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The Hero and the Sage,
Reincarnated
and Engaged
Author: Washiro Fujiki
Illustrator: Heiro



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"Long time no see, Raid!"
Raid grabbed his assailant by the leg and dangled her upside down. The black-haired girl grinned, seemingly unbothered by her position.


Eluria Caldwin
A beautiful girl once known as the Sage, the progenitor of all magicians. She proposed to Raid in order to fulfill their promise from a thousand years ago.
The thousand-year-old love of an eastern beauty...
A rival enters the scene!
Mifuru
The Imperial Lord of Legnare. She has adored Raid ever since he saved her in his past life.
Raid Freeden
A young man of extraordinary strength once known as the Hero. He is presently enrolled in the Vegalta Royal Institute of Magic and is Eluria's fiancé.


“Well, I *am* your **senior**. I get to act a little cool, don’t I?”
“Rusty ol’ **geezer**. I’ll wipe that smug smirk off your damn mug.”

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Prologue

“Why did it have to be this way?”

The question endlessly haunted her.

The great Sage had left behind a truly wondrous art. It should have saved countless lives and improved people’s standards of living… It should have made the world a better place, peaceful and safe.

She’d taken his research and built it up into “magic” for that very purpose…at least, she thought she had—*believed* she had, without a shred of doubt.

The thought of the smiles that magic would inspire had spurred her on. She’d given shape to the countless blueprints in her mind and tested them over and over to make sure others could use them, even cutting down on sleep just to further the craft dearest to her heart.

All to make the world a better place.

So why…

“Why did it have to be this way?”

From the top room of a decrepit steeple, she stared blankly at the landscape spread out before her eyes: pure and utter *nothingness*. No trees, no grass—just a ravaged wasteland dotted with rubble and dust.

This place had once been filled with people and life, with rows of buildings and bustling streets. It had been the greatest, most prosperous imperial capital in the world, earning the admiration of many.

Alas, there was nothing left of it—nothing but a tale of past grandeur, buried beneath centuries. Long had it been destroyed, ravaged, and reduced to naught but ash—and by her very own hand, no less.

“Why?”

Her empty gaze was set upon the vast nothingness as broken mumbles fell endlessly from her lips.

She had thought that her magic would bring peace to people’s lives. But she was *wrong*. Her magic had been used to *take*

countless lives. Upon mountains of corpses and a gruesome sea of blood, Altane had grasped within its greedy hands even the distant land across the sea and became the greatest empire known to man.

So she'd destroyed them.

She'd rained judgment upon the vile and heinous Altanians who had dared to use her magic for such evil. She'd crushed their homes and killed the people. She'd destroyed until there had been nothing left to destroy, until nothing but a question remained echoing emptily in her head.

"Just why?"

Left with nothing, the people still did not cease their fighting. Far from it, they began calling her the "Demon Lord" and even tried to kill her with none other than her very own craft.

"This is not what I made magic for!" she once screamed.

"Magic wasn't made to hurt others!" she once cried.

But no one had listened.

She'd been left with no other choice. She'd killed those who dared to wield magic so filthily. Any who approached, she had killed them one after the other.

She killed and killed and killed again.

Over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over...

For hundreds of years.

In the end, nothing remained. Even the continent itself, corrupted by slaughter and bloodshed, could no longer sustain human life.

"Why did it have to be this way?"

She had never wished for any of this. From the very beginning, the only thing she ever wanted was...

"Eluria."

She slowly turned around. The one who had called her name was a silver-haired man; his lips were quirked in a wry smile like always.

"What is it, dad?"

"We have a guest, so I came to call you."

"Oh." She turned back to the window as if she'd already lost interest.

The next second, a loud explosion rattled the air, and the

steeple tilted. However, neither of them batted an eye. They were gone in a flash, and just as quickly they reappeared outside.

"Yo. Been about five years, hasn't it?" Standing before them was a young man wielding a broadsword. His deep red hair fluttered in the wind as his lips turned up into a smirk. Then, he paused and cocked his head. "Oh, hang on. It's been five years for *me*, since I have all these memories, but I guess it's your first time meeting me... Should I introduce myself?"

"Doesn't matter," Eluria mumbled, her voice carrying emptily through the air. "You're the Hero. That's all I need to know."

The young man smiled. "Sounds about right. I'm the Hero, chosen and fated to defeat the Demon Lord and save humanity."

Over the centuries, not a single human had been able to stand against Eluria, but only the Heroes would try time and time again. She'd killed them over and over, but they never disappeared for good. They passed their mana and memories on to the next human, and once again a new Hero would appear to challenge humanity's nemesis. Once an expert swordsman, once the master of a dragon horde, once the vessel of divine beastly power... Many lives strung together, all striving to retake their peace from the Demon Lord's evil hands.

"You know," the young man drawled. "I personally find it weird that we're called 'Heroes.' If we were made to *fight* the 'Demon Lord,' then wouldn't a title like 'Brave' have made a bit more—"

"Doesn't matter," Eluria mumbled again.

Instantly, the young man's body was engulfed in blazing fire. The earth beneath his feet was scorched and the air around him crackled; it was a hellfire so relentless any ordinary human would have been erased from this world in less than a second.

"Sheesh! No mercy right from the get-go, I see!"

However, the Hero was different—he emerged from the flames mostly unscathed, save for a few singes on his clothes and skin.

The Hero was the one and only being in this world who, after accumulating mana for generations, could freely draw mana from the Divine Realm. It was with this power that the Hero stood as the only human who could face the Demon Lord.

However, facing her was the most they could manage, before ultimately dying by her hand. No number of accumulated lives could place them on par with the Demon Lord who had created

and mastered the art of magic.

"But I didn't come all this way just to die!"

Even then, the glint of hope never disappeared from the Heroes' eyes. Time and time again, they would grip their weapons and appear before her once more.

Alas, their resolve might have been unchanging, but so was the result of their clashes. It was set in stone, like the past that could no longer be changed.

"I don't care," Eluria mumbled expressionlessly, and as she quietly raised her hand—

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold your horses! I'm not here to fight!"

Eluria's hand froze in midair.

"Hey, Wallus! You damn geezer! Didn't you explain anything to the Demon Lord?!"

"I was just *about* to, when you suddenly attacked our steeple," Wallus replied. "Also, don't call her that. My daughter's name is Eluria."

"Ah, right. Names *are* important. I wouldn't appreciate having some nasty title just slapped on me either." The young man nodded casually before stabbing his broadsword into the ground. "Anyway," he continued, "I came here to surrender."

Eluria blinked. "Surrender?"

"Uh-huh. We humans can't defeat you. The Sage crafted 'Hero' for us, but no matter how many times we reincarnate, humanity will perish before we can ever surpass you."

As it stood, much of the continent had already been rendered uninhabitable to humanity. To escape the Demon Lord's growing sphere of influence, people had fled to Legnare across the sea, but the Calamities—the Demon Lord's apostles—were already encroaching on that foreign land as well. Humanity's destruction was but a matter of time.

Heroes repeatedly reincarnated while inheriting past mana and memories, and were granted growth beyond human limits. However, only humans could become Heroes, so once humanity became extinct, the cycle would end. And as the young man had said, this would happen much sooner than the Heroes could even dream of surpassing the Demon Lord.

"We acknowledge our sins," declared the Hero. "We deceived Eluria Caldwin, the venerable progenitor of magic, and used magic

to satisfy our greed and self-interests. Moreover, we even declared you ‘evil’ and dubbed you the Demon Lord. For all this, we apologize.” The young man then somberly bowed his head.

However, Eluria’s eyes remained empty as ever. “I don’t care,” she muttered again, not a spark of life or emotion in her gaze. “That you humans misused magic, called me evil, or accepted your deaths… None of it matters to me anymore.”

And she meant every word of it.

For a thousand years, Eluria had drowned in the darkness of her heart and slaughtered countless humans—over and over, each life she extinguished taking a little bit of her along with it. By now, neither rage nor sorrow remained.

“Because nothing can be changed now.”

The only thing left was an endless abyss of regret. Eluria had made magic for people’s happiness, but instead they had used it to take countless lives and trample all over her dearest wish. Whether she hunted the humans down to the last soul or they showed remorse and accepted their demise, the past deaths could not be undone, nor could she ever grasp her dream again.

“So it doesn’t…matter anymore.”

With a heart so weary and eyes so devoid of hope, Eluria could only repeat the same words over and over.

However, the young man simply smiled and asked in return, “Then what would you do if you could start all over again?”

The unbelievable words drew Eluria’s empty gaze, and the young man grinned.

“This might sound weird coming from me, but ‘Hero’ is some real crazy magic—it can draw out mana from the Divine Realm that exists beyond the human world. And I’m sure you’d know how crazy that is, given you’ve reached the pinnacle of magic and even attained immortality…yet still can’t reach the Divine Realm yourself.”

Two thousand years ago, a great and venerable Sage had left behind the knowledge and research that eventually served as the foundation for magic as it was known today. The notion of “Heroes” was also proposed by this very Sage, and it was later made into reality by Lailas of the Celios Federation and Yahigashi of the Legnarian nation-state after much time and sacrifice. This became humanity’s one and only hope—a spell that could only be

used by humans, and was thus beyond the grasp of even the progenitor of magic herself. Not to mention that this progenitor, Eluria, had also created magic through the knowledge left behind by the Sage.

"When we Heroes are reincarnated upon death, mana bursts forth from the Divine Realm," the Hero continued. "We can use that to undo your time so you can start over." His eyes were crystal clear, free of falsehoods, unlike the countless humans she'd seen before.

"He's telling the truth, El," her father piped in, a gentle smile on his face. "At the very least, I've judged that it's plenty possible. I called him here so he could share the idea with you."

Eluria watched as her father reached his hand out as if to pat her head, but she felt neither warmth nor touch from the gesture. Even after Eluria fell to madness and slaughtered everything within her sight, her father had promised to stay by her side—a promise he fulfilled, even at the cost of abandoning his body and becoming no more than a soul.

"You are a kind child, El. Kinder than anyone in this world. Yet in your anger, you killed countless humans, drowned in guilt and slaughter, and lost everything you knew. And all the while, I could do nothing but watch it all happen... I just can't bear it anymore." The intangible figure, wavering in the air, tenderly embraced Eluria. "So let's start over...to fulfill your dearest wish."

"My...dearest wish," Eluria echoed emptily, her thousand-year-old desire resurfacing in her mind.

"I want magic to make everyone in the world happy!"

It was a truly childish dream, but it was without a doubt Eluria's one true wish.

The young man smiled and nodded. "I won't have a hand in what happens from this point, but it looks like Wallus has some plans in store."

"I do. I swear to fulfill my promise to you...and all the past Heroes."

"Awesome to hear." The young man grinned. "Thanks to you, it looks like I'll get to die in peace."

Reincarnation was only triggered upon the Hero's death. In other words, this young man was sacrificing himself to send Eluria and Wallus off to the past.

“Why…”

“Hm? What’s up, li’l missy? Got the sudden urge to confess your love for me?”

“Why…are you doing this?” she asked, her eyes no longer as empty as they had been for centuries. The slightest glint of life had returned to the ocean blue orbs staring at the young man before her.

He simply smiled and answered, “If I have to say, it’s because we decided that this was probably the Sage’s will.”

“The Sage’s will…?”

“Yeah. I mentioned it earlier too—if the Sage had designed this magic to be used for defeating powerful forces, then he wouldn’t have named it ‘Hero.’”

After going through so many reincarnation cycles, the Heroes had come to realize the purpose behind their existence.

“A hero is someone who saves others. People, countries—heck, sometimes even the entire world…or perhaps,” he whispered, “a single, lonely girl who was condemned as evil.” The young man pulled his broadsword from the ground and tossed it over to Wallus. “We’re sure that the Sage—no, the *first Hero* who created us would think the same way. Magic that will save those who must be saved… That is what ‘Hero’ was always meant to be.”

The young man smiled, as finally, his turn had come to pass on his hope. “So,” he whispered to the void, “we’re leaving this girl to you, our first Hero.”

The moment Wallus stabbed the sword into the young man’s heart, the world flashed white. As she was embraced by a strange, unplaceable sensation, a certain name came to Eluria’s mind.

The man who had inspired her to create magic, who must have carried the same wish as her, yet she’d only known through documents and texts.

“Raid Freeden…”

Eluria whispered the name of the great and venerable Sage before everything she knew faded away.

Chapter One

“I told you we’d come see you right away…didn’t I, Wallus Caldwin?” Raid’s lips curled into a cold smile as his chilling gaze was locked on the girl known as Elise Lammel. “Oh, and you’d better not try to lie or bluff your way out of this. I’m not just taking a shot in the dark here.”

The absolute certainty in Raid’s tone had Elise freezing up on the spot, wide-eyed. Soon, however, she narrowed her eyes and hummed. “Well, you certainly sound confident.”

“I said what I said. So just cough it up already.”

“Before that…” Elise frowned. “Could you tell me how you knew I was Wallus?”

“I had definite proof.” Raid tapped his ear. “I was a general a thousand years ago. To manage so many soldiers and grasp the vast battlefield, I learned to identify and distinguish people’s voices.”

Voices contained a wide range of identifiers: volume, pitch, accent, intonation, and so on. Each of these varied from person to person, all coming together to embody their unique habits and tendencies. Because even the slightest discrepancy in intel could spell death on the battlefield, Raid had learned how to identify these factors to distinguish each individual. Of course, it was only possible thanks to the extraordinary physical capabilities that sharpened his five senses.

Although people could control the volume or pitch of their voices, the same couldn’t be said for the other, more minute, habitual factors in their speech. In fact, normally one would never even think to mask these parts of their voice—after all, who would expect that the person they were hiding from could hear such minute details with such incredible accuracy?

Thus, Raid had intentionally created a situation that would force Wallus out of hiding—to have a conversation, or more specifically, to hear him *speak*. After comparing Wallus’s voice with every single one he’d heard until now, the closest result he’d gotten was…Elise Lammel.

“Besides that,” Raid added, “Alma told me that you’re a genius at crafting magic devices and even helped advance technology by decades…almost as if you had a vision of what technology looked like in the *future*. Not to mention a lot of your devices felt very similar to Altane’s machines.”

During the simulation exam, when Raid had been watching the students with Alma in the instructor’s tent, he’d felt a subtle sense of déjà vu. The multiple screens displaying different scenes had reminded him of the surveillance cameras used to monitor public order in the imperial capital, and the bangles that could track the students’ locations and movements had been rather similar to the transmitters embedded into the bodies of criminals and slaves. Of course, it wasn’t entirely farfetched to say she’d simply come up with similar inventions, especially since over a millennium had passed, but the similarities were so striking to Raid’s mind that it felt more likely that the inventor had seen such machines before.

“I’d already suspected that the mastermind was near us,” Raid continued, “meaning the chances were high that we’d already made contact. All that was left was to hear their voice and pin them down.”

Elise sighed. “Yes, of course… In the previous timeline, you were an exceptional inventor and even conceived voice recognition technology… It’s just crazy that you can do it physically now.” Her lips momentarily twisted into a bitter smile before she finally nodded. “All right. A promise is a promise. No more secrets from me.”

“In that case, first and foremost, I want to clear this up.” Eluria suddenly raised her hand and set her somber gaze on Elise. “Tell me—are you really my dad?”

Elise momentarily pursed her lips. “Hm… I suppose you could say that, in a way.”

“Mm… Then, with that, I have something very important to confirm.” Eluria’s eyes glinted sharply, her narrowed gaze pinning the girl claiming to be her father, as she slowly spoke. “Have you always wanted to be a girl? Is that why you’re wearing such frilly clothes now?”

“Well, I… Wait, *what*?! No, hang on!”

“My dad became a little girl in a cutesy dress…” Eluria mumbled.



“Oookay! Let’s start by clearing up this misunderstanding, shall we?! My, or rather, Wallus’s honor as a father is at stake!” Elise flailed her hands around before clearing her throat. “Er, you see, I am most certainly Elise Lammel. But I also carry within me the memories of Wallus Caldwin.”

“So…you’re different people?”

“I myself am undoubtedly a girl,” said Elise. “I’ve inherited and have been influenced by Wallus Caldwin’s memories, but they haven’t replaced my memories and personality as Elise Lammel.”

“So…my dad *didn’t* want to be reborn as a little girl and wear cute and frilly clothes…?”

“Who are you calling a little girl?! Do I have to remind you that I’m older than you?! Also, I don’t wear these frilly clothes because I *want* to! People keep giving them to me, saying, *‘Oh, Elise, you’re as lovely as a doll! Try this on!’* So I can’t just toss it all aside, can I?!” she shrieked, slamming her hands over her desk. Her frustration was evident, but even then she dutifully wore everything they gifted her; such a young girl, yet she was already so polite and conscientious.

In any case, Raid had hit the bull’s-eye with his memory succession theory—reincarnation and time travel weren’t so easy to achieve, after all. Otherwise, there would have been more people reincarnating from the past or traveling from the future.

But although this had proven his theory, Raid could hardly feel relieved—not with new players jumping into the picture.

“First things first—tell us about those guys who summoned the Calamity. How were they able to cross over from the future?” Raid demanded, thinking back to the group of soldiers wearing Altane’s crest, as well as the white-haired man who led them.

Elise raised her brows and answered, “I’m sure you already have an inkling, but those guys are Altanians who came from what would be a thousand years in the future, from our perspective. Hm… It gets a little complicated, so let me clear this up first.”

She took out a sheet of paper and drew a vertical line. “This is our first timeline,” she began. “In this world, Raid, you were hailed as a great and venerable Sage. You left behind research and knowledge that led to the development of magic and technology.”

“So Raid gets lots of praise in that world… That makes me happy,” Eluria preened.

Raid chuckled wryly. “*I* was called the Sage, huh? You sure that was me?”

“Don’t say that. You’re smart.”

“Ahem! I feel a wave of flirting coming along, so I’m afraid I’ll have to stop you there,” Elise said. “Anyway, using the Sage’s research as the foundation, Eluria, you invented magic just like you did in this world. But you ultimately became a powerful threat and eradicated most of humanity from this continent of Etrulia.”

The girl froze. “I did…?”

“Yes. Because you made magic for the sake of others…but Altane betrayed you and used it to massacre and conquer the continent.” Elise bit her lips as Wallus’s memories played in her head. “You see, since you were so young, Wallus served as your agent of sorts and handled matters related to your magic inventions—to ensure both of you would be safe in Altane.”

Raid could easily imagine the reason: elven persecution in Altane. Worse yet, because their race possessed a long lifespan while appearing exceedingly similar to humans, they had been experimented on to research the means of attaining perpetual youth. The worst of the lot, in their foolish belief that elven flesh and bones could stop aging, had even dared to do the unthinkable. To escape that wretched fate, Wallus had probably wanted to use magic as a bargaining chip to keep him and his daughter safe.

“But Wallus knew that his daughter wished for peace and happiness in the world,” Elise continued. “So he handled everything for her and isolated her from the outside world—so she’d never have to know what Altane was *actually* using her magical techniques for.”

However, he couldn’t keep it hidden forever. Eluria eventually found out what wretched deeds her beloved magic had been used for—and that had been the birth of the world’s worst enemy.

“But why were you guys captured by Altane?” Raid asked. “Eluria entered the Vegaltan army, so I always figured she was from the western region…”

“Hm… That’s also a bit difficult to explain, so back to the paper we go,” Elise said with an awkward smile. On the vertical line she drew earlier, she added three horizontal lines. “Consider these horizontal lines as separated by a thousand years each,” she

began. “The topmost is the point in the future where the world is very nearly destroyed, and the bottommost is the era you were born in, Raid. Originally, Eluria and I were born in this era in the middle.”

“Oh… Basically, right around this era we’re living in now?”

“Exactly. By the time we were born, Vegalta had already fallen to ruin.”

In Raid and Eluria’s remembered past, Vegalta had opposed the great empire of Altane with the new art of magic. However, in the original timeline, magic was invented a thousand years later, when Eluria was originally born. With no means of defense, in that timeline, Vegalta must have been invaded and eventually collapsed.

“That was why Wallus went all the way back to a thousand years before they were born—to your era, when Vegalta was still standing. He handed magic to the nation with a history in magecraft to grant them the power to oppose Altane.”

And that was how he created a different future, a new timeline.

The people of the western region had also feared elves, but at most they maintained a reasonable distance from them and nothing more—a far cry from the cruel atrocities that took place in the eastern region. With Altane as their common enemy, Wallus saw no better place to take on the role of the opposing Magic Kingdom. And leading the Magic Kingdom would of course be the one person who could always be trusted to use magic the right way—Eluria. Thus did Vegalta earn its symbol, the Sage, and inherit the philosophy of using magic for the good of all people.

“But how did you guys return to the past to begin with?” Raid asked.

“Oh… Well, we borrowed the Hero’s power.”

Raid frowned. “Mine?”

“I guess it does count as yours,” Elise mused. “The power you hold now is something you, from our original timeline, came up with.” She pointed at Raid and smiled. “Among the documents and literature left behind by Sage Raid Freeden was a draft that included the ‘pathways and conditions to becoming a Hero.’ The head of the former Celios Federation, the Lailas clan, and Totori Yahigashi from the nation-state of Legnare, took that draft and created a spell called ‘Hero.’”

Eluria flinched upon hearing those very familiar names. “Lailas… That’s Lufus’s last name.”

“Right. When Lufus Lailas formed contracts with the Guardian Dragons, she became the first person to touch upon the suprarational Divine Realm. Totori Yahigashi, the leading researcher in forbidden arts, reached out to her, and they collaborated to craft a spell.”

“To fight me…?”

“Well…” Elise trailed off nervously.

“It’s okay. I want you to explain everything.”

Elise winced and nodded. “A hundred years after magic was promulgated, you finally learned the truth and fell into a rage. You reduced the entire continent to a mountain of rubble, indiscriminately bestowing death and destruction upon all. And so, Eluria Caldwin became the enemy of the entire world.”

The spell known as Hero had been crafted to oppose her, but alas, it seemed Eluria could not be stopped. Elise had said that the horizontal lines—the eras—were separated by a thousand years each. In other words, Eluria must have remained undefeated for another nine hundred years.

“Hero was made to fight against Eluria. It was a spell that extracted mana from the Divine Realm to pass on memories and abilities upon death. Ultimately, this succession continued for fifty generations and helped the Heroes surpass human limits…but none were ever a match for Eluria, and humanity was left with little time. So…” Elise narrowed her eyes. “Wallus struck a deal with the fiftieth Hero.”

“What kind of deal?” Raid asked.

“They would use the Hero’s immense mana to eliminate Demon Lord Eluria—by sending her very existence to the past.” Elise turned to Eluria before dropping her gaze. “To atone for hiding the truth, Wallus unconditionally stood by Eluria’s side. Even as the entire world turned against her, he watched over her… Yes, he watched as his daughter, who had once dreamed of a beautiful world, destroyed and ravaged it all with her own hands as she broke down from the guilt and sorrow.”

And so, Wallus set out to save his daughter, even if it meant betraying her once more by borrowing their enemy’s power. He chose the only way to save her: to return to the past and change

the history of the world itself.

"Fortunately, the Heroes had also begun to harbor doubts about the meaning of their existence. The fiftieth colluded with Wallus and decided to make a new timeline."

"And that's…*this* world?"

"Precisely. After Wallus returned to the past, he worked behind the scenes to make Vegalta into a Magic Kingdom that would rightfully inherit Eluria's will. Then, he erased the sinful empire from existence."

And that was how the history of the world had been rewritten into one wherein Eluria's ideal had become a reality.

However, it seemed it hadn't necessarily been tied into a neat little bow of happily ever after.

"Well, if Wallus has changed the past, then shouldn't the future have changed too?" Raid frowned. "So how the heck did Altane's remnants pop up here?"

