheads knew that such ideas were but idealism. And they knew that those who spouted such idealism despite not actually believing in it were more likely than not nobles—not just any nobles, but those angling to exploit someone.

Humans no longer dominated this world and therefore could no longer afford to work toward spreading such beliefs, especially when they were but empty slogans that only benefited a select few. Simply repeating them like a chant wouldn't do anything to convince monsters to back off during an attack.

"Yep, she's definitely the All Dragon," said Julia wryly as Eliza, who had yet to get used to Luna, struggled for words.

Even though the nickname "Lu" was starting to take hold, and despite her appearance as an adorable child, this therianthrope girl was Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon, the legendary figure who had devoured all other dragons in existence. She thought anyone who believed they could manipulate her master with an island or two presumptuous in the extreme and would not hesitate to bring her full wrath down on them as a lesson.

Julia and Eliza had spent enough time with Luna to know she wasn't just bluffing. They couldn't help feeling respect for Reen, who simply laughed and said, "Gosh, you always go to such extremes," and Frederica, who had maintained her princess smile the whole time. Of course, the most respect went to Sol, who could throw said All Dragon into a fluster with a single troubled sigh.

The balance of power on the continent had changed dramatically ever since the heads of state from each country had received detailed investigative reports regarding the events that had transpired at the Oratorio Tangram. The flashy performance arranged by Sol had forcibly altered everyone's view of the world, which in turn dictated how they were to comport themselves going

forward. When it was made clear that a god was present on earth and that those who did what he considered evil had no way of escaping divine retribution, even the most arrogant of all living creatures, humans, had no choice but to adapt. No occasion had been more telling than the Continental Conference hosted a while ago.

Poseinia was aware that it was in the weakest position of the four superpowers. In comparison, Emelia's place was rock-solid, with its first princess, Frederica, already being a candidate for the role of Sol's consort. Its next king, Franz, had a good relationship with Sol as well, whereas its second prince, Maximillian, who had been in line to inherit the throne until Sol showed up having already obtained Frederica's support, was now spending his days dungeon delving under Sol's auspices. There were rumors going around that the current king, Ethelweld, was jealous of his second son and practically counting the days until he could hand over his crown to Franz and do the same thing Maximillian was doing. In both name and truth, Emelia was the continent's most powerful nation in the new world.

Due to having openly opposed Sol in the Oratorio Tangram and lost, Istekario's and Amnesphia's ruling classes had been almost completely wiped out, and they were now, for all intents and purposes, Sol's vassal states. Some were even saying that Istekario's young emperor was still alive and in Sol's direct employ, and that Amnesphia's princess had joined Sol's harem. How troubling it was that the mindless general populace was so fast to believe the most far-fetched nonsense.

In any case, the point was that, up till now, Poseinia had been the only one of the four so-called superpowers that was as yet unconnected to Sol. Consequently, it was very eager to rectify that problem. Conveniently forgetting how they had chosen to take a wait-and-see approach before, the heads of Poseinia were all but bursting to cry, "Why didn't anyone tell us how much of a monster he is?!" And that sentiment was shared by everyone capable of intelligent thought, regardless of age, gender, or wealth. Everyone understood that a superpower without a firm bond with Sol in the

current world was akin to a castle built on sand.

Then, out of the blue, Sol had requested permission to visit the Fol Mentera Archipelago. Of the various cities trying to ply him with benefits and money, San Jeluk was dancing with joy at being chosen. An invitation to and the rights for San Jeluk's Tear were a cheap price to pay for favor with the man who could shape the world however he wanted.

What Sol had learned from Biblioteca's books had put the idea of paying Fol Mentera a visit into his mind, but what had sealed the deal had been the look that he'd seen on Reen's and Julia's faces upon bringing up the idea. The opportunity to go to a top-tier resort for a summer trip held irresistible appeal for girls of their age. And what was better than a private beach? A private island.

Now that the group had actually made the trip, the Standing Board of Directors, composed of the leaders of Poseinia's five greatest city-states, was earnestly considering how to draw closer to Sol, just as Frederica had expected. Luckily for them, San Jeluk was one of their own. For having successfully gotten Sol to visit, San Jeluk's standing within Poseinia had risen dramatically.

More than that, in the eyes of the international community, what had once been a mere city was now being treated with more esteem than the entire federation that the city was supposedly under. In other words, the "four superpowers" title that had once denoted incontestable strength was now little more than an obsolete curiosity. Just as Frederica had predicted, yesterday's smallest countries could suddenly become today's biggest if they managed to win Sol over. It didn't matter how hard that was to achieve. Those who held vested interests were dancing as hard as they could—all the more so the more they had to lose.

Unfortunately, the reality was that military strength, economic means, historic justification, and even connections no longer meant anything on the stage of international politics. The rug had been pulled out from under all those with vested interests in the world. The value systems that people had built up until this point in history were worthless before the boy who commanded monsters that could crush them as easily as paper-mache.

Though it appeared that peace was being maintained, the continent was hurtling into an age of quiet turmoil.

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"Now, now, how about we leave that topic for another time? We're here on vacation, so let's enjoy it!" said Frederica with a smile, noticing how Reen, Julia, and Eliza kept shooting longing glances at the inviting blue sea. The group had gone to much trouble to come to a top-rated beach, and there was no need to get into such topics now. The main purpose of this visit wasn't to take a vacation, but Sol had agreed to the idea of letting everyone get some rest and relaxation while waiting.

"I don't mind, but Frederica?"

Of course, it wasn't that Sol wanted to object to Frederica's suggestion. Rather, he was having trouble figuring out where to look and therefore feeling a burning need to confirm.

"Yes, Lord Sol?" Frederica purposely walked closer to where he was sitting and bent at the waist so that her assets were almost directly in front of his face, cocking her head quizzically. As a result, what was normally already enough to steal his breath seized his full attention, and it took serious effort on his part to act cool. Not that it meant anything given how loudly he gulped, though.

"May I ask what the intent is behind these getups?" asked Sol, referring to what everyone, including himself, was wearing.

Despite seeing through Sol's agitation, Frederica perfectly maintained her smile. "It's summer, and not only are we at the Santeshesel Sea, we're on an island resort in the Fol Mentera Archipelago. Swimsuits are practically a must here, wouldn't you say?"

"I mean, I get the reasoning, but..."

Indeed, everyone here was in a swimsuit. Frederica's logic, delivered with a cute head tilt, was flawless, and Sol saw no way to refute it. However, that wasn't what he was asking. It would be silly to ask, "Swimsuits? At a beach? Why?" after coming all this way to San Jeluk's Tear and changing into one himself. In the first place, he

was the one who had invited the others, and though their main goal lay elsewhere, it was true that he wanted to enjoy a summer retreat with them all. Given that, getting into swimsuits to play in the water was just a natural course of events.

"Ehe heh, how do I look?" Reen got as close as Frederica was and, in an unobscured part of Sol's view, quickly spun around in a circle.

While thinking about how Reen had grown so much that she now could bring herself to get close and ask for his opinion, but not wanting to lose, Sol mustered his courage and said earnestly, "You look really cute."

The happiness on Reen's face assured him that his answer had been the right one. He had braced himself for a rebuke along the lines of "Ew, why's a guy getting all red in the face?" but it thankfully never came. If it did, though, he would have hit back with "Any guy would in my place!"

"Is there any point in wearing such tiny pieces of cloth?" asked Luna with a pout. The swimsuits that everyone had on were so revealing that she, being a dragon at heart, couldn't really see how wearing them made any difference.

Sol couldn't agree more with the "tiny" descriptor. He had managed to answer Reen's question quickly enough, but his inner reaction had been, *That's what you're asking? Seriously?* His answer had been safe but not entirely truthful. What she was wearing was, if he could be fully honest, quite erotic but not indecent at all, even though it would have been all too understandable with the amount of skin being shown. Sol was bowled over by how much of a difference a good fashion sense could make. It was very impressive how, despite the scant amount of cloth used, all the girls' swimsuits managed to convey not only sexiness but cuteness and stylishness too. The outfit that each girl was wearing was perfect for her body, from the cut of the cloth to the designs, the colors used, down to the strings and see-through material used as accents.

Of course, the girls did feel a little embarrassed, but as shown by how Reen managed to ask Sol what he thought, the swimsuits also gave them confidence. At the very least, it was clear they had taken

a liking to their attire.

"Yes, there is, Luna," replied Sol. "Don't ever take yours off, all right?"

"Okaaay."

Luna and Aina'noa, the pair with childish appearances, were more covered up. Again, being a dragon, Luna was of the opinion that since she was planning on entering the water and getting wet anyway, she might as well go naked from the start. It wasn't that Sol couldn't see her logic, but he also knew that an offhand word from him could easily prompt her to take everything off in the blink of an eye. Then Aina'noa, who looked up to Luna, would follow suit without a thought.

In the one-in-a-million chance that happened, it was Sol who would get the side-eye from all the girls. Thus he saw fit to give another warning. No matter how little cloth there was, the swimsuits covered what they needed to, and that was the most important thing.

Having said that, when it came to eroticism, a token amount of cloth was at times more titillating than being completely naked. This moment was a great illustration of that. Sol couldn't help shaking his head at the sad nature of guys despite being a guy himself.

Seeing that Sol had taken the easy way out to make Reen happy, Julia came close too, smirking. "Now then, as the only guy on this tropical island, are you going to compliment *only* your Childhood Friend Number One?"

"My Childhood Friend Number Two is oh-so-very cute! Or rather, very adult and mature. By the way, Julia, are you sure about leaving your fiancé in Magnamelia and joining us here?"

Of all the swimsuits, Julia's was the most "mature," hands down. Part of it was because Julia herself had a very curvaceous body, and the swimsuit was accentuating it. Sol wasn't one to knock other people's preferences, but even he had to admit that size equaled power in this arena. Plus, while it was true that she was his childhood friend, she also was soon to become another man's wife, and guilty pleasure was a spice if there ever was one. Therefore, it was with great effort that he managed to voice his question. He had

made sure to invite Julia's fiancé, Marquis Sephiras Howard Walden—the Walden family had been raised one rank from viscount, and the position of family head had already been handed down to Sephiras when he and Julia got engaged—but the man was nowhere to be seen, while Julia was here alone.

"Well, it was a bit of a tall order asking him to be Boy Number Two in this setting. As for me, have we met? You think I'd be mature enough to turn down an invitation to *the* San Jeluk's Tear for a reason like that?"

"That's...fair enough."

Clearly, at least one of Sol's childhood friends was a tough customer. And now that her previous worry about Sephiras breaking things off with her had been allayed, she was head over heels for him more than ever. She felt Sol thought too much of himself if he was concerned about accidentally laying hands on her when he couldn't even bring himself to intentionally touch Reen.

Sol was already surrounded by girls who would welcome any advance he made. Not only was one of them also a childhood friend but there was also a princess and a younger girl who worshipped him for saving her life. As if that wasn't enough, there was a dragon and an elf—though their appearances were a barrier, their beauty was literally inhuman—constantly clinging to him. In Julia's mind, the chances of Sol disregarding all of them to come straight for her were nil. And that wasn't her putting herself down, but a conclusion backed by sound logic.

It followed, therefore, that the best thing Julia could do for the new head of the Walden marquis family and her future husband was to stay with Sol and continue carrying out her role as the absolute ruler's childhood friend. Sephiras's decision to courteously turn down Sol's invitation was something that even she, being a girl, understood, so she wasn't going to take him to task.

"Um...what about me? Should I really be here?" asked Eliza, who felt the most out of place.

Without skipping a beat, Frederica said, "But of course, Lady Eliza."

This could have come across as Frederica overstepping her place,

but that wasn't it. Even though Sol was the one who had invited Eliza, she still had trouble getting past her inferiority complex. Her question came from feeling daunted by the presence of the other girls, with them being princesses and personally close to Sol and possessing enormous power. Knowing this, Frederica had determined that it was important that she, as the one with the highest social status, gave Eliza affirmation right away. Reen and Julia were nodding in support too, and Frederica knew Sol well enough by now to know that he had instantly picked up on her intention.

So as to give Eliza a justification that would make her feel like being here was a responsibility rather than just taking time off, Sol said, "This is a good chance to test how well your organization can function without you around, don't you think?"

"Of course! You're entirely right!" Eliza exclaimed, beaming with more heartfelt joy and reverence than when she had received instant reassurance from the other girls. This was adorable but at the same time also rather worrying.

Understanding that it was her role to vocalize the issue, Julia said teasingly, "You seem to know her so well, it's like you have her wrapped around your finger."

Wise to what she was doing, Sol chose to answer in a light tone. "That's a groundless accusation if I ever heard one!" He had no intention of taking advantage of Eliza's fragility, and if she felt comfortable with the current dynamic, he thought it best to leave her be for a while.

"I don't know about that," said Julia. "I'm getting the impression that the public is starting to associate her most with being a member of your harem."

"I-I'm not worthy!"

Such rumors had reached Eliza's ears too, but having it brought up when the other girls were present made her instinctively flap her hands around in flustered denial. However, to outside eyes, a thirteen-or fourteen-year-old girl seizing control of Emelia's criminal underworld in the blink of an eye and earning the alias "Rose of the Underworld" could only be seen as a sign of her being showered

with Sol's affection. Those serving under her had all been big shots in their own right, and the contrast between them and her served to further speculations. Of course, Eliza having been blessed by Sol *was* actually true.

Julia was having fun teasing her in a friendly way and egging on Reen, the latter of whom had started showing signs of making an effort but was still far from being proactive in approaching Sol. Although Julia had a tendency to go a little overboard, all organizations needed someone like her to lubricate interpersonal relationships. Despite being a part of Sol's inner circle, she wasn't fighting the other girls for his love, which placed her in a very influential position. Even more so because she was a childhood friend of his and could therefore speak with him frankly.

Frederica, who had watched the previous exchange with a smile, bent over again like she had before, bringing her upper torso close to Sol's face, with several strands of her hair, glowing golden in the sunlight, brushing his skin. Giggling, she said in a low, sultry voice, "Lord Sol, what do you think of *my* swimsuit?"

Now that he was getting a close look, Sol realized that, although the swimsuits' designs and skimpiness were indeed factors, the real reason for their seductiveness lay elsewhere. The secret was in the fact that they did not restrict the movement of any part of their wearers' bodies, and this was thanks to the materials and techniques used to make them. In other words, when Frederica leaned over, Sol's eyes were blessed with much jiggling and swaying. This was undoubtedly what had lent such destructive power to Reen's little twirl earlier.

Swimsuits with such capabilities were most certainly made with high-grade monster materials and by the hand of Gawain. It was an enormous misuse of Magic Blacksmith, the talent he had received from God—or, depending on who was asked, perhaps an extremely noble application of it.

"It seems, um, innocent, but at the same time..." Sol mumbled, red as a tomato and unable to look straight ahead.

"Thank you," said Frederica with another giggle, positively radiating satisfaction.

Though she was acting composed, she wasn't entirely free of embarrassment. However, being able to see Sol's reaction made it worth it having conspired with everyone to go with swimsuits that even she had to admit were quite bold.

Having learned that Sol's ideal image of a royal was a self-possessed and imperturbable person, Frederica had been doing her best to come across as such. That way, the moments when she acted otherwise would hit him all the harder. After the banquet at the Village of the Elves, an occasion that she considered a great faux pas on her part, Sol had started viewing her more as a woman. It was upon noticing this that she had come up with the idea to get to Sol by making her noble royal persona a base that would paint her other sides in stark contrast.

This vacation was a battle, and Frederica had several plans that she was going to set into motion afterward. She would do anything to win, and in this context, victory meant getting Sol to lay hands on her. From that perspective, it was safe to say that the girls had seized the initiative. Next up was to provide support so that their vanguard, Reen, didn't chicken out at the eleventh hour, while remembering to also earn individual points when opportunity presented itself.

Finally accepting that he had to provide feedback on all the girls' swimsuits, Sol turned to Eliza, who was wearing something similar to Frederica's but in red, and said, "You look wonderful in your swimsuit too, Eliza. When you stand next to Frederica, you two look like sisters."

"Th-Thank you!"

When Sol had first met her, Eliza had nearly been skin and bones. Since then, her level had risen to the triple digits, she had been enjoying a balanced, highly nutritious diet, and Frederica had ardently brushed up her skin, her fashion, and her mannerisms down to the smallest detail. As a result, she now looked like a noble family's daughter. Even though she was still younger than Sol, fourteen-and fifteen-year old girls already possessed the ability to emanate a charm that could make seventeen-year-old boys go weak in the knees.

All girls were instinctively far more sensitive than boys were to such matters. It seemed like Sol had been calm when complimenting her, but Eliza had caught his eyes shifting a little, albeit not as much as when he had looked at Reen, Frederica, or Julia. She had always been envious seeing Sol blush at the other girls and was therefore now filled with joy from head to toe, while also going bright red with embarrassment. She didn't dislike Sol looking at her with desirous eyes. In fact, she welcomed it. However, the fact that the other girls looked happy that she was getting attention reminded her that she was still being seen as a child.

"Luna and Aina'noa, you look good too... But you have a complaint, Luna?"

"Aren't ours kind of childish?"

The last two were Luna and Aina'noa, who were wearing white and black, respectively—colors chosen to contrast the colors of their skin. Sol had no trouble complimenting how cute they looked, but Luna was clearly dissatisfied.

"That's...not true. It suits your current appearance perfectly. And when you grow older, you can show me how you look in a different swimsuit."

The brief pause betrayed the fact that Sol did indeed think Luna's and Aina'noa's swimsuits childish. Though they were master and servant, there was no way a mere human could pull the wool over the eyes of the All Dragon.

"It's a promise!"

The save made by Sol afterward resonated deeply with Luna, and her mood was restored in the blink of an eye. Despite having given Sol her true name and finding joy in serving him as a loyal servant, she still feared being discarded by him more than anything. Receiving a promise from him to be with her for at least the few years it would take for her fragment to grow up made her extremely happy. Until now, she had tried to assume her adult form at every available moment, but in this moment, she made up her mind to let her body age naturally. Adopting the look from that night could mean fulfilling the promise prematurely, and she simply could not let that happen.

On the other hand, his own words brought Luna's appearance as an adult to Sol's mind, and he inadvertently imagined that form in a swimsuit. The lewd look that came over his face made Luna even happier but at the cost of blatant displeasure from Reen, slight dejection from Eliza, and no seeming change in Frederica's smile. He was entirely in the wrong, of course, for showing preference for something in his imagination when there were real girls at his side.

Ignoring how Julia was nearly dying from holding in her laughter, Frederica brought her hands together in a crisp clap to dispel the weird mood in the air and said, "We will go play by the water for a while, so you rest here, Lord Sol. Of course, we would be delighted if you feel like joining us at any point."

"Uh... Sure, of course."

"Girls, let's go. Lady Luna, no. You're one of us girls too."

"Go have fun," said Sol.

"If you say so..." Luna grumbled.

And so all the girls, including Luna and Aina'noa, were led by Frederica to the water's edge. Luna had shot Sol a look as if asking for help, but upon being actually told to go, there was nothing else she could do. Then again, she had simply wanted to stay with him, and it wasn't like she hated playing in the water—no dragon did—so she hardly felt out of sorts.

After a pause long enough for the girls to get to the water and begin frolicking around, a presence seemingly roused itself from its efforts to sit so still as to be invisible this whole time and said, "So, Lord Sol."

"Yes?"

When Julia had said "the only guy on this island" earlier, she clearly had not included middle-aged and elderly men. There was one of each present, and they were feeling somewhat hurt that those in Sol's harem, every last one a drop-dead beauty, no longer saw them as men. Sol had tried to console them by saying, "It means they think you're trustworthy adults!" but such words had failed to resonate in the hearts of the two who thought themselves still very much in the game.

"You know how busy we are, right?"

"I do, of course. That's why I was concerned that you would overwork yourselves and asked you to come take a break."

"I want to return to my workshop..."

"Lord Sol, the papers stacked on my table won't decrease just because I take my eyes off them for a moment."

"I know. Even so, this break is mandatory for you two."

The middle-aged man was Steve Naiman, general director of the Adventurer's Guild. The elderly man was Gawain Baccus, head of the workshop exclusively developing weapons for Sol's clan, Libertadores. As they said, they were extremely busy. Therefore, Sol had seen the need to force them to rest their minds and their bodies and compelled them to come along on this vacation.

He had also extended an invitation to Ishli Duress, acting pope of the new Holy Church. Ishli had to reorganize the old Church and build up the new one, which involved coordinating matters on a continental scale and restructuring churches in every country. On top of that, he also had to investigate all the hidden areas inside the Holy City of Adrateio and oversee the study of Biblioteca. He was swamped with even more work than Steve and Gawain, with his constantly exhausted bearing earning him the nickname of "the Laboring Acting Pope."

When he'd received Sol's invitation, Ishli had been greatly overjoyed. However, he had firmly turned down the offer, not out of consideration for Sol and the girls but rather his own pride. The way he put it, he would be mortified exposing his overly indulged body before a group of teenagers looking to enjoy their youth at a resort. Being told that, Sol couldn't bring himself to force Ishli to come.

Steve and Gawain, despite their years, had very well-toned bodies. This was especially true of Gawain. Now that his level was in the triple digits, his muscles were so well-defined that they could cut rocks. With a bit of a tan, the two would become a handsome gentleman and a slightly rascally geezer, respectively. Sol thought that, even putting aside their social statuses, they would be very popular with mature women who had experienced their fair share of life's ups and downs.

It was understandable that Ishli, who had apparently been called

a sweet-faced hunk of a priest when younger, felt daunted next to Steve and Gawain when standing near Sol and his girls. However, he was turning his busy schedule into an opportunity to work on his body. Not only was he limiting what he was eating but he was also trying to move around during the brief moments when he was free. This convinced Sol to take a step back and, besides giving magical support as needed, simply look forward to seeing Ishli's new figure.

In the future, after Ishli succeeded in restoring his image, he would become known to many, along with Steve, Gawain, and Ethelweld, as "the Four Old Lords of Libertadores." That name would go down in history books too, but none of them had any idea as of yet.

"Old Man Gawain and I are a bit too old to have a vacation on a tropical island," grumbled Steve. However, he knew better than to go against what Sol had decided, so he sighed and added, "But I appreciate not having countless attendants waiting on us hand and foot, at least."

San Jeluk and Poseinia had both offered to dispatch large numbers of serving girls and maids of exceptional beauty, but Sol had firmly said no. As a result, the only people currently on San Jeluk's Tear were Sol's group. Given his position, Steve found that far more relaxing.

Gawain shook his head. "But everything here was prepared by Her Highness Princess Frederica and, uh, what are they called now? Right, Sol's Girls. That makes it hard to just relax and enjoy for a different reason."

"Hah! Too true."

As there were no servants around, it was up to Sol's Girls to take care of everything from laundry to cooking. That even included setting up the parasols and chairs the three guys were currently using. Of course, Steve and Gawain understood that manual labor was a breeze for the girls now that they all had triple-digit levels. However, they were taking care of Sol because they loved him and wanted him to love them back. Steve and Gawain felt uncomfortable enjoying the same services.

"I strongly protest the designation of them as 'Sol's Girls' and

express my deepest indignation at its usage," said Sol in a serious tone.

The name was indeed going around, and the reason was obvious. It was pretty much the truth, after all. Still, Sol felt it was a bit too much, although neither Frederica, Eliza, nor even Reen seemed all that put out by it.

"Then hurry up and officially announce your first queen consort and second queen consort and whatnot," Steve answered with a laugh.

"Ugh..."

Despite having created a situation where no one could complain and knowing that the girls were waiting with open arms, Sol was still dragging his feet. That was why a weird name like "Sol's Girls" was popping up. He had the energy and spirit to do it, so he ought to make a move already.

Then again, if and when he did, a different name would crop up. Despite what he had said, Steve knew that. Sol did too. Even Gawain, who was simply listening to the exchange, knew it.

"So, what're you going to do?" asked Steve. "You sure you want to just sit around and knock back a few with me and this old geezer here? The girls clearly want some attention from you. If you go join them, it'll make them really happy."

"Well...in a way, being able to drink while watching beauties frolicking on a beach under the bright summer sun is an enormous luxury. A guy getting in the middle of it would ruin the picture. Let's just stay here and take it easy."

Sol raised his glass to clink Steve's, and Steve obliged. Since Sol had made his intentions clear, Steve wasn't going to try to convince him otherwise.

"I suppose that sounds good too. I'll consider it a perk, then."

The spectacle of Sol's Girls cavorting at the water's edge was indeed a sight for sore eyes. Every last one of them was greatly attractive in her own way, with one being the princess of a great nation and two being monsters that featured in the legendary Kuzuifabra. Anyone who would complain about getting to watch them play around under the summer sun with a cold drink in hand

ought to be struck by divine punishment.

At their core, all guys were living beings who enjoyed drinking alcohol while watching pretty girls. That was why dancers were in high demand at night establishments, with the most popular ones practically being lauded as goddesses.

If Steve and Gawain hadn't held the positions they did, they wouldn't have received Sol's invitation to join him and enjoy this sight that normally couldn't be arranged even with money. And in this dramatically changed world, being able to drink with Sol lent unmatched influence to anyone who stood at the head of their organization. This was the correct way for those close to an absolute ruler to play the role of foxes borrowing a tiger's authority.

Knowing that, Steve had decided to be practical and fully go along with it. That said, he did plan on keeping an eye out for the right time to grab Gawain and slip away. Despite having been given permission to watch the girls playing around this way, they had scruples about being there when those girls started competing seriously for their man's favor. There was no telling what they would get up to, considering this was a beach and they were in swimsuits.

Gawain, who had already accepted things earlier than Steve and was deep in his cup, gave a mystified look and murmured, "By the way, why are they fine with the swimsuits they're wearing now and not the foundation suits?"

Even he had to admit that the foundation suits required to use the Numbers armaments were very lascivious. That wasn't the case when the Numbers armament was fully equipped, but in the window between the wearer's normal gear being stored in an extradimensional pocket and the armament's pieces being summoned—in other words, during the transformation—every line of the wearer's body was as clear as if they were naked. It hadn't been Gawain's intent for that to happen, and he felt very apologetic about it.

And yet, all of the girls had managed to ask Sol for a compliment in their current getup, albeit with some hesitation and embarrassment. It was Frederica who, after this trip to San Jeluk's Tear had been confirmed, had approached Gawain and asked him to

make swimsuits with the materials and techniques used to make the foundation suits. The old blacksmith already had all the girls' measurements, as there were plans underway to make armaments for all of them, including the two nonhumans. Making swimsuits based on that data and the designs that Frederica had brought in had been child's play for him. He also understood her reluctance to hand over the information needed to order tailor-made clothing to any other people and therefore accepted her request with Sol's go-ahead.

As it turned out, those swimsuits, as Sol had just said now, had ended up being quite lewd. Setting aside the fact that they were meant solely for use at a beach, there wasn't much difference from the foundation suits when it came to standing in front of other people. Of course, the swimsuits weren't just sexy; their designs also added cuteness and stylishness to the impression they gave off. And yet, the girls' stance on presenting them to Sol—and the two men they didn't see as guys—was like night and day compared to the foundation suits. This was what Gawain was struggling to wrap his mind around. The way he saw it, the foundation suits exposed much less skin than the swimsuits did.

Steve shrugged. "Beats me. I'm with you on that one." He had accidentally been present the very first time the foundation suits had been tested and rued the experience. However, after seeing how composed the girls were today in their swimsuits, he couldn't see why they had raised such a fuss about it.

"Um, how do I put it? I think it's a matter of time, place, and occasion. The embarrassment comes more from when those aren't aligned," said Sol, who was surprisingly the one who best understood the girls in this group.

Showing one's body and curves was part of the purpose of a swimsuit, so someone wearing it already possessed the mental preparation and resolution to bear the embarrassment that the experience entailed. In contrast, the foundation suits were part of something meant to give the wearer the strength to fight powerful monsters and enemies. Its sexiness had nothing at all to do with its function, which made it hard for the wearer to be mentally prepared

for both its appearance *and* battle. The discrepancy between its purpose as equipment for fighting with one's life on the line and its sensuous appearance was the cause of the girls' embarrassment.

Sure enough, although Sol conceded the swimsuits' incredible appeal, if asked whether it was more arousing than the foundation suits, he would've begrudgingly answered no. And that was with him watching the girls splashing water on one another and running around giggling as they wore the swimsuits in question at this very moment.

The appeal of something designed to elicit a certain effect versus something designed for another purpose that ended up eliciting that same effect—in other words, a manufactured stimulus against a natural one—was no contest at all. Or perhaps the girls' embarrassed reactions came from their understanding that this was how Sol saw things.

Unfortunately, this only came across as "one of those things only youngsters get" to Steve and Gawain. Like adults in any era, their joint reaction was therefore "There's just no understanding the young'uns these days."

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"Hey, this is surprisingly warm," said Julia.

"I know, right? I thought it'd be colder," said Reen.

"The Santeshesel Sea is well-known for having waters that are warmer than the surrounding regions for some reason," explained Frederica. "Some say it's because the islands all used to be part of the Floating Continent."

"The waves are tickling my feet," said Eliza. "It's giving me goose bumps."

Having split into their own group, the girls were at the water's edge, hesitantly dipping their bare feet in and taking a moment to play with it first before fully getting in and swimming. Frederica was planning on making the most of this opportunity to show off her appeal, as she knew that Sol could see them as clearly as if they were right in front of him thanks to his eyesight. Reen, Julia, and

Eliza, on the other hand, were so taken in by the sheer beauty of the water under the summer sun that all their plans went out the window as excitement coursed through them as if they were children.

What Sol had said earlier practically constituted a command, so the All Dragon and the Elven Queen also had no choice but to go into the water. However, they had no interest at all in playing in shallow water. Instead, they charged directly into the bay with aplomb, causing two huge geysers. They then proceeded to race each other, their voices ringing out with loud laughter.

The sight took Sol and the girls by surprise a little, but the fact that it was only a little indicated that they no longer saw things from the perspective of normal humans. In contrast, Steve's and Gawain's jaws practically fell open.

In any case, the first way that the girls were going to play was to splash water on one another, as was the cliché. Not doing it was not an option in Frederica's mind.

Upon suddenly being splashed with water, Reen, Julia, and Eliza each reacted in a different way.

"Gyah!"

"Augh!"

"What...?!"

Frederica smiled mischievously. "See? Feels quite warm, doesn't it?"

"That's not a reason to suddenly splash us," Reen protested. "Now you've got our swimsuits wet."

"Well, they're made to get wet," Julia pointed out.

"That's right; they are," Frederica agreed with a grin.

"In that case, you should get wet too, Frederica!" said Reen with a little retaliatory splash.

Still grinning, Frederica said, "Oooh. I suppose even when you see it coming, you can't help but yelp a little. But it feels good."

To encourage the others to temporarily forget her station, Frederica's plan was to invite Reen and Julia to reciprocate her attacks, then hope that Eliza would be swept up in the mood. Needless to say, triple-digit levels splashing for real would move as

much water as what Luna and her companion were kicking up, causing a large-scale catastrophe. Therefore, all four girls had to keep their strength in check and play the part of dainty, weak damsels. The effort could seem comedic to those who knew how strong they actually were, but there was nothing to be done about that.