"That's…also a little complicated. You see, a timeline is like a large river," Elise said, drawing another vertical line on the paper. "Just as a heavy storm or earthquake can greatly alter a river's flow, a shift as huge as changing the past made the timeline split into new channels. In other words, our world is now simultaneously housing two separate timelines."

"So the world you guys came from still exists?"

"Simply put, yes…" Elise sighed. "Eluria has disappeared from that world, but it is still quietly waiting for its end…at the hands of the Calamities she left behind."

Calamities were ultra-sized manabeasts the likes of those that had appeared over the eastern sea. Even special-class magicians, known for their extraordinary magical abilities, shuddered and cowered in the face of their immense power.

"Although the greatest threat had disappeared, the Calamities she left behind were still beyond humanity's capabilities to eliminate. Even the Heroes had their hands full just pushing them back, only ever subduing them through sheer luck."

With such powerful creatures running rampant in the world, humanity's extinction was but a matter of time. Thus, they created a new choice for themselves.

"This is just my guess," Elise muttered, "but their goal is probably to move into our timeline."

Raid squinted. “Can they even do that?”

“We can’t completely dismiss the possibility,” Elise replied. “If they could get their hands on Divine mana like we did, then they could surely make any impossibility a reality. But…” Elise scowled. “Based on Wallus’s memories, they should no longer have the means.”

“But can’t their Hero reincarnate? Wouldn’t a new one have been born after you guys returned to the past?”

“No… The Hero also reincarnated into the past with us.” Elise raised her hand and pointed straight ahead. “And that would be you, Raid Freeden.” She then lowered her hand and sighed. “Their agreement included a condition, you see—to specify the Hero’s next reincarnation as Raid Freeden.”

Raid narrowed his eyes. “Specify the next reincarnation… Is that even possible?”

“The spell automatically selects the next Hero from among those who *currently* have the aptitude,” Elise explained. “If the range is expanded to the *past*, then a large number of humans would become candidates, causing a terribly random selection. Long story short: no, it’s impossible to specify a single person.”

That answered one of Raid’s questions: if the Heroes could return to the past, then why didn’t they just return to a point before Eluria grew too strong and kill her then? That would have been the most rational course of action. However, if the next reincarnation would be chosen arbitrarily, then they couldn’t have ensured that the Hero would be reincarnated at a point in time where Eluria had already been born. In the worst-case scenario, they could even end up too far back and ultimately lose the Hero—their only means of fighting against Eluria.

“But it was possible for Wallus,” Elise continued. “In order to remain by Eluria’s side, he had adopted a unique existence composed only of his soul. He was capable of grasping the Heroes’ souls before they reincarnated into the next body.”

“Mm… In other words, dad was in charge of transporting and guiding the Hero’s soul?”

“Something like that, yeah. So even if Wallus’s plan failed and you once again became the Demon Lord, the Hero would continue to grow and surely surpass you this time. At the very least, they could avoid the worst-case scenario of the world just completely

ending."

"But...why did the future Hero specify me?"

"Because you were Hero's origin point," Elise answered with a raised finger. "As the Heroes reincarnated and inherited memories across the generations, they eventually found the reason for their existence...and they believed that they could trust the progenitor of this ideal with the immense power they were passing on." Elise quietly smiled and lifted her head. "And lo and behold, not once have you been intoxicated with your strength. You saved countless lives, wielding it in a manner worthy of its name. Their bets were right on the nose, hm?"

"Well..." Raid's lips curled into an awkward smile. "I'm glad I could meet their expectations, I guess?"

Elise nodded. "I suppose that about sums things up from my end. Is there anything else you'd like to know?"

"Then..." Raid hummed. "When Eluria died a thousand years ago after losing all her mana—was that also the doing of those Altanian remnants?"

"I'd say there's little doubt," Elise affirmed. "Mana extraction is a technique from the future, nonexistent a thousand years ago—heck, even now. Besides, I could easily imagine those greedy Altanians taking Eluria's mana for themselves."

"Aha..." Raid nodded. "Yeah, that does sound like the Altanian leaders I know."

Elise held her chin in thought. "But like I said, even I don't know how they returned to the past. I mean, the next Hero is right here, so there should no longer be one in their world."

"Is there no other way to return to the past?"

"Well, you're not exactly spoiled for choice when trying to travel through time... If it were that easy, Wallus wouldn't have had to make a deal with the Hero to—"

"They probably used forbidden arts," Eluria muttered, quietly raising her hand. "This is just a guess, but I believe forbidden arts use human lives—or to be precise, the 'soul' extracted from the body—to interfere with the Divine Realm."

Raid arched a brow. "Then why can I interact with the Divine Realm freely?"

"Mm... Again, this is just conjecture, but I think Hero is capable of interfering with the Divine Realm through *legitimate* means—

kind of like it has a permit. So while *you* can freely access it, others have to force the door open."

"So the backlash that happens after failed rituals is actually the product of Divine mana applying an unintended effect after being forced through the door?"

"Mm-hmm. Imagine you force a stranger's door open, and the homeowner gets mad."

"Well, that certainly scales the scenario down by quite a bit..." Raid mumbled.

"But wouldn't anyone get mad if a stranger tried to break into their home?" Eluria bobbed her head, genuinely satisfied with her analogy. She was by no means joking, but the scenario she presented was so bafflingly ordinary compared to the heft of the topic at hand.

Eluria's expression once again stiffened. "I have another question."

Elise quietly turned to her. "And what would that be?"

"I want you to answer me honestly: what did you do to Lufus and Totori?"

Lufus had nearly lost her life to a foreign spell implanted into her body. Elise had also mentioned that Lufus and Totori had been involved in the creation of Hero in the original timeline.

"You might have inherited my dad's memories..." Anger simmered behind Eluria's cold gaze. "But depending on your answer, I might not forgive you."

Elise quietly met her eyes and sighed. "What I did," she confessed, "was forcibly warp their life paths."

"Because they made Hero?"

"Yes. Sage Raid Freeden doesn't exist in this timeline, but those two might have still arrived at the spell's creation had they encountered the same crisis they had in the original timeline—that is, the deaths of their loved ones."

In this world, Lufus had very nearly lost her dearest friend, Lafika, at the hands of her own mother, who saw no use in the inferior dragon compared to the Guardian Dragons. But in the previous timeline, that horrible threat must have become Lufus's reality. Lufus lost her dearest friend and sought to bring her back to life, thus seeking out forbidden arts.

Totori had probably met a different future in the other world,

one in which she failed to revive her beloved, and thus continued her research into forbidden arts. With similar goals, the two eventually crossed paths, and together they grasped the means of “reincarnation” and ultimately created the magic now known as Hero.

“I absolutely needed them to walk different paths on this timeline,” Elise continued, “to stop them from working together to fulfill their wishes…and possibly creating a second Hero.”

Otherwise, they could very well wind up with multiple Heroes, which would allow them to not only fight off the Calamities in the future, but they might also want to hunt down the root of the world’s destruction, Eluria, who had returned all the way to the past.

“So I took away Lufus’s mana and made her incapable of forming complete contracts with the Guardian Dragons. I also gave Savad some residue of the Hero’s soul, allowing Totori to successfully accomplish just one instance of forbidden art.”

Eluria frowned. “I’m not too sure what to think of that.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t. That’s the kind of person you are. In a way, I sacrificed their futures for you and the world.”

“Yeah. But that doesn’t mean it was okay to hurt them.” Because of this, Lufus’s lifespan had shortened considerably, and Totori had been saddled with feelings of guilt for years and years after she’d revived her beloved.

“But…I think it didn’t turn out too badly in the end,” Eluria whispered, a small smile gracing her lips as she thought back to those two. Lufus might have lost some of her lifespan, but now she shared a soul with Lafika and no longer had to fear being separated from her. As for Totori, despite the guilt she carried, she had been able to revive her beloved and live the life they never could in the other world. “So as long as you apologize to them, I think I can forgive you.”

“If that’s what you wish, then I shall offer them my sincerest apologies. But to do that…” Elise tapped the desk with her finger. “There’s some business that needs to be attended to first.” She shifted her gaze to the side. “Raid, could you tell me what exactly you saw in the old Altanian capital?”

“Some guys bearing the crest of Altane,” he answered, “all led by a white-haired guy who killed his allies on an altar.”

Elise furrowed her brow. “An altar and human sacrifices… I see. That lends credibility to the hypothesis that they used forbidden arts, but the problem is that their ritual actually succeeded.”

“It normally fails, right?”

“Borrowing Eluria’s earlier analogy, forbidden arts are essentially acts of breaking and entering into the Divine Realm. Forget granting the trespasser’s wish—they always have to pay a hefty price for the crime.”

However, Elise mentioned that she had helped Totori succeed once by granting Savad a small fragment of the Hero’s soul. In other words, with the Hero in play, it was possible to attain the desired results.

Raid sighed. “Then I guess…that scar-faced bastard really *is* a Hero.”

In the underground ruins, the white-haired man in jet-black armor, wielding a battle-axe similar to Raid’s broadsword, had introduced himself as the Hero—and it turned out it was no bluff.

“If that white-haired man in your report is really a Hero, then that would mean the other side succeeded in *creating* a new Hero.” Elise narrowed her eyes. “But just how did they analyze and re-create the spell? And how did they summon one of Eluria’s Calamities to this timeline? Until we find the answers to these questions and deal with those guys, we cannot fulfill Wallus’s goal.”

Elise knew more than anyone how dearly Wallus had wished to save his daughter. He’d even opposed the flow of time for a chance to grant her a happy life, and now his dream was the reality before Elise’s eyes.

“As the inheritor of Wallus’s memories, I plan to do whatever I can to make sure his daughter lives a happy life.” Elise’s lips relaxed into a smile. “Although I’m sure we’re already halfway there, hm?”

Raid frowned. “What? Why’re you grinning at me like that?”

“Oh, nothing… I’m just happy to see you two enjoying each other’s company. Correct me if I’m wrong, but hasn’t there been some sort of development in your relationship?” She propped her cheek on her hand as a bright grin spread over her face. “You see, right now, you two are the very embodiment of everything that Wallus and his successors could have ever wanted. To be able to

witness it myself… I'm truly honored."

When they first entered the Institute, Elise had spoken passionately of the love story between the Hero and the Sage, all while knowing the truth. She was genuinely touched to see the impossible had become a reality: Raid and Eluria together, happy and content.

"Anyway, that concludes all the serious talk. Anything else you wanna know? Keep in mind I've got my hands full with the integrated exam, so I'd have to keep it short."

"So we're still holding it?" Raid asked.

"Sure are. There were talks of suspending the exam since the eastern region has suffered a lot of damage, but not many were injured, so it's best to push through with it to help restore and revitalize the region… Anyway, I insisted on it just as you told me to."

Although still in training, the students taking the exam were far more skilled in magic than ordinary civilians. Led by their instructors—*professional* magicians—the eastern region could expect a speedy recovery. Their restoration efforts might even draw tourists from other regions, further contributing to the recovery progress. As for the appearance of the Calamity, a larger-scale investigation was planned for after the exam.

"In any case, you two are officially exempt from the exam," Elise continued. "The two special-class magicians who would've been in charge of your exam have officially deemed it unnecessary, with this whole incident backing their decision. So you can just sit back and relax until it's over."

"Right. We should make sure we're free to spring into action," said Raid.

"Exactly. Though, I guess I'm kind of just handing the problem off to you two…"

"Don't sweat it. You've kept your promise, and we sympathize with your goal. Now that we're in agreement, of course we'll cooperate."

"Mm-hmm. I'm okay with it too," Eluria agreed, quietly standing from her seat.

Raid followed suit. "Anyway, good luck with all your work as headmaster."

"Thanks… I really need every bit of luck I can get," Elise sighed.

“I still have some preparations to make for the exam, on top of giving instructions to the other institutes. Besides, Totori and Savad told me a VIP is coming over from Legnare too, so I need to rearrange our personnel…” she mumbled while gazing emptily into the distance. Considering she’d been given an entire office to herself, she must’ve really had a lot of work to get done.

Leaving the overworked young girl to her woes, Raid and Eluria exited the room as quietly as they could.

Raid let out a small sigh before turning to Eluria. “Well? What’re your thoughts?”

“Mm… I’m still having a hard time processing it all,” she replied, brows furrowed. “Could you summarize it for me? You’re good at that.”

“Let’s see… You were originally from the future, then went back to the past and became the Sage. I was given power from the Heroes of the future and became crazy strong. And some guys from the future might come and attack us, so we need to fend ’em off and protect this world. I guess that’s about it.”

“Ah. Now that’s a bit easier to understand.”

“But that wasn’t what I was asking about.” Raid’s lips quirked into an awkward smile as he placed his hand on her head.

Eluria quietly nodded. “My dad said…I got so angry that I killed lots of people and made a huge mess of the world,” she muttered, not a tinge of shock in her voice.

A thousand years ago, Eluria had taken countless lives with magic—that she had initially done so to protect Vegalta did not change this fact. So, although she’d heard the atrocities her past self had committed, Eluria had already known that she had it in her to lash out.

“I just…can’t forgive using magic to hurt and oppress others.”

As the creator of magic, Eluria knew better than anyone that it had the power to take countless lives—to cause and spread so much pain and suffering—and so she carried within her a deep sense of responsibility. It was easy to imagine why her past self had been enraged—she simply couldn’t forgive those who had set out to use it for slaughter and plunder.

“And that’s why you never used more magic than necessary,” Raid said with a smile. “Right?”

A thousand years ago, Eluria had invented and promulgated

magic to defend her homeland from the Altanian empire's relentless invasion. However, magic was more than just a means of defense. If she hadn't been choosy about her methods, she could have easily used it to not only massacre the Altanian soldiers on the front lines but even take down the imperial capital. Altane might have had the Hero, but at the end of the day, Raid was just one human before an army of magicians. Eluria could have very well ignored him and marched right into the imperial capital…but she never did. Eluria had never crossed the line, and neither had the magicians she'd trained. She had stayed true to her deepest, most heartfelt wish.

"Going crazy mad that magic was misused or fighting me for all of fifty years to uphold your beliefs… They both sound a lot like you. At your core, you haven't changed." Raid reached out and ruffled Eluria's hair. "Back then, you were left with no choice because of the environment you were born in. On this timeline, you had a lot of options—but still, *you're* the one who chose correctly."

With the power of magic, the world today had become vastly more vibrant than ever before. People no longer needed to fear manabeasts, search for water upon barren land, curl into themselves in the freezing cold, or beg for food on empty stomachs—and it was all thanks to Eluria's magic. She had proven that magic, when used correctly, could change the world for the better. There was never anything wrong with her philosophy, and this time, she had seen it through to the end.

"So hold your head up high, Sage Eluria Caldwin," Raid said with a smile.

Eluria slowly looked up, a bright smile lighting up her face. "Yeah. I did great, didn't I?"

Raid gently wiped the tears from her eyes. "Anyway…" He sighed. "I'd better be careful not to make you mad, huh? Wouldn't want this perfectly peaceful world to go to waste, now would we?"

"I-I won't go that far…!"

"Really? You never held back against me, though…"

"B-Because it was *you*! I knew I could trust you, so I didn't have to worry…!" Eluria flailed her hands around, flustered. Her trust would have been endearing if she hadn't been talking about trusting him not to die under a barrage of her hardcore spells.

Raid shrugged. “Well, it’s not like you’ve hit me with your magic recently. The next time you do will be when we settle our past promise and—”

Eluria suddenly raised her hand. “Mm… Actually, I have something to say.” Slowly, she opened her mouth and hung her head. “About our fight…it’s my loss.”

Raid blinked. “Huh?”

“I already lost to you before we could even have our final battle.”

“No… Wait, hang on. Haven’t we always tied?”

“Mm-hmm. We’ve tied six thousand three hundred and twenty-nine times.”

“Wow,” Raid muttered, once again impressed by the precise count.

“Our battles a thousand years ago were all ties, but if we go farther back, it’s my loss.”

“Farther back…?”

“Mm-hmm.” Eluria’s lips softened into a smile. “The past me was inspired to make magic from the research that ‘Raid Freeden’ had left behind. Without you, I never would have made magic.”

“Uh… But didn’t you make it yourself this time around?”

“I learned magecraft from my dad, and he already knew about magic. We can’t deny the possibility that he influenced me in some way. So I can’t say that I made magic by myself.” Eluria nodded. “Besides, the spell *you* made ultimately saved me. In other words, I wouldn’t be here now if not for you.”

“But that was a version of me I don’t even—”

“You said I’m still the same person, past or present. Wouldn’t that apply to you too? In conclusion, it’s my undisputed loss,” Eluria declared, for some reason bobbing her head in satisfaction. She looked rather intent on being named the loser, and her cheeks appeared to be slightly flushed too. “I-It’s my loss, so, um…I’ve been meaning to tell you—”

“Hang on,” Raid interrupted. “If we’re going by that logic, then I have something to say too.”

“Wh-What…?”

“If you had gone all out a thousand years ago, the Altanian army wouldn’t have stood a chance. In a way, we were saved by your devotion to your belief. So it’s *my* loss.”

“B-But that’d be Altane’s loss, not yours!”

“I was also able to make good progress on my research thanks to all the magic devices you left behind. I never got to pay you back for that before I died, so that also counts as a loss for me, doesn’t it?”

“O-Oh yeah? Well, you cheered me up back in the ruins! Maybe *that* counts as a loss for me!”

“If you’re going that far, then how about this? We never would’ve reunited in this era if you hadn’t come looking for me. And I was even able to borrow House Caldwin’s status thanks to your proposal. Doesn’t that net into a loss for me?”

Eluria gritted her teeth. “Y-You’re pretty tough…!”

Whatever the case, her desire to declare her loss was clear as day. Raid knew she had something to say to him once they settled their rivalry, and judging from the flush on her cheeks and her nervous demeanor, it wasn’t difficult to figure out what it was she wanted to tell him.

So Raid smiled and said, “Looks like you’ve gotta add another tie to the count, huh?”

“I-I’m not done yet! Raid, you always take care of me when I’m floaty!”

“Oh, that’s how we’re doing this now, huh? Well, you also helped me learn a lot about my power—wouldn’t that offset it?”

“Um… You also helped me save Lufus!”

“I just played around with the Guardian Dragons for a bit. You were the one who saved her.”

“Then… Then I’ll start bringing up stuff from a thousand years ago!”

Bursting with determination, Eluria began naming instances from a millennium earlier, and Raid rebutted each attempt with a pleasant smile. It was a bizarre situation in which they each insisted upon their own losses, but oddly enough, they found comfort in such a silly and trivial exchange.

Before either side managed to win—or *lose*—this intense confrontation, a hearty scream suddenly echoed within the halls.

“*I found my brother!!!*”

An unhinged kick whipped toward Raid’s back, which he deftly blocked with only an inch to spare. Frowning, Raid grabbed his assailant by the leg and dangled her upside down.

“Stella…?”

“Uh-huh! Long time no see, Raid!” The black-haired girl grinned, seemingly unbothered by her position.

“Don’t just kick me out of the blue like that. What if you got the wrong person?”

“Heh! I’d never mistake you for someone else, especially from behind! How many surprise attacks do you think I’ve attempted on you since we were kids?!”

“Oh yeah, you little rascal? Then how ’bout I give you a whirl for old times’ sake?”

“Hooraaay! I look so silly when you do that, I love it!” the girl screeched, somehow genuinely pleased that she had been turned into a windmill.

Eluria watched the bizarre scene unfold before her and tilted her head. “She…called you her brother?”

Raid sighed. “Yeah. Let me introduce you. This is my little sister, Stella.”

“Wowie! It’s Lady Eluria in the flesh! Can I shake your hand?!”

“Introduce yourself first,” Raid chastised.

“Stella Freeden! Fifteen years old! Female!”

“Well, you got your name in there, so I’ll allow it.”

“Yaaay! I’ve earned the right to shake Lady Eluria’s hand!”

“Um… Nice to meet you?” Eluria stared at the girl and, for the first time in a while, fled behind Raid. It wasn’t her shyness rearing its head though; Raid would’ve wagered Eluria was simply puzzled by the odd girl who was asking for a handshake while upside down. A completely valid reaction in Raid’s book.

He looked down at the girl and arched his brow. “What are you even doing here?”

“The integrated exam!”

“So what you’re saying is, you were supposed to come for the integrated exam, then heard I was here and came early to launch a surprise attack,” he concluded.

“Uh-huh! Pretty much!”

“And since *you’re* here…” Raid trailed off as he shifted his gaze to where Stella had come from, right in time to spot a young man with messy black hair walking down the corridor. He let out a big yawn as his white coat fluttered behind him.

“Oh? Guess we can always count on Stella to sniff out Raid,

huh?" the man said.

Raid sighed. "I knew it. So you're here too, Ed."

"Oh, Raid... I know I haven't seen you in a while, but when did you learn how to clone yourself?"

"Try opening your eyes a bit wider. That should merge me back into one body."

"Don't ask me for the impossible, li'l bro... I'll have you know I spend my days working as an assistant instructor while babysitting that ball of energy over there. Heck, the floor here's starting to look real cozy to me..."

"But Ed, we've only sparred three times today!" Stella protested.

"Uh-huh. Calm down, little miss battle junkie. We cut down on my sleeping time and your battle time for a reason, remember?"

"No, I don't remember!"

"Damn it... I didn't know she sent her memory flying along with her kicks..." The man lazily caressed his stubble before bowing to Eluria. "Apologies for the ruckus, Lady Eluria."

The girl started. "Oh, I-I don't mind...!"

"Thanks for saying that. Anyway, allow me to introduce myself. I'm the older brother of that oddly sensible young man over there, as well as an assistant instructor at the Meridien Magic Institute down south. My name is Edward Freeden."

"I-It's nice to meet you. I am...Eluria Caldwin." With just a touch of awkwardness, Eluria determinedly reached out and shook his hand—a brilliant show of the amazing growth she'd achieved over the past months.

"Holy crap," said Edward. "Li'l sis, do you see this? It's Lady Eluria in the flesh."

"Ohhh! There's no doubting it if *you* say so, Ed!" Stella cheered.

"You're normally such a handful yet show me so much trust... Ugh, why does my little sister have to be so cute..."

"But Ed, if she's the real Lady Eluria, then could the rumors be true?"

"Probably, yeah... Aw, man. Do you think mom's gonna pass out?"

Raid frowned. "What's up with mom?"

"Come on, li'l bro." Edward sighed. "You left home without explaining anything to her, didn't you?"

"I told her that I got engaged and wouldn't be returning for a

while."

"And she took it as a joke," Edward added.

"Right. She mentioned that in her reply."

"But you weren't going back home, so she began to wonder, *'Wait, was he for real?'*"

"I really wish she'd trusted her son from the start…"

"So now, mom's in the area."

Raid blinked. "Wait… What?"

Edward nodded, his expression grim as could be. "She said she's not going home…until she meets the bride."

Chapter Two

A few days later, Raid and Eluria were back on the road. They were now traveling southward from Palmare, passing through two towns on their way to their destination.

“Wooow! I’ve never ridden a magic automobile before!” Stella crowed.

“Stella, *please* just sit still…” Edward groaned. “Seriously, no amount of driving experience from work is going to save this automobile from your roughhousing… Then I’ll have to slave away for the rest of my life just to pay off the damages.”

“Ed, you look so cool behind the wheel!”

“Ah, my little sister is so sweet… This is why I always end up spoiling you.” Edward reached out to the passenger seat and ruffled Stella’s hair. Then, he drew his hand back and grumbled, “Man, I still can’t believe my li’l bro’s become such a hotshot. Look at you, just casually whipping out an automobile for us…”

“It’s not mine,” Raid said. “I just borrowed it from House Verminant.”