"Do *not* splash one another with your full strength, understand?" said Frederica in a whisper. "This is a ground rule."

However, while Reen and Eliza replied in the affirmative, the latter with some nervousness, Julia whispered back, "But...wouldn't it be funny if we did?"

"No what-ifs, Lady Julia. This is not a lead-up to a practical joke. Please refrain."

It wasn't like it would have been a problem for Sol to hear the conversation, but the four were conducting it so covertly that they practically had to read one another's lips while skillfully changing their postures throughout. Reen and Eliza understood the general gist of what Frederica had in mind. Julia was the only person who could ruin the situation, but not even she would go against a direct request from her country's princess just for a laugh. It would've been one thing if it only affected her, but she wanted to avoid having Frederica tell Sephiras "Your wife really doesn't listen." He would probably get a heart attack.

In any case, the first move was made, and the game was afoot. Unfortunately, Sol, who should have understood the girls' efforts better than anyone, was so overwhelmed by the image of cute girls having fun on a summer beach that he couldn't care less. Beautiful was beautiful, cute was cute, and arousing was arousing. The girls' true strength had no bearing whatsoever on the breathtaking scene currently reflected in his eyes. As the person who had given them their strength, he was the only one in the world who could have that mindset.

In contrast, the older gentlemen were saying things like "Ah, youth!" and "Looking at them having fun like that, I can't imagine them as the one-man armies who brandish my Numbers armaments." Sol, however, was unable to keep a little grin off his

face, no matter how hard he tried. He was a seventeen-year-old boy, after all. *Not* reacting at all in this situation would have been far more bizarre.

A natural consequence of wading into the water barefooted and splashing one another was that the girls got wet. When wet, their swimsuits, made of the same material as the foundation suits but dyed and tailored into tasteful appearances, became even more stunning. Like most other materials, they gained a glossy sheen and a slight transparency. Any guy who saw them would feel as excited as a bull.

Unfortunately, in his effort to keep a straight face, Sol had forgotten something very important. He himself, without any buffs from Player, could see Reen's group as clearly as if they were right in front of him. It was only natural, then, that Reen's group, who *were* blessed with various stat bonuses, would surpass him in that respect.

"Hey, girls? Sol's been staring at us all this time," said Reen.

"He's totally let his guard down," Julia snickered. "With that lecherous look on his face, he finally looks like a boy his own age."

"Hmm, I see that getting wet is getting a good reaction," said Frederica. "That goes for both cloth and skin, so let's ensure we always have water dripping off us. But make sure not to get your hair too wet."

"Lady Frederica, this is scaring me a little..." said Eliza.

The secret strategizing using near lip reading was starting to get pretty on the nose. Of course, whatever the girls could do, the two monsters could do even better. They had also noticed Sol staring and continued pretending to play in the water while stealing glances back at him. When someone stared into the abyss, the abyss would stare back. Well, maybe that saying wasn't fully applicable here, but the point was that girls always could tell when guys were staring at them lewdly.

There were generally two ways that girls would react to this. Those reactions were wildly different and depended on who was staring. In this case, Reen's group was getting increasingly into it, despite how embarrassed they felt. They weren't exercising, but

their body temperatures were rising, casting a blush onto their cheeks. Unbeknownst to them, the situation was fast getting out of hand.

Gosh, why are girls so adorable when trying hard to catch the eye of the boy they love? thought Julia while looking at both sides and holding in her laughter. She didn't want to ruin things for the others by alerting Sol to the fact that the girls were aware of what he was doing, so she was doing her best to play along.

Thanks to their superhuman senses, the girls could catch every tiny change in Sol's expression based on their actions.

"At the moment, you catch Sol's eye most out of all of us, Frederica," mumbled Reen. "He grins the most when he's looking at you. Are big motions the key?"

Frederica started. "I'm so sorry; I was having so much fun that I got too into it. I had actually meant to make him look at you instead. It's just that seeing Lord Sol reacting to me as a woman is...so satisfying!"

"It's not as much as either of you, but Lord Sol is looking at me too," mumbled Eliza. "What am I supposed to do? How can I make him even happier?"

Oh man, they're all thinking so hard, thought Julia. *I can just see the gears spinning in their minds. And sometimes, they read too much into things and end up acting really ridiculous. And they don't realize it themselves, never mind Sol. Oh, they're all so silly and so adorable. I'm so going to die from holding in my laughter.*

Before long, the three girls were competing for the number of times they could steal Sol's attention. Then the goal changed to getting not the *most* but the *biggest* reactions from him. To make that happen, their actions started getting increasingly obvious. Of course, they had no intention of keeping him for themselves, so they started working together too. This led to more physical contact with one another, eventually leading to them tripping over their own feet and sitting waist-deep in the water.

"I'm very sorry, Lady Julia!" said Frederica. "I slipped."

"No, I'm sorry. I grabbed you pretty suddenly and made you lose your balance."

With their current stats, the girls would never stumble and fall, even while supporting another's weight. In other words, they had fallen on purpose and ended up getting tangled up in a very arousing display. For added measure, they made sure that they got wet—but not too wet!—to further enhance the impact of the scene.

At first, Reen and Eliza had been too embarrassed to join in. As Frederica got more and more into it and Julia started playing along, however, the two also grew bolder.

"Y-You feel warm, Eliza," said Reen, hugging the other girl from the back and giving some excuse about it starting to feel chilly.

Eliza yelped in surprise but caught on quickly and, blushing furiously, wrapped her own arms around Reen's. "Y-You're warm too, Reen."

From all the way back on the beach, Sol visibly suppressed an urge to pump a fist. It was getting so bad for Julia that she had to bite her lower lip. Reen and Eliza blushed even more, happy that they had pushed through their embarrassment to do what they had done.

In this way, the very skillful farce continued, with the girls trying to make it seem like they were playing naturally but very carefully controlling how much water got on one another's faces and hair. Steve and Gawain, having seen where things were going, had made their excuses and already left some time ago. This competition for Sol's favor was for Sol's eyes only, and the adults knew how to be considerate.

Seeing that Sol was the only person left on shore, Frederica's group got to where they started probing one another to see who was going for the ultimate move, that biggest cliché of all clichés tied to playing in the sea: suddenly having a wardrobe malfunction and losing their swimsuit top.

"After getting this far, we...have to do it, don't we?"

"Are you serious, Frederica?"

"Um, would Lord Sol really be happy seeing my scrawny figure?"

Julia said nothing, but she was completely in stitches inside.

When Frederica slightly pulled down one of her shoulder straps, shock ran through the group. The time for whispered discussion was

over. They were now reading one another's eyes and vibes to gauge their commitment and find the right timing. That is, with the exception of Julia, who was now struggling so hard to keep her inner howling laughter from bursting out that she would've been drawing blood if she'd bitten her lip any harder.

It was Frederica who was most open to the idea, with Reen feeling the need to match her. Julia, who was to be married to someone else, and Eliza, who was still young, had neither the intention nor the resolution to join in. Just as the willing pair were about to cross the line, however, a single strike ruined everything.

It had come from Luna.

The All Dragon possessed physical ability and sensory perception far greater than that of the four human girls. While swimming at full speed offshore, she had naturally noticed the happy expression on her liege's face and understood that it was because of the strange antics the girls were up to at the water edge. She still couldn't comprehend what was so fun about it, but her and Aina'noa's swimming had only evoked a wry look from him and given him no enjoyment. After going through all this in their heads, they were now deciding, without giving anyone a heads-up, to join in on the splashing—and with no holds barred.

Due to their complete inability to understand what it was that pleased their liege, they ended up causing a great tragedy...or comedy, depending on one's interpretation. A wave so great that it would make any surfer salivate was generated with a loud boom, instantly swallowing up the four who were, in Luna's eyes, playing like children. She felt like she had held back quite a bit, though, and sure enough, the wave affected Reen's group as much as a slightly stronger splash did for normal people. Right after that, Aina'noa raised a gigantic water pillar, throwing the four girls so high up into the air that coming back down would have been fatal for normal humans.

While surprised at suddenly being pushed around, Reen's group took practically no damage thanks to their levels. They had long surpassed the point where falling from such a height could harm them, even when they were not wearing any gear. Even if it could

hurt them, the girls' HP barriers, which were now insanely tanky, would fully protect them.

In other words, though the development seemed like a crisis at first blush, the four victims were entirely unhurt. Sadly, the same could not be said of their swimsuits. Of course, the cloth was in no danger of tearing simply from being hit by a large wave or launched into the air, as it had been made with the same material as the foundation suits. Therefore, the worst-case scenario would have been avoided if those swimsuits had been one-pieces like what Luna and Aina'noa were wearing.

Alas, all four girls were wearing designs with separate tops and bottoms that intentionally covered as little as possible. Regardless of the durability of the material, the cloth wasn't stuck to the wearers in any special way. And because of that, they easily came off.

First, the wave generated by the All Dragon rendered the girls entirely naked by forcibly ripping off said swimsuits. Right after that, they were thrown into the air by the Elven Queen's water pillar.

All Sol could do was say, "Wha...?" while staring in shock. It was a lot to expect him to know the right thing to do in this situation, but if he wanted to maintain his image as a gentleman, he should have immediately averted his eyes. Unfortunately, he was entirely caught off guard. Additionally, depending on how one saw it, being hit by a wave and then being launched into the air seemed straight up fun, much like a ride at an attraction park. Under such circumstances, Sol did not have the presence of mind to do the "right" thing.

As a result, he saw it all. He'd had yet to see even Reen naked, but at that moment, he saw all four girls bare as babies with his exceptional eyesight. Only there wasn't a scrap of the sensual excitement that would normally have come with a boy of his age seeing a girl naked for the first time. The four girls were just as stunned as he was and therefore assumed ridiculous poses while revealing themselves. For everyone involved, this was one big, terrible accident.

Although their levels took all the danger out of the situation, the girls reflexively assumed battle readiness. The magical light that burst out of them made everything more comical, while their

accelerated thinking enabled them to fully comprehend the plight they were in. Namely, they were fully naked, in silly poses, dozens of meters above the surface of the sea, just about to reach the zenith of their launch and enter free fall, and without the faintest clue where their swimsuits had gone. Even if they could see their swimsuits, they couldn't very well summon their Numbers armaments outside of battle, which meant they had no way of freely moving through the air. They were humans, not dragons or birds or any other species that could fly. The only thing left for them to do, then, was to look for the reaction of Sol, who had been staring hard at them mere moments ago.

Feeling the four flustered pairs of eyes on him, it finally dawned on Sol that if he could see the girls, they could see him too. In other words, they had known this whole time that he had been staring. He immediately turned away, his face filled with guilt, but it was too late in all sorts of ways. Accompanied by silent screaming, mortification bloomed on four faces in four different ways as the girls tried to hide themselves in a hurry. Sadly, that wasn't exactly possible with only two thin arms each. In the first place, covering up didn't change the reality that Sol had already seen everything in full view. It wasn't in their character to just go "So what?" and own it either.

The case could be made that their expressions and the way they were trying but failing to cover up was far more arousing than the silly poses they had made earlier. However, their hair was now thoroughly drenched and clinging to them with all semblance of style lost, and Sol wasn't even looking anymore.

Anyone would panic under similar circumstances. At this rate, the girls, in their desperation to hide their important bits, would crash-land where the water wasn't deep. They wouldn't take damage, but it would look extremely ridiculous.

Fortunately, the worst didn't come to be. Luna and Aina'noa, understanding that they had messed up in making the other girls take off their swimsuits when their liege had specifically said not to, reacted in time and caught the four in midair. As the Elven Queen, Aina'noa had command over all the elements and all natural phenomena. She used that power to raise four large water spheres

that spread droplets everywhere and created countless rainbows to catch the girls in midair. The girls, still falling while hugging themselves with their hands and with tears in their eyes, each fell into one sphere while they were still rather high up, making the sound of someone hitting deep water. Out of consideration, the surface of the spheres bent light, making it hard to see into them. Some would find the extra room for imagination even more arousing, but that was neither here nor there.

For a split second, the four girls couldn't comprehend what had just happened. Soon enough, though, they grasped that they were floating inside large spheres of water that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere. Thanks to what was likely more consideration on Aina'noa's part, they had no trouble breathing despite being underwater, and their vision, oddly enough, was not distorted at all. They had no idea what they themselves looked like but could see the three other spheres nearby and noted that they offered some concealment. That said, there still was a skin-colored silhouette visible, so the light bending didn't give complete peace of mind, especially because it was still possible to make out each person's hair color and the difference in their figures, thus identifying who was who.

It was better than nothing, but the girls weren't bold enough to remove their hands just yet. Seeing that, Aina'noa covered them with extremely dense water that became, for all intents and purposes, swimsuits made of seawater. These looked identical to what each girl had been wearing before the incident, indicating that Aina'noa was reproducing what she remembered. In this way, the very first swimsuits made of water came into being in this world.

The spheres of water then lost their top hemispheres, making it seem like Reen and the others were floating in little pockets of the sea in midair. That suddenly turned everything into a unique experience made possible only with the Elven Queen's aid. With what were essentially water platforms that allowed them to enjoy being in the air, the four girls temporarily forgot their predicament and squealed with fun. And now that they were wearing swimsuits again, there was no longer anything to worry about.

That high did not last long. Naturally, the girls had no way of controlling where their rides went. After several exhilarating minutes of zooming around in circles and going up, down, and every which way, they realized they were being brought back toward shore, where Sol was waiting. After another brief moment of consternation, they conceded that avoiding Sol indefinitely wasn't an option. Being forced to face him was perhaps a mercy.

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When the water hemispheres got low enough for the girls to get back to solid ground, Reen asked, "So...you saw everything, right?"

"Y-Yes, ma'am. I'm deeply sorry."

It was all an unfortunate accident that Sol had had no hand in whatsoever, so Reen had no intention of blaming him. However, a slightly accusatory note still made it into her tone despite her best efforts. The girls were actually a little happy that their distance from Sol had suddenly diminished so much, but expressing that happiness would hurt their pride. Hiding that was another reason Reen's voice sounded rather flat. There was no room for doubt, but she wanted vocal confirmation that Sol had seen everything. The same was true of Frederica, Eliza, and Julia. It would've been one thing if it had happened to only one of them. Since all four of them had been involved, there was no way to forget it and move on. After all, it would greatly affect the milestones they were striving for.

As a result of Sol's apology, the incident became an established fact. Reen's group blushed hard, albeit with no disgust on their faces. Regardless of what else they felt, there was no getting around the embarrassment. Furthermore, the situation wasn't exactly over yet, not when they were still wearing swimsuits made of water. These swimsuits covered more skin than the ones that were now floating out at sea somewhere, but being made of water meant they were somewhat see-through. The water was constantly in motion and therefore messing up the light rays and obscuring a clear view, but it was hard to deny that this was titillating in its own way. The water was dyed in the girls' respective colors, but the color of their

skin was still there, wavering, and that was embarrassing to no end.

Sol's face was red too as he apologized. This was not only because of the memories that flashed across his mind at Reen's question but also the allure of what he was currently seeing. There was a draw to something that was constantly at the edge of being seen but never quite getting there that spoke to both guys and girls.

Seeing that Sol was actually feeling bad, Frederica said, "To be clear, we are not against you having seen us naked. However, it's more like, if you were going to see it anyway, we would have preferred the occasion to be more...you know?"

"I'm so, *so* sorry..."

If she could have had her way, Frederica would've wanted to be alone in a room with Sol. Both of them would have been all shy and bashful as that last piece of sheer silk fell to the ground, or perhaps when Sol pulled it off with his own hands. That was how things had unfolded in her dream of the first time she would bare herself to a guy she had feelings for. Reality, as it turned out, could not have been more different. Even though she had come out of the closet regarding her masochistic fetishes while completely plastered at the banquet in the Village of the Elves, it didn't mean she was fine with anything and everything. She had still wanted her very first time to go a certain way.

The same was true for Reen and Eliza. They surely had their own ideas of their ideal first times, but none of it was coming true for any of them. The youngest, Eliza, was simply looking at the ground with a beet-red face, saying nothing.

Julia sighed. "I'm basically collateral damage here, aren't I?"

"I have no excuse whatsoever," said Sol with the deepest gravity so far. "I will visit Marquis Sephiras along with Luna and apologize to him in person."

Truth be told, Sol was every bit as much collateral damage as Julia. However, there was a big difference between the one who saw and the one who got seen, as well as between a guy and a girl in this situation. Between Sol and Reen, Frederica, and Eliza, this was mainly just an in-group problem. He clearly had full intention of making it up to them, and to be honest, the incident could be a

catalyst in their relationship.

With Julia, things were not so simple. She was a close friend and a reliable party member, but also a woman betrothed to another man. Making amends for seeing her naked was going to take more than a simple "sorry" to her alone. In the first place, the two who had caused the problem, Luna and Aina'noa, were in Sol's service. A liege who could not take responsibility for his servants' actions was not worthy of his position.

Sol was not one to hesitate in using his servants' strength. All consequences that arose from that strength being used, then, lay on his head. It was Luna who had killed Mark and Alan, but she had done so according to Sol's will. If asked, "Who was it who killed Mark and Alan?" Sol would answer, "I did" without missing a beat. The gravity of that situation versus the incident here today was like day and night, but the same principles applied nonetheless. Accordingly, Sol sincerely believed that he had to seek forgiveness from not only Julia but also her fiancé, Sephiras.

Knowing how stubborn Sol could get, Julia laughed a little. Within the dynamic of an assault, the victim was the only one who could say words like "It was no biggie" or "That's all it was." Third parties had no right to, much less the person who had committed the offense. Sol had always strongly believed that, and Julia appreciated him for it. In fact, seeing that this part of him had remained the same throughout his powerless childhood to his teenage years after he'd obtained power, all the way until now, when he could silence even the greatest kings on the continent, gave Julia great reassurance.

Her ability to think this way proved that she was already more mature than he was in some respects. She understood that he would only feel worse about it if she was nice to him. So instead, she decided to let him off the hook with a sigh for now, then use this incident as material to repeatedly tease him, about which he could never protest.

Seeing that the conversation that had to happen was over and the mood was about to get awkward, Luna and Aina'noa teleported back and prostrated themselves, with Luna shouting, "My lord! And

Lady Reen, Lady Julia, Lady Frederica, and Lady Eliza! What happened was not my intention at all. I'm deeply, deeply sorry!"

This was no joking matter for Luna. Not only had she broken a direct order from her liege, she had done it on those who he cared about. This was a grave transgression. It made it worse that she had caused everything in an effort to gain his favor. She had no recourse but to apologize with every fiber of her being. As a dragon, a race defined by strength and pride, she naturally understood that there was a clear line between things that could and could not be resolved with a simple apology. For the latter, sincerity had to be shown through something tangible.

Sol's jaw dropped. "Seriously?"

Despite how much everyone was getting used to the All Dragon's and the Elven Queen's antics, they were still floored by what they were seeing. The little girl fragment of Luna was still there before their eyes, but behind her, an Astral was rising from the sea with a sea serpent larger than most taboo territory bosses in its jaws. Luna had complete freedom in how big to make her Astrals, and this one was the biggest that the group had ever seen. It, together with its prey, was undoubtedly visible from the continental shore.

The magical light enveloping the Astral indicated that the sea serpent wasn't simply large. Having killed it, Luna was gaining many levels in succession despite having already reached the triple digits. If Gawain got his hands on this corpse, he would surely create some incredible weapon that would surpass even the Numbers armaments.

"The sea serpents of the Santeshesel Sea are incredibly delicious, so I caught one to make amends."

All that Luna cared about, though, was that this sea serpent was the most delicious prey she knew of. One might doubt how relevant a dragon's taste profile would be to humans, but Luna was starting to get a feel for what her fragment thought delicious, so her judgment was not without merit.

Besides magic stones and materials for armis magicka and magic tools, some monsters were indeed hunted for their flavorful meat and organs. So, there were requests registered with the guild for

obtaining monster ingredients. Rare and unique monsters, especially small ones, had a strong tendency to be great delicacies. A representative example was ragu lapan, a stew made with white horned rabbit. It was so rare that not even top-tier restaurants could regularly serve it on their menus. It was pretty much a luxury that only royalty and nobility could enjoy.

That said, Reen and Julia had a certain amount of experience hunting down and cooking such monsters thanks to the power they had received from Sol. In general, adventurers who weren't strapped for cash preferred to enjoy their catches themselves or sell to restaurant owners they were close with to build rapport.

What Luna was currently offering by way of apology, however, had never been cooked by anyone before. How good was it truly? Come to think of it, what about taboo territory bosses and the devigods on the Floating Continent? There was a staggering amount of meat currently in Sol's extradimensional storage, where it never went bad. It could be a good idea to take advantage of this vacation to try eating what no one else had for over a thousand years.

Being a royal, Frederica had also had many opportunities to try monster dishes. She, Reen, and Julia were all reminded of past experiences and seemed receptive to what Luna was offering. The only person who wasn't showing any particular reaction was Eliza, who was already overwhelmed by everything she was eating lately and having trouble imagining how much better monster ingredients could be.

"Luna, I'm afraid I don't actually have the right to decide things in this matter," said Sol regretfully.

Luna's body stiffened visibly. Sol was greatly tempted to say, "Don't worry about it," but he was technically the assailant and it therefore wasn't his place to write anything off. Hearing that, the dragon girl turned her teary eyes toward those from whom she had to seek forgiveness.

Right away, Reen said, "You're fine, Lu."

"Please raise your face, Lady Luna," said Frederica.

"It's all right, Luna," said Eliza.

Julia waved a hand dismissively. "It's forgiven. You don't have to

bring her to apologize either, Sol."

It was perhaps a little unfair that Luna was the world's most powerful being while also possessing a sweet fragility that triggered other people's protective instincts, but that aside, it could be said to be a stroke of good fortune for those in Sol's harem that he had forcibly ended up seeing them in the nude, albeit in a somewhat comical setting. Given that, they were more than happy to forgive both Luna and Aina'noa. It didn't hurt that this put Sol a little in their debt too. They did feel terrible about Julia and Sephiras, though.

"I...am deeply thankful." Once more, Luna deeply bowed her head. She was filled with gratitude, especially after seeing relief finally flood Sol's face.

"That aside, it felt amazing, Sol!" gushed Reen. "You should come join us for a dip in the sky!"

"Well, that's one offer I can't refuse."

A happy note rang out, betraying how Aina'noa, one of the culprits, was still as carefree as could be. On the one hand, it could be argued that all she had done was throw the four girls up into the air and catch them. On the other, if she hadn't done so, Sol wouldn't have seen them in their moment of undress. In any case, apologies were given and accepted, and the benefit that the girls had received somewhat balanced out the guilt that Sol felt. Everyone's attention now turned toward the exciting prospect of playing in the water in the air that the Elven Queen could create. It was time to enjoy the summer resort island in peace to their hearts' content.

The distance between Sol and the girls had shrunk by a lot more than Frederica had planned. Used properly, a little guilt and awkwardness could help accelerate that process even further. The first step in doing so was playing hard in a completely innocent way under the light of the sun. This was called an island of everlasting summer, but night would fall, and with a little preparation, the sound of the insects and the waves could lead to a very salacious mood.

There was no knowing if this also applied to the sea serpent caught by Luna, but snakelike creatures had always been said to boost virility. It didn't even have to be true. Simply bringing up the topic while eating a dish made with the sea serpent could create a

placebo effect. The girls were not above borrowing the power of alcohol either. As long as they managed to get Sol into the mood, it would be their win.

Alas, things were going so well—depending on interpretation—that even Frederica was letting down her guard. In order to fully wipe away the guilt and awkwardness in the air, the girls tried a little too hard to act happy and virtuous. As a result, they forgot the circumstances they were in. Normally, they wouldn't have forgotten to go find the swimsuits that had come off and put them back on. The Elven Queen's replicas were too well-made, however, and having been fully naked just before paralyzed their awareness in this regard. This was a recipe for disaster.

When the sun set, staining the sea and sky orange, and their surroundings started feeling cooler in contrast to the blazing afternoon heat, tragedy struck once again. After having tired themselves out playing, everyone was making benign comments like "Today sure was fun" and "It sure was a strange feeling floating in water and air at the same time," staring at the beautiful view in a half daze.

"Well then, shall we wrap it up for the day and go cook the sea serpent that Luna caught?" Sol asked, and everyone agreed with smiles.

Understanding that playtime was over, the Elven Queen hummed a note and dispelled the magic she had been maintaining. The girls' swimsuits all reverted to water, revealing their naked forms to Sol once more, but this time in the light of the sunset.

After a few more days of Sol and his group enjoying a peaceful vacation, an earthquake the likes of which had never been recorded for a millennium occurred off the eastern coast of the continent.

The Floating Continent was rising back up from the bottom of the sea.



Chapter 3: Negotiation

Ten days had passed. Steve and Gawain had headed back long ago, leaving Sol's party on San Jeluk's Tear still lazing around and waiting for the devinians' next move. Just as they had started worrying that they would become spoiled by all the comfort and luxury, the entire Fol Mentera Archipelago had begun rumbling at regular intervals. Whatever it was, it wasn't an earthquake, as the mainland remained unaffected. This held true as the intervals grew increasingly shorter. By the fifth day of the rumbling—today—it was nearly incessant.

One thing that had made the Fol Mentera Archipelago such a hot tourist destination was the exhaustive list of water activities that it had on offer. At the top of the list was diving down to see the formations of crystallized mana found at the base of the islands. Those crystals gave off a faint warmth that was attributed as another reason for the temperature of the Santeshesel Sea being higher than its surroundings.

The day that the rumblings began, Sol's group had confirmed seeing countless cracks running throughout those crystal formations. The supports that had held the islands in place since they had crashed due to the atmosphere being drained of outer mana a thousand years ago were giving way. The Fol Mentera Archipelago was absorbing the mana that Aina'noa had set free and trying to return to the sky. The rumbling was now accompanied by the muffled sounds of the islands' underwater foundations fracturing. The normally beautiful, crystal clear sea was bubbling as furiously as a pot of boiling water. World geography was about to be permanently altered.

While the rumbling had been ramping up, Sol had run around ordering cities on the east coast to evacuate. Thanks to the aid of the local governments, he was nearly done. This was one less thing

to worry about while dealing with whatever was coming.

With a final, earsplitting crash, all the islands of the Fol Mentera Archipelago rose up out of the sea. The resulting shock wave flattened countless luxury summer homes, eliciting fascinated cries of "Whoa!" from Sol's group. No normal human could remain upright within such conditions, but it was nothing for his group thanks to their high levels.

The sight of the floating islands that had been pretending to be ordinary islands for a millennium being restored to their former glory would have struck awe and wonder into the hearts of those watching from the continental coast if any had stayed behind. On their way up, the islands brought with them staggering volumes of water and shards of broken-off magical supports. All of that reflected the light of the sun in a cloudless sky, creating myriad rainbows that seemed to form bridges between the islands.

Crystal fragments of varying sizes burst with the sound of shattering glass, reverting to pure mana in a colorful display of colors and fading particles. Most of the seawater raised with the islands escaped their control once high enough, consequently falling back down as roaring waterfalls. The mist that got kicked up created even more rainbows in the air, as if there weren't enough already.

A colossal mass suddenly appeared close to San Jeluk's Tear, the island near the center of the fantastical phenomenon where Sol's party was watching spellbound. It was the largest floating island they had seen so far, and perched on it was a large, looming fortress. This was the main base of operations of the devinians who had gathered in rebellion up in the northern part of Amnesphia.

Sensing from the magical signature that it had been teleported over, Luna and Aina'noa promptly readied themselves for battle. In contrast, their liege merely continued to marvel at how islands could not only float but teleport too. Everyone else was simply dumbstruck from shock.

A powerful magical signature suddenly flared up from the tip of the newly appeared floating island and closed in on Sol's group at high speed. Before long, it revealed itself to be a devinian.

He was a devigod named Creed Inviworth. Known by the alias of

Dragonslayer, he had been one of the Demon Lord's closest aides a thousand years ago. When the Elven Queen had been released and mana once again filled the world, he had regained his original strength, gathered all living devinians, and declared war on humankind on their behalf.

And now, he had come before Sol of his own accord.

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"Demons" was the most common derogatory name for devinians. In this age, the official story was that they had all died out long ago. According to the Kuzuifabra, the Hero had extinguished them and their home, along with the Demon Lord who stood over them, before heading to her final battle with Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon.

Of course, that was a lie, and Sol knew it. He and Luna had faced a succubus in person, and while Luna was eating her alive, they had learned that the Church was still keeping devinians and using them as assets. After the Oratorio Tangram was over, he had placed Prodigium, which was also known as the Miracle Commission and had been in charge of controlling the devinians, and the Lost Technology Research Center under Ishli's direct supervision and charged them with the devinians' care and study.

Despite how much the situation had developed, the fact that the devinians had gathered on a fallen floating island and declared war on all humankind was still being kept a secret from the general populace.

There was no denying that, unlike other demihumans such as therianthropes and elves, devinians were distinctly hostile toward humans—their declaration of war confirmed it. Supposedly, they had all come from the Floating Continent, a place mentioned in legends but which no one alive knew the location of. From the Floating Continent, they had once waged war against humans, razing several countries and conducting inhumane acts. Even though, unlike monsters, communication was possible with them—no, *because* communication was possible with them—they and humans could

never coexist. As they had evolved to look similar to humans but were so much stronger, humans called them “demons” and constantly looked at them with fear and scorn. Such was the ugly, cowardly nature of man.

There were differences between species and individuals, but all devinians possessed powerful organas in the form of eyes granting Devi Sight, horns, wings, or tails to absorb outer mana from the air. These parts made devinians the most powerful demihumans of all, nearly enough to stand on equal footing with dragons. Like dragons, they had crimson eyes—this was the one characteristic shared by all members of their race.

“It is a pleasure making your acquaintance, Lord Sol Rock, Wayside God of this age and liberator of us devinians. I am Creed Inviworth, an old name who has temporarily taken up the mantle of leading my brethren. I have come in hopes of beseeching you for a favor.”



The devigod kneeling before Sol with his head bowed was a dashing man seemingly in his late twenties to early thirties who bore none of the characteristics that normally identified a devinian. His handsome features, which seemed perfect for a cruel expression, were fixed in a masklike smile, and his right eye seemed permanently closed, with his left eye being the only one open. There were no horns on his head, as all demons normally had, nor were there wings or a tail behind him. In fact, his neatly swept-back ash-gray hair, his unblemished skin free of curse tattoos, and the high-quality cassock that he was wearing gave the initial impression that he was a handsome young priest. The only thing that outed him as a devinian was his crimson red eye.

Luna widened her eyes in surprise. "Dragonslayer."

"You know him, Luna?" asked Sol.

"Yes, my lord. He is a devigod. In terms of battle prowess, he is practically the Demon Lord's equal. He has killed several earth dragons, which is why some call him Dragonslayer."

The introduction was much more impressive than Sol had expected. Devinians lived longer than humans, but it was very rare to encounter one older than a millennium. Such individuals were commonly called devigods and spoken of as great evils that stood alongside the Demon Lord to bring humankind to ruin. They featured very frequently as villains in myths and heroic epics.

The fact that Luna recognized Creed meant he had been alive during the time of the Kuzuifabra. If he had truly succeeded in killing dragons, then he had earned his right to stand next to the Demon Lord. The title of Dragonslayer being an acknowledgment of strength among devinians was in turn an acknowledgment of the strength of dragons. Humans and devinians had at least this one thing in common: glorifying those who defeated some great enemy as a champion. And no matter the race, dragons were always held up as the biggest, baddest enemy. For that reason, the title of Dragonslayer commanded respect and awe from both humans and devinians.

"Now that's a voice that brings me back. I see you are still shamelessly clinging to life, Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon."

The droll smile and calm manner with which Creed responded to Luna's introduction betrayed no sign of the devigod who had gone toe-to-toe with dragons. He was also prostrating himself on the ground despite being perfectly capable of using magic to float in the air. Someone who had supposedly regained his strength acting in this way was unexpected, to say the least.

"I know I'm hardly better off, but what is with that deplorable appearance, Creed?"

Luna had failed to recognize such a big name at first glance because of how drastically his appearance had changed, as well as his attitude toward Sol. The Creed she knew had a third eye on his forehead, two massive goat horns on his head, three pairs of wings on his back for a total of six, and an intimidating tail that looked like a great snake. It couldn't have been more different from the weak-looking figure currently kneeling before Sol. Powerful devinians conjured the clothes they wore, changing them with a thought based on the tide of a fight to intimidate those weaker than themselves. They were, in a way, exhibitionists, and yet Creed was wearing man-made clothing. The presentation of the person Luna was looking at went against what she knew of him in more ways than one. There wasn't a hint of the powerhouse who would once pick a fight with even a dragon over an argument and come out of it alive.

"My organas were destroyed a thousand years ago. This left eye is all I have left."

Creed's voice was flat and expressionless, making it hard to tell how much emotion he was suppressing. And yet, he had to have something that had kept him going as he swallowed his humiliation and served the Church throughout the past millennium. Wanting to live was far too weak of a reason to carry him through watching his brethren dying one by one.

As it happened, Sol had an idea what it was that Creed had clung to. The final words of the first devinian he had met, the succubus, had been "Not before I meet my lord again..." He was willing to bet that the person she was referring to, the Demon Lord who was supposedly currently "vacant" somehow, was still alive somewhere.

When Sol had used Summoning—arguably the most powerful ability of Player—the card for the Vacant Demon Lord had been there as an option.

Despite thinking he knew what the answer would be, Sol asked, "What would that favor be?"

Considering that Creed was asking him, Sol, the one who had selected the Bound Evil Dragon and freed the Captive Elven Queen, the favor could only be to restore the Vacant Demon Lord. Of course, Sol wasn't going to say no. He was planning on doing it anyway, even if Creed didn't ask. And if the devinians loved him for it, then all the better.

"Lord Sol, we ask that you allow us devinians to carry out our revenge."

Creed's words, though respectful, punctured Sol's faint hopes. That said, he understood the reasoning behind the request, and a part of him had seen it coming. Now that the devinians were back to being stronger than the humans, they wanted their pound of flesh for everything that they had been subjected to over the past millennium. The ledgers had to be balanced before they could even consider making an effort to get along with humankind.

"Um, Lord Sol..."

"Mm-hmm, I know. All yours, Frederica."

"Thank you, my lord."

In general, Sol left such decisions to those under him who were skilled at statecraft, with Frederica being the prime example. She was the one who had worked out the broad strokes for how demihumans were to be treated going forward during the Continental Conference the other day. It was only right that she represented humanity in today's negotiations too. That was why she had spoken up and why Sol had given her the go-ahead.

Though the other side was getting a little ahead of itself, they had chosen to come ask Sol for this favor first instead of carrying out their revenge straightaway. That meant there was still room for discussion. Otherwise, the devinians would have launched an offensive the very moment the floating islands were restored.

"May we inquire as to the intended targets of your revenge?"

asked Frederica calmly.

If Creed read between the lines as he was supposed to, he would get that the revenge he was asking for wasn't entirely off the table for the human side. In fact, many who had been confirmed to have mistreated demihumans had already been arrested, regardless of wealth, age, or gender. Under Sol's direct orders, Ishli was also identifying those within the Church who had done something that would make the devinians want some alone time with them.

Sol had no interest in using his power to protect those who had stepped far out of line. Whether someone was a piece of trash was based not on their race, but on the choices they themselves had made. And those who *were* trash, well, the new world had no place for them. Those who had crossed over of their own will, as opposed to making a mistake or having been coerced, did not deserve a chance at redemption. Their victims hadn't gotten a second chance, so Sol thought it made no sense for the assailants to get one. He had already made this stance clear to all those dependent on his power for their survival and livelihood.

In a quiet voice, Creed said, "Everyone besides the Kingdom of Emelia."

This was far from what Frederica had hoped for but not altogether unexpected. She had learned from historical texts that the devinians were a proud race. It tracked that they wanted to take revenge on all of humanity now that they were back on top.

What *was* surprising was that Creed was speaking to Frederica as an equal. Furthermore, he was willing to compromise by leaving Emelia alone. Both of these things were unthinkable for the devinians from the books. That went to show just how much of a threat to them Sol Rock, the Wayside God of this era, was.

"And what will you do to them? Specifically?"

"Wipe them out."

"And you're offering to overlook Emelia alone. However, we held what we called a Continental Conference a mere few days ago. We have just set up a framework for international cooperation."

The fact that Creed was at the negotiating table had to mean he wasn't planning on carrying out what he was saying. What he was

doing, therefore, was employing the well-established tactic of first asking for something ridiculous. If both sides were willing to play the game, they had to use the cards they had on hand to eventually find a middle ground that would satisfy the terms they both *really* wanted.

Of course, Frederica was well aware that in this new world, the game wasn't the be-all and end-all anymore. Just as things had been settled in the blink of an eye at the Continental Conference, whatever someone could get Sol to nod to would get passed, no matter how unreasonable it was. In fact, it could be said that she understood this sobering truth best of anyone in the world, since it was her job, as Sol's representative, to figure out how best to use this power. Accordingly, she was now hinting that modern human society was under Sol's protection.

Unfazed, Creed said coolly, "We are aware. However, as far as we can confirm, none of the terms obliged Lord Sol to protect the signatories."

Although Frederica didn't let it show on her face, this was a sore point. Plus, she was just now learning that there was at least one country that had thrown its lot in with the devinians. That was the only way to explain why they were so familiar with the finalized terms.

What Creed was pointing out was that the human nations weren't so united that they were obligated to protect one another. What Sol had promised them at the Continental Conference was that they could rake in great profits if they colored within the new lines, not that he would protect them from external enemies. What he wanted from them was the freedom to explore their dungeons and unseal their territories and cooperation if he asked for it, and in exchange, he wouldn't attack them. He didn't have a duty to stand up for them should the devinians wreak their revenge.

After human society received Player's blessing and rose to the level where it could handle monster territories and dungeons, it probably would be able to fight with the devinians on even footing. Now, however, was too early—without Sol's help, the humans would be steamrolled.

"Furthermore, we'll also exempt those specified by Lord Sol," continued Creed. "This includes the imperial family of Istekario and Acting Pope Ishli and those tied to him. We will take the greatest care to not touch anyone else who has a personal relationship with my lord."

In exchange for getting permission to go after the rest of humankind, the devinians would unconditionally exempt those with ties to Sol. That specific phrasing meant that someone who *had* done something that they deserved to be punished for but fit this condition would also get a free pass. Furthermore, Creed was taking care to maintain the stance that he was asking a favor and was by no means threatening Sol or looking down on him.

"But everyone else, you wish to kill?"

"Yes."

Even so, there was no hesitation in Creed's reply. Regardless of how incredible Sol's power was, there was a limit to how extensive his personal network could be. Unlike a royal or a noble, the number of people outside of Emelia he knew probably didn't come close to a hundred. In fact, even if Sol asked for a thousand pardons per country, Creed would still immediately agree.

The numbers were different, but Creed and his brethren had survived to this day because the humans had conducted a selection process in the exact same way a thousand years ago. Allowing forty thousand or so to live was a small price to pay for being able to annihilate the majority of the human race. Or perhaps, as a race that had experience being on the bottom, they wanted to press harder but had no choice but to make concessions given that they still weren't the one with *the* biggest stick. And in a way, a weak being that would normally be stomped out surviving by the grace of a stronger being made sense in the natural world too.

"Under Lord Sol's orders, we are currently rounding up those who have severely mistreated any demihuman race, which includes devinians and therianthropes. Naturally, we are also more than willing to look into information provided by any devinian and take appropriate action. We Libertadores and the Continental Conference are willing to hand them over and forget about them entirely."

Frederica understood the devinians' anger and agreed that if someone had done something to a devinian that they deserved to be killed for, they ought to get their just deserts. Like Sol, she wasn't going to hand out clemency just because they were the same race as her. Above all, this was Sol's policy, and she saw no reason to protest it. Law didn't play into this at all. Efforts were already underway to deliver such garbage to those who wanted to take revenge on them, with it being made clear that no one would interfere no matter what was done to them.

Creed looked a little surprised. "So we can torture or even kill them if we so please?"

"You are free to do absolutely whatever you want to them," said Frederica firmly, her expression not changing in the slightest.

Sol and his group didn't believe in only propping humans up, and neither were they striving to create an ideal world that harped on about justice or rights. Ultimately, all Sol wanted was to go dungeon delving and unseal territories. As long as conditions were suitable for him to do so, he didn't care much how it happened. It was only by pure coincidence that he had made Frederica's acquaintance early on, and it was she who was directing things, all while keeping in mind his main objective. If the devinians' anger over having been treated like slaves for a millennium could be vented in full on the offenders who were still alive, Sol's group would hand them over in a heartbeat. It would honestly be a steal.

In a matter-of-fact, nonthreatening voice, Creed asked, "And you...truly believe that is enough to make amends for a thousand years of disgrace?"

The devinian population had been whittled down until there were only roughly a thousand left, and they had been kept under the boot over numerous human generations. Going to town on everyone alive in this one generation was nowhere close to balancing the scales. Frederica could see where they were coming from. However, understanding did not compel acceptance.

Having never been in their shoes and therefore only capable of imagining what they had gone through, Frederica fumbled for a reply. "Well...um..."

"When we were weak, we fully understood that we had no right to protest the actions of the strong. We devinians bent our knees of our own will to live, and so it was our place to accept the disgrace visited upon us. However, the power dynamic has flipped."

After a thousand years, the positions of the strong and the weak had been switched—or rather, had been restored. Even though it was through no effort on the devinians' part and entirely thanks to Sol's actions, the fact remained.

"Those who died during the past millennium fell because they were weak. Dead men cannot take revenge. Such is the way of this world." When the devinians were weak, they had been nearly wiped out by the humans. "However, *we* are still alive."

Around a thousand had survived. If the humans had been serious about preventing a day like today coming around, they should have cut down every last devinian, no matter how convenient they were as tools, how beautiful they were as slaves, or how confident the humans were in maintaining control. They hadn't and were now paying for that mistake. That was all it was.

"Now that we're back on top of the power dynamic, we *must* have our vengeance, and no arguments will convince us otherwise. You cannot say that we don't have the right to do to you what you did to us."

They did have the right. When the strong trampled the weak, it was only oddballs among the strong who could protest that it was evil. It was the same way that almost no one thought twice about the rights and dignity of livestock sold and raised for consumption or of monsters and beasts eliminated as pests. Such concepts were but figments of human imagination and had no place in a world ruled by the law of the jungle. Warped righteousness meant nothing in this negotiation. Only strength could deny the devinians the revenge they deserved. That strength could take any form, be it violence or words, but if it could convince the devinians to stop, then it was real.

"In that case..."

Frederica had been granted permission to wield that strength. Creed coming here meant he was willing to comply if Sol ordered him not to take his revenge. He himself had said as much. If Sol

designated the exemption parameter as "all of humanity," Creed would respect it. And so, Frederica was about to play the part of the fox borrowing the tiger's authority and say the words to stop what those living in this era would see as an unreasonable tragedy.

This would, however, become a great debt. This exchange would be framed as the devinians heeding Sol's will and resisting the urge to act upon the burning anger they harbored against humans. They would be able to continue holding it over the humans forever. This was probably the settlement that Creed had been aiming for all along. To accept it was to admit defeat, but Frederica saw no other way.

Just as she was about to agree, Sol called out her name. "Frederica."

Most of the time, he was willing to roll with whatever she decided, but he had been listening this whole time, and he didn't like that the discussion was ending on "the devinians are forgoing their deserved revenge because Sol said so while holding a great big stick." Furthermore, Frederica's main role was to be the one to rein Sol in when he started going off the rails. To establish that, he first had to go off the rails. So that was what he would now do.

"Look, I'm happy as long as I get to dedicate myself to the dungeons, the territories, and ultimately, the Tower. To put it bluntly, no, I don't really care what happens to people I don't know. If you leave Emelia and my acquaintances alone, I generally won't take issue with you. If you would even be willing to help me, that'd be a plus in my book. I understand wanting to hold those who stomped over—or are planning to stomp over—what you hold dear accountable. I even understand wanting to hurt what *they* hold important too, tit for tat."

To start, Sol was overturning the assumption that he would not allow the devinians to take their revenge.

"Are you saying..."

"You can feel free to do as you like. In exchange, I will also do as I like."

"As in?"

"If you want to use the strength that you've regained to massacre

humans living honest lives in this age, then go ahead. I don't have the ability to completely stop it. However, I will defend against it using everything at my disposal."

He didn't want the devinians to hold themselves back because of an agreement they were exchanging. If they wanted revenge, they could have it. Sol would then take action to protect what he could. He and his group could easily handle the individuals they faced in person, but there were a thousand devinians in total, all of them had regained their strength, and they even possessed a floating island that could teleport. It would be nigh impossible to shut them all down. That said, it wasn't his duty to protect the human race. The responsibility for any casualties that occurred lay at the feet of the humans in the past and the present who had earned the devinians' ire, giving them justification for revenge.

This stance was fundamentally different from the one that Frederica had been working off of—that of wanting to establish friendly relations with the devinians. In a voice as dispassionate as Creed's, Sol was now putting all-out war on the table.

Having the rug pulled out from under his feet elicited a proper expression from Creed for the first time. However, he looked more amused than flustered. "Are you saying that our desire for retribution is misguided?"

"Is there any point in someone judging the rightness of what someone else is willing to stake their life on?"

As a personal opinion, Sol thought it was wrong to expand one's targets to excess when seeking revenge. Bringing all of one's strengths to bear in exacting revenge on someone who had come after them or her with malice made sense, but taking things personally meant keeping them personal. It would be overdoing it to also go after that person's organization, country, or even race.

That said, he wasn't going to challenge the value that the devinians saw in seeking revenge. Not because revenge never did anyone any good, or because those who had already died would want those still alive to enjoy their lives instead of being trapped by the past, or any other similar platitudes. If the like was ever said to him, he would either flip out or laugh the speaker out the door.

Rather, as he said, if someone wanted to do something so badly they were willing to put their everything on the line for it, a third party expounding on whether it was right or wrong meant exactly zilch.

"Speaking of, there was this lady, Fiona, who was really good to me. But a devinian killed her."

To wrap it up, Sol revealed that his willingness to fight the devinians wasn't only because he couldn't allow them to carry out their unreasonable revenge. By the same rationale that they touted, he, too, had a reason to kill them all.

"The succubus who did it is already dead. However, I won't hesitate to apply the same logic that you're espousing."

Sol wasn't going to tell the devinians not to have their revenge. All he was going to do was seek his own revenge too. There would be no limit on the number of those affected, how they were related, or the length of time that had passed. In all likelihood, the succubus had been coerced into doing what she did, so Sol would be going after those who had given her her orders too. If he were to take this logic to its ultimate end, he would have to put both devinians and humans to the sword. There was no particular reason he couldn't kill those of his own race. Humans had been killing one another since time immemorial.

This was what it meant to accept the favor that the devinians were asking and to allow them to go after all humankind to settle the score for the pain they had experienced.

"Since a devinian killed someone I knew, I will then annihilate all devinians. As a result, human casualties would be kept at a minimum, but that would be simply a side effect."

While Creed looked like he was somewhat enjoying this exchange, Sol meant what he was saying. He was ready to immediately enact this approach if Creed tried to continue negotiating. It was the same to Sol in that he still could carry out the tests he had planned in developing devinians using Player. Starting with Creed, he could knock out every devinian he found and use Subordinate on them. In fact, once Creed was under his control, it probably wouldn't be too hard to use him to make the remaining devinians surrender without putting up resistance.

Despite being a devigod and having regained his strength, Creed only had one organa left. He would stand no chance against the combined strength of the All Dragon, the Elven Queen, and Reen's group decked out in their Numbers armaments. Sol was more than happy to speak in violence if that was the only language that Creed understood.

As Sol's aura started to emanate a willingness to fight, an adorable voice chortled with mirth, cutting through the tension in the air. "It's your loss, Creed."

"Please don't make it sound like it's my fault." Creed sighed. "You're the one who wrote this ridiculous script, my lord."

Apparently he had no intention of refuting the sudden declaration of his defeat. Instead, he was insisting that the blame for it lay elsewhere.

Part of what Creed said jumped out at Sol, and he couldn't help repeating it. "'My lord'?"

"Fool! Why'd you go and reveal it so easily? I suppose this is a good point for it, though." As if in answer to Sol's query, a small figure crawled out from the front of Creed's cassock and, with much huffing and puffing, climbed to his shoulder and leaned back self-importantly.

It was a cute little doll with luscious silver hair and large crimson eyes. Though diminutive, it was clad in a fancy black dress and bore all the organas representative of a powerful devinian: goat horns, wings, and a tail. It was obvious even to amateur eyes that it had been made with great skill and expense, with the intention of being cute and lovely instead of beautiful and exquisite. It was the kind of doll that a little girl would squeal with joy to receive as a present. Its movements were so lifelike—like a small animal—that some would think it creepy, though.

"I'm very sorry to rain on your parade when you're basking in your entrance, my lord, but how are we to amend this mood? As a result of doing my best to act according to your script, I have completely stepped on the Wayside God's tail, for which the All Dragon is glaring death at me."

Clearly, Creed deferred to the little doll. As he'd pointed out, Luna

was as tense as a wound spring. Sol merely had to say the word, and she would tear Creed's head off in the blink of an eye.

Creed wasn't called "Dragonslayer" for no reason. Luna herself had mentioned that he had defeated earth dragons before. He likely was the most powerful devinian alive. However, losing his organas had permanently crippled him. Even if he was still in his prime, he was facing not a mere earth dragon, but the All Dragon. He didn't have what it would take to beat her fragment, much less her Augoeides.

With her chest still puffed out, the doll cackled loudly. "The loyal guard-dragon is hopping mad for real, but her liege was half acting. Isn't that right?"

She had correctly gleaned that the All Dragon was now faithful to Sol and wouldn't take any action without her master's say-so. Her confidence indicated that she also could tell that Sol wasn't as belligerent as his words had implied. Her decision to step in now was calculated and intentional. It was the juxtaposition of her cuteness and the self-important way in which she was speaking that actually drained the fight out of Sol, however.

With a sigh, he said, "I'm sure you'll tell me why you chose to make contact in such a roundabout way, won't you?"

"Before proceeding, please allow me to apologize for putting you on the spot with that negotiation just now, Wayside God," said Creed. "I am deeply sorry. Furthermore, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for still talking with us despite having deemed us enemies."

Finally freed from his role, Creed apologized to Sol with full sincerity. It wasn't that he doubted the doll's judgment, but he felt an apology was in order and therefore thought it wise to offer it right away. From the investigation that he had conducted in advance, he knew full well that Sol was merciless to his enemies. For merely insinuating harm toward Reen and Julia, Hans Occam of the major clan Hecatoncheires and his party had been reduced to vegetables. Sol had also killed Mark and Alan without hesitation, even though they had been his childhood friends and fellow party members.

"You respectfully made a request, and I turned it down. That is all that has happened so far. I was still waiting to see how you would respond."

The way Sol saw it, Creed had approached him to ask a favor and clarified what he wanted, no more and no less. He had even said that he planned on respecting Sol's decision if his answer was no. That wasn't enough to make him an enemy just yet. Of course, there had still been a possibility that his response to Sol's declaration could have put him firmly in the wrong book, but "my lord" had intervened before that point.

From that perspective, the script prepared by the doll hadn't been a bad idea, even when factoring in the All Dragon muttering, "Don't let it happen again," which had made both Dragonslayer and the doll freeze for a split second. Getting a second chance with the person who commanded the All Dragon and the Elven Queen was something to be truly grateful for.

"By the way, based on the way Creed is addressing you, would I be correct in assuming that *you* are the Vacant Demon Lord?" asked Sol.

"Yes, but not exactly. I am the consciousness of Demon Lord Alshunna. While I'm trapped inside this vessel, I call myself Little Alshunna. The Vacant Demon Lord you're talking about is my soulless Augoeides."

Sol sighed. He had a feeling that the script he thought roundabout, which even Creed had disparaged, was in some way tied to the Demon Lord's situation. He was, however, quite impressed by how quickly Alshunna had pivoted and surrendered once it became clear her attempt to finagle an advantage over him was going badly. He liked people who knew how to lose gracefully.

"You're a quick study." Little Alshunna cackled, then got serious. "I want you to recover my Augoeides. I'm not against submitting to you, but unfortunately, I don't have control over the Floating Continent anymore. Also, someone or something might be manipulating my Augoeides at the moment. I need your help in preventing the situation from seeming like the 'demons' are taking revenge against the world now that their strength is back."

In effect, the raising of the Floating Continent was a trap triggered by the freeing of the Elven Queen. Obtaining the Vacant Demon Lord's Augoeides was in line with Sol's plans, as was stopping the Floating Continent from turning devinians and humans into irreconcilable enemies.

Since she had yet to get a good read on Sol's character, Alshunna had tried the negotiation as a way of justifying the casualties that could be caused by the Floating Continent. It made no difference to her if Sol used his strength to deal with the dangers induced by its reemergence or used his authority to silence the human world. The only thing to avoid was him considering the devinians more trouble than they were worth and annihilating them. In her underestimation of how intense Sol could be, her little script had pushed the situation very close to that terrible outcome.

For his part, Sol was happy to grant Little Alshunna's request if it meant getting her and the remaining devinians on his side. Furthermore, he had set his mind on making the Floating Continent his home base ever since learning what it truly was. No one knew the place better than the devinians, which meant they were the most suitable caretakers for it. As the cherry on top, getting the devinians to submit after they had already declared war on the human world would further bolster Frederica's authority, making it that much easier for her and her people to rule the world. The Floating Continent was still in the middle of reemerging, but everything that Sol's group had seen so far indicated that dealing with it was going to make for a demonstration far greater in scale than the Oratorio Tangram.

Sol was almost sure that Little Alshunna understood all this and had made her declaration of war after the Oratorio Tangram on purpose. Finally having a monster who could use her head would be a welcome change from the two meatheads currently in his employ. Hopefully, she could help lighten the burden on Frederica's shoulders.

"Specifically, what are we to do?"

Since both sides were happy with where the negotiation had settled, Sol wanted to know what the Demon Lord expected from

him in clear language.

The need to put on airs was gone, so Little Alshunna said plainly, "I will tell you the exact date and time when the Floating Continent will emerge. When it does, it will create natural disasters of unprecedented scale—a storm and a tsunami. I want you to stop them from wiping out the eastern coast of your continent."

As it would be impossible to prevent said natural disasters from happening, they had to be dealt with. While laying this out, however, Little Alshunna's voice sounded a bit nervous. She was worried that when Sol heard what was being asked of him, he would say, "Like hell I can do that!" and go back on his word. She was aware of how challenging the task was.

Sol, as it turned out, was unfazed. "I see. When something large enough to be called a continent rises from the bottom of the sea, it *would* affect the weather and cause a big wave."

The princess at his side, instead of getting angry over how something impossible was being asked of him, simply nodded. "That makes sense." For some reason, she even looked a little crestfallen.

"All right, we'll take care of it. Girls, I want you to stand by in Emelia and other crucial locations to deal with any commotions that crop up."

"Sure..."

"Understood."

Where Little Alshunna and Creed had expected an awkward pause as Sol came to terms with the scale of the task, Sol instead took it on with such alacrity that their jaws nearly dropped. Reen and Frederica were both feeling down only because they couldn't help much in a matter of this magnitude, and Sol was practically confirming it with the assignments he gave them. In any case, it was clear that none of them were daunted in the slightest. This was true of not only the two monsters but even those who were mere humans. Though the task in question was too great for them to handle, they had every faith that Sol would take care of it.

"They make it sound like child's play," murmured Creed.

"That they do..." agreed Little Alshunna.

The two were taken aback, but that was because they had been

asleep during the Oratorio Tangram. They hadn't gotten to see with their own eyes the world being pushed to the brink of destruction by the Old Rulers and the Elven Queen reversing the damage and mending the planet.

"Aina'noa here dealt with a natural catastrophe of even greater proportions not all that long ago without breaking a sweat, so we know everything will be fine," said Sol with a laugh that elicited laughter from his companions too.

After watching the entire world being restored in real time, they didn't harbor a shred of doubt that the Elven Queen had the ability to stop a hurricane and a tsunami, even if they were on an unprecedented scale. That held true even though it wasn't clear whether the girl in question fully understood what was being discussed, as she was just floating around and humming cheerfully. In contrast, the All Dragon, who would be largely useless in this endeavor, was pouting a little.

When the laughter died down, Sol asked matter-of-factly, "So, what would be next?"

Seeing that Little Alshunna was still too stunned to speak, Creed replied hesitantly, "The Floating Continent has been producing magical living weapons nonstop for the past millennium. Additionally, there are four man-made devigods still there. All of them will need to be eradicated."

This, too, was a task that would normally be considered impossible, save for the Hero using her god regalia. From its location at the bottom of an ocean, the Floating Continent had been able to tap directly into the ley lines. Even Little Alshunna and Creed had no idea how many living weapons the continent's facilities had produced using all that mana.

"Can you tell me more about those man-made devigods?" asked Sol.

"I've heard of them," interjected Luna. "They're basically gigantic copies of the four greatest devigods of the Demon Lord's Army of the time, which included Dragonslayer here. Apparently their strength was reproduced rather faithfully. They were the army's most prized creations."

Creed nodded, affirming Luna's explanation.

Sol looked at Luna. "Can you deal with them?"

"Even if they cover the sea and the sky, not one will get past me!"

"And there you have it."

Given the All Dragon's strength, this problem wasn't going to pose much of a challenge either. Forget being worried; Luna was delighted to hear of it. Unlike with a natural disaster, a straightforward enemy was where she could shine.

"My lord," said Creed to the doll with deep regret, "I deeply apologize for asking if I could have a round with the All Dragon. I had no idea how presumptuous I was being."

"I told you, didn't I?" Little Alshunna chuckled. "The Wayside God and those he rules are all true monsters."

"And that includes you too?"

"Whoops, you found out?"

The blatant way in which the two were asserting that they, too, were under Sol's rule elicited an interested "Hmm..." from him. The All Dragon also stopped intimidating them with her aura. In submitting to Sol, they were also becoming her fellow servants, and Servant Number One had a big heart and wasn't one to pick on her juniors.

Though Sol wasn't very perceptive of such intricate dynamics between his servants, Little Alshunna heaved a quick sigh of relief and, before the mood changed again, moved on to speaking of concrete action.

"Once everything is dealt with, Creed and I will be able to take back control of the Floating Continent and make it freely available to you, Wayside God."

"I like the sound of that," said Sol, smiling breezily. "Who can do it better than the Demon Lord, right?"

The girls, who understood the maneuvering between the monsters better than Sol did, also sighed with relief. Through this exchange, Frederica was now convinced that Luna was the key to building an amicable relationship with all the monsters who would be serving Sol.

"You are in good hands, I assure you. It's just...there's one more

thing.”

“Yes?”

“If you find my Augoeides bound on the Floating Continent, could you try to retrieve it? It’s very likely— No, I’m almost certain that your power as the Wayside God is the only thing that can. It means a lot to me.”

Getting her Augoeides back was very important for Little Alshunna, but like in Luna’s case, that wish could only be granted with help from the Wayside God. Thankfully, this aligned with his interest in adding the card of the Vacant Demon Lord to his hand.

“Of course. You seem very sure that I’ll say yes, though. I’d love to hear what makes you think that when you feel like sharing some day.”

“Whoops.”

“Oh, I’m sure you let it slip on purpose.”

It wasn’t like Alshunna had been there when Sol had used Summoning. And yet, she had known that “the Vacant Demon Lord” referred to her Augoeides and that she herself was also a monster who was meant to submit to his rule. That could only mean she had learned of Player from some other source, and perhaps that wasn’t all she knew. Through little hints, she was insinuating that she was open to sharing information as compensation, and Sol had caught on. This was the reason for his interested “Hmm...” earlier.

She laughed. “I promise to tell you some other time. So please do your best to retrieve my Augoeides, even if it’s being manipulated by something else.”

“Guess it’s about time for my first card-against-card fight. Two against one is pretty good odds, I’d say.”

Though they were the ones behind the setup, Little Alshunna and Creed were impressed that Sol had indeed picked up on and understood everything. He wasn’t just mindlessly throwing his monsters at the problems he faced. Whereas many people would stop thinking after accepting that miracles happened, he was making an effort to work out how things truly worked and was actively seeking more information.

The appreciation shown by the two devinians made Luna and

Aina'noa puff out their chests. Their master was someone who could win over new servants on his own merit and not only because of how impressive the roster of those currently serving him was. Nothing could match the pride they felt from this fact.

And so, in order to secure the devinians as allies, Sol's group turned their attention to the reemergence of the Floating Continent.

Chapter 4: The Rising of the Floating Continent

The Floating Continent was a mysterious place said to have been the home of the devinians, a race irreconcilably at odds with humanity despite also looking humanoid and possessing the ability to communicate. It was a fable, a myth, something that no one alive could confirm or deny the existence of.

According to the Kuzuifabra, the falsehood-ridden account of the era of a millennium ago, devinians were the consummate humanoid race. Their population was much smaller than even that of other demihumans, but they possessed such incredible individual strength that they had managed to fight on equal footing with humankind, a race that drew most of its strength from numbers.

But that was then. Now, these supreme magical beings were even fewer in number. Outer mana once again filled the world, allowing them to wield all the magic they wanted, but it wasn't enough to contend with the crushing weight of the current human population. This was not mere speculation. The other demihuman races, though not as powerful as devinians, had already fallen to humanity despite also being magical beings possessing organas. In the thousand years since, humans had slowly but steadily chipped away at their territory, their dignity, and even their very identity.

It was a true mystery how humans, despite not possessing organas, had managed to dominate all humanoid races and bring about Era Gran Magicka in a world where dragons and giant monsters had been real threats, especially when it seemed like the only advantage they held was numbers, which should have held no sway in this world.