Edward sighed. “Still pretty crazy, if you ask me. Not everyone can just borrow an automobile from such a prestigious household.”

Raid had been treating Fareg like a bratty little kid, but only now did he recall that House Verminant was of the same standing as House Caldwin.

“And you’ve even got a Caldwin as your bride,” Edward added. “Just how much good did you do in your past life, I wonder?”

“A lot has happened… Why did mom end up coming to Palmare anyway?”

“Well, she thought her son was executing a very elaborate prank, when suddenly he popped up in the newspapers for subjugating an ultra-sized manabeast. Of course she’d come running.”

“Oh… And she asked you guys to check on me as well?”

“Got that right. She knew we’d be coming to Palmare for the integrated exam—Stella had told her through the communicator—

and as a faculty member, it'd be a piece of cake for me to swing by."

"But then she couldn't wait and just came herself..." Raid assumed with a sigh. "Sounds like mom, all right."

"Wouldn't *any* mom be the same? Ultra-sized manabeasts are like natural disasters, and one just appeared off the coast of the continent with no prior warning, causing massive damage."

The Calamity that had appeared a few days ago had caused extensive physical damages, but, compared to previous incidents, shockingly not as many human damages. Nonetheless, the number wasn't zero—and no parent could stay put after learning their child was right there when the disaster had struck.

"Well, we contacted her before we left the Institute, and she thought you were pranking her up until she saw the newspaper, so she's probably more shocked than worried."

"I can easily imagine her gripping the newspaper and screaming, *'Wait, that's my son! What's he doing there?!'*"

"Apparently, that's exactly what she said while running around the village."

Raid sighed. "Great. I suddenly don't feel like going back home."

"Yep. And that's probably another reason she came herself. Ah, by the way, I've also been meaning to ask..." Edward glanced over his shoulder to the back seat—there sat Eluria, stiff as a board and silent as a mouse. Her back was ramrod straight, and her fists trembled atop her lap. "Is my driving so horrendous to have incurred Lady Eluria's ire?"

"Nah. I think her brain's been fried by her nerves."

"I'm not sure if that's any better..."

Raid turned to his seatmate. "Eluria, you look pretty nervous. Everything all right?"

"Nu!"

"See? She said she's fine."

"Uh... Sounded more like a squeak than a reply..."

Raid shrugged. "My bride just squeaks sometimes." He leaned over and whispered, "Are you *sure* you're okay?"

"Y-Y-Y-Y-Ye-Ye-Yeee...!"

"Oh wow, even your language faculties are malfunctioning... It's not *that* big of a deal, is it?"

Eluria vigorously shook her head as a blush took over her face.

“B-B-But…we’re about to meet your mom…!”

Raid could get where she was coming from—after all, he’d met *her* parents a few months ago, and it was quite the nerve-racking ordeal, to say the least. For Eluria, this was a moment of unprecedented significance. To remain steadfast against powerful foes and formidable manabeasts, yet tremble in fear when meeting her fiancé’s parent was a very Eluria thing to do.

The girl clenched her fists. “Failure is not an option… No matter what…!”

“No need to get so wound up.”

“I believe I must face this ordeal as if my very life were at stake.”

“Are you going to greet my mom or challenge her to a duel to the death?” Raid chuckled and patted her head, but Eluria remained as stiff as ever.

Raid sighed and turned to the front, where his little sister was watching the passing scenery like an excitable child. “Stella, why don’t you chat with Eluria? She should feel at ease since you’re around the same age. Besides, your personality’s pretty similar to mom’s, so it’ll serve as a good reference.”

“Oh? You mean I can chitchat with Lady Eluria?!”

“Of course. She’s gonna be your sister-in-law.”

“Ohhh! So she’s my big sister!” Eyes sparkling, Stella was clearly enamored by the thought as she eagerly peered over the seat. “Hey-ho! Big sis!”

Eluria flinched. “Y-Yes…?”

Stella gasped. “She answered! She really *is* my big sister!”

“Oh, I just…”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Stella crooned. “I’ve never had a big sister. This is great!”

“I-I’m an only child…so this is kind of new to me.”

“Hm? But wait… Raid said we’re the same age, didn’t he? So maybe you’re *not* my big sister?”

“I-I’m sixteen this year…!”

“Me too!”

Eluria slouched in dismay. “There goes my big sister title…”

“By the way, I was born in the ninth month!”

“I was born in…the twelfth.” Eluria hung her head. “So I was the little sister all along…”

“But you *feel* more like the big sister, so it’s a-okay!”

“And now I’m back to being the big sister,” Eluria whispered, perplexed.

“Ooh, I know! I’ll call you Ellie! That way, it sounds like we’re chummy buddies or super close sisters—either way works! It’s perfect!” Stella preened, reaching out eagerly for a high five. Eluria reciprocated the gesture, a little dazed.

“I’m sure you can already tell,” Raid chimed in, “but Stella more or less takes after our mom. There’s really no point stressing over the upcoming meeting.”

“My improvisational skills are going to be put to the test…” Eluria muttered, but at the very least, her nerves seemed to have eased up a bit.

Stella shot her hand up. “Oh, oh! Can I ask you something, Ellie?!”

“Mm… Go ahead and ask.”

“Da-dun! Question: What made you fall in love with my brother?!”

Eluria instantly froze, her face growing redder by the second.

Without a care, Stella continued, “I mean, Raid can’t use magic, and your social standings are worlds apart, so *you* must’ve been the one to confess and propose, right? Well? Was it because he’s so strong? Or because he’s such an old soul? Oh, I know! It must be because he doesn’t get mad even if you try to kick him in the back, right?!”

“You’re the only one who’d fall for someone for that last reason,” Raid deadpanned.

“Uh-huh! That’s why I love you!”

“Eluria is capable of blocking your flying kicks too, by the way.”

“What? Why would I kick a girl? That’s not very nice.”

“It’s not nice to kick guys either…”

“Besides, my flying kicks are just for my brothers!” Stella proudly declared with her hands on her hips. Apparently her flying kicks were an expression of her sisterly love. “Aaanyway, go on! What do you like about my brother?!”

“Uh… U-Um…” Eluria’s eyes swam frantically around the automobile. She wanted to answer the question for Stella, but she was too embarrassed to answer with Raid right beside her.

Normally, Raid would have tossed her a lifeline by now, but he decided against it. Eluria had gotten more accustomed to

socializing in the past months, and besides, she would probably face similar questions from his mom. He wanted to watch over her and see how far she'd grown.

Sensing Raid's choice, Eluria pursed her lips and steeled her resolve. "E…"

"Eh?"

"E-Every…thing."

"Louder, for those in the front!"

"I-I fell in love with…e-everything about Raid…!" Eluria managed to wrench out one full sentence before burying her face in her hands. Her face had grown so red that it seemed as if steam could burst from her ears any second now.

Meanwhile, Stella nodded with a bright and satisfied smile, before throwing the window open and screaming at the top of her lungs, "Did you hear that, Ed?! Ellie said she loves *EVERYTHING* about Raid!!!"

Edward startled before miserably fixing his grip on the wheel. "Stella, please… Don't just throw the window open like that. You're gonna give me a heart attack…"

"But I did it to make sure I wouldn't burst your eardrums!"

"I'm touched by your thoughtfulness, my dear sister, but I think you broke Lady Eluria. Why don't you sit down and keep quiet for a bit?"



In contrast to Stella's bold declaration to the world outside their automobile, Eluria had curled into a trembling ball—a tendency she frequently showed whenever her embarrassment reached its limit.

"Next up—Raid!" Stella exclaimed. "Your answer, please! What made you fall in love with Ellie?!"

"Everything, obviously," Raid answered without a second thought.

"Goodness gracious, look at that composure—not a single twitch or pause!"

"Well, I'm just stating the truth."

"Wooow… You've changed quite a bit, haven't you? You didn't seem like the type to say something so…I dunno, *sappy*?"

"Well, that's 'cause unlike before, she's here with me now." Raid grinned and placed a hand on Eluria's head. "She said she loves everything about me. Why wouldn't I want to answer the same?"

Although Raid had never heard it directly from her, Eluria's feelings were clear as day to him after all the time they'd spent together—both in this life and in the past. Their reincarnation finally granted them this chance to fulfill their desires. It all started with their plan to settle their rivalry, and they'd taken a bit of a detour to investigate their reincarnation, but Raid was determined to respond to her feelings once everything was over. He had somewhat derailed those plans with his little slip of the tongue a few days earlier, but as long as they had each other—

"Whoa! What the—?! Are you sure you're okay, Eluria?!" Raid grabbed Eluria's arms, alarmed by the abnormal heat emitting from her skin.

"Uhhh…?" The girl's eyes spun, her face utterly flushed as if all her blood had rushed to her head. "R-Raid also…loves everything about me…?!"

"*That* did you in?!"

Stella squealed. "Ed, did you hear that?! Raid knocked out Ellie with the power of love!"

"Okay, okay. All of you settle down. You're not allowed to be funny while I can't even watch," Edward chastised, begrudgingly keeping his eyes on the road.

As the automobile continued on its way, Raid solemnly swore to

himself—since Eluria collapsed when faced with his sincerity, he should probably tone it down a bit next time.

◆

Eluria regained her senses right as the magic automobile rolled to a stop at their destination. This town was nowhere near as prosperous as a port city like Palmare, but nevertheless, the hustle and bustle was a touch above that of the average town as it served as a central hub for commerce and transport.

Eluria was staring at the lively townscape when Raid leaned over with a concerned frown. “Are you *sure* you’re feeling better now?” he asked.

“Mm. I feel great.”

“Huh… Well, you certainly don’t look like you just passed out.”

“Actually, I think it improved my blood circulation. I felt really warm and cozy when I came to, and now I’m cooling off to just the right temperature. My mind is especially calm.” Eluria cheerily bobbed her head and flashed him a small, reassuring smile.

She’d surprised even herself by passing out, but she’d gotten enough rest by now and was back up on her feet. Of course, she wasn’t about to tell anyone that getting to use Raid’s lap as a pillow had done wonders for her recovery.

“But if you make me too happy… I *will* pass out again.”

“Weirdest threat I’ve heard in my life,” Raid mumbled.

“I-I was over the moon, really… But I don’t want to keep passing out on you, and others might worry too, s-so…”

“I get it, I get it. It’s really no trouble for me, but I get that you don’t wanna worry the others.” Raid smiled awkwardly and patted Eluria’s head. She felt a flush nearly creeping back onto her cheeks at the pleasant touch.

Eluria felt like Raid had become much franker these days. He used to choose his words so carefully, but in the automobile he’d casually referred to her as his “bride” while talking with his siblings. It was like he’d stopped being so conscious of the little things, and a large part of that was likely because of what had happened in Libynia Desert. It was an unexpected yet pleasant change of heart, although Eluria found herself struggling to suppress a flush on her cheeks more frequently than before.

But today, she needed to pull herself together. Gathering her resolve, Eluria huffed and slapped her cheeks.

"Whoa! What's gotten into you all of a sudden?" Raid asked.

"I'm pumping myself up so I don't end up blushing again."

"Well, now your cheeks are red for a different reason…"

Eluria gave her cheeks a few more pats as she pulled her wits about her. She needed to brace herself as best as she could—it would soon be time to meet Raid's mom.

When they'd reunited in this era, Eluria had blurted out her whole engagement plan and placed a huge burden on Raid's shoulders, yet he'd pulled through and gained Alicia's blessing. Now, it was Eluria's turn. If she wanted to stand by his side, she needed to do her part. And if ultimately, they could gain the approval of both their families, then they could officially…

"Eeeee…!"

"Aaand now you're shaking your head." Raid sighed. "What is it this time?"

"I-I'm just trying to cool off!"

Raid grabbed her wildly swiveling head. "I'd stop if I were you. The centrifugal force is probably just pushing more blood upward."

Then, all of a sudden, a woman came running down the street toward them. "Raaaid! Why, you! How could you leave home for *months* just to prank me?!"

Raid let go of Eluria's head and frowned at the woman. "I wasn't pranking you… I explained everything in my letter."

"Do you even hear yourself?!" she snapped, hands on her waist. "You said that a young lady from an aristocratic household fell in love with you at first sight, so you'd be getting engaged! What's more, you can't use magic, yet you said you'd be enrolling in Vegalta's *magic institute*! Which part of that *doesn't* sound like a joke?!"

Raid scratched his head with a dry chuckle. "Well, when you put it that way…"

This woman appeared quite young, but she was, in fact, Raid's mother. She swiveled her head and looked at Eluria. "Oh my, and who is *this* pretty little lady?"

Eluria stiffly offered her hand. "I-It's very nice to meet you…!"

"Oh, I know! You must be Stella's friend!" Raid's mother snapped

her fingers, beaming as she took Eluria's hand. "I'm Kyla Freeden, their mother. What's your name?"

"I-I'm Eluria...!"

"Eluria! I don't know much about magic, but isn't that the name of the Sage from a thousand years ago? My, what a lovely name you have!" Raid's mother, Kyla, shook Eluria's hand with great vigor. The resemblance between her and Stella was uncanny, from their smiles to their overall behavior, so she felt more like a big sister than their mother.

"A-And my surname is Caldwin..."

"Oh my, even giving me your last name... What a polite little lady. Actually, I could've sworn that was the last name in the letter that Raid—" Kyla froze, her bright expression instantly turning slack in shock. "N-No way...!"

"It took this much for you to believe me? Mom, I'm getting a little concerned for you," Raid said.

"You're saying such a cute girl fell for you at first sight and proposed to you? Raid, just how much good did you do in your past life?!"

"Wow, Ed said the exact same thing. It's almost like you're related."

"Nice one, Edward! I always knew I could count on you!" Kyla's expression shifted seamlessly from shock to pride as she patted Edward's shoulder. She was a very expressive person, to say the least. "Well now, this calls for an emergency Freeden family meeting!"

"But mom, the rest of us know all about this already," Edward said.

"Uh-huh! Ellie's super famous among magicians!" Stella added.

"What?! You mean everyone else was in on this prank?! *I'm* the only victim here?!"

Raid sighed. "Could you *please* cut it out with that whole 'prank' business? I've already greeted House Caldwin and gained her parents' approval."

"What?! I haven't heard about that!"

"Well, yeah. Because you *read* about it in my letter."

Kyla snickered. "Oh my, you clever little boy."

"Let's save the discussion for after everyone's gathered. It's almost time."

As if on cue, a magic automobile stopped in front of them. A woman stepped down from the passenger cabin, her brilliant silver hair fluttering behind her. “It seems we’re the last to arrive,” she said, her voice ringing clear and dignified through the air.

A large man squeezed through the door after her. “Ha ha ha! Sorry for being late! The automobile couldn’t pick up much speed because I’m so heavy, you see!!!” he bellowed, so loudly that he drew in the gazes of several bystanders.

Kyla stared at the two newcomers and curiously cocked her head. “Um… Are you acquaintances of Raid’s?”

The woman nodded. “Yes. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Are you Madam Freeden?”

“Oh my! ‘Madam’? Now that’s a first!” Kyla giggled.

“Pardon me. It’s quite a common term of address for me.”

“Oh, no need to be so polite now. I’m just a boring old auntie from the boonies. Just call me Kyla!”

“In that case, I shall call you Ms. Kyla,” said the woman.

“Could you be Eluria’s big sister? Then you must be an aristocrat! Guess I was the one who needed to mind my manners!”

“Please, speak however is comfortable. I am Eluria’s mother.”

Kyla blinked. “Her…mother?” she mumbled, her mouth left open in shock.

The silver-haired woman primly bowed. “I am Alicia Caldwin, the twenty-fifth head of House Caldwin. This is my husband, Galleon Caldwin. We’ve come at the behest of your son, Raid Freeden.” Alicia lifted her head, her impassive gaze meeting Kyla’s wide and dumbfounded eyes. “Now then, shall we start this meeting between our families?”

◆

After meeting up with Alicia and Galleon, the group proceeded to a restaurant where they had reserved a private room—the best the establishment had to offer, evidently, as the corridor leading to the room was lined with plush carpets and lavish decor, while the room itself was impressively spotless, down to the nooks and crannies.

Once they settled down, Alicia turned to Raid and sighed. “Raid, I would appreciate a proper heads-up the next time you call us.”

“Apologies for the trouble, Ms. Alicia. It seemed my mother found it hard to believe my letter when I told her about my engagement with Eluria. I wanted more explicit means of convincing her.”

“Oh… Come to think of it, you never received a response to that letter, did you? I suppose I understand her doubts. It was all so sudden, after all.”

Beside Alicia, Galleon swiveled his head, eyes blown wide. “Hmmm?! Good sir! Could you be Raid’s father?! You’re looking a little pale!!!”

“No… I’m Edward Freeden, Raid’s elder brother. Our father Cyrus is currently conducting some business in Celios. He wouldn’t have made it back in time for this meeting, so he said that he would personally visit House Caldwin and give his greetings at a later date.”

“Aha! I understand, I understand! This meeting *is* rather sudden! He seems to be very dedicated to his work, and incredibly courteous to boot—a great man, I’m sure!!!”

While the men of the Freeden family were busy conversing with the Caldwins, the girls, on the other hand, were occupied among themselves.

“Stella!” Kyla whispered frantically. “You have to behave yourself today, do you understand?!”

“Okie-dokie! I’ll just quietly chow down over there, then!”

“No, wait! Aristocrats must have some fancy-shmancy dining etiquette or whatever! I mean, just look—I’ve never seen so many knives and forks on the table before!”

Stella cocked her head. “Ellie, do we have to use these in a certain order?”

“Um, I’m not too sure myself,” Eluria mumbled. “But…I think you can just start from the outside.”

Kyla gasped. “Oh my, really now? So you use these one by one? And here I thought we were just supposed to pick out a favorite…”

Alicia quietly cleared her throat, interrupting the high-end cutlery lesson on the other side of the table. “Now then, Ms. Kyla, might we begin our discussion?”

Kyla straightened her back. “Please, by all means, begin as you will!”

“Ah… I’m aware you must be unaccustomed to formal settings.

You may speak comfortably, as will I."

"Ooh! Then can I call you Allie?!"

"I…wasn't quite expecting you to get quite *that* comfortable," Alicia deadpanned.

"But, it's just, you look so young and pretty! I mean, fine, maybe 'Ms. Alicia' is more proper, but just look at you—so beautiful and so dignified, with just a touch of cuteness! 'Allie' fits you to a T!"

Alicia pursed her lips, until finally, she conceded. "You may address me as you see fit."

"Allie it is, then!"

In the face of Kyla's dazzling smile, Alicia furtively drew back. Before other aristocrats, she always remained undaunted and maintained her dignity as the head of House Caldwin, but it seemed Kyla's quirky personality had thrown her off course—truly a formidable opponent.

Alicia quietly sighed. "Do you now believe the veracity of Raid and Eluria's engagement?"

"Hm… I mean, there's no way such esteemed aristocrats would play along just to prank an old countryside housewife. I guess I'll trust it for now."

"Indeed. I acknowledged the engagement on some conditions, you see—one of which was for Raid to publicly prove his strength. He has truly gone above and beyond by subjugating an ultra-sized manabeast. In fact, we may be the ones seeking help from him soon."

Publicly, the subjugation was Raid and Eluria's joint effort, but many of the magicians on the scene had witnessed the significance of Raid's contribution. Some may voice suspicions on his power and pedigree, but the results spoke for themselves—he had undoubtedly taken down an ultra-sized manabeast while still enrolled in the Institute.

"That being said…" Alicia sighed. "I, for one, was planning to judge his achievements in the *integrated exam*."

"My apologies," Raid said. "Stuff happened, so I had to send it flying."

Alicia's eyes narrowed in exasperation. "I do hope you realize you are talking about a manabeast classified as a natural disaster."

In stark contrast, Galleon looked proud as could be. "Truly spectacular! There are records of such beasts eradicating an entire

squad of first-class magicians! This means you're already on par with special-class magicians, does it not?!"

"You said it!" Stella piped in. "I always knew my brother was the strongest in the world!"

"Ha ha ha! You're not wrong at all, young lady! And you must be quite the magician yourself, to have seen through his strength before everyone else!!!"

"Of course I am! I train every day with the goal of landing a kick on his back!"

"Good, very good! You should come work with me once you graduate!!!"

Galleon and Stella exchanged a firm and hearty handshake. It seemed the two, with their similarly boisterous personalities, were getting along quite well.

"In any case," Alicia continued, "our family has acknowledged both their engagement and future marriage. We will also shoulder the costs for their wedding and accept whatever conditions your family may have with regard to this matter."

"I see... All right. I get it now." Kyla bobbed her head and smiled. "Well, I'm *against* it!"

Stunned looks struck her from all around the table.

Unfazed, however, Kyla simply turned to her son and said, "Raid, what you've done is praiseworthy...but also dangerous, right?"

"Oh... Well, I guess you could say that."

"Then you lose points for getting into danger without telling me!"

"Huh. I mean, I guess I *did* fail to mention the dangers that came along with the engagement..."

"And I get that the Caldwins are being generous by offering to shoulder the costs, but now it feels wrong for me to say yes to this marriage! It makes me feel like I'm handing over my precious son for the money!"

Alicia raised a brow. "I never intended it that way, but I suppose I understand where you're coming from..."

Kyla propped her hand on her waist and puffed up her cheeks. "Right?! So right now, I'm against it!"

In Raid's eyes, Kyla's reaction was by no means unreasonable. Her son had left home for a while, and the next she'd heard of him,

he had gotten himself into danger. Then, after coming all this way to see him, some wealthy folks told her, *"We'll pay you, so please give us your son."* Of course, that was a terribly simplified account of the matter, but still, no parent would feel elated by all this.

"You see, I want Raid to be happy," Kyla continued, a forlorn smile on her lips. "He's struggled so much just because he had no mana...because I couldn't give birth to him as a normal child."

To the world, Raid was no more than a person who couldn't use magic, mana, or even the most rudimentary magic devices. This was socially fatal in a society that valued magic above all else—it had sealed off countless paths for him in the future. As his mother, Kyla felt terribly responsible for that.

"But you know, it's not like I'm actually against this," she continued. "I feel like you've gotten so much softer since I last saw you. Back in the village, it was like you were just going through the motions, but now you seem to be enjoying yourself." As his mother, Kyla could pick up on the slightest changes in his demeanor. "Tell me, Raid. Are you having fun now? Do you think getting married will make you happy?"

Raid nodded. "Yeah. Definitely."

"Good! That's all I need from you." Kyla beamed and turned to Eluria. "Next, Eluria—I have one condition. Would you like to hear it?"

Eluria pursed her lips and nodded.

"Can you make Raid the happiest man in the world?" Kyla's lips curled into a tender smile. "As his mother, that's all I could ever ask for."

Eluria looked Kyla in the eye and nodded. "Yes," she answered, head held high. "I promise to make Raid happy."

Kyla nodded. Then, she turned back to Raid with a wide smile. "Come on now, Raid! Are you going to let her beat you? You should say you're going to make her even happier! Where's your pride as a man?"

"Sure. I plan to make her the happiest woman in the world."

"Boo! Give it more oomph, more pizazz! I mean, look at Eluria—she's already red as a tomato!"

"I-I'm just...really, really happy...!" Eluria squeaked, commendably managing a full sentence despite her overheating face.

Raid once told her about the life he'd lived before he became the Hero. He hadn't blamed his parents, but she recalled seeing a hint of sadness in his eyes. Just how blessed must he feel to have this family now? If Raid had never lived through such a war-torn past, if he had just been born as an ordinary boy in this era…it was easy to imagine how peaceful and happy his life would have been.

The Freedens were a wonderful family, and so Eluria braved her embarrassment to offer them a heartfelt answer. Of course, it was embarrassing all the same—after all, she had essentially proposed all over again, right in front of both their families.

Raid nodded. "All right. Now that we've got all that out of the way, there's something else we'd like to tell you all."

Kyla gasped. "D-Don't tell me…I already have a grandkid?! Am I gonna be promoted from mommy to granny?!"

"What was that?! I cannot let this slide, Raid!!!" Galleon bellowed.

"Sorry, that's not it," Raid said. "You see… We want to share the truth behind our engagement with the families who raised us."

He and Eluria had decided on this beforehand. Needless to say, their circumstances were by no means normal. They had lived a thousand years ago and had been reincarnated into the present with their memories intact. These people before them now were, in a way, their second parents—they had given them their love and raised them with care. It felt like a disservice to keep hiding the truth from them.

"A thousand years ago, we were known as the Hero and the Sage."

Thus, they decided to tell their families the truth—to share their story from the distant past.

◇

Raid and Eluria explained their reincarnation to their families. They had decided that, considering their upcoming plans, it was far from fair to keep it a secret any longer.

As for their reactions…

"So, long story short, Raid and Ellie are super awesome!" Stella cheered.

"Well, Lady Eluria is already known as the Sage's Reincarnation,"

Edward added. “Seems like the Hero was also pretty formidable, considering Raid just defeated an ultra-sized manabeast.”

“Psh. So what?” Kyla shrugged. “We’re already family. If anything, I’m just happy to know that it wasn’t that you didn’t have mana—your mana is just too extraordinary!”

Galleon clenched his fist. “Hnnngh! To think that my adorable daughter was the Sage all along! Now I’m caught between fawning over her and respecting her! What a conundrum!!!”

“That certainly explains a few things.” Alicia sighed. “Still, that doesn’t change the fact that you are lacking in etiquette, Eluria. In fact, we simply cannot have others finding out that the Sage was actually so…timid. I must be stricter with you henceforth.”

Surprisingly enough, they remained unfazed for the most part. Heck, Alicia had even rethought her “training regimen” for her daughter now that her standards had been raised. Raid was speechless at her unwavering sense of duty as the head of House Caldwin. In any case, their families showed more relief than shock, likely connecting the dots between this new information and all their nonsensical feats.

Now that their families had met and the couple had received their blessings, their business was done. They filed back into the magic automobile with the Freeden siblings to head back to Palmare.

From the passenger seat, Raid turned to his brother, who was back behind the wheel. “Sorry ’bout this, Ed. You must still be tired from driving us earlier…”

“It’s no big deal, my dear little-brother-slash-Hero,” Edward replied with a smirk.

Incidentally, the two girls were snoozing in the backseats. Eluria had been thoroughly drained by the meeting, whereas Stella was simply content with a stuffed belly.

“Anyway…” Edward chuckled. “I’m overjoyed that my little brother has surpassed me, but the Hero’s reincarnation? Now I definitely wasn’t expecting *that*.”

“I probably should’ve told you earlier, but I hardly knew anything about it until I spoke with Eluria. There also were some mysteries surrounding our reincarnation, so we couldn’t speak freely about it either…”

“Oh, I’m not bothered by that in the slightest. You’ve always

been cautious.” Edward smiled, his bright gaze mellowing into something more solemn and reminiscent. “Raid, do you remember the day your mana was assessed?”

Raid pursed his lips. It wasn’t often his playful and easygoing older brother used such a serious tone. “Yeah, I remember. I broke the device and got an earful.”

“Right. After that day, mom and Stella were really running wild, so it was a tough time for me too…”

Raid remembered it like it was yesterday. The device had failed to measure his mana, and so he had been deemed “manaless.” From that day forth, Kyla would bow to the Magicians’ Association countless times, begging for a reassessment. The kids in the village would pick on Stella because of him, but she always stood up for him and fought back—although she would often come home crying in frustration anyway. As for Edward… He’d originally planned to become a magician, but he gave that up and instead took up magic research, specializing in mana studies. The reason for his change of heart went without saying.

“I just couldn’t accept it,” said Edward. “My little brother was so strong, so smart, and so kind…but nobody understood that.”

His sentiments were echoed by the rest of their family. Kyla had been repeatedly turned away by the Association, but she’d always made her way back, bowing her head time and time again—and she probably would have kept it up, had Raid not decided to settle for helping with physical labor around the village. Their father, Cyrus, had left the village to start a lumber company just for him. Stella, on the other hand, had convinced their parents to let her follow the path of a magician, to prove her brother’s strength by excelling herself—something she had stuck to and was achieving brilliantly still.

Whenever Raid looked at them, he felt horrible about keeping his past a secret.

“I hardly spent any time with my family in my past life,” Raid whispered, “so I really…can’t thank you all enough.” His past parents had by no means been bad people; they were simply born into an unfortunate era. Even so, Raid had never been able to bond with them.

“I was clearly different, but mom kept bowing her head for me, and dad carved a path for me to tread in the future. You also did

whatever you could for me, and Stella never lost her respect for me. It…made me happy. Really.” Raid smiled as the words welled up from the bottom of his heart. “I feel so blessed…to have been born into this family.” He had lived a long life in the past, but not once had he felt the warmth of a family—not until this second life, when these people gave him enough love for both lifetimes.

Edward let out a shaky breath. “Hah… Gosh, you’re gonna make me cry here… You’re a kind person, Raid. We know… We’ve always known. That’s why we couldn’t just sit back and watch everyone belittle you…just because you can’t use magic.” Edward couldn’t stand it, nor could Kyla and Stella. Their father Cyrus didn’t have to be present for Edward to know he felt the same. “Now, others are finally starting to see you for who you are. You have no idea…just how happy that makes me…!”

Raid’s eyes grew wide as tears spilled down Edward’s cheeks. Flustered, he drew in a panicked breath and—

“Wait, Ed! Don’t put your head down! Look forward—*drive*!”

“Damn it… I can’t see through the tears…!”

“So you’re saying we’re screwed?!”

“Li’l bro… We’re family, aren’t we? If I crash this automobile…let’s split the bill, all right?”

“How about you try *not* crashing first?!”

Stirred by the commotion, their backseat passenger—the one who’d passed out from a full stomach—roused with a yawn. “Hngh…? What’s all the yelling about?”

Edward sniffled. “Ah, li’l sis… You see, I’m shedding some very manly tears right now…”

“Oh, sure… By the way, I’m feeling kinda restless since I haven’t cut loose today…”

“My little sister cares more about her daily spar than my feelings… I *should* be offended, but as her older brother, I’m so touched by her diligence!”

Stella swayed in her seat, clearly still half asleep. Her hand, however, was instinctively clenched into a fist. “I wanna punch one of you… Either will do,” she slurred.

Raid sighed. “Why can’t our little sister be hungry for snacks instead of blood?”

“You know what? I always let her hit me, so why don’t *you* take the hit this time? Fulfill your older brotherly duties, yeah?”

“Sorry. The Hero doesn’t get hit so easily.”

Edward drooped. “Oh, well… Guess I’ll pull over so she can punch me.”

“You’re okay with that…?”

“Otherwise, she’ll get really pent up… Once, I got incredibly busy with my research and left her alone for a week. After that, every waking hour was spent sparring with her…”

“How long did that last?” Raid asked.

“A week,” Edward mumbled. “I considered preparing my will a few times.”

“Why didn’t you share the load with her class instructor or other assistants?”

“The other assistant instructors are overworked. Besides, her class instructor was the one who begged me in tears to come as a ‘Stella-exclusive’ assistant.”

“She’s always had too much energy to spare…” Raid sighed, thinking back to their childhood days. Then, he turned to the backseat and said, “Stella, if you can hold it in until tomorrow, then I’ll let you fight as much as you want.”

The girl blinked drowsily. “Really…?”

“Yes, really. So save all your punches for tomorrow, all right?”

Stella yawned. “If you say so…” she mumbled, then fell right back asleep.

Edward cast his brother a sideward glance. “I sure hope you’re not just putting this off. You’d better be a good big brother and keep that promise, okay?”

“Don’t worry. I have the perfect opponent for her.” Raid smiled as he gazed at the lights in the distance. “He’ll be able to learn a thing or two from Stella.”

At the end of his gaze was the villa of House Verminant.

◇

When they arrived at the villa, Valk and Lucas were right there to welcome them, having been informed ahead of time that Raid would be returning the automobile and staying the night, along with Eluria and his siblings. Raid carried the two sleeping girls to their rooms, and the night passed quietly. When the sun rose the next day, they gathered once more outside the villa.

“Waaaaah! Lady Eluria, we’ve been re-reunited!” Millis cheered, scooping up her friend into a hearty hug.

“Hooray,” Eluria replied, with not nearly as much enthusiasm.

Wisel trailed in behind the lively bumpkin and raised his hand in greeting. “We heard from Lucas and Ms. Valk that you arrived yesterday. We all retired early last night, so we didn’t get to come out and say hi…”

“Well, we did arrive right before midnight.” Raid shrugged and turned to Valk and Lucas. “Thanks for waiting up so late.”

“Please, think nothing of it. It is our job to welcome our guests,” Valk said.

“Yeah! I needed to perform some checks on our automobile, so I’d have had to stay up regardless,” Lucas added with a lighthearted grin.

Amid the friendly greetings, two more people came lagging behind, both carrying with them a gloom far too depressing for such a bright and early morning.

“Ugh, the sun is up…” Fareg heaved a heavy sigh. “That means it’s time to train…*again*…”

“You should be glad you get to move around,” Alma grumbled, the bags heavy beneath her eyes. “Day after day, I’ve been glaring at research and theses that are beyond my expertise… Ugh, I am *so* done…”

Raid turned to them. “Yo. Looks like you guys have been hard at work.”

“That’s putting it lightly.” Alma sighed. “You and Eluria should help…”

“What are you up to, exactly?”

“Researching how to extract, secure, and synthesize external mana, then encase it in my own mana to attain a pseudo-unification, and correctly cast a spell that will consume my own mana and, upon termination, cleanse the extracted mana and revert it to its original form.”

Raid blinked. “Eluria, dumb it down for me?”

“She’s trying to do something super-duper difficult,” answered the girl.

“Nice and simple. Thanks.”

“Put another way, it’s similar to my Polyaggregate Expansion,” Eluria continued. “Except Ms. Alma’s trying to do it with *external*

mana, so there are a bunch of extra steps."

"This sort of thing is mana efficiency studies territory," Alma grumbled. "I've dabbled in the field a bit for personal enhancement, but never too deeply—insufficient mana has never been a problem for me, after all. This topic is totally beyond me, so I'm really at a loss here…"

Raid didn't doubt that; Alma looked dead tired, and Eluria had even attested to the difficulty of her undertaking.

"Well, since I heard the gist of what you're attempting, I brought you some help," said Eluria.

Alma narrowed her eyes. "*Help*, you say?"

"Mm-hmm. Raid's big brother." Eluria turned and presented Edward.

"Oh…" The man stepped forward. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Magician Kanos. I'm—"

"Bleh, skip the pleasantries! Answer me—have you done any specialized research on mana efficiency? Do you understand the terminologies and institute-level theses?!"

"Yes, well… I'm working as an assistant instructor at the moment, but mana research is my main focus. I've also studied efficient mana application and read through theses on the topic."

Alma staggered on her feet. "H-Has a god finally descended to appear among us…?"

"Li'l bro, did you hear that? I've been promoted to godhood," Edward mused.

Raid huffed. "Well then, how 'bout you offer your guidance to this lost little lamb?"

Before Raid even finished speaking, Alma grabbed Edward's arm in a vice grip. "Then let's put you right to work! You said you've read theses on the topic, right? What about 'Fluctuations in Mana: A Study on Disassembly Volatility and Reassembly Efficiency'?!"

"Oh, you're referring to Professor Sanskurt's thesis, yes? His papers are always an interesting albeit difficult read—they never seem to be very well edited."

"How well can you dumb it down?!"

"I helped my academically challenged little sister pass our institute's test."

"Hell yeah! We've got a bona fide god on board!" Alma cheered, looking a little hysterical from the series of all-nighters she'd

pulled, as she dragged Edward back into the villa.

Edward had changed his career path to mana research for Raid, but it had proven so difficult—understandably, as even Eluria had failed to fully comprehend it—that Edward began taking in whatever information and research he could get his hands on. His pool of knowledge was impressive enough to earn not only a "wow" but even applause from Eluria. Surely, he would prove to be a huge help to Alma's endeavor.

With Alma and Edward back in the villa, Raid turned his gaze to his other sibling. "And this here's my little sister, Stella."

"Stella Freeden! Fifteen years old! Female!"

"Ooh, Raid's little sister!" Millis cooed. "I can't believe such a cutie is your—"

"I came here today because my brother told me I was free to punch you all as much as I want!"

"I take it back! You're Raid's little sister for sure!"

Wisel nodded. "All right, guys. How about we gang up on Raid and give him a heartfelt whack on the head? Ms. Eluria *has* taught us that we must steel our hearts in battle, and that we mustn't hold back even against our friends."

"Now, hold on a minute," Raid said. "Wisel, I have something else I'd like you to do, and I need Millis, Lucas, and Valk to be there for the explanation, so you're all exempted."

"Uh, so that means..." Millis blinked and turned around. Everyone followed suit, and soon their gazes all fell on one boy.

"Hey, punching bag," Raid called. "Stop spacing out and get ready."

Fareg's jaw dropped. "Are you calling *me* a *punching bag*?!"

"Who else? You're the only one left."

Stella whipped her head around. "Oh? So I can punch this redhead?"

Raid nodded. "Punch him as much as you'd like."

"Hooray! You're the best, Raid!"

Fareg blinked. "Huh? Am I just a punching bag now? But I'm a Verminant, aren't I? The son of a venerable household, a family as prestigious as the Caldwins...r-right?" The boy fell into an existential crisis, but alas, the only response he got was Stella's bright and excited smile as she began stretching and warming up.

"Your problem right now, kid, is that you're lacking in close-

quarter physical prowess and mana management because of your recent shift in fighting style," Raid explained. "As you are now, though, you can probably ace the integrated exam, no sweat."

Fareg raised a brow. "Then isn't that enough?"

"Is it, though? An exam is just an exam—practical or not, it'll *never* match up to a real fight. And what you're after isn't just the ability to pass an exam, but true strength that'll back you up in the real world, right?"

Fareg winced. He still blamed himself for letting his childhood friends get hurt during their first exam. To this day, the burden of his powerlessness haunted him. That was why Raid had been teaching him everything he'd need to protect them in actual battle.

"Anyway, you can't possibly claim that you're going to protect your friends when you don't even have the stamina to ride through dire straits. Take this chance to learn whatever you can from Stella."

"So you're saying...your sister is strong enough to teach me?"

"She learned physical combat from me and mana application from Ed. At the very least, she's mastered what you're currently struggling with."

Fareg hummed. "Can I...retaliate?"

Raid's eyes narrowed into a glare. "Are you saying you want to punch my cute little sister?"

"Yes! Yes, I am! Because she's going to turn *me* into her punching bag!" Fareg snapped.

Stella turned around, now finished with her warm-up exercises, and cocked her head. "Hm? I don't mind." Her lips stretched into a wild grin. "I mean, it's no fun to punch someone who's just running away! The more he fights back, the more okay it is for me to punch him!"

Fareg glared at Raid. "What in the world have you been teaching her?"

"Just how to beat up anyone who pisses her off and escape unscathed." As it turned out, Raid was the root cause of Stella's...*unique* behavior.

In their childhood, the village kids often mocked Stella for having a "manaless" brother, and she responded in kind by pouncing on them. She would then come home all roughed up after dragging the fight out to a draw—plenty impressive for such

a small child, but not quite enough for the girl who dearly loved her brother. Stella had cried that she wanted to be as strong as Raid.

From there, Raid had taught her some simple physical techniques. After seeing that she had more talent than he'd assumed, he began delving into other combat skills and even instilled into her the tough mental fortitude needed for battle. Stella, meanwhile, enjoyed his teachings and absorbed them all like a sponge, achieving rapid growth with her spectacular talent and natural wit.

And that was how Stella Freeden came to be the battle junkie she was today.

"All right! Let's get sparring!" she cheered.

"By the way," Raid interjected. "I don't really know much about what you've been up to at school. You enrolled last year, and now you've been assigned to your specialized course—magic combat, right? How's your standing?"

"My standing? Mmm... Second!"

Fareg hummed. "You're second in your class? Well, I would've been the strongest in mine if it weren't for Caldwin and the crazy commoner, so—"

"Nuh-uh," said the girl, shaking her head. "I'm second in the entire student body."

"Huh...?"

"Well, I'm actually the top student, but some dolts kept making fun of me for being a scholarship student—calling me a peasant and whatever—so I beat them up, then got demerits for bad behavior! Talk about unfair, am I right?!" Stella indignantly puffed her cheeks as she equipped her magic gear: a pair of deep crimson gauntlets and gaiters.

She struck her fists together and turned to Fareg. "Now, I could've sworn I heard you mention a 'crazy commoner' just now..." The corners of her lips curled up into an eerie crescent. "You couldn't have been talking about my super awesome big brother...*right*?"

Fareg gulped. The sharp look in her eyes made him feel like prey, powerless before a hungry predator. "W-We're stopping the spar if I pass out, right...?"

Stella cocked her head, still smiling. "Huh? Why would we, when

I can just punch you awake?"

"So it doesn't matter if I'm awake or not?! Is this hell?!"

"All right, start the spar," Raid nonchalantly announced.

"Wait, we're still talking! Also, I haven't even mentally prepared myself yet— *Aaaaaah!*" Almost instantly, Fareg was sent flying through the air.

His training didn't betray him, however, as he swiftly fixed his position in midair and glared at the girl. "Why, you...! Don't think a measly surprise attack will knock me out!" Still airborne, he formed a flame blade in his hand and unleashed a fiery wave at her.

However, Stella simply looked on with a smile as her gauntlets lit ablaze. "Well, you'll never beat me with such lousy flames!" She drew her arm back before smashing right through the fiery assault with a loud *bang*. Wasting no time, she triggered another explosion with her gaiters and propelled herself through the opening in Fareg's firewall, launching herself into the air right in front of him.

Fareg gritted his teeth. Her combat style was terribly familiar—it was the very one he was still learning himself. "If I can't dodge, then—"

"Then you'll just block it? Too basic!" Stella stopped her fist midair and instead, with another explosion at her feet, whirled around and knocked her heel right into Fareg's back. "And off you gooo!"



The impact sent the boy crashing straight into the lake. A pillar of water shot up from the surface just as Stella landed back on the ground and whooped. “Huzzah! Stella, one—punching bag, zero!”

Raid hummed. “You’ve gotten much stronger than when I last saw you.”

“Heh! I’ve been training every single day, just as you’ve taught me!”

“But he’s still a young master from a good house, so make sure not to give him any lasting injuries, all right? Just make sure it hurts. A lot.”

“Roger that!” she crowed, then whipped her head around. “Hey, no resting in the water! Get out!”

With another vigorous splash, Fareg was once again sent flying through the air.

“Stella makes really efficient use of her mana. Ten outta ten,” Eluria praised.

Raid nodded. “She times her attacks perfectly, adds in feints, and switches flexibly between offense and defense. I always knew she had talent, but now I’m just straight up proud as her brother.”

Millis looked between them in disbelief. “These two are just calmly commentating as Fareg gets beaten black and blue!”

Wisel turned to Valk and Lucas. “By the way, as servants of House Verminant, what are your thoughts after seeing your master get tossed around like a toy?”

“From the bottom of my heart, I am relieved that’s not me over there,” Valk answered as she stared blankly at Fareg’s pitiful beating.

“Same,” Lucas agreed, bowing his head as if offering his condolences. It seemed these two had long become accustomed to such hellish training.

“So, Raid…” Wisel gulped. “What in the world do *we* have to do?!”

“Usually, this is where we realize *we’re* getting the shorter end of the stick…!” Millis hissed.

“Now, now, no need to be on your toes. I said we needed to talk—no catch there.”

“Mm-hmm. You might lose your lives if you don’t listen carefully.” Eluria cut a hole through the empty air next to her and stuck her hand inside. When she pulled it back out, she was

holding the “firearm” once used by Altanian soldiers.

Wisel squinted. “Is that…a type of magic gear?”

Eluria nodded. “The group that infiltrated Libynia Desert’s underground ruins was using these.”

“Uh… Are you sure you can bring that here?”

“It’s all right. We’ve submitted another one to the Institute,” Raid replied. “Wisel, what we want to ask…is for you to analyze the mana circuits and find a way to nullify similar gear.”

“You mean, the same way I do with Rupture?”

“Exactly. If possible, we’d like you to formulate a blueprint so we can produce several units of the device.”

“Analyzing mana circuits and designing a blueprint, huh? Well, that’s fine with me…” Wisel frowned. “But why produce several units? I can use Rupture because I’m a magic artificer, but it’d be pretty difficult for most people to spot the exact moment a spell is cast.”

“Don’t worry about that. Only one person’s going to be handling them, and they’re just as much an expert in magic devices as you are.”

Eluria handed a bundle of documents to Wisel. “Here are the formulae that were embedded in the circuits. I’m sure a lot of it looks unfamiliar to you, so I’ve broken it down and added some annotations. You should be all set.”

“Hm…” Wisel’s eyes trailed through the sheets. “Oh, you’ve prepared quite a bit for me. Looks like I can get this done in three days.”

More likely than not, these firearms were the other world’s mainstream weapons due to Altane’s lasting influence. Their structure closely resembled that of this world’s magic gear, and every single soldier they encountered underground had carried one with them.

“Let me make this clear,” Raid continued. “If you run into anyone wielding these weapons—*run*. Millis and Valk, you two especially.”

“Oh, you don’t need to tell me twice,” Millis muttered. “But why us in particular?”

“This weapon fires projectiles called ‘bullets.’ They can nullify magic and pierce through your barriers and shields. Valk’s permeation won’t work on them either.” Raid held a bullet between

his fingers and raised it for them to see—the very one they'd retrieved from Savad's body.

Thanks to Wallus's meddling, Savad's body now hosted a mix of his own mana and residue of the Hero's mana. This bizarre mix had allowed him to cast his Demon's Tragedy, as well as wield mana so dense it couldn't be nullified. That said, Savad had reported experiencing some mana blockage after he dispelled his magic.

"The guy who took this bullet couldn't receive any healing magic. So if you get hit, we'll have to gouge it out of the wound before we can heal you."

The students gulped. The danger the weapon posed was now clear as day—just a single hit was instantly life-threatening, if not straight up fatal.

"So the moment you come into contact with those guys, make escape your first priority," Raid repeated. "Bullets only fly in a straight line, so it shouldn't be too difficult to dodge. Lucas can also put up a smoke screen to deter them, and that should give you enough time to escape."

Lucas pursed his lips and nodded. "Roger that. I'll be ready to jump into action anytime."

"Good. Of course, we also plan on informing the instructors and other collaborators so that we're fully prepared for the integrated exam. But the reason I'm briefing you all on this is to prepare for any unforeseen turn of events—so that you're ready to act on your own if the need arises."

Millis blinked. "What…? Do you mean they might attack during the *exam*?!"

"Not 'might.' They *will* attack during the exam."

"You're scaring me! How are you so sure?!"

"To begin with, calling it an 'attack' is an understatement." Raid's eyes glinted sharply, his expression turning cold. "That day," he declared, "will be *war*."

After a short pause, he shrugged and continued. "Though, its scale will be closer to that of a small domestic dispute. But still, people will be out for blood that day. Rest assured, we don't plan on dragging any of you into that."

"Wait…" Valk gulped. "If you're so sure, then shouldn't the integrated exam be postponed?"