In any case, one thing that had been a huge help to the devinians in their resistance against the bizarrely prosperous humans

was their home, the Floating Continent. As its name suggested, this was a large landmass that floated in the sky. Its position and altitude could be whatever the Demon Lord willed it to be, and when necessary, it could even manipulate the weather, creating powerful storms to dash the humans' fragile air units to pieces. The land also had multiple "spawn points" from which flying monsters periodically emerged, far stronger than anything on the ground and possessing an instinctual drive to prey on weak land-based creatures.

Most crucially, devinians had access to advanced technomagicka. Using it, they had managed to convert monsters into living weapons as a way to balance out the drastic difference in numbers between the two races.

As the clincher, all devinians could fly. Humans had to use spells such as Float and Fly, plus the odd Teleport, to be their equal in this regard, and the number who could use those spells were extremely limited. In conclusion, the devinians could attack whenever and wherever they wanted and immediately retreat home when the situation turned against them.

Despite being so disadvantaged, humanity, that prideful, egotistical race that basked in the past glory of Era Gran Magicka and still called itself the ruler of the world, had declared the entire Floating Continent an enemy of God and tried to seize it numerous times. The Oratorio Tangram that the Church had later levied against Sol was originally used to declare war against devinians. Similarly, "Hero" was a title for the leader of a party of elites—the situation wasn't conducive to deploying large armies—sent to invade the Floating Continent.

Accounts of that era, like the Kuzuifabra, had been altered to make humans look good, with snippets remaining to this day in the form of a wealth of myths and legends. This naturally meant that many of the stories were filled with justifications—and victories—for humans and stomach-churning depictions of devinian cruelty and savagery. For example, a few stories were about princesses or saints who were kidnapped and forcibly fused with abhorrent monsters, ultimately having to be put out of their misery by human hands. There were also ones in which members of the Hero's party,

swordsmen and mages of great accomplishment and repute, were brainwashed or died and brought back as zombies to attack their former companions. In a select few, the Hero themselves became a puppet and was turned against humanity.

Although these stories were exaggerated, they were based on real events. Some did away with the facade and simply described devinians wiping out entire countries and making a sport of killing humans, with the humans being unable to do a thing about it. It had been a very dark time. That was why, countless generations later, humans still instinctively called devinians "demons" and vehemently refused to find common ground with them.

At the time, the devinians had only been afraid of races superior to theirs, such as dragons, and the Elven Queen, who considered them a blight. However, as long as the devinians left them alone, these were not opponents who would actively invade the Floating Continent. That meant the devinians had been near the top of the power pyramid.

That is, until they were defeated by humans and brought low. How it had happened aside, the point was that the Floating Continent had been a large reason for the devinians' superiority a thousand years ago. And now, that very landmass was rising back up.

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One of the four superpowers on the continent, the Poseinia Eastern Seaboard Federation was an economic bloc made of a chain of huge port cities running up and down the east coast of the continent. Almost every inch of the coast was occupied by ports built to the highest standard, fully equipped to handle the docking of the largest ships. Man's power to conquer nature was in such stark display that it instilled in beholders a sense of omnipotence far more profoundly than most other structures inland, including metropolises and palaces.

These port cities were usually, no matter the time of the day, filled with as much energy from trading vessels coming and going as

the “cities that never sleep” frequented by adventurers, but today was an exception. Today, they were completely devoid of life for the first time since their construction.

The hour was slightly past midnight. The moon was beautiful and provided ample illumination that revealed there wasn’t a single ship—or, indeed, a single human—out and about. There wasn’t even a lamp, a lantern, or any other source of artificial lighting visible on the east coast. The sight, if someone could’ve climbed high enough in altitude to see it, was eerie in the extreme. It was as if the stories of the population of an entire town disappearing overnight had come true on a massive scale.

Of course, the Poseinians had not disappeared. Instead, they had been evacuated inland as a precaution on the advice of the Panhuman League. The ships that normally filled the ports had either been evacuated south or brought onto land and secured inside dry docks.

Pulling off such a feat in a week was categorically impossible under normal circumstances. The economic cost alone ensured that such a perfectly coordinated evacuation would never have happened. However, the continent currently had an absolute ruler. If Sol Rock said “jump,” everyone would ask how high. In hopes of impressing him, the leadership of Poseinia had spared no expense in this evacuation, taking great pains to ensure that it was carried out thoroughly and smoothly.

Even though there was almost no one around to hear it, the area was by no means silent. It didn’t reach the mainland, but the floating islands now hanging in the air were continuously emanating low-pitched vibrations that one could feel in their chest. In the distance, above what was presumably the outline of the Floating Continent, dark clouds hung heavy in the sky—likely an effect of such a colossal landmass being displaced so quickly—repeatedly lit up by streaks of lightning that added earsplitting booms to the cacophony.

One human and two monsters were present to behold all this in person. Of course, it was Sol, the All Dragon, and the Elven Queen. The trio were floating in the air above Poseinia’s largest port city,

waiting for the Floating Continent to come into view. They were the only ones handling its reemergence, as there was a possibility that enemies more powerful than Reen and the others in their Numbers armament might appear. Moreover, while it was great that the devinians of this age had agreed to ally with Sol, it made sense to take precautions in case hostile forces tried to take advantage of this moment when his attention was turned away from the continent. Consequently, the girls were currently stationed in Emelia, Istekario, and a few other crucial locations.

Of course, they had been given strict orders to immediately relay word and focus on getting away if they encountered opponents they could not handle. Sol had no intention of going so far as to sacrifice them in order to protect the eastern seaboard. Therefore, it was up to only him and his two servants—the crème de la crème of his group—to deal with the rising of the Floating Continent.

While waiting, he idly considered the situation he was in. He couldn't help heaving a sigh and saying, "Honestly, I have no words."

"I apologize, my lord," said Luna. "Keeping something minor like this constantly afloat is as easy as breathing for me, but when it comes to something on the scale of islands or a continent..."

She looked dejected, but Sol's disbelief was in the other direction. He was astounded by what she was doing with that "something minor," which was a sailing ship of the largest class. Its size was indeed massive, even though the Astral standing behind them made the ship look like a toy model in comparison. At the moment, the three of them were positioned high up in the sky standing on that unmanned ship.

"No, I'm more than impressed, Luna," Sol said hurriedly. "I have no words because I'm stunned. A ship floating in the sky—an airship—is like something straight out of a myth. I'm loving it."

The sight of the giant vessel, which Poseinia had given Sol as his flagship, floating in the sky tickled something deep inside him. Having a giant dragon standing behind it as if at his beck and call completed an iconic scene that he would never forget.

At first, Sol had been at a loss for what to do with the luxury craft. Now, he was intent on asking Gawain to modify it so it could

fly by itself. The old man would no doubt take to the task with gusto. Not only would he make it as good at navigating the skies as the seas, he would surely make sure it did so with style.

Truth be told, until this moment, Sol had been planning on simply throwing this ship at the monsters emerging from the Floating Continent. After actually traveling through the sky on it, however, he'd fallen in love with the concept. As a result, Poseinia would gain a lot of prestige for both having given Sol his flagship and coming up with the idea of airships, but this was a story for a little ways into the future.

The vibrations were growing stronger by the hour, with the resulting ground rumbles and low-pitched sound getting close to making verbal communication impossible. The interval between the flashes of lightning racing across the clouds hanging angry and low over the bay had shortened to mere seconds. The appearance of the Floating Continent was nigh.

Sol said, "Luna, Aina'noa, ready?"

"Anytime, my lord," Luna replied, accompanied by a cheerful note from Aina'noa.

In the face of a spectacle that looked like the end of the world, Sol was the only one whose forehead was decked in sweat, whereas his two companions were cool as cucumbers. For them, it was just a clump of dirt that had been moved somewhere a thousand years ago being moved back now. It didn't mean anything. However, they had been instructed to ensure that the man-made facilities on the coast didn't get damaged, so that was what they were going to do.

When the vibrations came to a climax and the thunderclouds had practically turned into a mass of lightning, the Floating Continent burst into view. Sol had thought he was mentally prepared, but it was a wall that he found himself suddenly face-to-face with, one accompanied by the dynamism and sound of staggering amounts of water cascading off. The sight was so overwhelming that he nearly backed up a step.

The thunderclouds were smashed apart like tissue paper, then a concussive wall of air slammed into him. Below, the bay's waterline pulled back as if running away from shore. The low booms were

drowned out by the gurgle of the whole sea churning and the high-pitched howl of compressed air rolling off the Floating Continent.

If unchecked, the gales formed by the air would flatten buildings and trees before the tsunami arrived to do the job. The damage would be extensive and reach a significant distance inland.

Abruptly, the deafening cacophony quieted down and was replaced by wordless singing from the Elven Queen, Aina'noa la Avalil. The approaching windstorm was drawn toward her and molded into a vortex. She could control even outer mana, never mind natural phenomena. Taming a mind-boggling mass of air moving at high speed was as easy for her as redirecting a gentle breeze. The same went for the seawater that had once receded but was now returning as a towering wall bearing down on the shore.

Way before the water reached its original shoreline, it started rising into the air in concert with the little twirls in the Elven Queen's midair dance. It kept its momentum, turning into an upside-down waterfall that surged into the sky. The torrent of water became one massive river, then gathered into a colossal sphere that gave the impression someone had pulled the moon out of the sky. Every person on the continent, no matter where they were, could see the slowly rotating ball of seawater. Conveniently, this moon helped to conceal the Floating Continent from their view.

Eventually, the rumbling ceased and the sea settled down. Silence finally returned to the coastline's dried-out seabed. But the situation wasn't over yet.

"Now then, that's taken care of the natural catastrophes caused by the rising of the Floating Continent. Good work, Aina'noa." Sol smiled at her melodic reply, then pulled a serious face. "Time to strap in for the real challenge. You two ready?"

"We will not let you down, my lord!"

Aina'noa hummed her response. Using teleportation, Luna repositioned the group in front of the giant orb of water. They watched as the magical living weapons once under the devinians' command rose from the Floating Continent like a black haze. According to the display windows floating next to Sol, their numbers were up to five digits and still climbing. They would wreak even

more havoc than the tsunami should they reach shore.

In other words, they had to die. Every last one of them.

Of course, the All Dragon and the Elven Queen did not think this task impossible. This was especially true of the All Dragon, who was raring to go. Opportunities for her to be helpful had been scarce as of late. A situation that called for pure fighting strength—pure violence—was where she would finally get to shine.

◇◆◇◆◇

The first to take action was the Elven Queen, who had kept the hurricane-class winds whirling around the gigantic ball of water. The fantastical sight of the seawater glittering under the light of the moon and the sky filled with stars was burned into the eyes of everyone who had evacuated inland. A beautiful emerald-green glow flared up in the middle, then spread to stain the massive sphere and its surroundings in the blink of an eye. The light was coming from Aina'noa's hair, the pigtails longer than her height spinning in circles as she danced round and round with joy radiating from every fiber of her being.

When the wordless melody coming from her lovely lips changed in cadence, the amalgamation of natural phenomena under her control seemed to take on a life of its own. After rapidly cycling through several shapes, it unraveled into a helix that exploded like a giant green firework, sending countless droplets of seawater clad in raging wind everywhere. The monsters, each and every one twisted and grotesque from the procedures that enabled them to kill humans more effectively, formed a cloud so large as to cover seven-tenths of Sol's vision, leaving only three-tenths occupied by the sea and sky. And yet, the green beads of light outnumbered them so much that they had as little hope of dodging them as raindrops in a downpour.

When the water bullets landed, however, they did not shatter the monsters' hardened carapaces. It seemed like all they did was wet them a little, but that was intentional. Because the monsters couldn't perceive the rain as an attack, it slipped past both their protective spells and their beefy HP barriers. Just like for humans, protective

spells and HP barriers could block, deflect, or even reflect attacks, protecting their wards from physical or magical damage, but only if what was incoming was perceived as an attack. Natural phenomena that were normally harmless, like rain, did not trigger them. It was with this understanding that Aina'noa had chosen to co-opt the gales and tsunami from earlier instead of simply blocking them with a barrier.

As a result of now being drenched, the living weapons found their organas unable to absorb outer mana anymore. Not only was the water infused with Aina'noa's mana blocking access to the mana in the atmosphere, it was draining their inner mana too.

The small and medium-sized living weapons in the vanguard started showing the effects almost right away. Mana was a monster's life force, no matter how they had been transformed. If they couldn't take in more of it, and what they had was being depleted faster than they could produce, they would eventually drop dead—in this case, dropping in a literal sense into the sea. They were recognized as having been killed by Sol's party and therefore entered his Storage before even hitting the water.

At the same time, Sol was gaining a staggering amount of experience points, reflected by the numbers shooting up in the display windows in his vision. There were easily over ten thousand living weapons, and he wasn't going to leave a single one alive. He had somewhat expected this to happen, but couldn't help being taken aback by the magnitude of it now that he was in the moment.

"This is brutal..." he mumbled in a daze, prompting Aina'noa to make a querying warble with a puzzled tilt of her head.

There was nothing that a human, no matter how powerful the talent they were born with, could do against a sudden tsunami or hurricane-class winds, much less ones on the scale of what had just happened. They were natural catastrophes and could only be accepted. The same went for the flock of monsters from the Floating Continent. The strength inherent in their numbers made them just as much of an inevitability.

Sol had been equally powerless, even with all he could do with Player, until he'd used Summoning. Now, however, he was above it

all, and all he needed were the two monsters at his side. The All Dragon and the Elven Queen were going to demonstrate what it meant to simply wave one's problems away. It was safe to say that no one in this world could pose a real danger to the one who ruled the monsters.

When the water under the Elven Queen's control finished sucking a living weapon dry of mana, it detached itself and flew off in search of another target, rejoining others or splitting up farther along the way. Thanks to all the mana they were absorbing, what had started off as mere drops took on the appearance of watery dragons, gaining the strength to launch actual attacks against mid-sized monsters. A system was being established where the water was draining mana and converting it into offensive magic. It proved highly effective, judging by the speed at which the cloud of living weapons was thinning out and letting through glimpses of the star-studded sky beyond. If the monsters had had feelings, they would surely have cursed the deviousness of the strategy.

In this way, the small and mid-sized living weapons in the vanguard—in other words, the cannon fodder—were entirely wiped out by Aina'noa. When it came to the larger targets, however, her mana-infused water started struggling. The two seemed evenly matched, with the water dragons eventually coming out on top, but the process was taking much longer.

Eventually, only giant living weapons were left—the ones as big as Luna's Astral. According to Player, there were easily more than a thousand of them.

"My lord, it's my turn."

"Looks like it. The giant monsters retain and produce so much inner mana that Aina'noa's method can't bring them down fast enough."

It wasn't clear how much Aina'noa understood what was being said, but she made a mournful melodic trill. This in turn made Luna puff out her chest, as if to say, *Watch and learn!*

The Elven Queen wasn't out of moves yet, but her specialty was in casting buffs and debuffs and manipulating mana through the World Tree. Going head-to-head with hulking opponents was a little

out of her forte. They were a bad matchup for the tactic she had been using so far. She herself confirmed this with a melody that had a slightly pouty ring.

"Nothing beats straightforwardness! At the end of the day, overwhelming violence solves all problems!"

"That's a draconic statement if I've heard one."

Almost gleefully, Luna spread her arms, and magical light burst from her diminutive form. Immediately, the single Astral behind her was joined by dozens more. Thanks to all the levels she had gained from the Oratorio Tangram, she possessed a much larger mana pool and produced inner mana at a significantly higher rate, all of which allowed her to summon numerous Astrals without Sol's help. However, the drain on her mana was that much more severe, and she still needed topping up with the occasional MP Recovery cast to prolong her time on the battlefield.

Without wasting a second, the Astrals promptly rushed at the large living weapons and started mowing them down with breath cannons. While the enemies' attacks couldn't even scratch their skin, the Astral attacks merely had to graze an opponent to gouge out a large portion of their HP barrier.

Sol realized that Luna had purposely let Aina'noa be the opening act. If she had wanted to, she could have annihilated the vanguard with a single breath cannon. This decision hadn't been made entirely to upstage her fellow servant. Luna understood that her master, Player, possessed multiple godly abilities. However, it would not do for those in his employ to be entirely reliant on him in battle. In fact, it would hurt her pride as the All Dragon to suddenly say "Oops, I'm out of mana" and have to be bailed out by her liege.

Consequently, she had worked out an arrangement with Aina'noa. The water dragons that were fully charged with the mana absorbed earlier were periodically drawing close to Astrals and allowing themselves to be absorbed. After being depleted in this way, the water then went to drain more from the large monsters the Astrals were tussling with. This teamwork made it possible for Luna to keep dozens of Astrals in play without Sol lifting a finger.

At the moment, Sol had yet to use a single Player ability to

contribute to the fight. All he had done was order the two monsters under his command to wipe out their enemies, then watch them get to work. The synergy between the Elven Queen and the All Dragon was impressive beyond words. The former could interfere with an enemy's ability to draw in outer mana while appropriating their inner mana as her own, while the latter was unmatched in converting mana into destructive output. Sol got the impression that they could handily defeat any opponent without him having to use any Player skills or give any commands.

In a matter of minutes, the hundreds of large living weapons had been diced up with breath cannons, torn apart by claws, and shattered by full-body tackles without a chance to put up any resistance. It proved that in this world, victors were decided by mana, which could be converted into anything else. That made the All Dragon and the Elven Queen, monsters who could manipulate mana at will, the most powerful beings in existence.

Based on this theory, Player was truly without peer, as its host could instantaneously restore someone's emptied mana pool. Only a god could create something from nothing. The title of Wayside God was not entirely unsubstantiated.

According to Sol's display windows, the living weapons that Aina'noa had routed as easily as stomping on ants were all higher in level than territory bosses like the basilisk that had earned Black Tiger its promotion to Rank A. The enemies that Luna had just decimated with great zeal were far stronger than the taboo territory bosses the Numbers armaments were made from.

I...might have a problem.

On top of the staggering amount of experience points entering the pool, which he could distribute to his subordinates, Sol was picking up enough monster materials to fill a sea. He could visualize Gawain saying, "Do you even have to ask?! Bring every last scrap to me! Right away!" with a euphoric grin on his face, but if he actually did so, that old man would surely work himself to death. The last time, he had taken only the bare minimum of food and sleep until he had converted all nine taboo territory bosses in Gio Nest into Numbers armaments, from Number One: Type Garm to Number

Nine: Type Kuzuryuu. His eyes had blazed with uncontainable energy and elation from start to end.

After the armaments were finished and their respective wearers had tried them out, he had dropped like a rock and slept for three whole days and nights. If hundreds of corpses from monsters more powerful than taboo territory bosses were delivered to his workshop, he would stay cooped up inside for the rest of his life and no one would ever see him again. The armis magicka created from taboo territory boss materials greatly surpassed the realm of traditional weaponry like swords and armor—a more accurate term for them would be "power suits." There was a high level requirement to wear them, and the number of people who met that standard had been very limited up to this point. However, the current fight had already given Sol enough experience points to raise hundreds to his companions' current levels. That meant there would be both enough materials and wearers for hundreds of armis magicka at or beyond the performance of the Numbers armaments. If Gawain knew that, he would become a runaway train.

When four massive pillars of light flared up from the Floating Continent, Sol heaved a sigh of relief. What he saw in the silhouettes of four colossal man-made devigods lit up by the fading light was the answer to his worries regarding Gawain, who would surely become obsessed with working on them first. Given their size, they might turn into a floating castle in the sky or a ship that could travel between stars, but at the very least, Gawain wouldn't fall into the quagmire of endlessly creating products on the level of Numbers armaments. Sol held out hope that the smith would work with the airship idea and make something that would blow his mind.

"Now then, my lord. If memory serves, those four are the mainstay of the Demon Lord's Army."

Regardless of their association with demons and evil, and no matter how wicked they looked, the devigods' sheer size imbued them with a certain divinity. Thus their title of devi*god*. And yet, in the face of enemies that symbolized inescapable death for humans, Luna's fighting spirit flared even higher, evoking a chuckle from Sol. He was sure that if he hadn't been accompanied by her and the elf

who was cheerfully singing and dancing behind him, even he would have plunged into despair at the situation. But because those two were indeed with him, he had the composure to entertain the idle musings about which devigod was the weakest.

To his surprise, instead of sending all her Astrals at the man-made devigods, Luna turned to him with a facade of calm over shored-up courage and asked, "My lord, would you be interested in trying to pilot me?"

Sol stared at her blankly. "What does that mean?"

Speaking quickly as if to forestall reproach, Luna said, "I'm merely asking because you seemed quite taken with the idea when fighting the Church."

It was true that when Mark had appeared, Sol had been somewhat envious of the god regalia he had operated. At the time, Luna had said that she could do the same thing, and she and Sol had agreed to practice once she got her Augoeides back.

"Wait, you can do it now?"

"I'm...sure I can!"

Sol hadn't realized that Luna could do the same thing while still a mere fragment. Of course, she wouldn't have offered if it wasn't possible, but in that case, he would have preferred practicing on easier opponents first. Then again, she likely considered the man-made devigods easy prey too, and perfect targets for her beloved liege to practice on. Against actual chaff, the fight would be over so fast that it would feel anticlimactic to both of them. Unlike Mark's god regalia, which had been made out of a dead dragon, Luna was very much alive and could therefore guide Sol through the process.

He was extremely happy about the idea. Although he understood that the most effective way to use his abilities as Player was to stick to the role of commander, his desire to defeat monsters using power directly under his control had never gone away. In this situation, where there was so much leeway that effectiveness and perfection weren't much of a priority, the allure was even greater.

Against the gales and tsunami from earlier, as well as the swarm of enemies that covered the sky, his inexperience could have led to mistakes that caused human casualties. The man-made devigods

were large, yes, but there were only four of them. Luna and Aina'noa could follow up easily if he made any blunders.

Pleased that her liege seemed receptive to the idea, Luna huffed with excitement. "What I can do now is more of a simulation, but eventually, I will offer you my real body!"

Just imagining joining with Sol and letting him manipulate her body at will put a wide grin on her face that was unbecoming of the All Dragon. She couldn't help it—it was an instinctual reaction. Dragons all started out with the pride and ferocity befitting the world's most superior race, but the moment they became attached to someone and gave that someone their true name, devoting their heart, soul, and mind to that person gave them the greatest joy in life. That was simply their nature.

"Thank you...I think? What should I do, though?"

The sight of Luna blushing happily and whipping her tail around in high spirits led Sol to express his gratitude, but he hadn't the slightest idea how he was meant to control her Astral.

"I'll handle everything! Excuse me!"

"Wait, but—"

Instead of answering, Luna promptly leaped into action. Sol had expected her to cast a spell of some sort, perhaps connecting the two of them with the glowing chains he had seen when he used Summoning. Something cool, at least. The way magical threads had connected Mark when he floated before the chest of his god regalia had been pretty cool.

Instead, Luna hugged his head from the front and stayed there, breathing heavily. Sol was absolutely flabbergasted. Despite all the fighting she had done earlier, there wasn't a bead of sweat on her silky smooth skin, but it seemed like that would soon change, based on how rapidly her heart was racing.

The contact didn't excite Sol at all; it was Luna who was excited. She looked over the moon as she pressed his face against her belly.

"Are you ready, my lord?"

"I...think?"

Sol wanted to ask how he was supposed to prepare himself, but he was busy trying to convince himself that Luna knew what she

was doing even if this position seemed ridiculous at first glance. She had Float constantly activated anyway, so it wasn't like this hurt her neck or waist. In fact, he was floating too, and at a very high altitude, at that.

"I'm starting now." Luna took a deep breath, then shouted, "Rubedo qualia!"

"Wha—?!"

Sol was assaulted by the anxiety-inducing sensation of the unconscious boundaries of his sense of self melting away, then felt, with ticklish discomfort, Luna and himself entering each other—not taking each other's place but blending together, sharing their senses, and becoming one entity.

After an instant of feeling a blend of pleasure and dull pain from Luna, along with the haptic sense of her small frame clinging to him, Sol's vision suddenly moved so high up in altitude that he could see for himself that this planet was round. Luna had combined all her Astrals into one colossal body worthy of being used by her liege. To make it easier for him, she was fully linking his senses with the Astral's and giving him complete motor control so that he could feel like it was his own body. Of course, despite being united in senses, they maintained their own minds.

While entrusting Sol with the Astral body itself, Luna maintained control over all the techniques, spells, and skills that it employed to attack, defend, and move around. Sol was focusing so hard on the Astral that his body, which Aina'noa was devoting her efforts to protecting along with Luna's fragment, was basically an empty shell at the moment. From his point of view, it was as if he had actually become a gigantic mass of mana that was the Astral. On the other hand, Luna's mind was running processes in parallel, which allowed her to continue feeling what her fragment was feeling while controlling the signals coming from her liege's now vacant body.

As a test, Luna surreptitiously made Sol's body wrap his arms around her fragment and rub his face into her belly. Right away, she realized what a mistake that was. Sweat burst from all her pores, a strange cry escaped her lips, and she nearly lost all the control she was holding on to. She stopped right away, but the damage—if it

could be called that—was done. Her fragment's body temperature was way up, leaving her drenched in sweat and flushed so red that it was obvious despite her tanned skin tone. Small quivers racked her small frame, prompting Aina'noa to give her an odd look.

Sol, however, did not have the mental bandwidth to notice what was happening with Luna. Even with her support, he was thoroughly overwhelmed by suddenly having turned into a massive hulking beast. He was so excited that he blurted out, "*This is incredible!*"

His real lips only moved a little, but because his senses were more concentrated on the Astral, it opened its jaws and let out a deafening roar. It was silly that he gave himself a jump scare with the roar, but there was nothing silly about the sight from an outside perspective. It looked like a powerful being declaring to unworthy opponents that it was now going to make mincemeat of them.

"*My...lord...feel free to control my body as if it is your own. I will attack and move...in coordination with you.*"

It was a relief to Sol that he could communicate with Luna through telepathy like the first time they had met. He was slightly curious what was happening to his actual body but had every faith that Luna and Aina'noa were protecting it. If there was something that could get past both the All Dragon and the Elven Queen, there was nothing he could do about it anyway.

"Got it. Thank you."

It also was a bit concerning that Luna sounded distressed somehow, but he figured it was because this whole rubedo qualia business placed a burden on her. She seemed willing to bear with it to maintain the technique, so it didn't feel right to ask how she was holding up. He trusted that she would tell him if the situation turned grave. It never crossed his mind that she sounded the way she did because his lips had unconsciously moved as he spoke telepathically and in doing so stimulated the area around her belly button. That was what had made it hard for her to reply properly.

While the weird back-and-forth between Sol and Luna was going on, the four man-made devigods had materialized fully and were now shifting into action. As a warm-up, they each launched an attack. One was a huge fireball that would incinerate whatever it

touched. One was an enormous lump of ice that would crush anything in its way. One was an expansive black hole that threatened to suck everything into its depths. And the last was a barrage of vacuum slashes that would dice targets up.

As expected, the devigods were each specialized in one of the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water. However, all their attacks were deflected—no, erased—by an invisible wall far before they could reach Sol's Astral. It wasn't that the attacks were snuffed out before they fully manifested; they possessed all the power they were meant to have, yet they didn't even come close to harming their opponents. The difference in not only strength but also class was plain to see.

It was Luna who had done the blocking, as Sol had no idea how to do it. The attacks weren't enough to make him flinch even if they had landed, but because he was feeling what the Astral was feeling, she had wanted to spare him the discomfort and thus taken appropriate measures.

Thanks to this exchange, Sol gained an understanding of how the arrangement worked. As Luna had said, he could control the Astral like it was a part of himself. If he kicked empty air, he would move as if he had kicked off the ground. If he mentally willed himself somewhere, the Astral would move there. When he wanted to attack, such as swiping at an enemy with his claws or tearing them apart with his jaws, Luna would ensure that he dished out the most damage possible by using the corresponding skill or spell. Long-range attacks like the breath cannon were likely activated with a mental command. In short, the experience was akin to an incredibly large power suit piloted with a combination of movement tracing and mental-and voice-activated commands.

"Luna, breath cannon. Highest output!"

"Y...es, my lord."

Sol felt his jaws opening wide. He unconsciously tensed up and braced himself, which was entirely unnecessary, as a breath cannon much bigger in size than his jaws burst toward the devigod in the middle—the one that wielded fire and was shaped like a dog. The beam undershot and hit the sea, so he moved his head up, and it

burned through the target at a slant, gouged the surface of the Floating Continent, and then pierced the sky before finally dissipating. The two halves of the man-made devigod exploded, with the resulting fragments also exploding until all that was left was dust.

This had been the ultimate demonstration of overkill, but Sol's excitement was not dying down. His understanding that he was piloting a gargantuan power suit with extremely tough armor and an advanced interface was correct but missing a very crucial element. The Astral did indeed function like a weapon, but in using it, the sensation of being a giant dragon was also flowing back into him. When he'd fired the breath cannon just now, euphoria surpassing anything he had experienced as a human had rushed through him. The feeling of being the most powerful being alive had no comparison.

Laughter bubbled up unbidden. Sol now understood how the All Dragon saw those who stood in her way and the deep gratification of tearing them apart. No wonder dragons loved fighting. To them, other races were not opponents, but prey. Fights were just them bringing their full strength to bear to crush something underfoot. That the act elicited such pleasure raised it to the same priority level as eating, sleeping, and procreating. Morality had no place in a dragon's world. They killed and ate the weak and felt unbelievably good about it. In a way, they were the ultimate agents of the most natural relationship between living beings.

Meanwhile, Luna was dealing with a lot of things. She was feeling everything that Sol was feeling, and that included emotions. His excitement, pleasure, and even a dash of madness was flowing into her as a heady rush, all while she was trying to dam up the immodest and embarrassing sensations coming from her fragment. As if that wasn't enough, Sol's original body was unconsciously making the same movements the Astral was as he started getting familiar with it and going all out. Specifically, when he swiped at a devigod with the Astral's claws, his hands dug into Luna's skin with almost enough force to hurt. When he tried to bite as the Astral—because of course he would—his actual teeth dug into Luna's belly

without reserve. His heart rate was up, which made him hot, and Luna ended up sharing that heat, leaving the two of them soaked and panting. If it had been winter instead of early summer, steam would have risen from their bodies.

Sol was driving the Astral hard enough to fully explain his and Luna's states. He had gotten so good at using Teleport to dodge the man-made devigods' attacks that she no longer had to deploy defensive measures. To keep mana costs down, he had also learned to employ Teleport to get in close so that he could use his claws and jaws. Every once in a while, he would devour one of Aina'noa's water dragons to restore his mana, then get right back to zipping around and having a field day with the weaklings whose only redeemable quality was their size. When Luna fought with an Astral, she did so with calculation and intelligence, using the breath cannon as the main way to deal damage. When Sol was behind the wheel, however, he preferred getting up close and personal, opting for the fighting style of a crazed animal.

Eventually, he had the last devigod, the one that looked like an amalgamation of countless arms and legs, specialized in earth, and mainly attacked using gravity, on the ropes. He tore off its last four misshapen limbs, then clamped his jaws over what was perhaps supposed to be its head. The way he glared down at the falling appendages made it hard to tell who was the true demonic god in the picture. Then again, if a god was one who stood above all others, a dragon technically fit the bill.