“At present, only we and the headmaster know the details,” Raid explained. “The instructors and staff have been informed and warned of the coming attackers, but only a select few will be dealing with them.”

Most would simply scoff in disbelief and mock them for claiming that soldiers from the future were coming to wage war on them. Instead of telling the truth and inviting skepticism, it was far more effective to execute the plan with a limited roster of elites.

“Besides,” he added, “we’ll only suffer more losses if we can’t predict when they’ll come attacking. That’s why I asked the headmaster to make sure the integrated exam goes ahead.” Before Raid and Eluria went to talk with Elise, Raid had passed on a certain instruction: to firmly turn down any suggestions of suspending the integrated exam. “If we know when our opponents are attacking, then we can prepare accordingly and execute our plan with just a select few.”

Lucas frowned. “But how can you say for certain that they’ll attack on the day of the exam? Sure, the bigwigs from different nations will be coming, but so will a ton of magicians, right?”

Raid shook his head. “You forget that they can nullify magic. No number of magicians can pose a threat to them.”

The man they’d met in the underground ruins blatantly looked down on magicians, and Raid could tell his soldiers felt the same way, indicating that they could very well suppress an army of magicians. In which case, they would likely set their sights on targeting the integrated exam and taking all the bigwigs and other attendees hostage.

“Additionally, Eluria and I will also be their targets.”

“Huh? But why?” Millis asked.

“Because I socked their leader,” Raid began.

“And apparently I screwed them over,” Eluria finished.

“Wow! You two sure know how to pick a fight!”

Raid shrugged. “Trouble is never too far away for the strong.”

“And it’s our duty to settle our battles,” Eluria added.

“Right, sure… I guess this is all just par for the course for you two…” Millis stared at them in exasperation. It seemed the attackers weren’t the only ones raring for a fight.

“Eluria and I are now publicly known as the subjugators of the

ultra-sized manabeast. I'm sure those fellows know how to gather intel, so they'll surely grasp our location when the exam starts. And that's another reason we can predict their time of attack."

"Anyway," Eluria chimed in. "We want you all to prioritize your safety. We'll handle the attackers."

Millis sighed. "Well, I know I can trust you two. If anything, this is really reassuring…"

"They've already exterminated an ultra-sized manabeast. It can't get more reassuring than that," Wisel agreed.

Raid nodded, grateful for their trust. "Now that that's all settled, we're heading back to Palmare. We need to discuss our plans with the headmaster and covertly contact our other allies."

"Roger that!" Millis crowed. "Then the next time we meet will be at the integrated exam!"

"We'll try not to worry too much. Good luck, you two," said Wisel.

"We will pass all this information on to the young master," Valk said. "Your sister may be tossing him around like a rag right now, but he's still a Verminant. He might be of help."

Lucas nodded. "He actually looks up to Raid quite a bit, so I'm sure he'll even bow his head to the master if you ever need any help. Please don't hesitate to call us."

Raid chuckled. "Thanks, you two. Pass my regards to the kid too."

"Once everything is over, I'll take over your training again," Eluria promised.

"No thank you! Please spare us!!!" the four of them exclaimed in perfect unison, flinging their heads down in a desperate bow.

Eluria pouted. "Boo," she grumbled.

In any case, Raid felt he wouldn't have to worry about the pupils of the devil instructor herself, so it was with a light heart that he left the villa with Eluria as their friends saw them off. They had already informed Alma of their plans, so she'd contact them once her own preparations were complete.

Raid looked down at Eluria. "Now then, let's head on back to Palmare, shall we?"

"Mmm… Should I teleport us?"

"I'm fine either way. Distance-wise, it doesn't make much of a difference."

Eluria nodded. “Then I’ll teleport us.”

“Well, you seem oddly committed,” he mused with a raised brow.

“N-Not really…” Eluria mumbled, her eyes swimming.

“What? You really keeping a secret from me at this point?”

“Y-You might laugh if I tell you…!”

“Why? Is it something I’d laugh at you for?”

Eluria pouted, a blush spreading on her cheek. “Yeah…” she mumbled. “Fine. I’ll tell you if you won’t laugh.”

“So any other reaction’s acceptable?”

“That’ll be subject to approval.”

“All right, then. Hit me with it.”

Cheeks still flushed, Eluria hung her head and mumbled, “It’s just, I haven’t…hugged you in a while, so…”

Her bashful murmur was met with complete and utter silence. Raid stared at her long and hard before quietly looking up to the sky. “Ah. Okay.”

“Why are you looking up…?”

“I look at the sky when I think.”

“I’m certain that’s not the case. When you fall into thought, you place your hand on your chin, furrow your brows, and look down.”

“Wow. You sure know me well.”

“Of course. I watch you more closely than anyone else,” Eluria preened, proudly puffing her chest. She probably had no clue that her statement had dealt him even more psychic damage.

“All right. Let’s teleport,” he said.

“How long are you going to look up?”

“Until you teleport us.”

“That can’t be good for your neck…” Eluria sighed as she wrapped her arms around him.

But there was just no way Raid could look down right now—not when he’d turned red as a tomato, caught completely off guard by Eluria’s innocent words.



Chapter Three

After returning to Palmare, Raid and Eluria's days were peaceful, bereft of any unexpected attacks or major incidents, but the clock was ticking nonetheless. Now, only one week remained until the integrated exam—until the day their "war" would begin. Many things needed to be done by then, but...

"Hey... You two."

Raid looked up. "Yes, Headmaster?"

"Is there a problem?" Eluria asked.

The elf glared at the pair. "Why are you lazing around in my office?"

"Because we're bored," they answered plainly.

Indeed, there was much to be done, but currently Raid and Eluria were seated comfortably on the couch in Elise's office. Eluria held a plate with a slice of cake in her hands, while Raid was leisurely looking through some documents.

"Raid, this cake is good."

"Really? Could I have a bite?"

"Mm-hmm... Here. Say 'ahh.'"

Raid chewed and swallowed, savoring the lingering sweetness in his mouth. "Oh... The orange's sourness and sweetness strike a good balance. The flavor spread through my mouth the moment it touched my tongue, and the syrup-glazed sponge has a very subtle bitter aftertaste that really highlights the flavor. Overall, it's quite refreshing."

"Your comments are impeccable," Eluria mused.

"I was often invited to high-end dinner parties back when I was a general. They were always looking for reasons to mock me for being a commoner, so I made sure I was eloquent enough to knock their socks off."

"I usually just say 'yummy'..." Eluria mumbled.

"Well, that's not a bad thing. Tiana would probably be over the moon for even that much."

"Mm-hmm. She always looked happy watching me eat."

"Oh, for the love of... You're flirting right in my face? Really?"

Elise slammed her hands on her desk. “Why are you even hanging around my office?!”

“‘Cause all the intel comes here first,” Raid replied.

“And I can order yummy food,” Eluria added.

“Well, yeah! Because I’m the headmaster of Vegalta’s magic institute! The personnel here are really accommodating, and unlike back at home, nobody says *‘Elise, want some candy?’* or *‘Wow, you’re working so hard!’* or whatever, and I’m honestly really happy about that!”

Elise was practically treated like a child back at the Vegalta Royal Institute, mostly on account of her outward appearance. To other institutes, however, she held the highest authority at the institution situated in the very birthplace of magic. It seemed she was finally receiving some just treatment here.

“Anyway, the institute’s chef prepared that cake for *me*!” Elise exclaimed.

Raid raised a brow. “Why not just ask for another one, childish old man?”

Eluria pouted. “There’s nothing wrong with a little girl wanting cake, but if I think about it as my dad throwing a tantrum over some sweets, well… I’m not sure how to feel anymore.”

“Stop it! I feel like you’ve been making me out to be some weirdo ever since I revealed my identity! I just have Wallus’s memories, that’s *all!* I’m still just an ordinary *female* elf!” Frustrated, Elise slammed her table once more, almost in tears. Such a young girl, yet already she faces such complex circumstances. It seemed that being treated like a man was a bridge too far for her.

“All right, then. Let’s take a quick break and review the situation,” Raid decided. “How’s the information dissemination going?”

“All done,” Elise answered. “We secured the firearm and even received the report of Savad’s temporary mana impediment, so there’s not much to contest. As we speak, the magicians from other institutes are gathering and joining the patrols. But…” She took a bite from the cake and frowned. “Are you sure things are going to develop into a *war*?”

“Well, let me ask you in return: why are you discounting the possibility?”

“Because I’m more familiar with time travel and reincarnation than you two, and neither are easy feats—they require *tons* of mana.”

“Specifically how much?”

“Hmm… Going by the average amount of mana in the human body, you’d need around thirty thousand people’s worth of it.”

“So you’re saying I have the equivalent of thirty thousand people’s mana in my body?”

“*More than*, actually. The amount of mana needed changes depending on the person traveling through time. Eluria had immense mana and was powerful enough to destroy the world, so it would’ve been impossible to reincarnate her without the Hero’s cooperation.”

“I see… But that’s insufficient grounds to deny the possibility of a war.”

Elise raised a brow. “Why?”

“Because if I were in their shoes, thirty thousand lives would be a cheap price to pay to ensure Eluria’s death.”

In the future, Eluria had driven the world to the brink of destruction and left it on a path to its inevitable demise. Although the root cause of their apocalypse had returned to the past, the Calamities she made were still there. But it was very possible that the monsters made out of Eluria’s mana would dissipate if they returned to the past and killed her—so they had every incentive to end her.

“Thirty thousand—no, even more sacrifices were practically nothing in the face of saving the world and the privileged class. The Altane I know could easily make such a decision.”

Elise pursed her lips and nodded. “Right. The Altanians that Wallus remembers were the same,” she mumbled, her expression warping bitterly as she revisited those memories.

Just then, Eluria shook her head. “But then they should have achieved their goal a thousand years ago.”

“True,” Raid agreed. “The whole nation held a funeral for you and all.”

“Mm-hmm. I was *dead* dead.”

“You talk like it was a thing that happened to someone else…” Elise sighed and shook her head. “Eluria, it’s true that you died from mana loss, but that wasn’t *all* your mana.”

The girl blinked. “It wasn’t?”

“Like I said earlier, the amount of mana needed for time travel varies per person. Think of it as needing stronger muscles to carry a heavier load.” Elise cut her cake in half and continued, “While moving timelines, Wallus unloaded half of your mana into the Divine Realm. Simply put, he lessened the load as he went.”

“So you’re saying…*that* half came back to me when I reincarnated?”

“I’m assuming so, yes. Because Raid rushed to your side, you were dragged into his reincarnation. Then, the remaining half of your mana in the Divine Realm was returned to you along with your memories… It was a series of miraculous coincidences,” Elise said, a fond smile spreading over her face. In his final effort to rush to the side of his war rival and the woman he loved, Raid had birthed a miracle at the very end of his life.

“Huh… So if I’d just dropped dead in a ditch somewhere, then Eluria would’ve just died,” Raid concluded.

“I’ve never been more grateful for your sturdiness,” Eluria mumbled.

“Come to think of it, Tiana nearly killed me along the way to see you.”

“I’ll give her a good scolding the next time we meet.”

Elise gritted her teeth. “I was *trying* to build up the mood…!”

Raid just shrugged her off and asked, “Anyway, how did we end up reincarnating into the same era?”

“Oh… That’s probably due to Eluria’s influence—you must have been drawn toward it since this was the era that Eluria Caldwin was originally meant to be born in. But…” Elise folded her arms and frowned. “I’m still not sure how Eluria was killed… I mean, even if those Altanians knew that we returned to the past, how did they pinpoint the specific point in time?”

Eluria hummed. “According to Tiana, there is a hole in the realm of Time.”

“A hole…?”

“Mm-hmm. Tiana’s magic allows her to interfere with Time. In it, she found that hole, through which she has been able to send her consciousness to converse with us.”

Elise furrowed her brows. “I’m pretty sure there’s no ‘hole’ in Wallus’s memories…”

“Then it must’ve been opened by those Altanians,” Raid concluded.

“Hmm… But still, my question stands: among the countless points in the past, how did they pinpoint the era we chose?”

Raid folded his arms. “I’m guessing it was just a terrible coincidence. Their trip to the past might not have had anything to do with killing Eluria to begin with.”

“What do you mean…?”

“It’s simple. Why bother with a culprit they couldn’t locate? They had to deal with their current threat first—the Calamities. And with their Hero gone, Altane’s choice was obvious: try to make a new one.”

“So…they went to the past to look for *you*?”

“Exactly.” That was likely their original goal: to find the person who first formulated Hero, give him knowledge of the future, and then make a new Hero. “But lo and behold, they travel back in time to find that *I* was known as the *Hero*, not the Sage. Vegalta had acquired magic, and Eluria was alive and kicking. So they switched up their plans.”

Eluria pouted. “Now I feel like I was killed just for the heck of it,” she mumbled sulkily—and she certainly couldn’t be faulted for it. The Altanians hadn’t planned on killing her, but they’d likely found her and figured, “Why not?” since they’d already made the trip back in time.

Raid sighed. “Anyway, if they returned to the future and found that the Calamities had disappeared, then all was good. If not, well…they’d still managed to find a way to re-create Hero.”

Elise narrowed her eyes. “You say they fulfilled their goal… So what’s brought them back here now?”

“I’d say it’s the motive you proposed yourself—having analyzed Hero, they probably realized that the timelines have split and that they can’t get rid of the Calamities. So their next best option was to move to the more peaceful timeline.”

They’d misused magic to their heart’s content, only to be cornered by a foe they couldn’t handle. Ultimately, they’d failed to defeat Eluria and were now looking for a new place to conquer—a downright selfish and truly despicable plot, albeit par for the course for the empire known as Altane.

And it went without saying that Altane knew best how to go

about invading foreign lands.

"Headmaster," Raid called. "What is the most important thing in war?"

"Well... Having a strong military and lots of resources?"

"Right. But to make all that work, it's imperative to secure a supply line."

"A supply line...?" Elise murmured, then snapped her head up with a gasp. Altane had no reason to suddenly unleash a Calamity on this era. After all, doing so would only ravage the land that they were trying to colonize. So why, then, had they done it?

"They must have unleashed a Calamity...to make a supply line connecting the two timelines," Raid declared. *This* was why he was so certain of their intent to wage a war. "Now, I'm not so sure why it had to be such a big fellow. Were they trying to see how much military force they could send in at once? Or were they trying to expand the opening? Either way, there's no doubt they're raring for a fight."

Elise sighed. "I see... You *are* a former Altanian general. I'll trust your judgment."

"That said, *we're* not planning to let it devolve into an all-out war. That's why we're rolling out all these preparations—so I hope you can hop to it."

"Easier said than done," Elise grumbled. "I'm already busy enough with my duties as headmaster, and now there's all this... Ugh, I'm getting a headache."

"Why not just use your authority?"

"Boy, oh boy, do I wish authority could make anything possible! Mind you, what you're asking me for needs *future* technology! Forget making it—I'm struggling to even get my hands on the *materials*!"

"So can you make it in time or not? Just tell me, and I can adjust the plan accordingly."

"Darn you! Yes, I *can* do it!"

"Ever the reliable little girl. Thanks."

Elise stared emptily into the distance. "There goes my meager sleeping time for today..." Then, in a burst of frustration, she began slamming her hands on her desk once more. "I have a meeting with the other headmasters about the integrated exam tomorrow. Who knows what they'll say when they see the bags

under my eyes?!”

It was clear to see just how hard she was working. Raid had to make sure she was justly rewarded once everything was over.

The elf soon finished venting her frustrations and turned back to them with a small frown. “By the way, Eluria… Are you absolutely certain?”

“Mm… About what?”

“About what you’re planning to do after we deal with the Altanian forces.” Their plan didn’t stop at just intercepting the attack—they also had plans for *after*. “You finally have the very ideal life you’ve always wanted. In fact, your life now is surely more wonderful than anything you could have dreamed of back then. So…I can’t say I’m pleased by your decision.”

“Are you saying that…because you have my dad’s memories?”

Elise nodded. “He wanted you to be happy—that was always his number one goal. He wouldn’t have wanted you to throw away this happiness you’ve finally attained,” she muttered, as if passing on Wallus’s words for him.

However, Eluria simply smiled. “Do you remember the first time my dad used magic in front of me?”

“You’re talking about after that time you made a huge tree with magecraft?”

“Mm-hmm. I was so amazed back then. I believed that if I could do that too, then I could make everyone in the world happy.” Whether in the past or the future, this desire never changed—this was always the reason she’d set out to craft magic. “Right now, I’m very happy. So I want to do what I never managed before.” Eluria closed her eyes, imagining the version of herself that had drowned in endless despair.

Elise stared at her for a moment before her lips quirked into a bitter smile. “I see. If that’s what you wish, then I won’t say any more.”

“Thank you. But I still have something to say.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Back then, I worked really hard on that magecraft ritual, yet you used future magic to win over your daughter and were so smug about it. Have you no shame?”

“What are you asking *me* for?! That was Wallus!” Elise shrieked, indignantly flailing her hands.

“I just can’t accept it…” Eluria stuck out her lip in a pout. It happened so long ago, but she was still hung up on it. Apparently, she’d been a competitive spirit since childhood.

Before Eluria could bore a hole through Elise with her razor-sharp glare, a quiet knock sounded from the door, followed by a girl’s voice. “Excuse me. Is Headmaster Lammel in?”

“Yes, I’m here. Come in,” Elise called.

“Ah. Pardon me… Huh?” The voice paused, and some flustered clacking sounded from the other side’s doorknob. “What? This door—it won’t open!”

“The handle! Turn the handle!” called another, more familiar voice.

“I-I’m already turning it,” the first person whimpered.

“Yeah… I don’t think it will open if you’re pulling it when it’s supposed to be pushed,” said a third person—also a familiar voice.

Raid slowly stood and approached the door.

“Oh! It finally ope— Eek!”

The moment the door swung open, a girl came tumbling in at full force. Raid caught her in his arms, almost as if he’d seen it coming.

“Huh? Why am I hanging in the air…?”

“You’re not. I caught you.”

The girl slowly looked up and, the moment she saw Raid’s face, *shrieked*. “Eeeeek!”

“I’m mildly offended,” Raid deadpanned as he landed a light chop on her head.

Totori rushed into the room. “Raid, what are you doing?! She may be just an acquaintance to you, but she’s still the ruler of our continent, okay?!”

“I had a feeling she was going to fall…” Savad muttered, following after Totori.

Raid turned to them. “You should’ve contacted us when you arrived. We’ve been waiting here every day to welcome the VIP.”

Savad sheepishly scratched his head. “Well, that was the plan, but she insisted on surprising you…”

Meanwhile, Elise looked between them and curiously cocked her head. “Um, I know Savad and Totori, but that girl… Do you know her, Raid?”

“Sure do. I’m surprised she hasn’t changed a single bit,” he

mused as he ruffled her hair.

“Ahhh, please stop…!” she cried, flailing her hands in the air.

Eluria stared at the black-haired girl…then at the pointed ears on her head, and gasped. “Wait, is she…?”

“Oh, apologies for the late introduction!” Noticing Eluria’s gaze, the girl straightened her back, her ears standing tall, as she primly bowed her head. “I am Mifuru, the Imperial Lord of Legnare.”

◇

Their group moved to the sitting room beside Elise’s office and settled down.

Mifuru, the Imperial Lord of Legnare, settled down on her seat and cradled a teacup in her hands. “The western continent’s tea is quite sweet,” she remarked as she softly blew on the liquid. Her expression was relaxed, and her large black tail swished leisurely from side to side. “May I ask what this tea is called?”

“Mm… It’s called milk tea,” Eluria replied. “I heard beastdwellers aren’t fond of hot drinks, so we made it a little lukewarm.”

“Oh my, how kind of you. Thank you.” Mifuru smiled. “Milk tea, hmm? How fascinating, that here in the west tea is made out of milk.”

Totori awkwardly cleared her throat and whispered, “My lord, it’s called milk tea because milk is *mixed* with the tea.”

“Ack… My apologies. I’ve been too holed up in the palace…” Mifuru whimpered as her ears fell flat over her head. She looked so miserable, it was hard to believe she was the ruler and icon of the entire eastern continent.

That said, this was entirely in line with Raid’s image of the girl named Mifuru. “You’re as wimpy as I remember,” he mused.

“P-Please don’t call me wimpy! I will have you know that I am a very important person!”

“You sure are. Can’t possibly get more important than the Imperial Lord of Legnare.”

“I’ve been promoted, I have!” Mifuru preened, her tail now swishing proudly.

Raid chuckled. “I’m not sure this could be considered a simple ‘promotion’…”

A thousand years ago, Mifuru had conveyed to him—with much

struggle, through the language barrier—that she was of considerable standing. But since she'd helped reorganize the nation after a seemingly endless period of strife, she had now achieved the position of Imperial Lord—quite the unprecedented feat that was much more significant than a "promotion."

Regardless, to Raid, she had always been a very meek and timid girl. After he'd saved her when she'd washed ashore, she was constantly shrinking in on herself and mumbling one apology after another. Back then, he thought it might have been in part because of the language barrier between them at the time. Seeing her now, though, it seemed this was just who she was.

"Er..." Elise reluctantly glanced between them. "Okay, I think I get the picture now. But Raid, how in the world are you acquainted with the Imperial Lord?"

"I picked her up on the beach a thousand years ago," he answered bluntly.

The elf groaned. "Anything goes with you, doesn't it?"

Raid shrugged. "A Calamity appeared in Legnare a thousand years ago, and Mifuru came over to the western continent looking for help. So I went and beat it up."

"Indeed!" Mifuru chimed in. "We were powerless in the face of that monster, but the God of Victory saved Legnare with a single swing of his broadsword—and in no more than one week!" Incidentally, of that one week, he had spent one day subjugating the monster and the remaining six going to and from the eastern continent.

Elise turned to Raid in exasperation. "How about you stop saving entire countries like you're running a quick errand?"

"I was in a rush, okay? I couldn't be away from the front line for too long..." He sighed, then turned to Mifuru. "Actually, I'm surprised you were so sure I was the same person just on Totori and Savad's word."

"I picked up your rich scent!" Mifuru exclaimed.

Raid turned to Totori. "Care to interpret?"

"We beastdwellers are more sensitive to mana than the ordinary person and can use it to tell people apart. For simplicity, we often refer to the distinctions as scents."

"Oh, thank goodness." Raid sighed.

Eluria nodded. "Don't worry, Raid. You smell good," she said as

she sniffed at the air. Come to think of it, she also had quite the impressive sense of smell.

"Anyway..." Raid continued. "It's been an entire millennium since we last met, Mifuru, but I'd like to ask you a question right off the bat."

"Ah... About the Calamity a thousand years ago, yes?"

"Right. Tell us about the similarities between the sorcery we saw in the Libynia Desert and the one that appeared in the past."

Mifuru took a moment to straighten her back and smooth her expression. "The events that transpired in Libynia Desert have been conveyed to me by Totori and Savad," she began. "Forbidden arts are a deplorable craft that must be condemned as well as an unsavory part of our history. Thus, as the Imperial Lord of Legnare, I am afraid that I cannot unconditionally offer related information to foreign nations."

"Even in an informal setting like this?"

"Indeed. The foes you met in Libynia Desert had successfully snuck into Legnare and even bypassed the palace's defenses, all the way into the inner courts. My gag order can only do so much—I cannot offer information so freely, lest my people start suspecting information leakage to the west. Ultimately, this could even impact our diplomatic relations and shake our country's stability."

Raid sighed. "I see... And that's why you came here in person?"

"Correct. To maintain my status as the symbol of Legnare, I refrain from appearing in public and limit my contact with others," Mifuru explained. "This would mark the first time in a millennium that I have appeared in public. The people's attention will be focused on me and my appearance rather than worrying over the familiarity of the most recent calamity."

The Imperial Lord of Legnare, who was seen as a legend even in Legnare, had not only appeared in public but even gone to visit the distant western continent. The effects would be tremendous. It would reassure the populace that the situation was now safe enough for their highest authority figure to step out of the nation, as well as serve as a bigger piece of news to distract them from the previous issue. It could even be seen as a show of intent to improve relations with Vegalta and other western countries. This was Mifuru's decision as the Imperial Lord—the ruler of Legnare

who offered her everything for the nation and had protected it for over a thousand years.

"But you still came here," Raid said. "That means you have intentions of sharing information with us, no?"

"But of course. We are alive today thanks to the God of Victory—no, thanks to *you*, Lord Raid. Hence, as long as you accept our conditions, I shall gladly share information."

Raid squinted. "Conditions?"

"Huh? Oh, um, it's nothing so serious, okay?! This is all for Legnare... Ah, maybe it's kind of for me too, but anyway...!" Mifuru flailed her hands around before taking a deep breath and calming herself. A moment later, she straightened her back, clenched her fists, and boldly declared, "I...want *you*, Lord Raid Freeden!"

Raid slowly blinked. "Uh... Right..."

"May I take that as a 'yes'?!"

"Hold your horses. That was just me struggling to process what you said."

"Unfortunately, I *cannot* hold my horses! I have come here with the resolve to declare these talks null and void should I fail to receive an immediate response!" Mifuru vigorously bobbed her head, her tail shaking eagerly behind her. Incidentally, her gaze was also flicking restlessly between Raid and the girl seated beside him—Eluria. "I take it you are the Sage of this western continent, yes?!"

"I-I am indeed..." she mumbled.

"I am fully aware that you are currently engaged to Lord Raid! However, I have felt deeply for him since the day he saved my life a thousand years ago! Simply put, your *love rival* has arrived on the scene!"

"O-Oh...?"

"As you can see, I am a fox—a vixen, if you will! As the female lead, you must now retaliate against my advances!" Mifuru exclaimed, staring at Eluria with a gaze full of hope and expectation.

The rest of the room's occupants watched speechlessly, baffled by the odd turn of events.

Eluria was among them, until she recovered and curled her lips into a frown. "No... I won't let you have him." She wrapped her arms around Raid, hugging him tightly as she looked Mifuru right

in the eye. “Raid is mine. You can’t take him from me. *Ever*.”

The two gazes clashed like electricity in the air for a moment—until Mifuru quietly placed one hand against her cheek and tightly clenched the other. “Marvelous,” she whispered, her expression melting into a full-faced smile. “Ahh, what a dream come true! To think the day would come where I get to personally witness the Hero and the Sage’s splendidly harmonious relationship…!”

“My lord, your nose is bleeding,” Totori muttered, offering a handkerchief.

“Ack… P-Pardon me. This scene was simply too much…” Mifuru sheepishly scratched her head. Once Totori finished wiping her nose for her, Mifuru beamed and clasped her hands together. “Ah, that was wonderful! Now, back to the topic at hand!”

“No, *not* back to the topic,” Raid deadpanned. “What the heck just happened?”

Mifuru gasped. “Are you giving me permission to express my overflowing passion and enthusiasm?!”

“Make it short and concise, please… And intelligible.”

“Er… In that case, this should do!” Mifuru reached into thin air and took out a book. It appeared to be quite the antique, with some tears here and there, but it also sported indications of having been mended, revealing how precious it was to its owner. And on its cover was the title, which Mifuru very proudly read aloud, “*Once Upon a Sage’s Love*!” Her tail swished vigorously in excitement—so vigorously that Raid wondered if it might fly right off. “Incidentally, this is the first edition published eight hundred years ago!!!”

“Oh… Quite old then,” Raid mumbled blankly.

“I first read it only after we established diplomatic relations with the western continent, but from there I started collecting the various editions published in different eras! I keep them all locked away so securely, you’d wonder if they’re records on forbidden arts!”

“Yeah, just…keep them locked up, please.” Raid cast a sideward glance at Eluria and Elise—they were both very blatantly avoiding his gaze. “Is that the book?”

Elise hung her head. “Yes…”

“Who wrote the first one?”

“Uh… The first inheritor after Wallus died…”

“And why was Eluria so desperate to keep me away from it?”

“Well, *Sage’s Love* is geared toward women, so the Hero is really romanticized, and there are some pretty…flowery depictions…”

“Don’t think I didn’t catch you using the book’s nickname,” Raid said with a glare. Nevertheless, it seemed he had no need to ask for further details. He sighed and turned to Mifuru. “All right, let’s get back on topic. You said you…*wanted me*?”

“Ah, you see, I phrased it that way to draw out the Sage’s reaction… To elaborate, as the Imperial Lord of Legnare, I would like to announce your power as the origin of Legnarian forbidden arts. *That* is my condition.” Mifuru quietly cleared her throat. “I’ve heard that your power is currently treated as an unknown type of magic here in the western continent. If we tie it in with Legnare’s God of Victory, then it would be known that power of Legnarian origin has birthed a new special-class magician. The reason your power remained unidentifiable until now would be because of the information restrictions on forbidden arts. With Savad as a precedent, it would be a fairly believable story, no?”

Elise hummed. “And that’s why you had me sit in on this meeting?”

“Precisely. I’ve heard from Totori and Savad that you are an ally, but more importantly, your word as the headmaster of the Vegalta Royal Institute of Magic could lend credibility and help us disseminate this news.”

“Easier said than done… But I guess it’d be great to have a solid explanation for Raid’s power.” Elise bobbed her head. “Besides, establishing *both* Raid and Eluria as *our* special-class magicians would likely shake the power relations between the continents.” It turned out there were some power politics among the magicians between the eastern and western continents.

Raid shrugged. “As long as you don’t make me out to be the God of Victory.”

“As the Imperial Lord, I promise that Legnare will not impose any restrictions whatsoever on your movement or actions,” Mifuru declared.

“You should’ve led with that.”

“But then I wouldn’t have been able to hear the Sage say the line!” Mifuru puffed up her cheeks. It seemed that over the course of a millennium, this girl had changed—and in more ways than

one, unfortunately. “In any case, please rest assured: I will not be taking Lord Raid from you!”

Eluria nodded. “O-Okay… Thank goodness.”

“By the way, I love it when the Sage is assertive!”

“I’m not sure I can adjust my character as I please…”

“I-Is it too tall a task after all?!”

Eluria hummed. “If you let me touch your tail, then maybe I can give it a try.”

“Why, that’s no problem at all. Please, touch to your heart’s content!”

After establishing a rather questionable deal, Eluria sat beside Mifuru and began caressing her large and fluffy tail. It seemed the two of them were getting along splendidly.

Raid sighed. “So? Could you tell us your thoughts on the incident or any info on forbidden arts?”

“Very well. First, if I were to compare this incident with the Legnare Calamity as I remember it, I would say they are very likely a similar kind of forbidden art.” Mifuru’s expression warped bitterly as she spoke. “A politician at the time ordered for a residential area of their city to be purged—supposedly, they were planning an insurrection. In reality, the residents were refugees who had lost their homes due to local disputes. The purge was executed despite the lack of solid evidence.”

Raid narrowed his eyes. “In other words, somebody spurred the politician into conducting forbidden arts.”

“I am of that belief as well. At the time, forbidden arts were not strictly regulated. They were more widely known as a sort of miraculous technique. Moreover, a thousand years ago, many ethnic groups in the eastern continent were engaged in local conflict, meaning authority and power had little in the way of stability.”

“Toss a rumored ‘path to immortality’ into that chaos, and you’d find a ton of people thinking it’s worth trying all those inhumane methods and experiments—right?”

“It is as you say. They believed that forbidden arts would place the entire continent within their grasp. They sought power not too dissimilar to what I now hold.”

Humans were greedy creatures, never satisfied with what they already had. Once they attained immense wealth and power, next

on the list were eternal life and immortality. This was especially the case in Legnare, where the existence of unaging beastdwellers made immortality seem far more attainable to the populace.

"The ritual was activated through death—in other words, through the use of the mana and soul contained within a person's blood. Thus, the horrific bloodshed opened a gigantic hole in the middle of the city. Many perished again, and each death further expanded its size. Eventually, the Calamity emerged from within the opening."

Raid narrowed his eyes. "So the Calamity didn't appear at the start?"

"No. It only appeared after the city had collapsed and countless lives had been lost. From that, we can deduce that the ritual progresses and becomes more complex proportional to the amount of blood shed and souls taken. Moreover, considering that the hole's size continued to expand after the ritual was technically complete, it must have constantly been taking in blood and souls."

Mifuru then took a breath and looked Raid in the eye. "You say that those who infiltrated Libynia Desert's underground ruins will come attacking once more, and that we must fend them off. Unfortunately, it seems we are placed at a rather tricky disadvantage from the onset." She furrowed her brow and sighed. "That is, the only way to stop them from completing the ritual…is to ensure not a single person dies."

That was the condition for their victory, and it went without saying how difficult a task that would be. Murder was the simplest and most basic means of fighting a war. Killing someone stopped them for good—unless, of course, some external magic came into play. However, with that option removed from their arsenal, they now needed to *subdue* their enemies. Any method they could come up with would surely be incomparably more burdensome than simply killing them off.

Raid and Eluria knew this very well. Their armies had clashed time and time again yet sustained minimal loss of life over the course of fifty years, only because the two of them had colluded, in a way, to minimize damages. Needless to say, this was an approach they couldn't take with such an aggressive invader this time around.

"Specifically, how many deaths would trigger the ritual?" Raid

asked.

“Most likely…a hundred, I believe.”

“That’s practically asking for zero deaths…”

In war, a hundred lives could be lost in an instant. Before Raid and Eluria took up the front lines of their respective countries, a single battle had once seen tens of thousands of deaths. They couldn’t even work with a margin this time. Moreover…

“It doesn’t even have to be deaths on *our* side, right?”

“Correct. We postulate that forbidden arts are activated with mana-rich blood. Who that blood comes from is of no importance.”

“We’re dealing with the types who’d give up their lives to accomplish their goals. So if they run into an obstacle, they probably won’t hesitate to offer their own lives to activate the ritual.”

They could choose not to kill the attackers, but the ball wasn’t solely in their court. The attackers could simply switch to Plan B and kill themselves—it was truly that simple for them. They would stop at nothing to activate the ritual, whether it was the people of this world…or they themselves who needed to pay the price. Needless to say, the former was far more favorable—hence this whole desperate endeavor. The Altanian soldiers would take life after life to save themselves, but even if they perished along the way, their mission of invading this world would be fulfilled.

Raid scoffed. “They really never change… Scum till the very end.”

“I’ve compiled all necessary information regarding forbidden arts,” Mifuru said. “I hope it will serve you well.”

“All right. And thanks for coming all the way here.”

“N-Not at all! I owe my very life to you, and besides, I even got to meet the Sage in person. I am quite satisfied!” she exclaimed, bowing over and over. As the Imperial Lord, she spoke with much grace and dignity, but apparently *this* was her true self.

Eluria snapped her head up. “Mifuru, will you be here until the integrated exam?”

“Hmm… Yes, I will. You might still need to consult me for more information. Totori and Savad will be with me as my guards all the while.”

“Do you have any work to do in the meantime?”

“No. I will be tightly guarded until the day of, and thus—while it may be quite rude of me—I will refrain from greeting any other authorities.”

“Mm. Okay.” Eluria nodded and stood from her seat. “Totori, Savad.”

Totori’s ears perked up. “Hmm? What is it?”

“If you’re worried about her security, then don’t be,” Savad said. “This *is* our job. Besides, the public only knows that we’re escorting a Legnarian VIP.”

“Can I take Mifuru out to the capital?”

Totori and Savad blinked. “Huh?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take responsibility for her safety.”

“No, no, hang on a minute! Where did that even come from?!” Totori exclaimed.

“I wanna hang out with her,” Eluria replied matter-of-factly.

“So it came out of nowhere!”

Savad looked between them and scratched his cheek. “Er… But wait, doesn’t it take a few days to travel from Palmare to Vegalta’s royal capital? We may have some time until the exam day, but it’s—”

“It’ll take five seconds with my teleportation magic.”

“Oh… As expected of the Sage…” Savad sighed and held his head.

Indeed, teleportation was a simple task for Eluria. She just used normal transportation methods because she might cause confusion by appearing at nearly the same time in distant locations, and because Raid’s unique mana made long-distance teleportation difficult. However, according to her, her main reasons were that “I’d have to wait for everyone else anyway” and “I’m scared I’ll get lost.”

“If you’re taking Mifuru out, I guess I’m staying here?” Raid said.

“Mm-hmm. I’m sure you have other stuff to do anyway.”

“Sure do. I wanna keep track of everyone’s progress, and now that we’ve got some new intel, I also have to fine-tune our plans for exam day. By the way, will you be back for dinner?”

Eluria nodded. “Though if we take longer, I might sleep over at Kris’s.”

“Oh, yeah. No need to worry about security in the palace. If you’re staying there, then could you tell Princess Kris I’m handing

you over since I couldn't keep our promise?"

Totori looked between them in disbelief. "Why are these two talking like she's just going for a walk around the block?!"

"And they're treating the princess like their neighbor to boot…" Savad mumbled.

Eluria turned around and smiled. "Well, Mifuru? Want to hang out for a bit?"

Mifuru met her gaze for a moment before returning the smile. "Yes… I certainly cannot turn the Sage down, now can I?"

Totori gaped. "A-Are you sure about this, my lord?!"

"Lady Eluria, could we bring Savad as well?" asked Mifuru. "He is very adept at supporting covert operations. He can also conceal my ears and tail for me."

"Mm… His mana isn't as dense as Raid's, so it should be fine."

"Very well. Then it's decided!"

"But I want to go too!" Totori whined.

Savad sighed. "Totori… I'll bring you next time, okay? Some of us need to stay here, or it'll cause problems."

"Guess you're hanging with us, Totori," said Raid.

"Nooo! I want to hang out with Eluria and the Imperial Lord!"

Elise nodded. "Oh, I get you, Totori. Yes, I completely understand! But too bad—our work's a-waiting!" She dragged Totori back to her office with a big smile on her face, looking *extremely* pleased to have a companion in the midst of her suffering.

Eluria turned to Raid. "Then we'll be off."

"Sure. Could I ask you a favor?"

"Mm-hmm. What is it?"

Raid's lips broke into a sheepish smile. "Take care of Mifuru for me, yeah?"

Eluria nodded. "Sure thing. You can count on me."

And with that, Eluria, Mifuru, and Savad disappeared from the room.

◆

As Eluria had promised, it took no time at all to teleport their group to the royal capital. Specifically, she landed them in the Caldwin estate. Here, they did not need to worry about being

spotted, and they didn't even need to explain themselves to Eluria's parents, as both were currently out. Not to mention, Eluria's entire wardrobe was right there for Mifuru to borrow.

One quick outfit change later, Mifuru stood on the streets of the capital clothed in civilian garb. Her beastly features were hidden from the public's sight, courtesy of Savad, although Eluria found it a little unfortunate—after all, Mifuru's sparkling eyes and wagging tail were a sight everyone should be able to see.

"So this is Vegalta's capital!" Mifuru gushed, her excitement palpable in the air. "I've seen pictures, but it's far more impactful in person!"

Eluria nodded. "I'm glad you like it."

"I *love* it! It feels so...three-dimensional!"

"Mm-hmm... Not every country builds their capital on a mountain, after all. We also have a ton of springs, so there are some similarities to Palmare's infrastructure."

"I see... How novel! You see, Shenyan—home to my palace—is built on level ground and does not have such sloped waterways," Mifuru mused. Her tail leisurely swayed to and fro as she swept her curious gaze around the cityscape. As she'd said earlier, there was a different charm to visiting a place and seeing its sights in person.

"You might fall in if you lean over too far," Eluria warned.

"Urk... My apologies. I nearly ruined your clothes..." Mifuru's tail drooped in shame. She had set aside her usual outfit in favor of the clothes that the servants of House Caldwin had prepared. They could have simply had Savad conceal her entire figure, but that would have actually been counterproductive—passersby might have been drawn to the odd gap in space. Hence why Mifuru had changed into civilian clothes—to avoid the risk of drawing scrutiny. And with her ears hidden under a newsboy cap, the spell needed only to be applied to her tail, which was too large to hide with more traditional means.

Eluria tapped her ear. *"Savad, is everything okay on your end?"*

"All good. I'm following from the shadows," Savad responded, his voice sounding in her head.

Using a magic communicator would have stood out, and mouthing their words ran the risk of being lipread, so they instead communicated by directing their mana toward one another. With

this method, Savad could even keep tabs on their location by tracing the mana flow. It was the perfect setup.

"Let's have a blast today," Eluria said.

Mifuru beamed. "Yes! I can't wait!"

"I'm thinking we can grab a bite while walking around."

"Ooh, that sounds nice!"

"Mm-hmm. It's fun to stroll through town while snacking on street food."

"Wow... I've seen people do that during the new year's festival, but this would be my first time trying it myself...!"

"What's your favorite food, Mifuru?"

"Meat!"

"Hmm... I don't think any stalls here sell deep-fried mice, unfortunately."

"Hngh... It's true that Legnare has a tradition of offering mice to foxes, and beastdwellers do tend to adapt the preferences of the beast that dwells within them, but I am—"

"I was joking," Eluria deadpanned.

"Right! Of course! Come to think of it, that *was* a very obscure piece of Legnarian culture...!"

Eluria shrugged. "Besides, mice actually aren't half bad."

"Y-You've tried one?!"

"Mm-hmm. In the past, when we ran out of rations in the field. You should keep your hands off mice around human civilization, but wild mice around forests or rivers are edible if processed well."

Eluria and Mifuru walked down the street while sharing some lighthearted chatter, until Eluria furtively cast a sideward glance. *"Savad, I have a request."*

"Hmm? What is it?"

"I want to have a private conversation with Mifuru. Could you conceal our conversation for a while?"

There was a short pause. *"Could I ask why?"*

"Because I want to speak with Mifuru*—not the Imperial Lord."*

"All right. I'll keep my distance for ten minutes, then I'll contact you again."

"Mm... Thanks." Eluria nodded and turned to her new friend. "Mifuru, I want to apologize."

"Huh? Wh-Whatever for...?"

"You must've been so happy to see Raid again, but you held

back because I was there.” Eluria smiled faintly. “But I can tell…you like him, don’t you?”

Mifuru’s eyes grew wide, but her expression swiftly settled into a wan smile. “No… You’ve no need to apologize, Lady Eluria,” she muttered with a shake of her head. “My feelings were never fated to bear fruit. I am a beastdweller, a being divorced from humanity. Lord Raid may possess great power, but in the end, he is just a human like the rest.”



Eluria could understand. As a former elf, she had once accepted that she and Raid had incompatible lifespans.

“Besides,” Mifuru continued, “I already knew that Lord Raid had someone else in his heart.”

“You did…?”

“Yes. He saved Legnare yet turned down the glory and fame with a smile…saying that he had somebody waiting for him on the battlefield.”

It was a smile that Eluria could imagine all too well—that bright and boyish grin he always wore as he ran across the battlefield.

“Back then, I had no way of knowing who exactly he meant,” Mifuru continued. “But just one look at his smile, and I could easily see how deeply he felt for that person. Suffice it to say, however, that I never expected to learn of their identity through a romance novel…”

Eluria pouted. “Me neither…”

“I had tasked a confidant to gather information on Lord Raid, but nothing was found save for that novel. Regardless, the Sage’s existence was indisputable, and I could tell that the Hero in the story was based on Lord Raid.”

That novel had been written as bait for those who tried investigating the Hero’s existence, but it was also Wallus’s prayer for his daughter’s happiness. The first author, having inherited Wallus’s memories, must have written about Raid’s appearance and personality in great detail—something Mifuru could easily verify, as she’d met the man himself.

“I always knew he had someone else in his heart. That was why…I could become the Imperial Lord,” Mifuru said with a bitter smile. “He heeded my pleas and risked his life to save the people of my nation. My feelings may not bear fruit, but even so, I wanted to stand before him with my head held high. Thus, I resolved to unite Legnare.”

In that moment back then, the girl named Mifuru had become the Imperial Lord of Legnare—not for any selfish ambition, but to pray for the happiness of the person she adored.

Mifuru had believed that over time, the feelings that had bloomed in her youth would eventually wither into naught but the “past.” But alas, she had yet to forget. A thousand years had come and gone—the greater portion of which she’d spent in obscurity—

but she found herself crossing the sea the very moment she'd heard he was alive.

"And I'll have you know I meant every word I said earlier," Mifuru added. "Had you not spoken up, Lady Eluria, I was very much intent on taking Lord Raid for myself."

"Yeah, I could kind of tell."

"Why, I even planned on appealing to his emotions—acting like the damsel in distress that I was in the past and stirring up a sense of protectiveness in him..."

"Okay, *that*, I never would have guessed..."

Mifuru snickered, her lips curving into a confident smirk. "I told you, no? I am a vixen. I may not look it, but I've lived a full millennium. However..." Her smile strained sadly, and she hung her head. "I suppose I've been the Imperial Lord for far too long. My feelings remain, but much larger now are my responsibility and importance to Legnare."

Mifuru's position placed an immense and insurmountable weight on her shoulders. Her conundrum was one Raid and Eluria were also familiar with. The Hero and the Sage of the past, despite acknowledging one another's strength, had been compelled to remain no more than rivals and enemies by the great responsibility on their backs. It was only once they were freed of those responsibilities in this current life that they could finally be together.

However, it was quite the opposite for Mifuru. She had started out as an ordinary beastdweller, then over the years had grown into an irreplaceable pillar of Legnare. Her feelings for Raid had remained unchanged within her, but everything she'd built up—her people, her land—would not allow her to be *just Mifuru*.

"So you need not blame yourself, Lady Eluria," Mifuru quietly finished. "The moment I decided to become the Imperial Lord was the moment I settled for praying for Lord Raid's happiness and striving to live a life I could be proud of. Both came to be...and for that, I feel so very blessed."

Eluria stared mutely at the girl's gentle smile. After a short pause, she reached out and poked Mifuru's cheeks.

"Er... L-Lady Eluria?"

"Mm. I get it now." Eluria nodded as she drew her hand back. "Change of plans. No more food stalls."

“Aw… No meat?”

“Maybe later. There’s somewhere else I want to go first.”

Eluria grabbed Mifuru’s hand and led her down the street, past the rows of storefronts and displays, until only high-end shops remained around them. They came to a stop in front of one particular store.

“We’re here,” Eluria announced.

“Um, may I ask what store this is…?”

“It sells all sorts of papers and writing tools.”

Eluria had learned about this store from Kris. It was quite old and had built a good reputation in the capital, so much so that royalty and aristocrats often patronized this establishment.

“What will we be buying from here?” Mifuru asked.

“A stationery set.”

“S-Stationery…?”

“Mm-hmm. Like papers and envelopes—stuff for writing a letter.”

“Do you need to write someone a letter?”

“No, not me. You.”

Mifuru cocked her head. “Huh? Me?”

Eluria nodded, looked her in the eye, and declared, “You will write a *love letter* to Raid.”

Mifuru immediately reached out and poked Eluria’s cheek. “I may not be the most fluent in this continent’s language, but those are words I recognize,” she deadpanned.

“Yeah. Love letters are a thing in Legnare too, aren’t they?”

“Er… If I recall correctly, you are Lord Raid’s fiancée, yes? And your feelings are mutual?”

“Mm-hmm. A recent, happy discovery.”

“Then why are you asking *me* to write him a love letter?!” Mifuru snapped, poking Eluria’s cheeks over and over.

Not only was it out of the ordinary—Eluria was essentially telling Mifuru to dig up the feelings she had desperately buried deep within herself. It was nothing short of cruel, but Eluria’s gaze was resolute.