It had taken no time at all to slaughter the four man-made devigods that had been the mainstay of the Demon Lord's Army. With a staggering amount of experience points and monster materials in hand, Sol looked up at the moon and roared at the top of his lungs, as if he had fully transformed from man to brutal beast. He unleashed one final breath cannon, packing every last drop of remaining mana into it, until the Astral's tank dried up and it dissipated into the atmosphere.

A peculiar silence filled the surroundings. Fresh out of living weapons, the Floating Continent simply hovered there, making no noise but illuminated almost as bright as day by the moon and stars.

"I... Sorry, Luna. That was...bad...in a lot of ways."

"It's...fine, my lord. Practice...makes perfect."

Since the Astral had run out of juice and disappeared, the rubedo qualia was dispelled and Sol was now back in his own body. Despite his high level, fighting as a dragon and being immersed in those sensations had left his body overheating and sweating buckets to compensate. His heart was beating faster than it ever had throughout his five years as an adventurer, and his body, which had turned superhuman long ago, was aching all over. The same went for Luna, who was drenched in more sweat than he was. He had never seen her so spent.

Sol was apologizing because he understood that the way he had flown off the rails had been a burden on Luna and himself, not to mention dangerous. That said, learning how to fight in this way on top of polishing his ability as a commander would surely come in handy someday. Consequently, Luna's reply made him happy, and he nodded with a genuine smile.

Despite how tired and wet she was, Luna returned the best smile she had ever given, one so attractive that Sol, to his chagrin, felt that it had a slight sexual allure. Inside, however, she was feeling a twinge of apprehension. In light of how things had gone with a simulation of rubedo qualia performed with an Astral, it was clear to her that she wouldn't be able to handle the real thing in her Augoeides in her current form. Since she now had permission from her liege, she resolved to petition him to do this again at every opportunity. If necessary, she was even willing to perform the so-called "night services" that humans indulged in. It was imperative that she gained more of an immunity to pleasure. Heaven forbid she made unbecoming noises on the day she retrieved her Augoeides and finally joined with her liege for real.

Suddenly, Aina'noa grabbed Sol from the back and started rubbing her face on him, apparently thinking it was now her turn to participate in whatever it was she had just been forced to watch. Though Sol would normally have reprimanded her and told her to stop, he did not have the strength to do so now and simply let her be. Aina'noa herself, due to being so mentally immature, was

satisfied that she had caught up with Luna and soon regained her spirits. Luna also made no move to separate her from Sol as she always did when Aina'noa got too touchy-feely with their liege. Not because she was tired, which she was, but more because in comparison to the "adult" act that she and Sol had just performed, what Aina'noa was doing seemed like mere child's play. The superiority she felt from the disparity was giving her the magnanimity to allow her fellow monster to touch Sol as much as she wanted.

Women were equally a force to be reckoned with as they were a dream come true. This was true whether they were human, dragon, monster, or indeed, even deity.

Then again, maybe the same could be said of men too.

Chapter 5: The Vacant Demon Lord

The Floating Continent's reaction to the eradication of all magical living weapons it had created since being cast down from the sky and left to rot deep underwater was, unsurprisingly, entirely by the book. Namely, it started gaining altitude, presumably aiming for a height that would put it out of human reach. The floating islands that had been the Fol Mentera Archipelago followed suit, with the whole group quickly picking up speed. They got so fast that even monsters would have been thrown off, much less humans, but since the landmass was large enough to be called a continent, its movement appeared agonizingly slow.

"Can we take its retreat to mean its arsenal is depleted?" Sol mused.

"Maybe it's retreating to make more," Luna said.

The trio were a significant distance from the continent and looking down at it with composure. They didn't care how fast it was rising, because they could easily fly or teleport even higher. The sky was the domain of the dragons.

"Over another millennium? I mean...is there even a point? And for some reason, we still haven't seen the Vacant Demon Lord's Augoeides. Is the continent *not* being controlled by someone after all?"

Luna shrugged. "Aina'noa and I were simply left alone after being bound."

She and Sol were idly racking their brains for the reason the Floating Continent was retreating, but no convincing answer was forthcoming. It had taken them less than half a day to clean up the forces that the continent had built up over a thousand years. It couldn't have been clearer that the living weapons were worthless

against them. Making more wouldn't help.

Little Alshunna had been certain that her real body, her Augoeides, was on the Floating Continent. The fact that such a major card had yet to be brought out suggested that it really had been sidelined. That had been the case with both the All Dragon and the Elven Queen, albeit with a bit of a twist in both cases. Then again, Sol had obtained the Bound Evil Dragon only thanks to Summoning, a special power that he could only use once. There was no guarantee that the monsters' Augoeides would all be friendly to him right off the bat.

"Just imagining facing an enemy like your Augoeides gives me the shivers."

"I don't even want to think about it."

Given that, it was hard to completely write off his and Luna's concerns. There was undeniable similarity between the All Dragon's and Demon Lord's current states. One was in a fragment body while the other was in a doll, but they were the same in that someone had wrested control of their Augoeides. If that someone could manipulate Alshunna's body, they just might be able to do the same with Luna's. In fact, it might be safer to assume as much. After all, Luna's Augoeides was still locked up somewhere.

Not quite comprehending Sol's and Luna's gloomy faces, Aina'noa looked between them in puzzlement and whistled a questioning note.

"Well, there's no point dwelling on it now. I don't see a reason to pull back and regroup, so let's keep going and catch back up with the Floating Continent."

"Right away, my lord!"

While the two had been talking, the landmass had passed them in altitude, leaving them staring up at its precipitous underside. As expected, it was rising at an impressive speed. The sight of it flying by had packed quite a punch. Sol's group was already much higher than the tallest peak on the planet's surface, but the devinians' home was showing no sign of slowing down.

In response to his command, Luna brought the three of them to where they were looking down at it once more, then matched its

speed so that their relative height remained fixed.

When the Floating Continent finally came to a stop, Sol marveled at it. "The moon looks so close. And whoa, the planet really is a sphere."

They were so high up that they were practically in space, with the entirety of the planet in view. Being up here was such a surreal experience that even someone afraid of heights probably wouldn't have minded it.

As Sol pointed out, the moon looked much larger than it did on the ground, which implied that it was much closer than expected. That was the only way to explain such a drastic difference in size from traveling merely the distance between sea level and the stratosphere. At the same time, it could also be deduced that the moon was substantially smaller than the planet. It was as though there were a man-made facade to make it look like the moon was blocking the view of the real satellite. Despite its appearance, a part of Sol suspected that it served some other purpose. After all, this was a world that had man-made satellites that could deliver orbital strikes.

"I like it up here. The outer mana is crisp and clear," said Luna with a contented sigh.

As if substantiating her comment, Aina'noa vocalized increasing excitement with each breath she took.

Unlike them, Sol did not possess any organas and therefore could not relate. "Is it? Sadly, I can't tell."

The phenomena triggered by the Elven Queen's revival had demonstrated that mana ultimately came from the planet itself. Logically, that meant outer mana should have been very thin all the way up here, but perhaps that was what made it so "crisp and clear." Sol wasn't an expert.

While the conversation was taking place, an Astral broke the protective barrier deployed around the Floating Continent—as if it would help—like glass and casually entered the dome. Sol was impressed to discover that the conditions in this space (temperature, air density, and so on) were exactly the same as what Luna had discreetly been maintaining around him this whole time, which in

turn matched the conditions on the planet's surface. He took it as an indication that the continent's functions were almost fully restored by now.

"This really does scream 'continent in the sky.' What a sight."

It had been hard to tell when far away, but up close, the continent's size was truly overwhelming. Truthfully, calling it a continent was indeed an exaggeration, but its size, compounded by the fact that it was floating in the sky, made onlookers instinctively *want* to call it one.

"It's at least as big as Emelia," said Luna. "Once we gain control and Aina'noa does her thing, it will be more than possible to set up a self-sufficient habitat here."

Sol nodded in agreement and with resolve. Frederica had been talking about creating a new country, and he himself had been looking to set up a permanent base. This land would be perfect for both. Of course, being underwater for a thousand years had killed everything that had once lived there, and all the aquatic life that had settled since had died when the seawater was gone. But thankfully, as Luna was pointing out, Sol had the Elven Queen with him. Compared to restoring a planet on the verge of self-destruction, transforming this land into fertile earth covered with luscious greenery was child's play. It wouldn't take her more than a second.

Sol wanted a base about which he could say, "I'm good as long as I still have this" in a worst-case scenario. He had no current interest in destroying the world, but he also wasn't so conceited as to think that he could protect the entire planet. In that respect, the Floating Continent was the perfect size. He was confident it could be protected from anything given the aid of the All Dragon and the Elven Queen, the abilities that came from leveling Player up, and his close companions all decked out in armis magicka on par with the Numbers armaments. And if there were an opponent with the power to crush this base like a fly, well, protecting the planet would have been a mere pipe dream in the first place.

"I like the sound of that," said Sol. "But now, this place is really run-down, to put it mildly."

"That's because the Hero went on a rampage here using her god

regalia a thousand years ago."

"That must have been some fight."

Even when taking its ecosystem—or lack thereof—out of the equation, the Floating Continent was in a dreadful state. Part of it was undoubtedly due to the passage of a thousand years and it being underwater for all that time. It was clear, however, that the main cause was the battle between the Hero and the Demon Lord depicted in the Kuzuifabra. Craters dotted the land, accompanied by oddly shaped mountains that no passing of time could have carved and canyons that were obviously not natural formations. There were several walled settlements that looked far more refined than any human city even as shadows of their former selves, but needless to say, not one of them remained whole. Even after a millennium, their thoroughly destroyed remains spoke eloquently of the ferocity of the battle that had taken place here.

The real Hero, equipped with a god regalia made out of a real dragon's Augoeides, had fought against the Demon Lord's Augoeides, with both sides going all out. Even with the devinians' technological superiority, there was no way their cities could withstand that degree of damage. Sol was able to maintain his composure seeing the scars of the fight etched into the continent only because he could imagine what would happen if two of Luna's Astrals were to fight each other.

Without further ado, Sol's group started heading inland, following the instructions from Little Alshunna while picturing images of the distant past. Eventually, they spotted an enormous man-made form in the distance.

"So, the capital city should be in that direction. Incredible. The Demon Lord's Castle is still standing."

"So it seems. Wait, no, my lord. That isn't..."

Given the size of what they were looking at, it was logical to assume it was the heart of devinian civilization. That the seat of power had somehow defied total destruction would be surprising but somehow also make sense. But that wasn't it.

"It's not a castle!"

"No, my lord. It is the Demon Lord's Augoeides."

“Isn’t that way too big?”

“It’s around the same size as mine.”

Luna was the first to notice, but Sol wasn’t far behind. Before them was the empty, towering husk that had been referred to as the Vacant Demon Lord when Sol had used Summoning. It was, in so many words, a gargantuan statue. A thousand years underwater had left its surface scoured of all signs that it was flesh and blood. It was tied to the ground with countless chains that, though different in size, were a perfect match for those that Sol had seen wrapped around the All Dragon’s Augoeides.

Unlike the All Dragon’s body, the Demon Lord’s still had all its organas. Most likely, it had been deemed necessary to incapacitate the former, as she had retained her consciousness—until Sol had extracted it using Player, that is—whereas the latter had already been split up. The gigantic pair of horns on display were markedly different from dragon horns in that they looked almost man-made—in this case, more specifically like a pair of axe blades. The ornament on the statue’s head, likely meant to be a crown, also strongly bore the sword motif, making Sol wonder if the Demon Lord was meant to represent weapons in general.

The body had long hair that turned scalelike partway down and a pair of ominous, elaborate wings that were a far cry from angel wings. Its form was covered all over with complicated engravings connected to countless circular curse marks by lines of tiny, complex magical text. The armor that covered its feminine curves looked like bone, and what could pass as tails or whip swords composed of bladed segments could be seen near its wings and waist.



While the Bound Evil Dragon's organas had been taken and the Captive Elven Queen's organas had been sealed with items, the Vacant Demon Lord was only tied down with chains. This made sense if, after driving out Little Alshunna's consciousness, the plan was to use this body as a puppet. It would be silly to weaken a weapon that one wanted to use down the line.

The combination of the Vacant Demon Lord's humanoid shape and gigantic size made it hard to perceive it as a single living being. Unlike with the All Dragon, who was supposed to be massive, being *a dragon*, in this case, all of Sol's instincts rejected the existence of the Augoeides he was looking at. Of course, there were giant things in nature too, some even passably humanoid. However, the Demon Lord's body bore such detail that it seemed about to jump to life at any moment, which sent Sol's mind thinking about its nonexistent creator. His inability to comprehend what he was seeing evoked within him a blend of dread and veneration akin to awe.

That which surpassed human understanding was usually called a god—or a demon. Sol was now feeling the same emotion that had run through the military forces of the world when they'd beheld the man-made angels during the Oratorio Tangram. Thankfully, no normal human was here to behold this sight.

"Looks like Little Alshunna's prediction was spot-on."

Although he was human, Sol had Player and two monsters. Anyone else would have been overwhelmed to the point of shutting down in this situation, but not him. When the colossal statue started rumbling, his eyes shone like those of a child in a toy store.

As suspected, the Vacant Demon Lord was indeed being manipulated by someone or something. It was now waking up for the first time in a millennium, seeking to eliminate the enemies who had invaded the newly restored Floating Continent—seeking to kill Sol and his group.

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During the recent negotiations between Little Alshunna and Sol, the former had proposed two conditions for the devinians'

submission. In exchange for Sol accepting them, Little Alshunna had told him exactly when the Floating Continent would appear and what her side planned on doing when it happened. It was thanks to this information that Sol had been able to make all the necessary preparations, which included sending Reen and the other Numbers armament wielders to various key locations in case the Old Rulers made a move.

As a result, Sol had fulfilled one of Little Alshunna's conditions (to protect Poseinia from the effects of the Floating Continent's restoration) with flying colors, thereby averting the devinian race from being blamed for a catastrophe.

The other condition had been to retrieve the Demon Lord's Augoeides. This was in line with Sol's own wishes, so the All Dragon and the Elven Queen were fully willing to do everything in their power to make it happen.

"Allow me to apologize beforehand, Wayside God," Little Alshunna had said. "As promised, you will have to do all the fighting while we work on taking back control of the Floating Continent. The Elven Queen and even the All Dragon in her current state would be hard-pressed facing my Augoeides, but I would appreciate it deeply if you would simply incapacitate it rather than erasing it entirely. If you do, I am confident I can regain control of it."

"You think I would be bested by your empty shell?" Luna had growled.

"We never fought directly a thousand years ago, but I know I would have been no match for your Augoeides. However, you are currently using a fragment body, and your primary way of fighting is through your Astrals, is it not?"

"What of it?"

"My Augoeides can cancel out all magic within a certain radius. Is it not obvious how this would disadvantage the two of you? I do not say this with the intention of putting you down, but you *might* have to fall back. If you do, I would appreciate a word, even if you have to suspend radio silence to do so."

This revelation had changed things drastically. The ability to nullify magic was a hard counter for the Elven Queen. Regardless of

who was more powerful overall, she would lose every time in a one-on-one against the Demon Lord. The All Dragon was in a similar situation at the moment. If she'd been in her Augoeides, she would have had no trouble fighting without using magic. As a fragment, however, she was just a cute little girl. If she was denied all her spells and skills, the levels she had gained so far wouldn't mean a thing. She had the physical ability to trounce a human, but that was a far cry from going toe-to-toe with the Demon Lord's Augoeides. An ant, no matter how highly trained, would be stomped by a run-of-the-mill elephant. Beings in the realm of dragons and the Demon Lord could not be stopped by a person with a little bit of extra strength.

In case the enemy could tap into the communication channels operated through Player, it had been part of the original plan to maintain radio silence until the fight was over. If the need to regroup and reassess arose, however, getting in touch would be crucial in organizing a coordinated retreat.

"My lord?"

"If it gets dicey, we will withdraw right away."

"Understood, my lord."

Luna herself was averse to putting Sol in danger. Even though she had practically been told to her face that she could not win, it was no time for her to take offense. Her priorities were now starkly different from a thousand years ago when she'd devoured all her kin to become the All Dragon and challenged God. However, she was not ashamed of it. She was proud. She was aware it made her a bit of a hopeless case, but she didn't hate the fact that she had given her true name to Sol and now held defending her new life above all else. Strength and pride only held meaning when there was something to protect. Having learned that recently, Luna no longer obsessed over having the biggest fist in the room.

Hiding her surprise at the change in the All Dragon, Little Alshunna had said, "I don't know if this is any consolation, but my Augoeides will likely move rather sluggishly despite maintaining its physical abilities. Getting away from it should be easy. And if there are any traps laid to impede your escape, I'm sure you two will have

no trouble tearing through them."

Dragons had been the most powerful beings in the world. When Luna, who had devoured all of them to become the All Dragon, regained her Augoeides, no one in this world would be her equal. This held true even for the freed Elven Queen, the fully present Demon Lord, the resurrected Divine Beast, and surely the cleansed Hero too. And this ultimate being had chosen to give away all she was, not because it was the natural order and not because of fear, but because her heart told her to.

Little Alshunna and Creed had taken a good, hard look at the person who had her devotion: the boy who ruled the monsters. This was the person who had been granted the power to freely impose his will on this world.

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"I guess we really are doing this."

The waking of the Demon Lord's Augoeides could be heard all across the Floating Continent. Tiny cracks ran down the length of the body, gradually spreading until its statuesque exterior started falling off in chunks. The distance made it hard to tell, but each chunk was so massive that it created a boom and a shock wave when hitting the ground. The same went for the countless chains breaking, with high-pitched pings and crashing sounds. Slowly but surely, what had looked like a mere statue was regaining its color as its limbs were freed to once again lay enemies low.

"How does it look, Luna? Can you beat it?"

"If the goal was only to destroy it, I think so. However, we want to incapacitate it, and that's much harder. And if it really can cancel out magic..."

"It'd be tough for Aina'noa and your current form?"

"I'm deeply sorry."

Despite having been somewhat desensitized to what the All Dragon and the Elven Queen were capable of, Sol couldn't help feeling awed by the Vacant Demon Lord. In contrast, Luna was not intimidated in the least, and Aina'noa was, as usual, cheerfully

floating behind him with her arms around his neck.

That did not mean Luna had let her guard down. Neither had Sol. His level had shot up again thanks to the living weapons, but he was facing an opponent that just might be able to defeat his two servants. His mere presence put his life at risk.

"No, *I'm* sorry. I got the order wrong. That said, we can't just leave this be. Please fight with your own safety as the top priority. Understood?"

The "correct" order that Sol was thinking of was to either first retrieve the All Dragon's Augoeides or obtain the Cursed Hero who had already defeated the Demon Lord once. Little Alshunna herself had confirmed that victory would be easy for the All Dragon in her Augoeides, and the Hero being a hard counter for the Demon Lord was intrinsic to their respective roles. Facing the Demon Lord without the help of either was a big mistake.

However, the Floating Continent had already resurfaced, and the Demon Lord's Augoeides had already awoken, albeit under the control of some mysterious will. To retreat now and abandon the situation would mean untold damage being inflicted on the rest of the continent. In light of this knowledge, Sol had no choice but to fight, despite being at a significant disadvantage.

"Of course, my lord. However—"

"We're running as soon as the situation turns sour. Little Alshunna said her Augoeides will be slow, and the continent itself is trying to get away. If we back off, I think it's safe to say nothing will give chase."

For some reason that he himself didn't fully understand, Sol did not want to hear Luna talk about running away. Therefore, he had stolen her line, making it his call and his responsibility.

His optimistic prediction wasn't unfounded. After losing all its forces, chances were indeed high that the mastermind controlling the landmass would leave his group alone if they fled.

"Fully understood."

Having read Sol's intentions, Luna shifted to directing all her attention to the coming fight. Since she had permission to retreat when she deemed the situation hopeless, all she had to do now was

to fight with everything she had. If she won, all their concerns would become moot. Since she was the All Dragon, her decisions regarding battle were swift and on point. She also already had a handle on how to coordinate with the Elven Queen.

Not affected in the least by being up in the stratosphere, Aina'noa kicked off the fight by creating a multilayered magic formation big enough to envelop the Floating Continent. This formation started drawing in outer mana from not only its surroundings but also the surface of the planet. So much mana was being moved that it was visible as glowing pillars connecting the sky and the ground. The complicated patterns that made up the formation pulsed vividly as all the mana it was absorbing flowed toward Luna.

A dazzling nimbus formed behind the All Dragon's diminutive body as a receptacle for the torrent of mana. Her body lit up as the outer mana was joined with the massive amount of inner mana that she herself was producing and fully expended to create a single Astral.

This Astral was roughly the same size as usual, but clad in flashes of light running along its body and a shining aura that pulsed in time with Luna's heartbeat. Never before had one of her Astrals packed so much mana. This was the most powerful Astral that she was currently capable of manifesting.

The very moment its form materialized fully, the Astral fired its greatest attack, the breath cannon, at the Demon Lord's Augoeides, which had only just started moving. Explosive sound and wind burst out as the enormous amount of mana residue scattered in the air around the beam gathered into countless light clusters of every color of the spectrum, banishing the night. The light then converged and was compressed so densely that any monster on the planet would explode into atoms from a mere graze, forming rapiers that launched themselves with the aim of severing the Vacant Demon Lord's four limbs.

Before any of the attacks could land, however, a semitransparent dome sprang up around the Demon Lord, giving the impression that it was standing inside a giant hemisphere of water. Upon making contact, the breath cannon died out, dissipating long before reaching

the Demon Lord's body. It almost looked like the beam had melted into water, with the vast mana that formed it turning into bubbles that popped and disappeared, having achieved nothing more than creating ripples on the dome's surface.

Luna had her Astral continue firing off breath cannons for a while, but upon confirming that the watery barrier wasn't shrinking, she stopped. Next, she unleashed a barrage of homing lasers that landed from every single direction, but again, they only turned into bubbles and ripples and never got anywhere near their target.

"Curses. It appears our opponent can indeed nullify all magical attacks."

It wasn't in the All Dragon's nature to hold back with the opening salvo. The breath cannon and homing laser barrage were her most powerful attacks, and since they'd failed, she knew that anything weaker would be pointless.

"Well, the Demon Lord certainly lives up to its reputation."

Sol understood the strength of Luna's Astrals better than anyone else. Now that he had witnessed its biggest moves foiled, he begrudgingly conceded that the Demon Lord truly was king over the arcane. While the Elven Queen had absolute command over the creation of mana, the Demon Lord had absolute command over its erasure.

"I strongly believe that Aina'noa and this body of mine would be rendered completely powerless if we were trapped inside that barrier. The unique skill that characterizes the Demon Lord, Calm, is formidable indeed."

Without their magical buffs and defenses, the All Dragon's fragment and the Elven Queen were nothing more than little girls. The latter was slightly better off due to having a physical body, but the former was composed entirely of mana. For all she knew, she could be erased simply by touching Calm.

"I see. That's a fitting name."

The way the breath cannons had disappeared upon making contact with the barrier bore a great resemblance to the phenomenon of turbulent water streams dissipating into calm water. Perhaps an attack with even denser mana traveling at much higher

speed could breach the skill, but this was a hypothetical that carried no meaning for Sol's group, which did not have in its arsenal an attack surpassing the breath cannon.

"Let me try one more thing."

Without missing a beat, Luna moved on to her third strategy. If attacks directly composed of mana didn't work, logic dictated that she try a physical attack prepared with magic. The go-to example was to lift a boulder high up and drop it, as the ability to cancel magic could not erase gravity or physical matter. Following this rationale, she gouged out a large piece of the land from the Floating Continent and compressed it into a sword matching her Astral's height. The product was far from a work of art and, though sword-shaped, was so dull that it was more accurately a club. But it packed more than enough mass to deal devastating damage, and that was all that mattered.

The giant Astral lifted the sword, approached Calm but stayed far enough away to avoid touching it, then delivered an overhead strike with all its strength. The weapon had sufficient reach. Though it had been created with magic, its speed and mass remained unaffected by Calm, and sure enough, it landed a clean hit on the Demon Lord with an earsplitting boom.

"It made contact, but..." said Luna.

Unfortunately, the attack only managed to make the towering form stagger a little and left no visible wound. Moreover, it landed with such force that the sword shattered completely.

"To no avail."

This was a step up from attacks of pure magic, but shaving off a tenth of an HP barrier with tens of thousands of points was far from leaving the Demon Lord incapacitated.

"It's a pity. However, if Calm is truly invincible, the Hero wouldn't have been able to defeat the Demon Lord. The only possible explanation is that Calm does nothing to magic deployed inside someone's body."

There was no way that the Demon Lord's movements in the fight against the Hero had been as wooden as they were now. And yet the Hero had still won, presumably handicapped by Calm the whole

time.

Realizing the implication that all of the terrible scars left on the continent had been wrought by physical attacks, Sol smiled wryly. “Could it be that the Hero was a musclebrain?”

“What is a musclebrain?” Luna tilted her head quizzically.

The term was used by adventurers on the back lines to poke fun at vanguards who cared only about leveling up and physically hitting things—“musclebrain” as in having only muscles for brains—but naturally Luna was unfamiliar with the slang.

“Don’t worry about it. So, the orthodox strategy is to level up a ridiculous amount and grab all the buffs in existence. That, or first obtain the Cursed Hero. Or—”

“Retrieve my Augoeides.”

If anything, the last idea was most realistic. A vanguard with an extremely high level and all manner of buffs could perhaps make some headway getting up close and personal. However, the Vacant Demon Lord was simply too big. Human adventurers took down monsters much larger than themselves by manifesting attacks that could bridge that size difference, be it from using a spell or a skill. Either way, it required using mana. Where that wasn’t possible, common sense dictated that there was no way to win—even more so against an opponent the size of a castle.

Whether the Hero had been a musclebrain aside, the Kuzuifabra depicted her having fought the Demon Lord using her god regalia. Though she couldn’t use magic or skills, she’d had the body of a dragon as both a weapon and a suit of armor. That had probably been the key to her victory.

In the same way, if Luna had her Augoeides, she could probably defeat the Vacant Demon Lord simply by punching it. However, it was still bound, and she was stuck in her fragment body.

Sol sighed. “I really went in the wrong order.”

“It is not your fault, my lord!” Luna cried reflexively. “The blame lies entirely with me for not being good enough!”

She didn’t want to admit that her liege had made a mistake, but her coming up short was exactly what made his path thus far a mistake. They now had no choice but to pull back. Seeing as they

were at an impasse, continuing the fight would be a waste of time and effort. She wouldn't object, as her highest priority was still Sol's safety. However, just thinking about it made her grimace, as it would make this encounter a failure on Sol's record—not because it was an affront to her pride as a dragon or because it triggered in her the fear of losing Sol's favor and being sent back into her prison. She was seized by a powerful emotion that she herself did not fully understand, something deep that made her reflexively shy away from causing Sol shame or having other people think he had lost at something. She could tell this wasn't merely ardent loyalty, but she couldn't put an exact label on it.

As if in response to her intense feelings, a mysterious voice rang out directly in her head. *"Do you want power?"*

The words sounded like sweet temptation from an actual demon from a world beyond.

Chapter 6: Summon Augoeides

Luna purposely responded to the suspicious voice in her head out loud. "Who's there?!"

It didn't even occur to her to hide the contact from her liege. Based on his and Aina'noa's surprise, it was clear they had heard the voice too. So she waited for a reply while keeping an eye on the Vacant Demon Lord, who had impenetrable defenses but seemingly no method of attack besides its large form.

"Your current state has piqued my interest," the voice said, sounding amused. *"And it seems luck is on your side."*

The voice clearly had no intention of identifying itself, but there were hints in its words. The fact that it found the All Dragon's current state interesting could only mean that it had known her when she had been known as the Evil Dragon a thousand years ago. For all she knew, it might have known her from the moment she first came into being. Something that had lived that long had to be other than human. The voice's somewhat laid-back tone gave off the air of a person of character with a good upbringing, but the timing of the contact painted the speaker in the light of a demon swooping in to snare an easy contract.

Luna maintained a wary silence as Sol and Aina'noa looked around in confusion.

The lack of an answer prompted the voice to ask, *"Or was I wrong? Do you not want power?"* It sounded as if it had expected an instant "yes," given the current situation.

Making no effort to hide the suspicion on her face, Luna said bluntly, "I don't need it. We'll simply come back another day."

Being the prideful All Dragon, she naturally saw no meaning in a victory seized with power that someone else had bestowed on her out of pity. But then again, her usage of "we" implied she wasn't thinking of trying to resolve everything by herself and had the

presence of mind to retreat when chances of victory seemed slim. Both of these things deviated from the usual thought pattern of the most powerful race.

"Spoken like and not like the All Dragon at the same time." The voice chuckled, indicating it took no offense to being rejected. *"Hmm. How about you, Player of this age? Do you also feel no need for a new power?"*

The way that Luna was both like and not like the All Dragon was likely what the voice had found interesting. Instead of rebuking her for rebuffing his goodwill—if one could call it that—it was pivoting and speaking to Sol next.

Since it had called him "Player," it seemed safe to assume it fully understood the abilities he possessed and the exact nature of his relationship with the All Dragon and the Elven Queen. Its question was therefore more along the lines of asking whether he agreed with his servant's decision. Although Luna had replied in the negative, if her liege said yes, then she would surely abide by his decision.

"Well...if you're offering, I'll take it. Especially if it can help us get out of this impasse."

The caution shown by Luna had come from concern for Sol's safety, but Sol had faith that she and Aina'noa could protect him from anything—he *had* to believe it if he was to realize his dream. As for the offer, he was aware that Player, the power that enabled him to challenge dungeons and whatnot, had come from some entity he only assumed was God. If he was to doubt and avoid everything coming from unfamiliar sources, he wouldn't be here today.

"Oh? The master is curious in his own right. Not many can see their own power with such objectivity. Very curious indeed."

Sol had long accepted that all his abilities, his looks, and most importantly, the strength that allowed him to fight monsters had been given to him, be it by God or someone else. It was his effort that determined how far he could develop and master it, but he hadn't obtained everything himself. This way of thinking informed how he saw the relationships he had built thanks to Player, including with the All Dragon and the Elven Queen. The flip side of this philosophy was that he would never hesitate to use his powers. The

value and meaning in strength was not based on where it had come from but what it was used for.

Shifting in tone from amused to pleased, the voice said, "*I like that. I like that very much. But I'm not actually giving you a new power. I'm just here to let you know that Lady Luck is smiling on you and make clear what that means. It's up to you whether to take advantage of it or not.*"

A new line appeared in the list of Player abilities that only Sol could see.

"You have a very unique opportunity right now that is the product of being in the right place at the right time and *having me here to open your eyes. The window will not last long."*

Staring at the ability that had not been there mere moments ago, Sol could not help but ask, "Are you...God?" It was said that talents were given by God. An entity that could interfere with them could only be God himself.