“Nothing hurts more…than leaving your feelings unspoken.”

Eluria recalled her final moments in the past. As she’d realized that death was near, the last thing she’d thought of had been…Raid’s face. And not once had he left her thoughts, not even

in the future where she'd gained a new life—so much so that she had gone looking for him as if grasping at straws. And so, Eluria knew painfully well that with unforgettable feelings came indelible regret.

"Today, I want to hang out with you. Not with the Imperial Lord of Legnare, but with *you*—the girl named Mifuru."

Such had been Eluria's plan from the start. For just this day, Mifuru would not be the Imperial Lord—not in her speech, nor her actions, and most especially not in the words she would pen in her letter. They would belong to Mifuru—just Mifuru.

"Something precious is still smoldering in your heart," Eluria whispered. "Please, don't extinguish it with your own two hands."

The two girls who shared their love for the same person locked gazes, firm and resolute. Mifuru let out a small sigh as her lips quirked into a meek smile. "A thousand years ago, I would've broken down into tears on the spot."

"The longer you live, the stronger you get."

"Ah. Come to think of it, you used to be an elf, didn't you?"

"Though I guess I'm younger than you either way..." Eluria mumbled.

Mifuru chuckled. "I've lived for over a millennium, after all. Why, you can think of me as your big sister, if you'd like!"

"My family just keeps growing..."

"Indeed." The beastdweller smiled as she reached out to open the door of the stationery shop. "In any case, I thank you for your kind— Huh? Th-This door...!"

"Needs to be pushed," Eluria supplied.

"I-I'm pushing it this time—I swear!"

Eluria quietly looked down. "I think you need to turn the knob too."

"Ugh... Perhaps staying cooped up in the palace for a thousand years wasn't such a smart move..." Mifuru's tail drooped glumly.

Eluria patted her shoulder. "Relatable. I'm a homebody too."

The two girls walked into the shop. A clerk immediately stepped out from between the orderly shelves and bowed. "Welcome. How may I help you today?"

Eluria blinked before taking a step back. "It's all yours, Mifuru."

"What?" Mifuru stiffened, then leaned over and whispered, "Are you going to leave the *shut-in* in charge of this conversation?!"

“But I’ve never gone out shopping…”

“Well, *I* hardly talk to anyone outside my inner circle!”

Alas, it turned out neither had thought about what would happen after successfully opening the door.

The clerk observed the two flustered girls and bowed once more. “My apologies, Lady Eluria,” she said with an awkward smile. “I’ve heard you’re a very quiet person, but still, I approached you in hopes of giving you a good experience in our establishment…”

Eluria flinched. “Y-You know me?”

“Why, who in the capital *wouldn’t* know the brilliant young lady of House Caldwin? Her Highness has even notified us to treat you with utmost care should you ever come to visit.”

“Wait… Kris did that?”

“Indeed. She dispatched a notice to all the business partners of the royal family.”

“She sent a memo on my lack of social skills…”

Mifuru placed her hand on Eluria’s shoulder and smiled sadly. “Lady Eluria, I know this may be a bit rich coming from me…but I suggest you start making efforts to reintegrate into society.”

Eluria frowned. She didn’t think she was *that* bad; after all, it wasn’t like she actively avoided going out. But in any case, what was done was done—Kris’s questionable exposé aside, at least now the clerk was here to help.

“Would you like to take your time looking around? You could also just call me if you need me.”

“Mm… Well, you’re already here—could you recommend us a good stationery set? The kind you’d give someone you’re close with, like a friend or a lover. We’d like two, please.”

“Understood. I shall bring over a few sets.” The clerk bowed and took her leave.

Mifuru tilted her head. “Um… Since you asked for two, I presume you’re going to write a letter as well, Lady Eluria?”

“Yeah. I got a response from my friend yesterday, so I need to send a thank you letter back.”

“Goodness! A friend? It seems the princess will need to send out an update!”

“I have friends,” Eluria grumbled indignantly. “She’s away from the Institute right now, and our magic communicators don’t work across the western strait, so we’ve been exchanging letters

instead.”

Eluria looked out the window, her lips curving into a wistful smile. “She’s…a very precious friend of mine.”

◇

It wasn’t until the deep red sunset hues seeped in through the office window that the group in Palmare received an update from Savad.

“Sounds like they’re staying over at the palace,” Raid said. “Apparently, Mifuru got carried away and ate too much street food, so she might hurl if they teleport back here.”

“Oh dear,” Totori murmured. “Yes, that…sounds like a smart choice.”

“Uh-huh… Wouldn’t want her soiling the documents we spent all afternoon organizing…” Elise grumbled from behind a mountain of papers.

“Ugh! I wanted to sightsee in the capital too…!”

“Didn’t Savad promise that he’d take you next time?” Raid chuckled. “Besides, it sounds like Eluria and Mifuru had some good bonding time today, so how ’bout we leave it at that?”

“Yeah! I mean, look at me!” Elise snapped. “I can’t even remember the last time I had a break!”

“*Your* case is entirely hopeless,” Raid deadpanned, making the elf hang her head in despair. He sighed and shook his head. “Anyway, let’s summarize our findings for the day.”

The girls nodded and straightened their backs.

“First off, we figured out how they made a new Hero,” he began. “My suspicions on this were right on the mark.”

Elise hummed. “You said they must have succeeded thanks to Viteos Altane…and your sword, which he ran off with?”

“Right. My sword was made with the Hero’s mana, right?”

“It was. You said you just found it among a pile of weapons way back when, but I think you must have needed one so badly that you subconsciously manifested it with your mana.”

Back then, Raid had been searching for a weapon that could withstand his power. The countless swords he’d destroyed until then fueled his desire, and that led to him subconsciously forming one with his mana.

But after his death, his sword had *disappeared*.

According to Ryatt's report, Viteos Altane had apparently fled with it. However, it was hard to believe that a dethroned emperor fleeing from the clutches of a rebel army would feel the need to take a dead general's old sword with him—that is, unless he knew its *true* value.

"The future Altanians had only just killed Eluria at that point, so they were definitely still around. And since her death didn't reap the results they were hoping for, they went back to plan A and searched for me…only for me to turn up dead before they could even make contact. My sword must have been their last hope."

From there, the future Altanians made contact with Viteos and convinced him to take the sword—their new means of re-creating Hero.

"The rebellion began, and Viteos was allowed refuge in the future in exchange for handing them my sword. That guy was a sorry excuse for an emperor—no, a sorry excuse for a *human*—but he was still the emperor of Altane. They probably didn't want to risk changing the future by carelessly threatening or harming him."

Raid had always considered the possibility, but it was only when Mifuru instantly recognized him that he became certain. Since she could recognize his mana, she should have also been capable of recognizing the sword made out of his mana—yet she made no such mention of it. Thus, Raid could completely rule out the possibility that Viteos had crossed the sea to Legnare.

Moreover, if Viteos had drowned at sea, then Raid's sword—submerged along with him—would have caused malfunctions in passing ships and magic devices. From there, it would have only been a matter of time before it was found with modern-day magic technology. But this didn't happen either.

Thus, with his new knowledge on diverging timelines, Raid came to the likely conclusion that his sword must have vanished from *this world* altogether.

And there was another piece of evidence that corroborated this hypothesis.

"I was wondering why the future Altanians summoned the Calamity off the coast of Palmare…but it would make sense if that was where they'd made a 'hole' for Viteos to cross over to the

future. They wouldn't have had to worry about being spotted out at sea."

If their goal in the present was to activate the ritual, why not summon it somewhere more densely populated? Had they summoned it in the capital of Vegalta, for example, then they could not only reap many more sacrifices but even deal a blow to Eluria by destroying her home.

However, they hadn't done that—either because they couldn't…or they had some reason not to.

"According to Elise, they must've needed a large number of sacrifices to send their troops here to the past. In that case, I can see why they just reused the existing hole out in the sea."

Totori nodded. "I still can't quite wrap my head around all this past and future business, but purely in terms of sorcery…it's not impossible." Forbidden arts were so powerful, they could create a "connection" with the land. With this connection, the same ritual could be activated in the same location using fewer catalysts. "But Raid…" Totori frowned, her voice dropping into a growl. "What you said earlier—is it true?"

The Altanians had most likely summoned the Calamity off the coast of Palmare because they hadn't had enough sacrifices back in their timeline. But how, then, would they be able to fit their entire world population through it? If their end goal was to move to this timeline, then they would need a much bigger opening.

And as it turned out…the hole out at sea wasn't the only one. Another hole had been opened up a thousand years ago—in Legnare.

"Their goal," Raid declared, "is to connect the two holes to form a *gate*."

Two holes: one made by the Calamity in Legnare a millennium ago, and one above the sea that had been widened by the recent disaster. The Altanians must have been planning to connect these two points and draw a line—a *crack*—that would widen the opening, giving them the large supply route they so desperately needed.

"If that happens, then Legnare will surely see catastrophic damages." Totori frowned. "The place that the Calamity ravaged in the past has, by the Imperial Lord's efforts, been built up into what is now Grand Capital Shenyan. It is far more prosperous than it

was even before the Calamity, so who knows how many will perish if forbidden arts are activated there now?"

"Well, that's probably part of their plan. All those lives will feed into the ritual and form a bridge to the other timeline."

Elise sighed and scrunched up her nose in distaste. "Not like they haven't already committed mass murder, seeing as they were able to send troops back to the past. In their eyes, the people in the other timeline are no more than tools for their survival."

Raid shook his head. "I'm not saying you're wrong, but keep in mind that they don't have many options available to them. Either they survive or perish… And if there's only one path to survival, then they can only numb themselves to all the sacrifices that are needed to get there."

Put in their shoes, the people of this new timeline would have likely felt the same. It was much easier for humans to accept the unthinkable when the only other choice was total annihilation. Because of this, Raid had no intentions of berating them for their choice. That being said, he didn't plan on affirming their stance either.

"If worse comes to worst, they're probably willing to off themselves to activate the ritual," he continued. "But I'm sure they want to avoid using up the forces they sent here, so we can assume it's their last resort—an option they'll only turn to once they're in a deadlock."

Elise hummed. "And you said their goal is to secure all the VIPs coming for the integrated exam?"

"To be precise, they want to capture the VIPs to gain leverage moving forward. Their magic and technology may be more advanced, but they can't afford to turn this entire timeline into their enemy."

For the Altanian army, the best possible outcome was to activate the ritual with minimal sacrifices. After all, their timeline's population had been severely culled by Eluria's Calamities, and they'd even had to sacrifice many more to send their forces here to the past. Rather than wearing themselves and this world down through an all-out war, they would much rather hold the VIPs hostage and enslave the people of this timeline.

"Besides, they've probably sent in quite a sizable force already, considering the hole's current size. They must have enough

soldiers on standby to suppress the venue of the integrated exam."

"Ah, right. You mentioned they must be hiding at sea, yes? Using that 'submarine' or whatever it was you called it," Totori said.

"Officially, it's known as a magic submersible, something that is invented in the future," Elise said. "Unlike the magic ships in the present, they can dive and move underwater. Incidentally, it was invented by none other than Raid Freeden."

"The *other* Raid Freeden, you mean? Don't look at *me*..." He sighed. "Though, I'd be lying if I said I never thought of it myself... Not too surprised it's an actual thing in that timeline."

Raid had once proposed building "warships" and "submarines" to broaden their strategies in naval battles and stealth operations but had been dismissed because their battles against Vegalta were mainly on land. They had been no more than ideas in his head, so he was a little moved to learn that they had been fully realized in another timeline.

"The people of this world would never expect to find a boat and people underwater," Raid explained. "Sure, they'd probably conduct a naval survey, but nowhere too far from the coast—everyone's still busy stabilizing the areas damaged by the Calamity, after all. And since modern vessels stick to specific routes due to the complex eastern sea currents...the Altanians can stay in their submarine, just out of reach—and that's that."

Elise nodded. "They may be struggling with their supply route, but we can still assume they have nearly a thousand soldiers and enough weapons and resources for all of them."

"Their numbers aren't the biggest issue here—it's their technology, far more advanced and developed for battle. They've probably already gauged the level of our technology too... And they probably already know that combat here is magic-centric."

"Right... They might also throw in a few manadroids as manabeasts."

According to Elise, the armored dragons that appeared during their first simulation exam had actually been "manadroids." Once injected with mana, they could morph into certain creatures and mimic their abilities. That was how Wallus had gained a temporary form to fulfill his duties as Eluria's father. Thereafter, his successors would also utilize manadroids to stay hidden while changing

history from the shadows.

"Well, I'm sure they don't have too many of those," Elise mumbled. "But still, even a small number of anti-magic creatures is a threat. If only we had some manadroids of our own to mimic *their* natural predators…"

"You mean you don't have any?" Raid asked.

"A certain *someone* blasted mine to smithereens along with a mountain!"

"Hey, I had no choice. The kid and his team almost died back there."

"Urgh… Yes, that was my bad," Elise admitted. "They were only supposed to attack you guys, but my manadroids have gone through many repairs over the years, and something went wrong with their command system… Anyway, it was a whole string of unforeseen accidents…"

"Aren't you glad we were there?"

"Yes! I am truly, genuinely, and sincerely grateful for your assistance!!!" Elise instantly leaped from her couch and slammed her forehead on the ground. Such a young girl, yet she no longer hesitated to prostrate herself at a moment's notice. Raid shook his head, lamenting the pitiful sight.

"Still…" Totori frowned. "Raid, don't you have an idea as to where they are hiding?"

"I do, actually, and I'm pretty confident in it too. Their hiding spot would need to keep them hidden till the day of, have access to the quickest route to shore…and not to mention they need a spot on shore where they can unload their supplies. Not many areas meet those conditions."

"Then couldn't we make the first move? Or even lay traps and set barriers along their route? Why are we waiting for them to make their move on the exam day?"

"Most of our forces aren't used to naval battles, so making the first move is out of the question. As for traps and barriers, well, I'd say those are pointless considering those guys were able to infiltrate the Legnarian palace unnoticed."

"But don't we have three special-class magicians on our side? You and Eluria can even defeat a Calamity. Is that not enough?"

"It would've been—if we could afford to simply kill them all. But when our goal is to incapacitate and restrain nearly a thousand

men? Not possible. It'll all be over the moment they choose to bite their tongues." Raid calmly shook his head despite Totori's impatient frown. "If they succeed with the ritual, Legnare will bear the brunt of it. I understand that. That's why we need to prepare as best as we can."

"I understand as well..." Totori sighed. "However, a large chunk of our plan hinges on your deductions and conjecture. We've no solid proof that they will make a move on the exam day, much less appear where you say they will. It's no more than an armchair theory."

No matter how confident Raid was in his judgment, it was only natural for others to feel that the plan lacked basis and credibility. After all, it was mostly made under his assumptions and their logical conclusions.

However, Raid would beg to differ.

"It's not an armchair theory—it's my experience."

"Your...experience?"

He nodded. "I didn't spend years just fighting manabeasts and a few hundred armed forces. Since I fought in an era without magic and magic devices, the type of warfare I'm well acquainted with is about using anything and everything at your disposal—terrain, time, manpower, provisions, strategy, tactics, intel, sabotage, what have you."

Although magic had greatly diversified the strategies on the battlefield, it also took the spotlight away from others. If the terrain wasn't to your advantage, just change it or create a base. If you didn't have enough time or provisions, just bring the battle to a quick end with a large-scale spell. Not only did magic offer more solutions on the field, but it also became the best and strongest weapon to wield in battle.

However, their opponents were different this time. They possessed magic and technology far surpassing this era, and not to mention the magicians of this world didn't know how to fight as the underdogs.

But *Raid* knew. Altane had been a grand empire that possessed machine technology, but it had been no match for magic. Back then, he'd had to use all sorts of methods to cope.

"A thousand years ago, I fought against whole *armies* numbering from tens to hundreds of thousands—not just Vegalta

and the Sage, but all sorts of countries as well. Dealing with all the attacks on Altane's stupidly massive territory, grown through thoughtless colonization, was just business as usual for me."

A thousand years ago, the continent had not yet been unified—it was split into many smaller independent countries. Some had formed alliances and invaded Altane, while others had waged war on their own.

"And in that era, I was known as the Hero for nearly fifty years," Raid continued. "Even villagers near the front lines moved according to my word, all because they trusted me—not only on account of my ability to rival the Sage, but also because of my achievements as Altane's general."

Raid's subordinates hadn't been the only ones who trusted him. Even Altane's emperor and upper class, while ostracizing him, could not deny his ability. They certainly couldn't have afforded to replace him for fear of failing to maintain Altane's vast territories.

Raid's lips stretched into a bold and fearless grin.

"I wouldn't be the Hero if I were all brawn and no brain, you know?"

Chapter Four

If you were to ask someone, “What’s happening today?” most would answer, “The integrated exam.” Only a select few knew the *truth*—and one of them was the elven girl presently clutching her stomach with a face drained of color.

“Ughhh… My stomach’s killing me…” Elise wailed.

Eluria rubbed circles on her back. “You’ll be fine. We’ve prepared tons of stomach medicine.”

“It doesn’t sound like you’re expecting me to be fine…!”

In the venue that had been prepared by Palmare’s magic institute, the VIPs and audience were waiting to watch the exam proceedings through a gigantic projector in the very center of the arena. Raid and Eluria’s group, however, was gathered in the magic device control room.

Alma cackled as she loomed over the miserable little elf. “We’re *beyond* prepared for this. I can’t believe the nerves are still getting to you! Just trust His Excellency!”

Elise looked up at her with a petulant glare. “I don’t want to hear that from the person who barely finished her spell on time. We were seriously considering removing you from the plan until you *finally* responded two days ago!”

“Heh, well…” Alma sheepishly scratched her head. “Actually, Edward really knew his stuff—more than I expected, so I got a bit carried away adding in a bit of this and a little more of that… You get the drill. But we dropped dead the moment we were done, so we didn’t get your messages.”

Raid hummed. “Sounds like he was a huge help, huh?”

“That’s putting it lightly! He knows what he’s talking about, and his knowledge even extends outside his field! Not to mention he’s great at laying out the pros and cons of whatever idea I dish out! I *will* drag him over to work under me, mark my words!”

“Well, you’ve got my support. People should start to realize his talent if he works under a special-class magician like you. As his little brother, I could ask for nothing more—especially since he gave up on being a magician for me.”

“Hell yeah! Time to get a new capable subordinate to push all my annoying work onto!” Alma raised both hands in the air with a full-faced smile. She had clearly taken a liking to Edward, but Edward’s days ahead seemed as stressful as ever. “Anyway, looks like the opening ceremony’s about to begin, so I’ll be on my way. Oh, and Your Excellency—I’ll pass their messages to you later. Look forward to it!”

“Sure thing. Tell them we should grab a drink once everything’s over.”

“Roger that. The rest’s all up to you!”

Alma turned and left the room, one hand waving leisurely and the other hefting her battle-axe over her shoulder. The flag fluttered behind her, the white and blue hues undulating like waves—the flag of the Allied Army.

Elise watched the door close and breathed out a sigh. “Thank heavens Alma made it in time. There aren’t a lot of people who can hold their ground against the Altanian army…”

“That’s true,” Raid agreed. “What we need now isn’t pure firepower—it’s the skill to hold out in a war of attrition against enemies we’re prohibited from killing. There aren’t many who meet the criteria.”

The war they were about to fight wasn’t one they could put an end to through total annihilation. On the contrary, that was the condition for *their* loss—the more enemies they killed, the closer the other side would get to activating the ritual. Needless to say, they couldn’t just let themselves be annihilated either. For that, their camp needed people who were skilled in prolonged defensive battles, as well as long-range fighters who were less likely to be hit by the anti-magic bullets.

“Alma aside, I definitely wasn’t expecting the *others* in our lineup,” Elise mused.

“Retired magicians and, heck, even different species… We’re a whole motley crew, I guess.” Raid shrugged. “But we’ve secured their cooperation through Eluria, and they’re all holding their positions now. No problems here.”

A knock cut into their conversation, followed by a muffled voice from the other side. “I can sense it… Yes, this door must be *pulled*!”

“Wrong again,” Raid called.

Mifuru whimpered, pushing the door and entering the room

with drooped ears. “I had a fifty percent chance and still blew it…”

Raid arched his brow. “You sure you can be here? The exam’s about to begin.”

“Urk… My apologies. I was planning to come much earlier…” Mifuru’s face was marred with reluctance, but her gaze was firm. “Lord Raid, I’ve come here…to give you something.” She offered him an envelope with both hands.

“Hmm? What’s this?”

“I-It’s a…l-love letter!”

Raid blinked. “A…what?”

“I’ve written down my feelings for you,” Mifuru mumbled with flushed cheeks. “I-I’m aware of the impudence of my actions, and I was actually conflicted until the very end… But I would be a failure of a love rival if I backed out after all the support I’ve received.” Mifuru turned to Eluria with a small smile on her lips.

Raid looked between the two and, after a short pause, nodded. “All right, I’ll take it. Thank you, Mifuru.”

“I-I will always gladly welcome you, Lord Raid!” the beastdweller crowed. “I know a millennium has passed, but I look exactly the same, don’t I? And I’m also open to being your second wife once I retire!”

“Hang on, you didn’t say anything about that,” Eluria immediately cut in.

However, the fox-eared girl simply chuckled. “You let your guard down, Lady Eluria. Your complacency was evident from the moment you encouraged me to confess. Remember—I am a vixen! My slyness knows no bounds, not even with my beloved’s fiancée in the room!” Mifuru wore a playful grin as she pressed her ring and middle fingers to her thumb, mimicking a fox.

Raid looked between the two with an awkward smile, all the more certain that something had happened between them last week.

Eventually, Mifuru turned back to Raid while reaching into empty space. “And here,” she said, “is another gift for you, Lord Raid.” She took her hand out and revealed a sword, one that looked exactly like his partner of a thousand years ago. The blade, however, was sleek and sharp—not a single chip on its edge. “I have poured my mana and prayers into this sword over the past millennium. It was originally made to symbolize the God of Victory,

our continent's savior...but perhaps it was meant for your return all along."