"Who knows? But in keeping with your talent being called Player, I suppose you can call me Game Master."

"Game...Master?"

Sol was not familiar with this term, but he noticed that the voice did not deny being God. Perhaps "Game Master" was the correct name for the entity humans commonly called God.

"All Dragon. Elven Queen. All you monsters who are to be ruled by Player. Entertain me more with your new liege. Put on a show grand enough to bring not only me but her *to the stage too!"*

Leaving that satisfied cry lingering in the air, the voice disappeared as suddenly as it had spoken up. Sol's group waited a bit, but nothing more was said.

"Luna, I—Player has gained a new ability."

"What does it do?"

"It's called Summon Augoeides."

The power that the voice had spoken of, the power that was available for a limited time because Sol was in the right place at the right time, was the ability to call forth Luna's Augoeides from the place where it was bound. If this was real and not just a trap, it would very decisively break the deadlock they were in.

As a situation that somewhat fit the saying "if you're eating poison, you might as well lick the plate too," it seemed foolish not to use the ace that Sol now had in hand. It had come from an entity that could interfere directly with Player. If it was a trap, there was nothing that Sol, Luna, or Aina'noa could do about it. The voice could have wiped away Player's existing abilities if it wanted to, and probably erased Luna's fragment and forcibly sent her consciousness back to her Augoeides too. Therefore, being overly wary of it would serve no purpose. One could not play a card game when doubting the very cards being dealt.

Sol and Luna exchanged a look that confirmed they were on the same page. Then he promptly used Summon Augoeides.

"Ugh..." Right away, Luna groaned in pain.

"Luna?"

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHH!"

Not answering when Sol called her true name was usually unthinkable for Luna. However, her body was racked with agony that trumped all her priorities. Worse, that body was fading away. Sol couldn't even begin to imagine how much pain the All Dragon was suffering that she could do nothing but scream. Frightened by seeing Luna like this for the first time, Aina'noa flitted around in a panic.

As it turned out, Summon Augoeides was not a lie. At the same time, it was also a trap. The voice had made no mention of the burden it would place on Luna's fragment if Sol were to use the skill now. Come to think of it, it made sense for her temporary form to disappear when her Augoeides, her real body, was summoned. This development was practically a textbook illustration of the adage that being able to invoke great power without making any sacrifice was too good to be true.

The problem was that this fragment had been with Sol ever since he had used Summoning, and he now saw it as the real version of Luna. This body had used Astrals as its ultimate move, so he had assumed that it would be able to manipulate her Augoeides in the same way. No matter how much her real body could improve his situation in the current fight, losing her fragment in exchange was absolutely unacceptable to him.

"LUNA!"

This time, he called her true name with not only surprise and concern but also intention and will. Additionally, he grabbed her curled-up and half-transparent body and hugged it as tightly as he could. Then he shouted her true name again, filling the cry with his dogged refusal to let her disappear.

No longer able to form coherent words, Luna wrapped her arms around herself, her gritted teeth hinting at some great struggle within. She remained semitransparent and unable to do anything else, but her body was still there, and the fading seemed to have been halted.

Perhaps the cost of Summon Augoeides was supposed to be the fragment she had spent every day in from the moment she had been freed to this moment. The voice had not lied. It just hadn't been entirely forthright. Maybe it had been gleefully looking forward to the faces that Sol and Luna would make when her fragment was erased. That outcome had been averted, at least so far, and just barely. With Luna's state still in limbo, Summon Augoeides proceeded apace.

Tonight had been a full moon all along. Everyone knew that the moon merely reflected the light of the sun and did not give off light itself, and that a full moon meant that when looking at the moon with the planet behind one's back, the sun should be even farther behind the planet.

Now that he had gotten closer, however, Sol realized things were not what they seemed. Something that had gotten so much bigger from merely having traveled the distance from the sea level to the stratosphere was not in the right position to reflect the sun as a full moon. Moreover, it was glowing from the back and therefore lit up from its circumference, as if a total solar eclipse were happening.

Suddenly, cracks ran throughout the moon's surface, then it shattered. This was not from the actual moon breaking up, but the facade of the thing masquerading as the moon. Without the facade, what came into view was a pitch-black sphere. A closer look revealed faint movement on the surface of the sphere. It clearly wasn't a natural satellite, but neither was it a living creature. The movements appeared lifelike yet mechanical at the same time, and

there was a certain regularity to them.

The sun was not on the other side of this creepily squirming quasi-moon and therefore could not be the explanation for the light that was illuminating it from behind. That light rapidly grew in intensity until it started seeping within, and Sol finally realized that he was staring at a giant ball of chains wrapped around glowing lines and sharp corners that flashed intermittently. Right away, he understood that this surreal sight was the exterior of the space that he had been drawn into when he had used Summoning.

The muffled sound of chains breaking rang out repeatedly from within the sphere as it leaked more and more light. That sound quickly picked up pace until it was one continuous cacophony, at which point the light completely banished the darkness and swallowed up the shattered fragments of the enormous chains.

It was supposed to be nighttime for the continent below, but magical light shining as bright as the midday sun drew a multilayered magic formation large enough to cover the sky, and in the center of the formation, a dragon's silhouette came into view.

This was the All Dragon's Augoeides. It hovered amid raining pieces of the false moon and chain links falling to the surface of the planet. Sol would never mistake it. He was once again staring at the most powerful magical being to ever live, still missing one eye, one horn, and both wings. Like that first day.

The magic formation spread out behind the colossal dragon body rotated counterclockwise a few degrees, and one of the stakes driven into the body shattered, along with all the chains attached to it. The formation rotated again, taking with it another stake. This repeated again and again, with Luna's fragment shuddering and groaning in anguish each time. Obviously, she was connected to the giant magic formation and her Augoeides. However, Sol hadn't the faintest idea why the Augoeides being freed—if it was being freed—caused her pain and could therefore do nothing but watch the mythical scene unfolding before him with bated breath.

When the formation moved for the thirteenth time, completing one full rotation, the thirteenth and last stake running through the All Dragon's body disappeared, as did the last of the chains. Though

many of its organas remained missing, the Bound Evil Dragon was fully liberated.

As if celebrating its freedom, the dragon unleashed a mighty roar that shook not only the continent below but the entire planet. Within Sol's arms, Luna's small frame shuddered, as if she was frightened by the maddened delight in the roar. Her knuckles were turning white with how hard she was clutching herself as she desperately fought something within.

The roar did not end as a mere roar. As the enormous multilayered magic formation deployed behind the Augoeides was quickly absorbed by its remaining eye and horn and display windows sprang up all around it, bloodred lines ran over its giant form, exponentially growing in density. Magic formations in the form of rings appeared around its still quivering throat as more formations lined up in front of its wide-open jaw. There was a beat, then a turbulent torrent of light burst forth from its mouth. The torrent shrank with each magic formation it passed through, as if being condensed like someone squeezing the end of a hose, until it became the true form of the breath cannon.

The distance to the Augoeides made the beam appear thin, but when the dragon moved its head down, the glowing line directed into the depths of space rapidly drew toward the position of Sol's group. Thanks to Luna's Thought Acceleration, Sol clearly observed that it was bigger than he could comprehend and was instantly convinced that it could split the very planet.

Biting back the crazed laughter that bubbled up due to terror, he called out in a loud voice, purposely using a commanding tone. "Luna, deflect it!"

Luna obeyed reflexively. As a result, the breath cannon that would have erased the Vacant Demon Lord, Calm and all, only clipped a part of the Floating Continent and grazed the planet's surface—thankfully, a part of the ocean—before flying back up to harmlessly expend itself. Everything the light had touched was gone without a trace. If not for Luna, the breath cannon would have at least sent the Floating Continent crashing back down, causing catastrophic damage, and probably split the continent below, if not

outright cracked the planet.



Normally, the breath cannon was a power far beyond what a human could handle. However, Sol had seen it used a few times since meeting Luna, and he had even started thinking that he had the measure of it.

"That...was something."

As it turned out, its true form greatly exceeded his imagination, much less his limited experience. Having been born on this planet, his mind struggled to comprehend power that could destroy the entire heavenly body. It rejected the concept on an instinctual level, despite seeing the logic that nothing physical could be fully indestructible.

Regardless of what a tiny human thought, however, planets could be destroyed in any number of ways. Two planets crashing together was one. Being swallowed by a star was another. Even a comet could shatter a planet, despite the drastic difference in mass, due to its momentum.

Of course, being hit by a breath cannon from the Augoeides of the All Dragon would do the trick too. It contained the potential to cause, at will, a catastrophe that could occur naturally with only the slightest of chances. That was the impression that Sol had received, and the places where the Floating Continent and the planet proper had been seared off more than substantiated his fears.

"I'm...sorry...my lord." Luna groaned from within Sol's arms.

Roused from his shock, Sol cried, "Luna?! Are you all right?!"

More than he could perceive, Luna was seized by certainty that the god of destruction floating in the void was indeed her true self. That was how she had been able to divert its breath cannon when commanded. However, that also meant the responsibility for unleashing an attack that had nearly destroyed the planet without permission was fully hers. Thus the apology right out of the gate.

"My...lord. That...is also...me. In fact...that...*is*...me."

Her heavy breathing, pained expression, and difficulty in getting her words out suggested that she was still working on reining in her Augoeides, which was trying to wreak havoc. Sol didn't understand why it seemed to be such a herculean task. If her Augoeides was her real body, it made no sense that it was fighting her. The only

explanation he could think of was that the being who had kept it bound all these years had set up a trap in it.

"The ghosts...of the dragons I devoured...to become the All Dragon...filled my Augoeides...with a thousand years...of resentment...and grudges."

Apparently, it wasn't an artificially created trap. Before, Luna had explained that she had become the All Dragon by devouring all other dragons, therefore taking into herself their abilities and authority. What she had not mentioned was that remnants of the victims' wills still clung to their powers. She'd probably had no trouble suppressing all of it while doing the devouring, but the resentment had continued building up over the past millennium, all locked inside, until it had started eating away at her mind.

Now that Sol thought about it, Luna had not been entirely sane when he first found her. He had managed to extract her consciousness using Player, but in doing so, he had inadvertently given the countless remnant psyches free rein. In the time since, they had turned completely mad and merged into a blistering compulsion to destroy everything. The chains and stakes had held them back, but upon being freed, they had promptly given in to their impulses.

The only way to stop them was for Luna to wrestle them down and reassert control over her body. This was beyond her current form, however. The amusement in the voice had probably been from foreseeing this development.

Having grasped the situation, Sol's embrace turned gentle, and he sighed. "For me, the real Luna is the one in my arms right now. *You* are Luna."

His dream was to unseal all territories, clear all dungeons, and in the end, reach the top of the Tower. Power that could destroy the very planet that hosted all those goals was beyond what he needed or wanted. The world would probably be better off if he never called on it, unless he encountered a clear enemy who could only be defeated by it. The current state of Luna and Aina'noa already had him worrying about the tendency of excessive power to ruin people.

Though she had to push herself, Luna smiled. "Then

what...is...that *thing*?"

The dismissive way in which she referred to the body she had completed to challenge God made Sol chuckle a bit. That was how she viewed it at the moment, though, since it was causing her liege trouble.

"Um...materials for the god regalia that you promised to give me someday?"

Sol had considered the possibility of Luna's Augoeides escaping her control to become the final boss that he would have to face. There was no point in bringing it up now, however, and it would be hasty to view it as an enemy when it had yet to completely get away from her. So he opted to reply with a joke that referenced what she had said during the Oratorio Tangram.

Luna giggled weakly. "I did...promise that. In...that case...I can't...remain at the mercy...of mere materials."

Beads of sweat dotted her beautiful features, and her small body was racked with pain. Her efforts to suppress the raging rancor and destructive impulse flowing directly into her head from the liberated Augoeides was scouring her mind like sandpaper. And yet, she purposely kept a smile on her face, as if to say that the Augoeides was but a present to make him happy and she wasn't going to let it get the better of her.

The truth, however, was that she was scared. It terrified her to once again face the thousand years of pain, bitterness, madness, rage, sorrow, and above all, loneliness that had nearly driven her insane before Sol found her. No, it had probably driven her insane long before then.

With upturned eyes, she asked, "My lord...may I...cling to you?"

"Of course," Sol said right away.

It was by fully believing in her that he could chase his dreams again. He would give her everything she asked for. If she needed to cling to him to defeat the as yet undefeatable Vacant Demon Lord and lock her Augoeides back up afterward, then she could do so to her heart's content.

Tentatively, Luna relaxed her hold on herself and snaked her arms around Sol. She was now going to throw open the floodgates to the

connection that she had been working hard to keep back this whole time. The physical contact with her liege was how she was going to keep herself afloat when the madness threatened to drown her.

Obey me!

The instant the connection was thrown wide open, the urge to destroy all creation, including herself and her own consciousness, rushed through her like molten lead. Luna threw all her mental resources at it, riding out the needles piercing every inch of her skin. She bit Sol's shoulder so hard she drew blood and almost squeezed the air out of him, but she simply could not take back full control over her Augoeides. Stopping it from moving was the best she could do. It seemed her only option was to maintain this deadlock until time ran out, waiting for the body to be automatically bound again and give up on the idea of using it to defeat the Demon Lord.

Sensing her struggle, Sol reciprocated her hug, but not with the desperation that he had shown earlier or that she was now displaying. As gently as he could, he stroked her trembling head. Without intending to, the other hand, which was wrapped around her body, touched the stumps of the wings that she was missing, and a knee stimulated the base of her tail. As a clincher, the hand still stroking her head ran over the surface of her snapped-off horn.

Electricity shot through Luna. The pain, anger, grief, and loneliness that threatened to overwhelm her disappeared in the blink of an eye, leaving her will uncontested inside her Augoeides. In the face of pleasure granted by the one to whom she had given her true name, a millennium of bitterness paled to nothing. The promise of enjoying such pleasure again gave her the push she needed to tear through the trap that was her own madness and the madness of those she had devoured.

And now, a mere second was all she needed to win.

Completely ignoring Calm, the All Dragon's Augoeides charged right up to the Vacant Demon Lord, crushed its four limbs quick as lightning, then slammed its colossal form into the ground. Dragons stood above all other magical beings, and the All Dragon was peerless under heaven. Just in case, Luna also snapped off her opponent's two horns and punctured its two eyes, robbing it of the

ability to fight back. A bloodcurdling scream went up near the center of the Floating Continent, presumably from Little Alshunna due to the sudden deluge of pain feeding back to her. Then the All Dragon's Augoeides successfully incapacitated the Vacant Demon Lord without further mishap, and control over the Floating Continent was restored.

After that, the gigantic dragon simply hovered in place, waiting to be bound again. When it happened, Luna instinctively sensed that the bindings that had been undone once would come off easily next time. That was, if she could take full control of the body.

Sol had not gotten the order wrong after all. If he had first restored the All Dragon's Augoeides by returning its lost organas, Luna would have been unable to stop its rampage, even with Sol's "help." Now, he could continue working on obtaining the Vacant Demon Lord, the Lifeless Divine Beast, and the Cursed Hero before circling back to complete the Bound Evil Dragon again.

Luna suspected that had Sol not chosen her first, she—the All Dragon—would have been the final boss in his story.

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"That was interesting. Very interesting indeed. I never would've thought the time they spent together in less than a year would so easily trump a thousand years of resentment and rage."

The voice that had temporarily granted Sol and Luna the Summon Augoeides skill and watched the almost farcical development that followed chortled with mirth. Although there was warmth toward the pair in its tone, its original aim had been to watch the master and servant fall into despair and deride them when the freed Augoeides went on an unstoppable rampage and tore the world apart. It was with great surprise that it had witnessed all of that derailed by, of all things, the All Dragon's worldly desire. What she had felt could be dressed up with words like "affection," but regardless, it had clearly been far from noble or innocent. The voice couldn't help but laugh.

What had further piqued its interest was that Luna had gone

beyond simply suppressing the voices of her kin and their resentment. One incorrigible aspect of the human condition was that they could trample all else for the sake of love, no matter its form. Beings created based on them sharing that aspect was hardly cause for surprise. That said, the fact that Luna had split herself and condemned her other part also made things different. There was no doubt that it was the physical contact with her master that had enabled her to do so without a second thought.

It was a common saying that only fools allowed themselves to be trapped by anger and bitterness. The results produced just now substantiated this saying far better than any argument could, be it logical or emotional. Armchair theories only gained meaning when backed up by real-world data, after all.

If what it took was not only the materialistic elements but also the relationships and emotions triggered by the pursuit and built up over time, perhaps all ideals had a possibility of coming true. At least, what had happened seemed to make a strong case for it.

"How entertaining it is to have my expectations betrayed!"

The voice that not only knew the real events that had transpired a thousand years ago but quite possibly understood every truth of this world laughed out loud, half mocking, half gleeful.

"Looks like I should take great care to make sure things proceed smoothly this time."

The new protagonist just might be able to summon *her* to the stage once more, maybe even granting the dream that the voice had chased for eternity without ever giving up. If so, every step must be planned out with the utmost attention. This included both the trials to be issued and the growth that overcoming them would bring. And who knows? The Wayside God of this age just might manage to reach the ending that he dreamed of...and beyond.

Chapter 7: The Country in the Sky

The audience hall in the Emelian royal palace—its biggest room—had been hastily converted into a giant meeting room. At the moment, it was the scene of carnage the likes of which the country had never seen since its founding, and it involved everyone from the king to the newest civil servant hire.

"Hand me those documents; I'll package them up! You work on finalizing the terms!"

"It will be a while yet before Princess Frederica can give final approval for this case. Take the time to gather up everything that needs her signature and the corresponding supporting documents!"

"Those who haven't had lunch yet, do it in shifts! We'll be burning the midnight oil again today, so don't work yourselves into the ground now! We can't afford to let anyone drop out!"

Almost everyone who worked in the palace was of notable status, and the foreign dignitaries they were dealing with also held highly esteemed positions back home. However, over the course of the tribulations of the past few days, the atmosphere in this place had been stirred into a jumbled mess that was more reminiscent of a local municipal office. Standing on ceremony and maintaining a dignified appearance had long gone out the window. Here, time was extremely tight, and priority was purely assigned based on getting things done. Understanding that this was in line with Sol's preference, Frederica had approved a certain degree of candidness. In fact, she even encouraged it. After the summit hosted to set the Oratorio Tangram's peace terms, Emelia's civil servants had been swamped with more work than they had ever seen. The current situation, however, made those days seem like a holiday. When Sol had secured the Floating Continent, the project to found his country had kicked off in earnest, and the tasks and negotiations that it induced were truly endless.

Needless to say, no one challenged Sol's claim to full ownership of the Floating Continent. There were still many such voices in street-level taverns, but none of those advocating for their countries' interests and indeed very survival were so foolish.

The Libertadores, as led by Sol, had wiped out the lost technology employed by the Old Rulers, destroyed the thirteen man-made angels, and even defeated a god regalia made out of a dragon's Augoeides. The angels had literally been brought down to earth by cute girls wielding Numbers armaments, and the god regalia that had symbolized humanity's victory in the Kuzuifabra had been, of all things, gobbled up by the All Dragon's Astral. In such a world, military might no longer hold any meaning—not against Emelia, at least. That held true even if the armies of every country on the continent were to band together with perfect coordination. Such a force would be a few hundred thousand strong and erased in seconds. Those who would actually have to stand in harm's way in that scenario knew, down to the last man, that they had zero chance of winning. The morale of the world's armed forces had been broken beyond repair, beyond anything that their superiors back home with armchair tactics could fix.

Though the countries hadn't sent all that many men to the Oratorio Tangram, in their eagerness to avoid losing face with the Holy Church at the time, they had made sure to send their very best. When those men had returned home terrified, their reputations and distinguished careers had lent extra credibility to their warnings, thereby successfully convincing everyone of the power of the All Dragon and the Elven Queen.

On the other hand, no country fully understood the part where the Old Rulers had tried to destroy the planet and Sol's group had stopped it. Even Emelia didn't have the full picture, much less the others. That said, everyone could see for themselves that the World Tree had been restored, and all countries had been informed by their scholars that the density of outer mana in the air had returned to the levels of a thousand years ago. They knew, therefore, that the demihuman races they had lorded over during that time had been restored to their original strength and that humans were now the

lowest on the world's totem pole.

This meant human countries could no longer afford to be squabbling among themselves. The only path to survival was to bow to the world's absolute ruler, Sol, swear fealty to him, and hand him anything he wanted. Without his protection, their countries were but prey for the taking. When magical beings who had been persecuted for the past millennium knocked on their door, seeking revenge, there was nothing they could do.

Put simply, a country that failed to be accepted by Sol was as good as done for. The devinians' uprising, which had presumably ended with them bending their knee to Sol, had been something that humanity had no hope of handling on its own. The same went for the catastrophes caused by the reappearance of the Floating Continent and the onslaught of the magical living weapons. By now, Poseinia would have suffered irreparable damage, probably so much that all organizational structure would have collapsed. And with no one capable of stopping them, the living weapons would have continued pushing inland. Humanity wouldn't have been conquered; it would have been annihilated.

Then again, though the stakes were higher now, the other countries' situations hadn't changed much from the time after the Oratorio Tangram. Almost all of them had already succumbed to Sol under threat of obliteration. However, there was now a carrot to go with the stick. And the land above the clouds, the Floating Continent, made for a very attractive carrot indeed.

The idea that there was a landmass floating in the sky would sound fanciful to many, so Sol had ordered that the Floating Continent lower its altitude and do a circuit around the continent below, ensuring there wasn't a single person who could doubt its existence. Then he had announced that he would be founding his own country on it.

It was now established that this world had an absolute ruler who was practically God incarnate. Going against the rules he set meant a horrific death, and the mere thought invoked fear. But on the flip side, as long as one colored within his lines, there was no place safer than at his feet. Before him, everyone was effectively equal in their

weakness. Anyone who acted out would be knocked down just as easily. This applied to demihumans too, who would otherwise have become humanity's worst nightmare for possessing both strength and intelligence. To those who took care not to defy Sol—even out of ignorance—his country would be the world's very first land of perfect security.

The number of people who wanted to live in this paradise, from commoners to aristocrats, was overwhelming. Even if this wish was not granted and they had to continue living in their lowly, ground-level country, they hoped to obtain a guarantee of safety extended by one of those literally living in the heavens.

The country in the sky would be ruled by Sol, who had command over the All Dragon, who could eliminate all his enemies, and the Elven Queen, who controlled mana, the energy for all activity in the world. The landmass was indeed large enough to be worthy of being called a continent, and seeing as Sol could move it at will, in an extreme scenario, it wouldn't hurt him in the slightest if all the countries on the surface of the planet were reduced to embers. A population around the size of Garlaige was enough to maintain a civilized standard of living. Advancements would flag, but keeping the status quo would be more than feasible.

Even problems that could only be solved with numbers were nothing before Luna's overwhelming strength and Aina'noa's ability to practically create miracles. Taken to the extreme, the powers of destruction and rejuvenation could overturn anything and everything previously accepted as fact. The authority they imparted was enough to convince all people that nothing was impossible for them.

Because the people of the world understood this—or had been forced to understand this—the fear they held toward the All Dragon and the desire triggered by the bounty of the Elven Queen's bottomless mana drove them to throw themselves at Sol's new country. And since Emelia was the only way to reach him at the moment, even kings had come to bend the knee in person.

It was due to such circumstances that the kingdom was being flooded by a sudden onslaught of delegations officially offering vassalization and seeking promises of safety. It was the duty of

those in the hall to deal with all of them, and no help was forthcoming. The amount of work involved was such that even the word "overwork" wouldn't do it justice. In fact, many should have collapsed long ago. And yet, not only had no one collapsed but everyone was still there and accounted for. Moreover, they were the very picture of health despite having been at full tilt for several days on end. This nearly superhuman feat was thanks to one person in Sol's inner circle: Julia Miller, the Saint of Healing.

An elderly minister who was in a state that would prompt anyone with a conscience to yell, "Go sleep already!" and who looked far too old to be pushing himself so hard, stumbled forward, asking, "L-Lady Julia, may I trouble you again?"

Julia herself was sitting at the top of the raised dais, with Reen standing guard next to her. That was exactly where the king's throne had been, but by this point, no one took issue with the presumption, be it out loud or in their heart.

"Sure, sure."

After all, the healing magic that she cast gave her every right. She made it look easy, but its incredible effect was something that everyone in this room had already experienced for themselves numerous times.

Healing magic was different from recovery magic, which restored the HP barrier only possessed by monsters and those registered with Player as companions. Able to even regrow limbs, healing magic was considered a miraculous power.

Upon activation, light burst out from behind Julia, and a stream of golden particles flowed from her outstretched hand to envelop the haggard retainer. The sight was exactly how a stained glass depiction of a goddess bestowing salvation to a weakened, downtrodden people would look.

"Thank you very MUCH! NOW I CAN KEEP GOING A LITTLE LONGER!"

As a result, the old minister's ashen face not only regained color but even glowed with vitality as his previously raspy voice became a full-lunged shout. With enough energy to make someone meeting him for the first time think him a thirty-something-year-old with an

older face, he turned around with alacrity and gallantly dove back into the battlefield of the department he headed.

During her Black Tiger days, Julia's healing magic had already been seen as a miracle, as she could not only heal wounds but actually regrow lost limbs too. Because of that, she'd had devoted "customers" from Garlaige all the way to Magnamelia. Thanks to Sol's awakening and her own level-ups, her power had since been elevated to where it could now even overturn death.

Generally, healing magic worked by infusing someone's body with mana to stimulate it into healing itself. A side effect was that all other aspects of the patient's body would be healed too—including fatigue—thereby leaving them in peak condition. This had been a trait of Julia's magic from the start. Therefore, if mana was no issue, said magic could be used like a broad-range stimulant, exactly as she'd just done. It had been thanks to her that Black Tiger was able to handle prolonged fights lasting over a day without having to cooperate with other parties.

"But when that cast runs out, make sure you get some sleep. You still need a certain amount of sleep, you hear me?"

"YES, MY LADY!"

Unfortunately, though healing magic could keep someone's physical body in prime condition for longer than a week without sleep, their consciousness would eventually shut down. When it crossed that threshold, the person would remain unconscious for several days. To avoid it from happening, it was necessary to get at least a full day of sleep after a full week. This was something that Sol's group had not known during their Black Tiger days, as they had never gotten into a fight that lasted that long. No, this was a new discovery, thanks to a certain old blacksmith who had too much zest for his own good.

The gazes of the foreign dignitaries watching the exchange between the smiling goddess and the animated retainer were filled with amazement. When they turned to look at Julia herself, that amazement invariably turned into awe.

Of course it did.

The fact that no one was stupid enough to challenge Sol anymore

meant the world was now entering an age of peace. Freed from monsters and wars, humanity would be able to focus its energies on development. Moreover, rapid expansion would be taking place too, as Sol steadily freed up territories previously dominated by undefeatable guardians. Struggles between countries would become purely economic, and victory would be decided by factors like developmental capability and productivity. This would require human capital in many different settings, such as those with boots on the ground, admin and support, researchers and inventors, and those specialized in improving and streamlining processes. And all of them were on display in this hall, operating at such efficacy that the dignitaries could scarce believe their eyes.

"M-May I have some healing too?"

"Sure thing!"

Even more impressively, there appeared to be no limit. One after another, enervated individuals approached the dais and returned to their seats bursting with vigor, proving that those packed inside this hall could indeed work nonstop for a week with only a day of rest.

From the viewpoint of the dignitaries, it wasn't yet a big problem that they could not do the same thing, as even those representing the biggest countries were only getting at most a few hours of attention each day. However, it was an impactful demonstration of what a big difference it would make to gain Sol's favor. When compounded by time, the drastic increase in productivity would create an unbridgeable chasm.

Even if there came a day when Sol's lifespan ran out and the monsters he commanded stopped serving humanity, Emelia would likely be an age or two ahead of every other country by then. Beyond a certain threshold, differences in strength—technological being just as effective as physical—compelled absolute obedience, regardless of whether the side with the advantage was a god, a demon, or even a fellow human.

"Are you seeing this?" said a breathtakingly beautiful princess to her knight escort. "We *must* ensure that our country is accepted as Emelia's vassal. I'm willing to offer *anything* to make it happen."

The knight, who had started out indignant that her historic

country had to go so far, had completely changed her mind since. With conviction, she replied, "Yes, Your Highness."

In this new world, a single girl whom the absolute ruler deigned to point a finger at was worth far more than an entire backwater country. This princess was desperate to offer herself because she understood this. It was not vulgar or conceited, but simply the most effective way to secure her country's national interest.

Any country that failed to catch Sol's attention was doomed. Consequently, the delegates were desperate to avoid the cardinal sin of reaching a complete breakdown in negotiations. Swearing absolute fealty to Sol and fully accepting Emelia as the continent's leading power were the bare minimum. The question was what else they could do or offer to secure for their country the lowest seat at the table. Nothing short of their beloved homeland's very future was on the line, and they would rather die than walk out of this room empty-handed.

Recalling that this was no time to stare in fascination at the glimpse of Sol's miracles, the dignitaries returned to their negotiations with renewed determination. Like the princess's knight escort, novices who had left their country in a huff, thinking, *Why do we have to act so subservient?* they had switched gears to thinking, *How much favor can I buy with all the cards I have on hand?*

"Isn't this a little scary?" murmured Reen. Despite having the strength to massacre everyone there besides Julia and Frederica in an instant, she looked somewhat ill at ease in the frenzied peace filling the room.

When those who had experience leading a country negotiated for real, it produced a certain tension in the air different from that of a warrior facing a monster that could easily overwhelm someone unused to it.

Interpreting Reen's question in a completely different way, Julia replied, "I know, right? We probably have the least right to say this, but magic can do some pretty questionable things."

She already had experience dealing with nobles back when she was "just" the Saint of Healing and when she'd secured Sephiras, the heir of a viscount family, as a fiancé, all before Sol had risen to

his current status. Despite her short stature and winning looks, she was barely fazed by what was unsettling Reen so much.

Instead, it was her own powers that she was alarmed by. What she could do now was so incredible that even she didn't think it an exaggeration to call them miracles or acts of God. If they had been made possible by the talent that God had given her when she came of age, she might have thoughtlessly let them go to her head. But no, her powers were entirely thanks to Player. The fact that there were people lionizing her as a saint in earnest as a result scared her as much as the extent of her powers did.

Not a single member of the Walden family, which had been raised from viscount to marquis in one bound, looked down on her anymore. Quite the opposite. Those who had been overly "honest" with her before, sometimes to the point of unpleasantness, had since apologized by prostrating themselves and outright begging her for mercy.

She had thought it unavoidable that Sephiras would get some envy from other nobles, but now he had become the most influential person in Emelia, second only to the royal family. Even bigwigs from other countries treated him with the utmost courtesy. If Frederica had not become one of Sol's prospective wives, the Walden family would undoubtedly have risen above the royal family in status.

At this point, royal status and the hierarchy between nobles had become little more than outdated badges. Closeness with Sol was the only metric that mattered. Because of this, Sephiras, who was capable but good-natured at heart, was struggling with severe stress ulcers every day. The fact that this had not dampened his feelings toward Julia had struck a chord in Sol, such that Sol had started seeking him out as a conversation partner of late, inadvertently worsening his condition.

One time, Sol had joked, "Hey, with Julia around, you don't have to worry about your stomach hurting!" evoking a burst of laughter from Julia at the instant stiffening of her fiancé's smile. That was, until she caught the meaningful look on Frederica's face and realized the headaches of those in positions of power that it hinted at.

What an important person my childhood friend has become.

This was actually the crux of Julia's reaction to Reen's mention of being scared. That said, she was way beyond being scared of Sol. It was surely the same for the girl with her head cutely tilted in puzzlement currently standing at her side. That went without saying. After all, if it was something that could be shaken, she and Reen would have gone the way of Mark and Alan by now, girl or no.

When she'd first confirmed that her powers came from Sol, however, the first thing that had crossed her mind was so indecent that even now, she blushed to recall it. Put simply, she had worried how she would respond if Sol said, "You know what you have to do if you don't want me to take your power back, right?" She was so embarrassed about it that she had admitted it to Reen only a few years later, and it was only recently that she had been able to apologize to Sol for it.

At the time, Sol had made a very serious face and said, "Huh, I should have thought of that..." then failed to hold it for longer than a few seconds and burst into guffaws. It had made Julia so happy that she'd nearly cried, but that was a secret. If she hadn't already given the most important part of her heart to Sephiras, she just might have joined Reen and Frederica in chasing Sol, becoming a rival of theirs.

In any case, what scared Julia now was everything besides Sol, and that included herself. She wanted to believe she was still fine, but it was a constant worry in the back of her mind that she would take her situation for granted. That could fly for Reen, Frederica, and Eliza—in their positions as Sol's wives or concubines, they were practically all-powerful as long as they retained his love. Julia, however, was not his. Therefore, she had to hold herself to a higher standard. She had to periodically check herself and ensure that, God forbid, she never went beyond taking him for granted and started taking issue with him. That was a one-way ticket down the path that Alan and Mark had trodden.

Julia shot a quick glance at Reen. "I can't imagine you doing that, though."

Reen considered it. "Well...it's not quite the same, but there are things on my mind too."

Without the need for an in-depth explanation, the two had worked out the miscommunication that had taken place and gleaned from each other's faces what they wanted to say. Understandably, Reen wasn't worried about herself the way Julia was. Such concerns were like water off a duck's back for a girl in love.

"Oh yes, now *there's* a dynamic that ought to have changed long ago."

The concern that was eating at Reen was a very straightforward one. It was a natural product of how long her and Sol's relationship had remained vague and undefined.

"You're laughing at me! You're acting like you're the only adult here!"

"I should give your cute butt a slap."

Julia's honest opinion was *Hurry it up already*. Being a girl herself, and since Reen was a close childhood friend, there was an emotional side of her that wanted things to go perfectly for her. Her pragmatic side, on the other hand, thought that Reen should pin Sol down and take him that very night to secure the position of his first girl, especially given his current standing. They would be better off for it, and it would make it easier for Frederica to move too. Pulling off a fait accompli was at times the best strategy, and Sol and Reen were in exactly such a situation.

Surprised by the serious glint in Julia's eyes, Reen exclaimed, "What?! Why?! That's mean!"

"Then again," Julia dropped her shoulders, "you being yourself is one of your greatest strengths."

Reen had ended up dragging things out this long precisely because she was purely concerned about Sol's and her own feelings. She was the only one in the world who could remain so completely unaffected by his rising status. Sol himself liked that about her. Moreover, it complicated things that he knew she had carried a torch for him for a long time. It was why he was leaving it entirely up to her to set the pace.

Julia wanted Sol to step up, as she herself preferred a man who could take a little more control. However, in a world where everything he truly wished for would come true, his staying true to

himself mattered much more than being a wimp.

There being leeway for them to develop their relationship as slowly as needed was, as Julia had said, one of Reen's unique strengths. It resonated with Sol most when he was approached as an equal. That was how things had been before, and how he preferred it. Julia knew this thanks to all the time she had spent with him.

At the same time, it worried her. Put simply, Reen and she were the only two people who could be entirely honest with him and be accepted. It would have been more reassuring if Mark and Alan had been there to share that burden, but they weren't. Though the fault had been of their own making, Sol had all but killed them with his own hands. Because of that, he was unconsciously putting his two remaining childhood friends on a pedestal. The two who had entered his life later, Frederica and Eliza, could never take their place. The fact that Steve and Gawain, who had been there since the very start of his career as an adventurer, were still around was a saving grace.

The issue of the absolute ruler's small pool of true confidants was something that seemed to bother Frederica even more than Julia. Therefore, Julia was not too critical of her idea to create a country for him and gather pretty girls from all over the continent to fill his rear palace. A case could definitely be made for increasing the number of reasons for him to care about this world, no matter what form it took, and that it was crucial for the world at the moment.

"But don't forget that our dear friend is becoming the king of a country in the sky soon. Being the one of us who has actually fallen for him, you may not have as much time as you think."

Of course, it could be said that Reen was being *too* laid-back. To remind her friend of the reality of her situation, Julia purposely went for a slightly pointed jab, implying in a roundabout way that a horde of princesses on Frederica's level would be rushing into his rear palace in the near future, every one more willing than the last to give him everything and clamoring for his love. As if to prove her right, the princesses in the room were paying less attention to Julia and her "miracles" than the one standing guard at her side, Reen.

They were clearly sizing her up, but Julia worried that they would

see Reen zoning out and conclude that they could easily do a better job of winning Sol over. Taking her lightly would not only rub Sol the wrong way, it would get them killed by a certain scary therianthrope girl who wouldn't brook such offense even from those close to him.

"Isn't a country in the sky just amazing? I understand why P— Frederica is so enthusiastic about it." Reen turned dazzling eyes toward Julia, having completely failed to catch the indirect message.

The verbal gaffe was due to Frederica having asked to be addressed without her title. If the reason had simply been that Julia and Reen were Sol's childhood friends, the two would have refused. But when Frederica had clarified that it was because she saw them as the first friends she had ever made, there was no way to say no. Julia understood that, although it wasn't a lie, it was brilliant framing, and therefore she had obliged right away. In contrast, it was proving a bit of a challenge for Reen and Eliza. As a result, Reen had ended up frequently calling the princess "P— Frederica," with Sol jokingly copying her.

Thinking about how this side of Reen was likely what endeared her to Sol the most, Julia chuckled and sighed. In a brief moment of self-deprecation, she admitted that she probably never could have become someone truly important to Sol even if she had managed to become one of his girls.

"It's like a fantasy come true," Julia agreed.

Honestly, the idea of a country in the sky excited her too. The fact that it was so fantastical that it had never crossed anyone's mind made it, in a way, better than the depths of a dungeon, the heart of a monster territory, and even the top of the Tower. And yet, her dear childhood friend had pulled it off. This was indeed a feat worthy of the "super famous party" that they had dreamed of becoming when young.

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The planning for the country to be built for Sol on the Floating Continent was largely spearheaded by Frederica, with the main points here below.

First, the imperial capital was to be erected in the treacherous mountain area in the center of the continent. Normally, building a capital in such a place would be out of the question, but the plan was to have the All Dragon and the Elven Queen carve out an area big enough for a metropolis and then build Sol's castle at the tip of a sheer promontory. By this point, everyone knew this would not be hard to do.

To elaborate, the castle would actually be more of a tower in form, built to the maximum height possible using current construction techniques. All facilities crucial to the running of the country would be located in this tower. The top of the tower would be connected to San Jeluk's Tear, the largest of all the floating islands that had once formed the Fol Mentera Archipelago. In contrast to the tower, this island was to be a completely personal area, occupied solely by Sol's residence and rear palace.

The precipitous peaks themselves would serve as the city's walls, with there being no plans at all to create gates or roads leading to the city. Travel to and from the island would be conducted entirely through large-scale teleportation magic maintained by the Elven Queen. Short of flying, it would be impossible to sneak in or out of the city.

One more thing was going to the floating island connected to the top of the castle, in fact. Aina'noa was going to teleport the World Tree there. Despite it practically being in the sky, that was the nexus from which she was going to control the world's ley lines.

It was expected that when the city was finished, it would be a breathtaking sight that would go down in history as being a worthy seat of power for the ruler of the world down to the very inch.

As for residents, applicants from Emelia would be prioritized before any other country. Naturally, there would be screening. With Sol's permission, Frederica had already announced that those from Garlaige would be processed first and promised that those who made it would be provided with a house larger than their current one and could continue doing the work they were doing. More than ninety percent of the population had applied in a matter of days.

Only Emelia would be allowed to have an embassy inside the

imperial capital. In exchange, all countries would be granted a plot of sovereign territory of a uniform size around the edge of the Floating Continent. They could be used in whatever way the countries that owned them saw fit. Nations could send as many people as they wanted to fill up these special wards, and Sol's government would not interfere, short of those residents starving to death. It was almost certain that those from each country who were selected to live here would be seen as upper-class citizens by the rest of the world.

Moreover, as there were far more floating islands than there were countries, it was decided that each would also be given one island to serve as a consulate. One could enter the capital only through one of the large-scale teleportation circles set up in these consulates, with control over them naturally held entirely by the capital. That way, the capital maintained full control over who it let in.

The consulates would be connected to the corresponding special wards—and the special wards to their countries—through large-scale teleportation circles as well. These circles were to be monitored by the countries themselves. The empire would shoulder the responsibility of maintaining them in exchange for a regular standard fee.

Travel between special wards using the large-scale teleportation circles would not only be possible but entirely free. Thanks to this, the movement of goods between countries was expected to improve so drastically as to change the rules of trade forever. The idea was to use the land in the sky as a miniature representation of the land below that would help to dramatically improve the infrastructure of the whole continent.

Participation would be entirely voluntary, but no country would even think of turning this offer down. After all, to do so was to disassociate from the development of the entire world. In fact, the cost of entry seemed so minuscule in context that some countries worried there was a catch somewhere.

There was no catch, of course. All Frederica wanted was to build the ideal world, one where, by offering overwhelming benefits as opposed to threatening unavoidable punishment, people wouldn't be

forced to abide by rules set by a higher authority but would want to regulate themselves. This country was the first step toward that dream.

Sol and Frederica did not easily despair over humans, but at the same time, they held no expectations of godlike integrity or infallibility. At the end of the day, humans were animals too, and the two had the objectiveness to include themselves in that evaluation. Although humans had the mental ability and creativity to create the concept of God, as long as they still possessed the instincts of animals, they could not truly act as God.

The fact that some people acted because it was the right thing to do, because it had to be done, or because it was compassionate hinted that there was indeed innate goodness in humans, but it wasn't always present and therefore could not be relied on. Instead, the ideal world was one in which taking action in line with one's animalistic instincts was what made a living being better than its peers. Allowing everyone to become truly free to pursue their own self-interest was the way to create a better society.

The carrot was development on the scale of which recorded human society had never seen. The stick was so unspeakably terrifying that it made death look merciful in comparison. It was only when a godlike being with the power to realize both of these promises was present that people could enjoy true rule of law.

As long as Sol wished for it, that is...

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Suddenly, bells rang out, their angelic peals reverberating throughout the large meeting hall. A look revealed that the bells were attached to the towering main doors. Each had been made by the best artisan of a country on this continent and given to Emelia as tribute. Many people had failed to notice when the first had gone off, but as more and more joined in the chorus, the chaotic atmosphere quickly died down. In no time at all, the bells were all singing at the top of their beautiful voices amid an expectant and reverent silence reminiscent of a temple.

By the time the two members of Frederica's personal guard, Leticia Ahskalid and Lydia Ducray, standing on either side of the doors, proclaimed, "Lord Sol is arriving!" everyone in the meeting room was already kneeling with their heads bowed in his direction. This included Reen, Julia, and the members of Emelia's royal family.

Bells had been installed all over the Emelian palace to announce the absolute ruler's approach. The instant Sol's foot crossed the threshold, the bells associated with that door and hallway would begin to ring, with the successive hallways he passed through marked in the same way. The doorways and hallways were grouped as stages such that when he passed certain points, the bells tied to the paths he did not take in the previous stage would also start ringing. That way, all of them would be ringing in the end.

Following the guards' proclamation, the giant bell up in the meeting room's lofty rafters started clanging with solemnity, and the large double doors opened slowly. The entrance of the ruler of the world, the man acknowledged by all as king and therefore effectively an emperor, deserved no less pomp and ceremony.

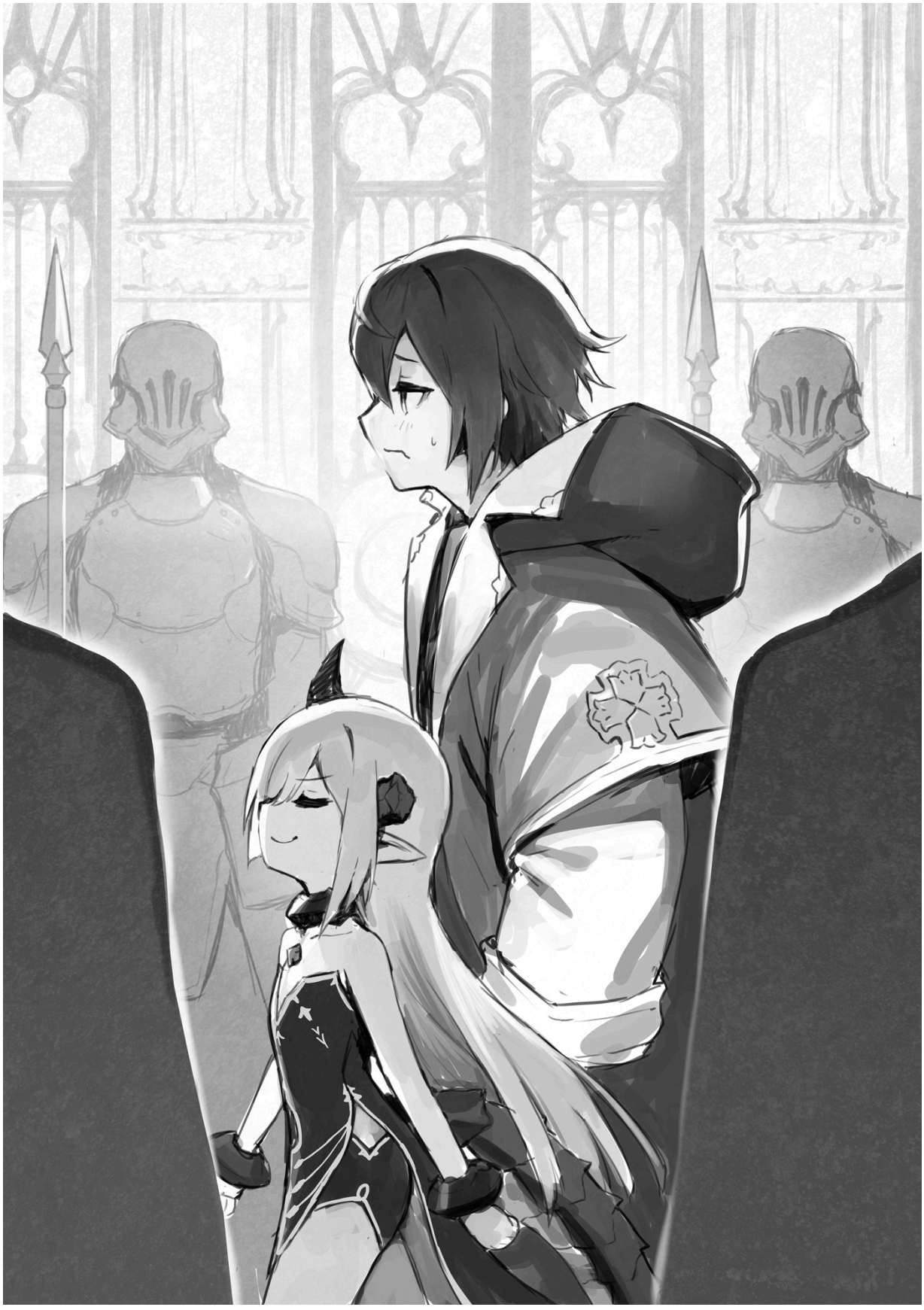
Awkwardly, Sol said, "Um...good work again today, everyone. Thank you for being still at it."

No one said a word. No one lifted their head. There wasn't even a cough.

Personally, Sol thought this pageantry rather self-aggrandizing and didn't like it. However, Frederica had convinced him of its necessity. It was true that it would be troubling if anyone and everyone could casually engage him in conversation. Conversely, he himself understood how tiring it was to have an important person approach in an overly casual manner. At Frederica's insistence that this would make things easier on everyone, he had finally folded and agreed to play along.

Instead of clinging to him like always, Luna was walking next to Sol with her chest puffed out and her nose high in the air, radiating satisfaction at the deference that the humans were showing her liege. She looked less like the All Dragon and more like a daughter who was proud of her dad. In contrast, Aina'noa was acting no differently than usual. She simply floated along behind Sol, happily

oblivious to what was happening.



"Good. They are all well trained."

"Luna, don't talk about them like that."

Luna's breathing had quickened, indicating how happy she was to see her liege being held in such esteem. Sol wished that she had chosen her words with more care, but having her, the cute young girl, acting high and mighty came across much better than if it were him. It was even an accurate representation of their respective strength—she was his executive arm, after all.

Thanks to Luna, Sol had gained a bit of a reputation for appearing suddenly using teleportation. When this setup was put in place, however, she'd fallen in love with it. Consequently, teleportation was now only used when they were in a big hurry.

"Reen, Julia, Frederica, let's head back."

The purpose of Sol's visit was to fetch his companions. They promptly acknowledged him and packed up. The other civil servants were naturally going to remain and continue working until the three returned in the morning, but because Julia wouldn't be present to fix them up, they would have to pace themselves. They would get one last cast before she left, just in case, so there shouldn't be any major issues.

Needless to say, the foreign representatives had no objections to the arrangement. They were there to suck up to Emelia. Complaining about the proceedings being interrupted would be entirely counterproductive, and they were smart enough to know that.

Regardless, Sol took only a few steps into the meeting hall, and in a matter of minutes, he turned right back around. The hem of the long coat that he loved and therefore was still wearing despite his drastically different position was the last thing visible before he disappeared from view.

While following behind him, Julia caught the besotted looks on Reen's and Frederica's faces and gave a small smile. They were glowing so brightly that even she, a girl herself, found them adorable. She was honestly impressed that simply being fetched in person to have dinner together in the temporary rear palace would make them so happy. If their relationships with Sol really were to

develop further, she worried that even Frederica would become too distracted to work, much less Reen and Eliza.

In contrast, the non-Emelians in the room were watching the departing girls with burning envy. A small part was simply drawn, like Julia was, to the attractiveness that girls in love could not help emanating. The majority, however, came from a compelling sense of purpose and urgency to get a girl from their own country standing among them. In their eyes, the absolute ruler—looking dashing at the head of his procession—and those chosen by him and granted power to mold the world as they saw fit were unequivocally the main characters of the new world.

This did not call for mere jealousy or resignation, however.

"We must do everything in our power to send someone whom Lord Sol would call on."

"Understood."

Similar conversations were being whispered between the delegates and aides of the numerous countries in the room as their eyes blazed with ambition. They *were* going to be represented in the group of the chosen. By any and all means necessary.

Chapter 8: The Next Step

Night had fallen, but it would be a while yet before the capital went to sleep. After leaving the large meeting hall, Reen, Julia, and Frederica were joined by Eliza and had dinner at the main residence of the Great Bath Palace, the rear palace of a former Emelian king, which was currently being used by Sol as a temporary home. Then the four, who had started being openly called Sol's Girls, gathered in Reen's room.

Sol himself had headed out to the base of a new initiative headed by Fritz, bringing with him Luna, Aina'noa, and the latest addition to his posse, Little Alshunna. Being able to teleport meant he could return as quickly as he had left, but because his business involved discussing the treatment of his newest allies, the devinians, it was probably going to take him a while.

Sol had decided to delegate responsibilities as follows: Frederica was in charge of official, public business, including interracial negotiations; Eliza was to handle underworld business within general society; and Fritz would be managing the dark side that countries and races relied on to forcibly push agendas through—namely, their intelligence networks and special forces. As the former emperor of Istekario, a militaristic country all too familiar with assassinations and other clandestine operations, Fritz was well equipped for the position. Circulus, the strike force previously under his direct command, had been returned to him. Now, Sol was also putting him in charge of the devinians, who had been groomed by the Church for similar work. Thanks to the restoration of outer mana in the air, they were nigh invincible.

Seeing an opportunity in the absence of the master of the house, Sol's Girls were secretly plotting something. Given that they didn't want this discussion to be heard by Sol, who could appear at any time and out of thin air thanks to the All Dragon's and the Elven

Queen's powers, they found themselves naturally lowering their voices. Consequently, they were huddled up in a corner of the room despite its spaciousness. This made them look so guilty that anyone could take just one look at them and tell that they were up to something.

"And that is why this is so urgent," said Frederica solemnly. "I'm very sorry for putting you on the spot, but would you be able to do that, Lady Reen?"

"I...guess so," Reen replied, not sounding very sure.

Julia sighed. "There isn't much of a choice, is there?"

"The majority of the delegation's representatives were the princesses of kings and heads of state," said Eliza, sounding slightly dazed and envious.

The serious expressions on their faces confirmed that something was indeed afoot, and Eliza's comment eloquently conveyed why they had gathered together. This was, in short, an emergency meeting for those who, despite how they were seen and treated by the world, had yet to *actually* become Sol's women.

Frederica said, "Word has reached me that heads of countries that do not have a princess suitable for Lord Sol are scrambling to adopt beautiful girls as daughters regardless of social status. Moreover, I'm sure it will be seen as a matter of course for daughters born to kings and emperors in the future to be raised as concubine candidates."

"So they are willing to accept those who have no blood ties for now but do ultimately want blood relatives in the position." Julia grimaced. "And they figure that no man would ever grow out of appreciating younger girls, so they would still eventually get their bloodline into the rear palace. Is it just me, or does that give you goose bumps too?"

The intel was shocking enough to make her actually shudder, but there was no doubting its veracity. Eliza's eyes and ears in the underworld had confirmed it.

"It's the rear palace of the person ruling the world, so I'd be more surprised to hear that countries *weren't* doing something similar. That said, objectively, it is rather distasteful." Frederica smiled

weakly and shrugged. Though she shared Julia's sentiment, she could also see how things looked from the perspective of those in power and understood why they felt it was no time to be held back by morality.

It was established fact that an absolute being with godlike power now walked among men and was looking to found a country. In response, as could be seen in the large meeting room for the past few days, existing countries were lining up to bargain for their country's continued existence. However, since it had been made clear that Sol had no intention of actually seizing political control over the world, everyone was starting to look for wiggle room in hopes of finding a balance where they could eventually make back more than what they were now offering.

This wasn't hard, as a country that was accepted by Sol was practically guaranteed access to the vast swathes of fertile land that monster bosses had so vehemently denied prior entry to. The most obvious example was, of course, the taboo territory still dominated by Country Eater, a boss that had obliterated seven countries two centuries ago and which Sol's group had already announced they would deal with as a part of the first phase of continentwide undertakings they were planning. If the numerous dungeons sprinkled throughout each country were to be conquered as well, nations could give everything they owned now and recoup them more than a hundred times that in the future.

Wanting to seal that guarantee by sending a princess with their own blood into Sol's rear palace was essentially a given in this age. Countries that unfortunately did not possess such pawns were simply getting creative. This was the exact development that Frederica had predicted when she had first visited Sol and Steve, having just learned of the former's existence.

Reen frowned. "I don't think Sol would like that, though."

Indeed, the person in question, the absolute ruler himself, did not appreciate such tactics. When he first heard Frederica talk about it, it hadn't felt real to him and he had therefore nodded along mostly because he felt too timid to contradict his home country's princess. Now that things were actually taking shape, however, his aversion

was becoming more tangible.

It could be said that Sol was in the wrong here, as he was taking exception to what was still considered the normal way of doing these things. However, the rules of the world were rapidly changing to suit the preferences of the person it was revolving around. In other words, the onus was on the countries to read his whims, though it was a rather tall order to expect them to have a solid grasp on his character in such a short time. Sending girls to him *was* their way of trying to learn more about him, so there was no way for them to know that in itself was a mistake.

As the person inducing countries into doing so, Frederica did not really have the right to get on a high horse and call them "distasteful," even if she understood Sol best among the world's ruling class. That said, she herself had changed rather drastically since getting to know him. Not only did she acknowledge that it would be a bad move to force him to do something he truly didn't want but even if it was for the sake of the world, she herself was growing less fond of the idea of having to share him with more girls.

When a power was so great that it could not be wiped out even with the entire world working in concert, the principal and the auxiliary in the dynamic surrounding that power was automatically flipped. Put simply, that power no longer existed for the world's sake; it was the world that existed for the power's sake. And if the world failed to realize that, it would eventually be erased by that power. It was the same logic where, when God no longer loved a world, he could simply scrap it and start over. To avoid this fate, said world had no choice but to change itself so that God would continue to love it.

"I imagine those who share a similar background with Frederica would act the same way of their own volition," said Julia. "But, wait... Frederica's fine because she does it as a result of how she was taught and raised as a princess, but I can see Sol taking issue with girls being specifically shaped that way in their upbringing."

Julia was getting close enough to Frederica—the princess had even asked her to drop her title in conversation—to be able to glean the complicated struggle in her mind. Sure enough, Sol would not

simply laugh away this issue as mere overthinking. He understood that countries were more than capable of such atrocities. When the benefits and continued existence of an organization as big as a country were on the line, there was no room to worry about the condition of a single person.

"What scares me most is if Lord Sol abolishes the rear palace entirely because of it," said Frederica. "It serves to underpin the promise that those under his protection would be able to keep their sovereignty while enjoying the unprecedented profits brought about by the coming rapid development. With it gone..."

Though she was delighted to have a friend who could keep up and wasn't just mindlessly voicing agreement, her concerns were hardly solved. On the one hand, Frederica was just a girl who felt blessed to be at Sol's side, new though their relationship was. On the other hand, she was the first princess of a major nation and therefore felt strongly obligated to utilize her privilege to better the world at large. And unfortunately, she couldn't do both at the same time.

If the rear palace initiative that was being developed at the moment came to a standstill, there were bound to be countries that would start using more questionable methods. Sol wouldn't be affected—he simply was too powerful—but these machinations could set off a vicious reciprocative cycle that would drastically slow down global development.

Reen said, "We can set rules and guidelines that he would be satisfied with, then. For example, we can tell girls when they first enter the rear palace that if they're not here of their own free will, they can tell Sol directly during their first night with him."

If the girl herself wanted it, Sol would hardly say no. Even Reen acknowledged this of him, as he was, after all, a boy. What he abhorred was the forceful alteration of someone's thought process. Or, in simpler terms, brainwashing. If there was no coercion and a girl desired him of her own will, his general reluctance to get involved with others would surely be trumped by his instinctual appreciation of the opportunity as a male.

The underworld information network that Eliza was developing

would catch wind of any country that went so far as to impose something on the level of brainwashing, as would the monitoring conducted by the clandestine agency that Fritz was setting up. And as a fail-safe, a system could be put in place for a girl who fell through the cracks to tell Sol that she wasn't willing, and he would personally set her free, gladly taking it upon himself to ensure her safety and the safety of her close family, thereby solving the issue. There was no telling what he would do to the top echelon of the country responsible, but once an example was made, the others would know better.

Reen honestly thought this a rather brilliant solution, but the other girls weren't so sure.

Hesitantly, Eliza said, "W-Would they be able to, um, stop at that point? I believe in Lord Sol too, but he's a guy, and..."

"I can totally see someone entering the rear palace unwillingly but then falling for him by the time things get that far," Julia said bluntly. "Not so much because of his character, but because he's literally the ruler of the world. She would think him a lecherous womanizer because of his reputation, but there he is immediately apologizing to her and probably even saying, 'I wish you all the best.' No, not probably—he *would* say it. That's the kind of person he is."

Even a girl could tell what a torture it would be to be alone with a guy in a room and, when he was fully in the mood, suddenly tell him, "Actually, no." This was even a kink for some guys, and none of Sol's Girls could say for sure that Sol wasn't in that group. After all, none of them had gotten that far with him. And if a girl truly fell for Sol as Julia said—and that seemed very likely—the system would fail to serve its purpose.

As girls themselves, the four had no intention of making light of anyone's feelings. That said, they understood better than anyone else that there did exist a world and environment that would put many fairy tales to shame. Pure feelings did exist, but so did greed, and the latter was in everyone to varying degrees.

If asked whether her feelings for Sol were greater than the status he provided, even Reen, who was the biggest dreamer present, could not easily bring herself to say yes. Her position as his

childhood friend was incredibly privileged, but it actually made it harder for her to say for sure that her feelings were entirely pure.

As for Eliza, well, her feelings for Sol were inextricably entwined with his saving her from rock bottom. She was willing to give him anything he asked for and equally willing to completely write off whatever he didn't want as worthless and inconsequential. What he had already given her was, to her immature mind, worthy of absolute devotion.

"I suppose we simply have to trust that not all princesses are like me and that there are some who are more similar to you, Lady Julia," said Frederica. Being a princess, she had a rather realistic view of the world. However, recent experiences were cultivating in her the sentiments of a normal girl. Because of them, a part of her wanted to believe that there were more people like Julia in the world—people who wouldn't only be blinded by the benefits that Sol could give.

Julia grinned. "Hey, even I would feel tempted in that situation."

"I promise not to tell Lord Sephiras you said so."

The two looked at each other, then burst into giggles. The exchange felt so much like they were friends that it warmed Frederica deep inside. The idle and frivolous conversations that she had taken to having with this group of four—though Eliza's youth was still a barrier to being as casual with her as the others—was fast becoming more precious to her than pushing the development of the world, and that scared her a little.

Like Reen, Julia fully understood how lucky she was to be Sol's childhood friend. She was aware that her looks were quite desirable to the other gender, but it was almost entirely thanks to the power she had received from Sol that she managed to become connected with Sephiras. Though she indeed had not chosen Sol as her man, she felt somewhat uncomfortable being held up as an example of someone who wouldn't be swayed by him when it was the stats, skills, and levels that she had received from him that made her who she now was.

Although Frederica had some idea of how Reen and Julia felt, the fact that they never felt the need to suck up to Sol to ensure they

didn’t lose their powers was proof enough that they were special. Simple faith in him was nowhere near enough to offset her own fear of losing the overwhelming benefit that came with his favor. At heart, she was the same as royals from all other countries in that she sorely needed solid assurance of his love. It was so important to her that she would give anything for it.

“Most importantly, are...you okay with the arrangement, Reen?” asked Eliza timidly.

The urgent request that Frederica was making of Reen was to approach Sol this very night and be the first to take her relationship with him to the next step. It was a highly improper request—Frederica was all too aware—but Eliza could see that the situation had progressed to a point where they couldn’t afford to put it off any longer. What she was asking, however, was a more fundamental question: Was Reen accepting of the idea that, after the feelings she had held for Sol all these years were finally realized, Frederica would be following her, as would (Oh, how unworthy she was of the honor!) Eliza herself.

Needless to say, Eliza would not hesitate to give Sol her body if he asked. She was now lauded as the Rose of the Underworld, but no one had seen her as a girl before Sol healed the terrible burn on her face. She had been young, but compassion was in short supply in the slums. There had been a few other girls near her age who had been assaulted, and among the higher-ups of the Gafus Gang Sol had crushed to paste, one had a predilection for young girls. In a way, that burn mark had been a blessing. It had kept her unharmed in that aspect.

In any case, since Sol was the person who had made her who she was now, she had no interest whatsoever in any other guy. Though she was still a child, that part of her was sure of what she wanted. He was the only person she was comfortable showing her womanly side to.

At the same time, she could see that Reen was special to Sol. The way he looked at her was clearly different from how he looked at Frederica, the princess, and Luna and Aina’noa, the two servants with literally inhuman beauty. Eliza had no intention of pursuing her

own insignificant love if it meant hurting Reen, whom she saw as a big sister figure. As long as Sol did not ask for her directly, she would not approach him herself in that way.

Wow, I've gotten so full of myself. I wouldn't even know how to approach him if I wanted to. How would I? I'm just a little girl who doesn't know anything.

In short, what Eliza wanted to confirm was how Reen felt about there being other girls at Sol's side.

"Well...it's gotten way past the point where I can say I want it to be just me and him. I kind of already accepted this eventuality when I learned what his talent really did. I'm not vehemently against the idea, which I suppose is an answer in and of itself."

"So you don't like it, but you're willing to accept it? My dear best friend, you've matured so much," said Julia.

"Isn't it the same for you, since you're marrying a marquis?"

"I didn't even think I was going to be his main wife."

The childhood friends shared a wry smile. In this age, it was rather common for kings, nobles, powerful merchants, and even high-ranking adventurers to have multiple wives. Though gender supposedly had no bearing on what talent one received from God, male dominance was accepted as a matter of course due to society still being under violent threat from monsters.

Reen sighed. "We can't forget Lu and Aina's presence either. And Alsh is still just a doll, but I'm sure she'll be joining in person before long. While they're actually pushing Sol's dream forward, we're all just riding his coattails."

Her answer to Eliza's question was, in so many words, yes. From a purely objective point of view, Reen's relationship with Sol wasn't one in which she had any pull to make any requests of him. If she truly wished to make him hers alone, she had to have the conviction to give up everything that he had given her so far. And what she feared losing most wasn't the overwhelming power that everyone envied or the benefits it brought, but the affection from him that was becoming more pronounced as of late. She was most scared of being so insistent that she wore out his love for her.

In the first place, her position was so weak that she had

considered returning to Ros Village by herself and merely praying that he would come home to her once he had fulfilled his dreams. Yet now, the princess of a major nation was trying to prop her up as Sol's number one, with support from the Evil Dragon and the Elven Queen from legends. To complain in such a situation was to invoke actual divine punishment. What Julia had voiced out loud was on the mark.

"You are entirely right, Lady Reen. Even so, you and Lady Julia, the childhood friends who have been with Lord Sol since before he had a drop of power, are special in our eyes. We would like to say that we come next, but the truth is that Steve and Gawain are probably ahead of us. Eliza and I only happened to enter Lord Sol's life soon after his metamorphosis."

In light of the situation, Frederica wished that Reen, at least, would become a firm connection that tied Sol to human society. At the moment, she was the only person who could call the All Dragon by the nickname "Lu" and get a guaranteed response. This proved that even the All Dragon acknowledged her as the person next in authority after her liege and therefore above herself. As an extreme example, if Frederica, Eliza, and even Julia were gone, Sol would probably still retain the sensibilities of a human as long as he still had Reen. Conversely, if he lost her, he could very well lose interest in the development of humankind and his own role in it. In a way, the world was being anchored by a single chain, and the fragility of the situation was not lost on Frederica.

Though she recognized the presumption in doing so, she found herself thinking in vain how much she could have improved things had she, through the influence of her family, gotten in touch with the Miracle Children of Ros Village back when they were still Black Tiger. There was something special in a solid friendship between guys, especially childhood friends of the same age, that could not be replaced by a woman. It wasn't entirely Sol's fault that he had ended up cutting down Mark and Alan with his own hand, but flipped around, that meant some of the fault *was* on him. He was aware of that, which made his current state even more precarious.

That was why Frederica wanted Reen, who was now closest to

Sol in several ways, to further solidify her relationship with him. The excuse that her own position was being threatened by the flood of princesses looming on the horizon was perfect for pushing the two closer. Hopefully, Reen could follow up on the jab she had thrown at the Santeshesel Sea with a powerful right punch. If she knocked him out altogether, all the better.

"Maybe, but I'm pretty sure you two have become special to him too."

"Perhaps. There was a time when I had confidence that was true. Unfortunately, the advantage that being a princess afforded me has been effectively negated. Despite having been blessed with so many levels and even my own Numbers armament, I can be left behind at any given moment. In contrast, the time that you, Lady Julia, and even Steve and Gawain have spent with him is truly irreplaceable. I have been in his life for less than a year. That can be easily surpassed by anyone Lord Sol takes a liking to in the future."

The four who had been granted Numbers armaments—Reen, Julia, Frederica, and Eliza—possessed strength that greatly surpassed even that of magical beings, including the devinians. And if they had Player's support, they could take on all the armies of the continent and win handily. The only opponents beyond them were the monsters under Sol's direct command.

At least, that used to be the case. Now, enemies were cropping up who could only be dealt with by those monsters. Even if these four had been present for the restoration of the Floating Continent, all decked out in their Numbers armaments, they wouldn't have been able to contribute in any meaningful way. In fact, it would have taken everything they had just to stay alive. The jaw-dropping number of level-ups and the incredible equipment they had received still made them little more than slightly stronger ants in the eyes of the monsters Sol commanded. He could make anyone their equal whenever he wanted, which meant their advantage was no advantage at all.

What *was* special, therefore, was truly exceptional strength that surpassed even Player and held the potential to drastically evolve with its support, such as that possessed by the All Dragon, the Elven

Queen, and the Demon Lord. Before such beings, the authority of countries amounted to precocious claims from children. In the same way, a girl's beauty was just as inconsequential. If Sol put out a call, every country would bring every last beauty to his door.

The point that Frederica was making in light of all this was that the companions who had stuck by Sol since before he'd realized the true worth of Player were the only people who were truly priceless to him. And of those who fit that description, the most important were the childhood friends who had been with him way back in Ros Village when he had been a mere child before coming of age.

"I'd like to say that's not the case," Reen said slowly, "but I guess you're right." She and Julia had no rebuttal for Frederica's reasoning.

"Therefore, though I am aware it is a mortifying thing to ask, I, too, wish to secure my position before the rear palace is officially established. Naturally, I will do what it takes to make that happen, but my hands are rather tied until..."

"Until I take action first, because I'm first in line?" Reen finished.

Frederica was going to do whatever it took to seize this golden opportunity. If needed, she would not hesitate to play wingman. In fact, it topped the list of the possible ways in which she hoped the situation developed.

"If, as a result, Lord Sol says that he only wants you, I would still consider it a win. The rest of the rear palace, including Lady Eliza and myself, would be relegated to mere ornamentation for a while, but the stance that he can't yet see girls other than his childhood friend-turned-lover as a woman would still reassure the countries and maintain Emelia's prestige."

From the perspective of other countries, Frederica monopolizing Sol's favor would be a huge threat. Conversely, someone who wasn't tied to any particular country occupying that position would allow them to relax a bit and shift toward action that focused on a few years down the road. That would lower the chances of the situation blowing up or collapsing due to hastiness.

As a girl, Frederica would be disappointed, but such a conclusion was acceptable to her too.

Julia grinned teasingly. "'For a while,' is it?"

Caught off guard, Frederica gasped. “Ah!”

“Nah, I agree with you,” Julia said. “Sol’s a boy too, after all. I’d like to meet an ideal guy, but I don’t get the impression he’s it.”

If Sol remained besotted with his main wife for the first year or two, that would be fine. In fact, the honeymoon period could last a whole decade, as he would still be in his twenties. Frederica and Eliza would still be in their prime, and it would be easy to prepare other girls who were suitable for him at that point.

By then, Reen would have come into her own as queen consort. Even if the idea of Sol having other women understandably upset her, she would be much more understanding and amenable by then. She might even develop some character flaws along the way, such as becoming envious of younger girls, but there was no point considering such worries now. Such troubles had plagued many other rear palaces in the past, and remedies that had worked back then could be applied in Sol’s rear palace too.

Reen shook her head. “Suddenly, I’m thinking how much more complicated this would become if Sol knew we were having this discussion.”

“It would,” Julia agreed. “He’s never had much interest in such things, even when we were in Black Tiger.”

The two sighed nostalgically. When Black Tiger had finally started gaining some recognition, Mark and Alan had immediately made a name for themselves in the red-light district, evoking obvious frowns from their female party members. Sol had accompanied them a little at first, making Reen feel rather conflicted, but he’d grown weary of it rather quickly.

Reen and Julia had secretly suspected that Sol had a go-to that he wasn’t visiting openly like Mark and Alan were. However, they’d never managed to catch him at a decisive moment. Mark and Alan had gotten really worked up about their investigation at one point, refusing to believe that Sol had no interest despite being a guy, but they’d similarly failed to produce results.

Thinking about it now, Sol had always been aware of where his companions were thanks to Player. Dodging his friends’ surveillance would have been child’s play for him. However, Reen chose not to

pursue that line of thought any further.

"It's not that I am expecting Lord Sol to suddenly develop an appetite for it," Frederica clarified. "I would welcome it if so, but I don't think it likely."

"If he suddenly started laying hands on every princess he saw, it would be hilarious." Julia chuckled. "But yes, I can see how that would put your position at risk."

"Exactly. That is why I am the only one being backed into a corner. Lady Reen and Lady Julia, your positions are unshakable and will remain so. Therefore, my request to Lady Reen is highly inappropriate, but I am making it nonetheless."

Though she was intentionally skirting the motives derived from her position as royalty and someone whose actions would dictate whether Emelia would sink or float, there was no falsehood in what she said. It was good enough for her if Reen truly was willing to accept her and Eliza becoming Sol's concubines as a necessary evil.

"But, so, I, um, seduce him? That would really resolve everything? Really?"

It wasn't breaking news, but Reen was almost as much of a wimp as Sol was.

"After seeing Lord Sol's reaction at the Santeshesel, I can say so with certainty. You saw for yourself, did you not?"

"I-I did, but still..."

Even in Frederica's eyes as the much-lauded Lilium dei Regnum, Reen was undeniably attractive. Her confidence levels aside, there was no doubt that Sol had feelings for her. The reason their relationship had yet to make progress this whole time was clearly because they both lacked courage.

Being a princess, Frederica had naturally had a very proper upbringing. Since she still wasn't used to having female friends on equal standing, she had yet to develop the ability to get exasperated with Reen. If she had been just a little more familiar, her words would have been more cutting.

Understanding that what Reen needed now was a push in the back as opposed to censure that would dispirit her, Julia said helpfully, "What boys want is permission, and permission given in

such an obvious way that it cannot be misinterpreted. Sol's definitely a wimp, but given his status, I guess we can give him the benefit of the doubt and call him 'virtuous.'"

"Give him permission? How do I do that?"

Seeing Reen still dithering, Julia decided to get specific. "Okay, look. Yes, you seduce him, and you make it as obvious as possible. Wear what you're wearing now and hug him when you're alone with him tonight, and that'll do it. I think."

At Frederica's request, starting this night, Sol would spend the night at each of the girls' residences in turn on weekdays, then spend the night at his own residence only on the weekends. Naturally, he was supposed to come to Reen's place the first night—tonight.

This emergency strategy meeting had been called due to the very real concern that if this first night was allowed to pass without anything happening, the whole process would once again be delayed indefinitely. To increase her chances of success, Reen was now wearing a masterpiece that Frederica had tasked the entire costuming department of the Emelian palace with making. Though Gawain's products had a stellar track record, it was a bit too much involving him in the nightwear of a queen consort candidate on her first night. A design passed down through the royal family had been altered with input from Frederica and Reen herself to become a negligee meant for Reen alone.

The end result looked chaste yet irresistibly tantalizing. Any man who saw it would want to stare at it forever, while at the same time, want to take it off with his own hands, given permission. It was pure temptation woven into an outfit, with its provocativeness amplified by Reen's innocent mannerisms. She appeared invincible in it. Anyone with a greater affinity for darkness wearing it would be driven mad and die, as the saying went.



"You 'think'?"

"Hey, if he dodges"—Julia gestured at Reen—"*this*, we're going to slap him with the nickname 'King Wimp.'"

Though Reen sounded unsure of herself, what she was wearing made her blush when she looked down at it. If she leaned against Sol wearing this and he *didn't* lay a hand on her, he very much deserved the ignoble moniker.

Eliza asked, "Wouldn't the All Dragon eat us alive for that?"

Julia clapped a hand over her mouth. "Whoops."

Of course, if the name reached Luna's ears, even Julia wouldn't get off scot-free. Though the two were purposely using a joking tone, they were reminded that they were enjoying what felt like a sleepover a little too much.

"The history books won't describe me as not being attractive enough, right?"

"No, no, it's all on Sol. It's true that when a boy looks at a girl in a sexual way, part of it is unrelated to whether they actually like the girl, but a boy who won't take action even after a girl who's liked him since they were children goes this far cannot be called virtuous. I won't accept it," Frederica replied.

It wasn't that Reen had no confidence at all. She had a feeling that when she approached Sol in this getup, considering how he had been behaving recently, he wouldn't leave her hanging. Thinking about what he would specifically do nearly made her head overheat, so she decided to simply leave it to him. It had hurt to see him accompany Mark and Alan on their nights out in the past, and she thought it very unfair that boys could practice these skills so freely, but thanks to that, at least they wouldn't both be complete amateurs tonight.

If things still didn't work out, Reen was quite sure she would never recover. Of course, that was ridiculous, and anyone looking in from the outside could tell how silly it was, but as illustrated by the phenomenon of mutual one-sided love, these situations had a way of feeling very real to those actually in them.

As Julia and Frederica gazed at Reen with warm, fuzzy looks, Eliza said, "Um, I don't really understand how you seduce someone.

Do you just act direct and say, ‘Please take me,’ or...um...is...there...?”

Being the most innocent on account of her youth and, in a way, the one with the most straightforward feelings for Sol, she voiced aloud what she thought she might say but trailed off as she saw the expressions the other three were making—some strange mix of half-lidded eyes and lips barely pressed together.

“She...isn’t wrong,” said Julia stiffly, “though I imagine it’s a bit hard to do when you’ve remained childhood friends with him for so long, isn’t it?”

“Uh...it is.” Reen nodded, blushing deeply.

For some reason, Frederica had averted her gaze, but the part of her face that remained visible was red too.

“I-I see...” Eliza realized that she had stepped squarely on a land mine that triggered the older girls’ embarrassment. Though she didn’t really understand, her cheeks turned crimson too as she sat in awkward silence.

Side Story: The Wards

The Wards were very special beings that, despite having been present all along, remained entirely unknown. This was true for not only Frederica and other royalty but even the late Pope Gregorio IX, head of the Holy Church that supposedly controlled the very narrative of this world. There was no way for someone to find out about them, as they lived "behind the curtains" of the world, but now that the Wayside God of this age—Sol, the boy who was host to Player—was climbing onto the stage of history, they were emerging from the interstices of the world where they had been lurking to fulfill the purpose for which they had been made.

Put simply, the Wards' purpose was to protect the status quo of this world. That meant eliminating—sealing away—everything that did not belong. That was why they had been named "the Wards" by the unidentified being who had spoken directly into the minds of Sol, the All Dragon, and the Elven Queen during their battle with the Vacant Demon Lord.

They had not remained hidden all this time due to long-lost technology or complicated large-scale magic. Very simply, it was because they thoroughly erased every last person who learned of their existence whenever they manifested to seal away a target. For the sake of protecting the rightful state of the world, they were not beyond sacrificing a country or two. In fact, they wouldn't hesitate even if it meant complete ruination of the world for a while.

Although the Wards existed to protect that world, their definition of that world did not include society or the people living in it. They cared about the world as a whole, both the inside and outside. At that scale, the humans who were born, lived, and died inside as they pleased were of no consequence. That was why there wasn't a single mention of the Wards even in Biblioteca, the crystallization of human knowledge and tenacity. Besides the Old Rulers, absolutely

no one but the Wards themselves knew of their existence.

This meant that they, too, had once been sealed away and removed from the world, making them Wards in both senses of the word. They themselves were something to be put away just as much as they put others away. This meant that they were indeed bound by the provisions that steadily grew in number as the world continued to exist.

These beings were once again rousing from their slumber, their latest target being the current Wayside God, who had just obtained the third monster card. Inside a massive spherical space lined on the inside, with monitors located near the top of the Tower and therefore way past the stratosphere and firmly in space, countless bright lights flickered to life, with one gradually assuming humanoid form.

Back when this figure had itself been a target for sealing, it had been known by the alias Unlimited Sword Glint. Now, it was the first one chosen by the mysterious entity to face the Boy Who Ruled the Monsters.

Finally, Sol was facing opponents not only from within the world but from without—from the wayside for which he was named.

Thus ends the Vacant Demon Lord arc.

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up volume 4 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, hot on the heels of the very first third volume that I ever released, we now have volume 4 as well. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

This volume is mainly centered on the fight against the Vacant Demon Lord and Sol's party obtaining the Floating Continent that will serve as their home base going forward. Besides flashy battles, it also features an obligatory beach vacation and the relationships of Sol's group taking a step forward. I had fun writing it, so I hope you had fun reading it.

From this volume onward, the plot development begins to take a drastic departure from the version on Shosetsuka ni Naro, with more than half of this book having been rewritten. Almost everything going forward will be original, with the Wards playing a big part and therefore showing up every so often. Of the two monsters Sol has yet to pick up, the Cursed Hero will show up first, somehow entangled with the Wards.

In this volume, we see the introduction of the process that allows Sol to personally wield the All Dragon's strength. I loved the visual concept that NAKAMURA 8 came up with so much that I used it as it was. Sol's body being covered by the same glowing patterns as the gigantic dragon he's controlling is so incredibly cool! It's a stroke of brilliance. (See the third colored insert.) As long as I continue progressing the story, NAKAMURA 8 continues bringing it to life with his pen, and that is literally the best reward I can ask for. I wish to deliver both to the hands of you, the reader, so I am going to put in even more effort. I hope you not only appreciate the cool page I mentioned before but also take a good look at the colored spread and the seventh insert art. I'm seriously going to do my best, so

please continue showing your support!

With the introduction of the mysterious entity and the Wards, this story will continue to get increasingly involved with the mysteries and beings that it revolves around. The next volume will begin to reveal glimpses of the gamelike setup of this world and what everyone will see when Sol finally realizes his dream, so I hope you look forward to it.

As the author of this series, it is truly a dream to have not only NAKAMURA 8 drawing illustrations but also Ketsuyuki Tamon creating a manga serialization. This, too, is thanks to the support shown by all of you. Once more, thank you very much.

Here is where I wrap up the afterword for volume 4. I hope we meet again in volume 5!

Bonus Story: Girl Talk ① Before & After

"Well... Good morning," said Frederica.

"G-Good morning," said Reen.

It was still a time when this greeting was applicable, albeit barely. The location was the same room where Sol's Girls had had their strategy meeting last night. Reen was fidgeting nonstop, with her face beyond a cute blush and firmly in "red as a tomato" territory. Frederica took that to mean what they had all wanted to happen had happened.

At the moment, Sol was once again out visiting Fritz with Luna, Aina'noa, and Little Alshunna. Reen had seen him off before making her way to this room, thus the late hour.

The moment Julia, Frederica, and Eliza saw the state she was in, they were seized by a strong curiosity how Sol was tending to his official duties. The latter two further found themselves longing to soon, like her, be able to see Sol first thing in the morning too.

Staying silent was just prolonging the awkward air, so Reen, still fidgeting, plucked up her courage and opened her mouth. "Um..."

Frederica raised a hand. "Before all else, please allow me to ask: Are you granting us permission to discuss this with you?"

If Reen really had sealed the deal the previous night, she was now officially Sol's girlfriend. It didn't matter what her official position was or that they had yet to be actually engaged. The most important thing was that she was the first girl to share a night with him since his abrupt rise to power. It was somewhat comical that a girl who'd spent a night with a boy was a bigger deal than the first princess of a major nation or the head of the criminal underworld, but that was simply the way of the world now, and she was now undoubtedly the second most powerful person in the entire world.

And Frederica's upbringing dictated that she treated her with the appropriate degree of respect. Until told otherwise, at least.

Reen blinked, then caught on. "Oh." She had spent enough time with the princess that, on top of having been given permission to address her without her title, she could largely understand her position and worldview. "Um...yes," she said, giving the group carte blanche permission.

Though there was still a little conflict within Reen, it didn't look like she was forcing herself to accept something she really hated. Inwardly sighing with relief, Frederica asked further, "May I inquire as to the reason?"

Reen shook her head. "That's...a secret."

Though she declined to answer, she was practically radiating joy. Clearly, something had happened that had made her think, *"Oh well"* in regards to Sol taking Frederica and Eliza as concubines and perhaps even having a full-fledged rear palace in the future.

"So my childhood friend is all grown up. What a pity." Julia shrugged. "Looks like you two will get the nod too, Frederica and Eliza." Satisfied that her friend was happy, she figured it was her role to voice out loud the confirmation that the other two would get to follow in Reen's footsteps.

"Yes!"

"Th-Thank you..."

Seeing that neither Frederica's enthusiastic cry nor Eliza's embarrassed little mumble evoked any revulsion in Reen's face, Julia relaxed further. If Reen truly found the situation intolerable, Julia had been ready to go to bat for her to the bitter end, even if it meant earning Frederica's and Eliza's ire and, God forbid, ultimately falling out of favor with Sol. Thankfully, Reen seemed willing enough to roll with things, though it might take some coping. This was the most peaceful outcome possible, and Julia was glad for it.

Feeling buoyed by a sense of security, she shifted into her teasing self. "So, can we ask for details, or would that be lèse-majesté?"

Playing along, Frederica jolted as if a matter of grave import had been brought up and said solemnly, "It would, actually."

"It won't!" Reen cried vehemently.

Apparently, she hated the thought of being isolated by everyone and worshiped as the one and only partner of God incarnate far more than the thought of her loved one having an experience like last night with someone else. This was in large part because Sol had told her clearly that he would not do so if she didn't want him to. When she asked why he said that, he didn't reply that it was for her sake or that it was the right thing to do, but simply that he wouldn't like it if he was in her shoes. The rather childish nature of this reply lent it extra genuineness and made her laugh out loud. She had thought, *"I guess that's true for all guys. How unfair."* but then conceded that girls had unfair advantages of their own too.

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha!"

"I'm thankful to hear that."

Eliza scrambled about in a mild panic for how to react as Julia burst into hearty laughter and Frederica maintained the amicable air to invite the continuation of the conversation.

"But, um, are you sure you want to know?" Reen asked—not because of disgust, but as a final, futile resistance to great embarrassment. Perhaps, just perhaps, the others might agree to keep matters of the bedroom within the bedroom now that it was confirmed they would all be having intimate relations with Sol going forward.

"But of course."

"I very much wish to know, yes."

"I-If it's okay with you..."

The three replies differed based on personality but carried the same demanding intensity. Reen realized she had no right to deny them, as she would want to know just as badly when it came to Frederica's and Eliza's turns.

Recognizing that she was witnessing a glimpse of the group's future dynamic, Julia joked, "It's like Sol's become your shared property."

"That is indeed one perspective," said Frederica, "but I think it more accurate to call him our shared master."

The correction she posed was little more than mere wordplay, but both were equally valid descriptions of their relationship.

"I don't know about that..." Reen said, her expression eloquently conveying reluctance to acknowledge Sol as her master.

Without skipping a beat, Frederica said breezily, "Excepting you, of course, Lady Reen."

Reen fell silent as happiness, loneliness, and a whole cocktail of other emotions flitted across her face.

"That's one profound look you're making," said Julia with an evil grin.

Shaken from being read like a book, Reen wailed, "Julia!"

No matter how close Sol and Reen were, there was no way to entirely wipe out feelings of superiority or inferiority between them. Being boy or girl had no bearing on the fact; it was a fundamental part of all human relationships. It was easy to spew high-minded ideals or platitudes, or to go the other direction and use roundabout self-deprecation to obfuscate it. Making the conscious choice to be better than that and to mutually put in effort to stay together and find a balance was, it could be said, the ideal path toward prosperous coexistence.

Understanding all this, Julia pushed to move the conversation along. "So, how *was* it?"

"It was...mind-blowing."

The answer was so simple yet seemed to allude to so much that it stunned Julia into silence for a moment. *"Mind-blowing"? How was it mind-blowing?!* she thought as she said out loud, "Specifics, now."

"Even though it was your first night?!" Frederica exclaimed.

"Isn't it supposed to, um, hurt the first time?" Eliza said timidly, then quickly added, "That's what I heard."

Julia literally leaned in, abandoning all efforts to maintain her poise as some sex guru. Frederica and Eliza, who had no experience of their own, were charged with surprise at the discrepancy with the prior knowledge they possessed. Having expected little more than "It was a challenge, but we made it work," the three were flummoxed by the look of pure contentment on Reen's face. Now they simply *had* to know what had made the experience so "mind-blowing."

"You're both right, but...you know how Sol raised our levels super high?" In bringing the relevant memories to mind, Reen

unconsciously began giving off a very alluring aura.

"Ahh..." Understanding dawned in Julia's eyes. "So it's the same thing that I went through. But even more intense, I imagine."

"Spoken like someone with experience!"

"Wait, what?"

The respect in Frederica's and Eliza's gazes toward Julia, whom they now saw as a combat vet, elicited laughter from her.

"I think so," said Reen. Coming over to Julia's side of the fence seemed to have emboldened her to get more vivid with her language. "It's like, I can tell pain is pain, but I'm extremely resistant to it now. Like it's become trivial."

"And at the same time, your adaptability has gone through the roof, right?"

"Yes, that! I stop being bothered really quickly. It took no time for me to get used to being naked and to the fact that I was actually doing *it*. Looking at Sol's reactions made my heart and mind race like mad, but, um, how can I put it?"

"You feel like your body can easily handle it all—both the pain and the excitement. Your thoughts affect your body, but the sensations feeding back from your body barely shake your mind."

"Exactly!"

This was precisely the "thing" that Julia had been referring to. Thanks to leveling up so much, her and Reen's—and presumably also Frederica's and Eliza's—bodies possessed physical capabilities far beyond those of the average human. That capability enabled them to adapt quickly even on their first night. Julia had told Reen about this before, and last night, Reen had finally understood what she had meant.

"I see... But hold on. If that's the case, wouldn't it also make you much more capable of handling the act itself?"

"That's what I was thinking too."

Being highly adaptable meant being better able to take things in stride, which logically meant it would be harder to have an experience that could be described as "mind-blowing." Not that Frederica and Eliza were unhappy—they felt reassured at the thought that their high levels would help them get through their first

experience with more grace than they had thought.

"See, that's the case...for pain." Julia smirked and paused meaningfully as if there was a "but" she was leaving unsaid. "Isn't that right, Reen?"

The other girl whimpered and hung her head, blushing furiously. All the talk so far had been about the pain, but it wasn't actually that big a part of the experience. Even normal people stopped feeling pain once they became used to the act. No, there was something else that a very capable body would adapt to.

"Ah."

"Huh?"

Frederica quickly caught on, but Eliza was still too young to get it.

Still grinning, Julia continued. "You have a strong resistance to pain even without the aid of skills that dull it, but you're still fully susceptible to pleasure."

"Yes..."

"Moreover, your adaptability helps you quickly discover and settle into the most optimum movements and rhythm."

"Yes, ma'am..."

There was nothing for Reen to do but confirm everything that Julia was saying. Julia, of course, knew all this because she had also experienced in person how heightened physical competence alleviated the negative parts and enhanced the positives. And now that Reen's level was in the quadruple digits, the effect was surely even more pronounced.

"Then there's Sol. It's not like he has any special skills, but his level is far higher than even ours. That means physically, he's in a whole other dimension."

"Mm-hm..."

"That explains 'mind-blowing.'"

Her own experiences had not changed much beyond the initial surprise, so Julia had been lost for a while, but now she finally had the piece that completed the puzzle. Apparently Sol had become the best in the world in a whole other arena without him knowing.

Adding that Reen had a body that could meet Sol where he was, her impression of the experience being "mind-blowing" made a

whole lot of sense. In all likelihood, Sol himself was also thinking, *"It was mind-blowing"* this very moment.

"Frankly, I was getting scared that I would be losing my mind all by myself. Also, I think I physically can't keep up."

"He's *that* good?"

"I don't have any other reference to compare to, but I would say so."

Reen was starting to get a little too candid, as if she was getting used to talking about this topic. What she was saying, put another way, was that she didn't want to be the only person to get hooked on the act and lose her mind, but that it wouldn't be scary anymore if they could all lose their minds together. At the same time, she was giving solid confirmation that Sol did indeed possess the battle prowess in this area to leave said effect on her, despite her level being in the thousands.

"As if that's not enough, he told me that he has access to all the powers that Luna stole from the succubus when devouring her and asked if I was interested in giving them a try sometime."

"That's straight up horror."

When it was nearly sunrise and the pair had finally settled down for some pillow talk, Sol had casually dropped an off-hand remark that gave her goose bumps from head to toe. There were any number of erotic tales dressed up as divine myths and legends that went on at length about the fathomless lewdness and immorality of the powers possessed by succubi. She shuddered from the mere thought of having one of them used on her as a casual experiment. That said, if she could be entirely honest, there *was* a small part of her that yearned for it, and that scared her even more.

Both Frederica and Eliza had been struck speechless. They didn't think it likely, but there was no way to say for sure that Sol would treat them as kindly as he did Reen and that he wouldn't use one of those succubus skills on them right from the start. If he did, they surely were going to "lose their minds," as Reen put it. Whether their bated breaths were due to fear or anticipation was something that only Sol would get to find out some day.

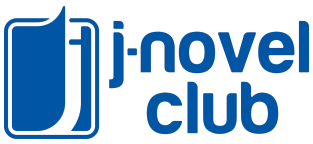
"You did an effective job dialing up the shock factor and

overloading Frederica's and Eliza's minds, but I hope you don't think it worked on me. I'll ask you again later for a detailed account of how you actually approached him," Julia whispered directly to Reen in a voice too soft to be heard by the other two, whose faces were cycling between crimson and pale from the excessive amount of unexpected information. She wanted the A to Z from the start of the night to where things got "mind-blowing."

"Y... Yes, okay."

Reen, who had listened to Julia's account of her first time while blushing furiously the whole time, had no right to say no.

Fin.



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The Boy Who Ruled the Monsters: Volume 4
by Sin Guilty

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