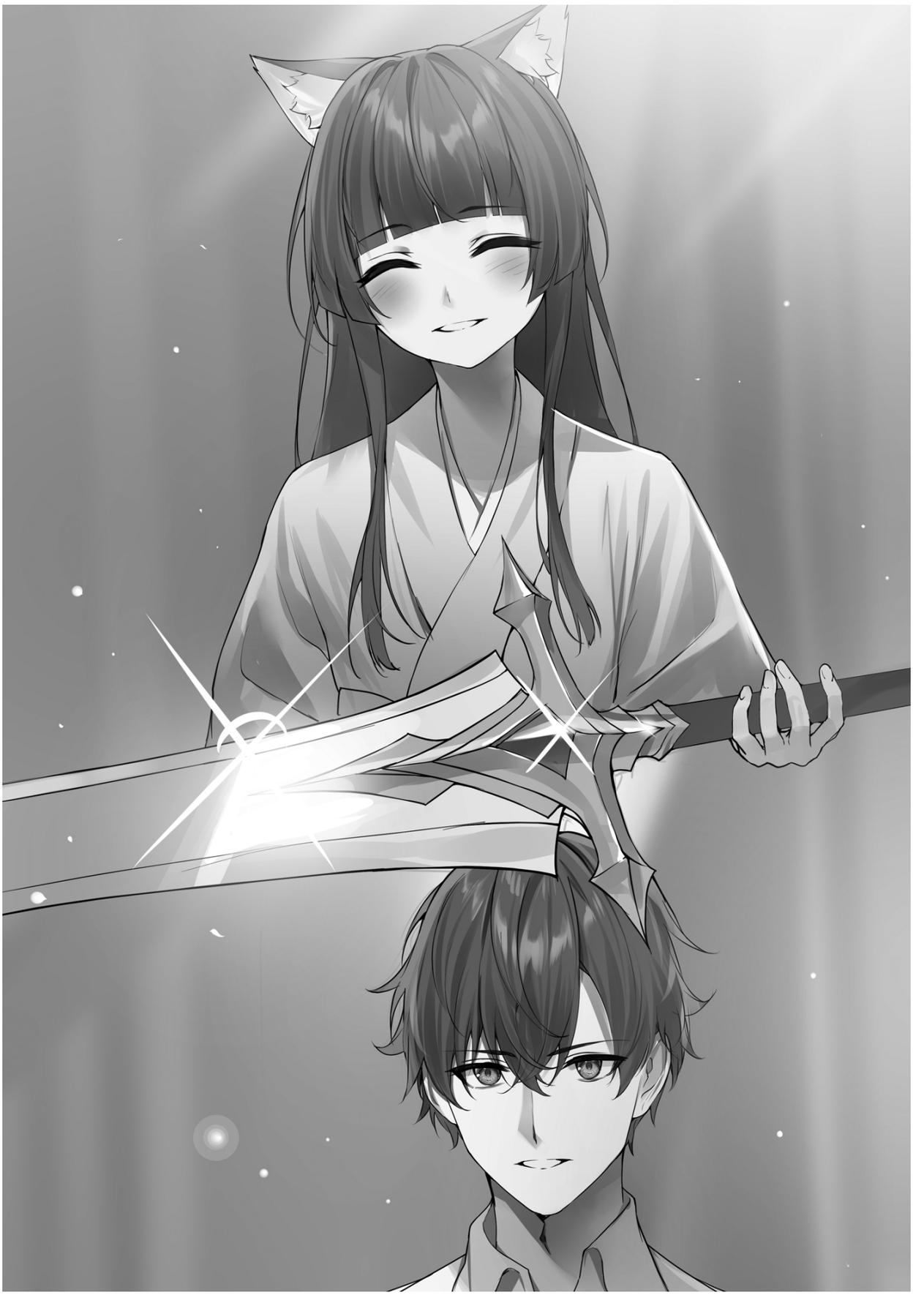
Raid had heard of the magical swords and mythical blades of Legnare forged and refined with mana—first by the blacksmith when it was made, and further by the wielder thereafter. Over a long period of time, the blade would be granted unique qualities and even rendered unbreakable.

However, he also heard that the act of gifting a weapon imbued with one's mana carried a certain *meaning*. Eluria was likely unaware of this...but Mifuru, now smiling softly before him, must have known.

"Will you accept, Lord Raid?"

Raid answered with a smile as he took the sword. "Gladly."

Mifuru's cheeks flushed in joy. "It's filled to the brim with my mana and love!"



Eluria looked between the two with puffed cheeks. “I-I also gave Raid a sword...!”

“Oh? But was it imbued with a millennium’s worth of mana? Why, mine was even made using a secret sword forging technique and can thus withstand Lord Raid’s immense power—a weapon like no other!”

Eluria turned to Raid with a pout. “Raid, are you interested in dual-wielding?”

“Dual-wielding broadswords, huh?” Raid shrugged. “Sure, why not?”

“All right. Then I’ll make a neat new sword for you too.” Eluria nodded vigorously, a competitive fire in her eyes. It looked like he was going to have to try out dual-wielding in the near future.

“Well then, everyone—duty calls,” said Mifuru as she executed an elegant bow. “The Imperial Lord of Legnare must attend the opening ceremony, so I shall take my leave now. I pray your plan ends in success.” With that, she turned and left the room. Before the door shut, they saw Totori step into pace with her—she must have been waiting outside the door the whole time.

Raid looked down at his new sword and sighed. “Man, talk about a grand gift...”

“Mm... But this is just what you need,” Eluria muttered as her expression warped bitterly. “You can’t fight bare-handed against these armed enemies...especially since it’ll be all up to you in the end.”

The white-haired man they’d met in the underground ruins was also a Hero and rivaled Raid in power. Granted, he was a *new* Hero, but surely understood the Hero’s power to a high degree. Conversely, Raid had decades of experience with his power but little to no understanding of it.

Raid squinted. “But still...I need to be the one to fight him.”

Only a Hero could fight a Hero. Raid knew very well what it meant to be a Hero, so he couldn’t simply hand off the role to just any one else. His eyes narrowed as his thoughts deepened, but he was quickly dragged out when he felt a small hand pet him on the head.

Raid looked down at Eluria and blinked. “What is it?”

“A good luck charm,” she murmured. “You’re gonna win for sure, so I’m rewarding you in advance.”

“Hah. That so?”

“Mm-hmm. And since you’ve already been rewarded, you absolutely have to win now.” Eluria withdrew her hand and settled back down on her heels, but her ardent gaze remained on Raid. “You *cannot* lose to anyone but me.”

Raid’s lips stretched into a broad grin as he returned the gesture, settling his hand on her head. “That’s great, ’cause I was never planning to anyway.”

“Why am I also getting a head pat?” Eluria muttered.

“You said so yourself, didn’t you? This’ll set you up for success.”

“Ah. Makes sense.”

“Hey…” Elise grumbled. “Have you forgotten I’m still here, watching you flirt without a care in the world?”

“We’re not flirting,” the two replied in unison.

Elise sighed. “Oh, you two just never change, do you?”

Raid quietly rose to his feet. “It’s especially important to stick to our routine before battle,” he declared with a daring grin. “Because it reminds us of the precious everyday we’re fighting to protect.”

“We will now begin this year’s first integrated exam!”

At last, the announcer’s voice rang across the venue, raising the flag to their hidden war against the Altanian army.

□

An endless abyss stretched beyond the glass window.

The darkness of the deep sea drew his gaze, for in his eyes it was a vision of their future: empty and bleak, with not a single ray of light. The future left to them was one of destruction and ruin, and the only thing it promised was mutual death and despair.

How many times had he cursed the absurdity of it all?

Once upon a time, a Demon Lord was born. If life were a fairy tale, then surely a brave warrior would have stepped up and departed on an awe-inspiring journey to slay the evil being and return the light of peace to the world. But alas, reality was not so kind. Even their one and only Hero, humanity’s last hope, had vanished off the face of the earth.

He just couldn’t accept it. Nothing was right in their world.

Their doom was written in stone. They faced impending ruin to

pay for the sins of humans long gone. Their so-called Hero lent his ear to a traitor and abandoned his duty to humanity. And no brave warrior had stepped up to slay the Demon Lord.

Their world was so utterly, hopelessly, and detestably *askew*.

And so, he—

"Your Excellency! Your Excellency Dian!"

The call of his name pulled him from his thoughts, and the man lifted his face with a click of his tongue. "Keep it down, will ya? You tryin' to make my ears bleed, Bracchio?"

"Not at all! Please forgive me, Your Excellency!"

"And I told you to quit callin' me that fancy-ass title. I'm not even your goddamned superior... I just happened to be compatible with the Hero's power."

Unfazed, however, his adjutant simply saluted. "But those who've proven compatible with the Hero's power are automatically granted military authority over us ordinary soldiers! Therefore, I believe it is appropriate to address you as we would our general!"

Dian turned away in disinterest, groaning as he scratched the scar on his face. "So? What's got you callin' for me?" he asked instead.

"I apologize for disrupting your rest, Your Excellency! I come bearing a report: the time nears to begin our operation!"

"Oh yeah? Cool. Guess we do have the fate of our world on our shoulders," Dian muttered before he let out a huge yawn.

Although insincerity marred his tone, theirs was undeniably a vital operation. By connecting the two dimensional gaps created in the past, they could create a gate that would bridge the two branching timelines, ultimately providing a place of refuge to save their humanity from ruin. They had already paid immense sacrifices for it, so there was absolutely no room for failure.

But for an operation of such grave significance, this was almost laughably *easy*.

The magic of this world was unlike theirs—different in essence, but also just objectively cruder. Granted, their army had a millennium more to develop their craft, but the core reason lay in but one point: this world had developed magic for *peacetimes*. Research branched into many fields and specializations, all for the purpose of applying and improving magic for use in daily life. The prominence of friendly diplomatic relations and the absence of a

looming threat had rendered the magic race between the nations extremely tame.

To Dian and his men, even the strongest magicians of this world were hardly a threat. They wouldn't go so far as to pit one of their ordinary soldiers against the likes of those they'd encountered in the desert, but with the right numbers and strategic teams, such magicians would be a nonissue. Not to mention that Dian could easily obliterate them all himself.

All this only served to further fuel his resentment.

These people were living the peace his world had never known. They woke up, ate their meals, and went about their day not once fearing for their lives nor realizing how blessed they were—as if this peace, this light, were simply their *birthright*. Whereas Dian's ravaged world was left to struggle amid a future of promised ruin, these pigs were granted a dazzling paradise to enjoy as they saw fit.

The solution, then, was simple: take everything from them. Was there any reason to hesitate in sacrificing the fools living in indolence? Since the Demon Lord had trampled over his people like bugs, they could just do the same to this timeline. It was as simple as that.

But now, an unexpected factor had come into play.

"So... Was that guy really Raid Freeden?"

"Yes, sir! With long-range mana identification, we have confirmed that the target's mana wavelength is a match with that of the Divine Realm, as well as that which was observed a thousand years ago in this timeline! Hence, we can conclude he is the same Raid Freeden who was called a Hero in this world!"

"Damn... So the Sage is our enemy in this world, huh?"

Sage Raid Freeden had left a great impact on their world, for better or for worse. He had set his sights on the niche art of magecraft, analyzed its concepts and techniques, and formed the foundation of what would come to be known as magic a millennium after his death. The most powerful being in the world—now feared as the Demon Lord—ultimately shaped it into the art of magic, but even she couldn't have achieved such a feat without the Sage's work. Put another way, it could be said that the Sage was the root cause of their impending doom, though their means of fighting back had also come from him. After all, magic was but

a fraction of the knowledge he'd left behind, and only a select few—that is, the Demon Lord and the creators of Hero—had set their eyes on it.

Most, however, turned to his *other* contributions. Mathematics, medicine, physics, chemistry, botany, zoology, astronomy, geology—there was hardly a field he *hadn't* touched. The Sage had advanced Altane's development by centuries. In fact, some of his theories were so profound that researchers had only recently come to comprehend them. Others would go so far as to say that humanity would have met its end much sooner if not for him. Some stories say that physical activity and combat were his one weakness, but that must not have been true if he had been hailed as the Hero in this world.

"But now that he's our enemy," Dian growled, "we just gotta crush him."

Through careful analysis of the sword they'd received from Viteos Altane, they successfully reconstructed a large part of Hero. It now had a much smaller pool of candidates to pull from, but they no longer needed to rely on Raid Freeden's help to complete the spell as they had initially assumed—which was all well and good, since Raid Freeden had now become their greatest *threat*. But from their encounter in the desert, Dian was certain that Raid couldn't draw out his full power as the Hero—and Dian would have no issues taking down a man who was just wildly wielding his strength.

"Raid Freeden and Eluria Caldwin are to be killed on sight," Dian declared with a cold glare. "The traitorous Hero's host and the abominable Demon Lord's offshoot…are better off burning in hell."

The operation would proceed as planned. As the Hero of Altane, Dian must fulfill his role…and protect his doomed world.

"Connect me to all squadrons," he ordered, then waited until the lines were connected. "This is the Hero speaking. Proceed as planned. The first squadron will suppress the institute, the second will eliminate the magicians and detain the civilians, and the third will capture the brats. Now, proceed to your stations through your designated routes."

The most recent widening of the dimensional gap had allowed nearly a thousand soldiers and even more weapons to cross over to this timeline. In exchange, over ten thousand sacrifices had

been paid in their world—all the more reason they couldn't afford to quit now.

"Either kill them without remorse or blast yourself to bits. Die as miserably as a bug, I don't care—as the cornerstone of humanity, I'll remember every last one of you."

Dian lowered his hand and ended his transmission. It wasn't like him to give such a speech, he knew. But whatever the case, success was practically guaranteed for this operation. Even if they failed to suppress the enemies or negotiations broke down, they themselves were ready to give their lives to activate the ritual. Should worse come to worst, the magic device attached to them would blast their hearts to smithereens at a moment's notice and feed the ritual with their own blood.

And if *that* also failed, then he…

"Your Excellency," Bracchio called. "I have received a transmission from the third squadron."

"What? From Burgess?"

"Yes, sir. He reports that there are some obstacles along their designated route."

Dian narrowed his eyes. "Obstacles?"

"We suspect they were placed there for the integrated exam. Given their small size, however, Burgess reported no more than minor revisions to their route."

Dian shrugged. "Yeah, well, we can't risk getting found by the brats or, worse yet, having to kill 'em before taking 'em hostage. Tell him I don't care as long as they get to their positions on time."

Killing the people of this world had to wait until *after* they'd suppressed their target location. The reason was simple: the number of necessary sacrifices varied depending on each individual's mana pool. They would need a whole lot more sacrifices if they were going to draw from children with underdeveloped mana pools, and the same went for the ordinary civilians that the second squadron was in charge of.

Indiscriminate slaughter only birthed deeper grudges. They would know this best, as the measly humans who had resorted to sacrificing countless lives after being cornered by the Demon Lord's relentless rampage. They couldn't afford to push the people of this world to that level of desperation.

Hence, they decided to *choose* their sacrifices. Narrowing the

list down to skilled magicians was not only more efficient but would also weaken their enemy forces. And if any of their targets resisted, then the army could proceed with slaughtering them anyway—a warning shot of sorts.

"Hah… Disgusting."

"Pardon?"

"Just talkin' to myself. Mind your own business."

Dian hadn't come up with this plan. The bigwigs and imperial family of Altane—which was just barely holding up as a state—had suggested taking another timeline for themselves, and the method itself had been proposed by the one who'd raised Altane into a grand empire. Dian was in no place to say this or that about whatever plans they dished out.

Morals be damned, as long as their world was saved. His only duty as the Hero was to do whatever it took to get there.

Dian glared at the cold and endless abyss. "Our fight for survival…starts *now*."

□

While the opening ceremony was underway, the participating students were busy making their preparations in the exam venue.

"I feel it… Yes, I feel it!" Millis snapped her eyes open, blazing and bloodshot. "Right now, I can place first…in a competition of *nerves*!"

Wisel sent the girl a withering look. "Calm down, Ms. Millis. You're acting weird."

"I'm *always* acting weird!"

"Huh… Truly."

Millis cocked her head. "Is it just me, or do you sound pretty drained?"

"It's not just you… These past few days, I've been helping the headmaster make adjustments to her magic devices. To make matters worse, my sister has been helping me over the communicator, so I'm *extra* tired…" Wisel hefted out a heavy sigh.

"What? Is talking to your sister that exhausting?"

"Let's just say she has…a way with words." Wisel winced. "Imagine talking to someone who has their own unique dictionary in their head… It's exhausting trying to keep up."

Millis hummed. “But you know, seeing you as tired as ever actually brings me a sense of normalcy. I’m feeling better already,” she said with a serene smile as she patted the boy on the shoulder.

“But Ms. Lambut, I wholeheartedly understand your nerves,” said Valk, her expression a touch strained.

“Same here.” Lucas nodded with a bitter smile. “You just can’t rest easy when you know *something’s* about to happen.”

Raid and Eluria had already briefed their classmates on what was to come—on the “war” that would happen today, the foes lurking in the shadows, and their advanced magical techniques.

Incidentally, they had also been informed of Raid and Eluria’s special *circumstances*.

“What’s with all the doom and gloom around here?! Keep your chins up, my friends!” Only Fareg was bursting with energy, his eyes sparkling in excitement. “Weren’t we told that Caldwin is the Sage who invented magic a thousand years ago? And that Freeden was her rival?!”

“Uh, yes…” Lucas scratched his cheek. “We don’t doubt that.”

“If anything, I was relieved to know there was an explanation for their absurd power,” Valk agreed.

Millis chuckled. “Wisel and I reacted that way too, when we first found out.”

“It seems relief wins over shock when it comes to those two,” Wisel mused.

Unfazed by his companions’ bland expressions, Fareg propped his hands on his waist and puffed out his chest. “I *knew* they were special—that they had to have some sort of hidden backstory or exceptional circumstances! Nothing else could explain their extraordinary strength!”

Millis took a step back and whispered to Valk, “What’s got your young master so excited?”

“My apologies…” Valk sighed. “You see, our young master is a little kid on the inside, so the reveal excited him quite a bit. Not to mention he’s delighted by the fact that he is one of the select few who know about this hidden truth.”

“Oh… I guess boys like that kind of stuff…”

“Indeed. He is like a pubescent boy deluding himself that he’s awakened to a special power… An unfortunate illness of sorts.”

“Are you calling me a lunatic to my face?!” Fareg shrieked.

“Please refrain from barking too loudly,” Valk said breezily. “Unless you don’t mind me telling them about the locked box in your desk containing gloves, an eye patch, and a notebook titled ‘Ultimate Secret Techniques.’”

“How did you know about that?! I’m sure I locked it!”

“We servants learn lock picking to assist our master in case of a lost key. Then I found a funny-looking box, so I picked the lock.”

“What happened to using it for lost keys?!”

“By the way,” Valk continued, ignoring the question, “Lucas spent an entire night copying the notebook’s contents.”

Lucas hung his head and groaned. “It was *horrible*. My head throbbed and my ears were ringing…”

“It’s not some cursed grimoire! Wait, no— You *copied* it?!” Fareg yelled, before running a hand down his face and taking a deep breath. Once he calmed down, he simply sighed and shook his head. “Never mind. There shouldn’t be any problem with Freeden and Caldwin in the lead. Their crazy strength goes without saying, but Freeden also mentioned he was skilled in battle tactics.”

Millis blinked. “Wow. Am I hearing this right? Fareg is openly complimenting Raid—a *commoner*?”

Fareg shuddered. “That girl will send me flying if she hears me speak like that again…!”

“Your traumatic experiences are really piling up…” Wisel sighed, looking at Fareg in pity.

“Anyway!” Fareg cleared his throat. “I’m saying those two will be fine. *We* should worry about our exam.”

Fareg trailed his eyes over the crowd of institute students slowly gathering around them. Some were familiar faces from their class, while many others were students they only saw during joint training and meal times—simply put, their cohort.

The boy took a step forward to draw their attention. “We will now be briefing our plan for the integrated exam!” His voice boomed over the crowd, drawing all their gazes. “In the last simulation exam, our team recorded the highest number of points and earned the right to overall command for our camp! We will be facing students from other institutes, some of whom are already taking their specialized courses, but we are determined to lead everyone here to victory!”

His voice resonated clearly, and his posture radiated

confidence. Fareg stood before this large crowd while carrying his pride as the son of House Verminant.

"Our great undertaking for today," he declared, "is *garbage disposal*!"

The crowd's gazes turned cold in an instant, and a freezing wind blew through the space. A suffocating few seconds passed...until finally, Fareg buried his face in his hands.

"Forget I said anything!!!"

Millis shook her head. "Oh, Fareg. This is when you gotta double down, you know?"

"He's not wrong though, is he?" Wisel chuckled as he stepped up to help. "Officially, this integrated exam will test our coordination in large-scale operations. The rubble and scrap from the recent ultra-sized manabeast attack have been piled up at several set locations, which have been distributed to all the student camps to serve as our bases. Our pile's total weight corresponds to our camp's points for this exam."

Wisel spread a map open and pointed at one location. "Furthermore, we can transport the scraps to this processing plant, which will earn us points worth *double* their weight. To sum it all up, we need to coordinate our transportation efforts and escort our load like we would VIPs, all while defending the scraps at our base from other camps that might attempt to steal them. I guess it isn't called an *integrated* exam for nothing, huh?"

He chuckled and pointed to several other locations on the map. "Anyway, we have to transport our scraps if we want to rack up additional points. But the more we carry, the slower we'll move, and it also increases the risk of losing it all to another camp. Careful allocation of manpower is highly advised."

As Wisel wrapped up his briefing, the students began throwing out their opinions.

"Hmm... Then shouldn't we group everyone by their combat roles and redistribute them from there?"

"But we don't have time to regroup this many people. Why don't we work with our current teams and adjust the weight of our load accordingly?"

"But it's not like every team already has a balanced composition, right? It might be safest to leave those suboptimal teams to defend our base while the rest head out."

“Wouldn’t that thin out our defenses, though? I’m sure some camps will decide to safeguard *their* scraps, and steal and transport *others’* to the processing plant. We’ll also be pressed for backup if we transport our scraps by team. I say we leave our base to people who specialize in defensive magic.”

The students made very valid points. They hadn’t been given enough time to optimize their groupings, yet working with their current teams limited their options and diminished their capability for coordination and support. Most likely, other camps would attempt to slowly but surely rack up points by transporting many smaller loads.

Their camp, however, would be *different*.

“We just have to defend our base,” said Wisel. “We’ve already got the points—we just have to defend them till the end.”

“But…” The students glanced reluctantly at one another. “But then we’d just lag further and further behind the other camps as they turn in more and more of their scraps, right? Of course, I understand that it will at least save us from falling into last place, but…”

Wisel shook his head. “You’re wrong. We can still nab first place with this method.” He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose as his lips curled into an evil smile. “All we have to do…is *burn* everyone else’s scraps before they reach the processing plant.”

The students’ eyes grew wide. “B-Burn…? Not steal?”

“Yes, burn. We’ll get rid of their points.”

“But then…why don’t we just take it for ourselves?”

“Because then we’d need to carry it. But burning it is much simpler—just pop in with a small team, light a fire, then book it. Not to mention they’ll busy themselves with putting the fire out, slowing them down even more.” This exam wasn’t simply about earning more points—it was about defending the points you already had while stopping others from earning more. “So the burnt scraps won’t become our points, but they won’t become our opponents’ points either. Better yet, they’d be losing the points they initially had.”

“I see… And if we can just defend our base, then our ranking will keep stepping up as everyone else’s gets dragged down.”

“Aha. So that’s what you meant by nabbing first place by focusing on defense.”

“And the only regrouping we’d need to do is to gather people who can use fire…”

Amid the growing approval, however, Wisel quietly shook his head. “Our base’s defense is an absolute necessity to this strategy. Since we’re going to be facing off against more experienced students, we need to allocate almost everyone to defense.”

“Then who will go around burning the scraps…?”

“Our team,” Wisel answered as he placed his hand on Fareg’s shoulder. “We have just the matchstick for the job.”

“Am I not even human anymore in your eyes?!” Fareg wailed.

“Isn’t this an upgrade? You used to be a punching bag, no?”

“Argh! Why does that actually make me feel better?!”

“Anyway,” Wisel continued, turning back to the students, “I’m sure you saw how well we performed last exam. Our two new members will also make it much easier for us to launch surprise attacks and secure escape routes.”

The goal of this strategy was to burn as many scraps as possible, so avoiding combat was the most efficient choice. After all, throwing punches wasn’t going to burn more scraps. *“Go and raise hell as efficiently as you can,”* were the orders they’d received with this plan.

“But wouldn’t we be placing too much on your plate?” asked a student.

“Don’t worry about us. If anything, you should worry about yourselves.”

Another student frowned. “We’ll just be sitting still in our base, though?”

“Imagine this,” Wisel said. “Our team runs around and sets fire to everyone’s precious points. Obviously, they’re pissed. Now cue the horde of angry students trying to force their way into our base.”

“Uh… Huh…?”

“They’ve got revenge in their eyes and swear to the heavens that they will set fire to our scraps too, if it’s the last thing they do.”

Eyes bloodshot, the student whipped his head around and screamed, “Gather everyone who can use water-type magic! And set up as many barriers and shields as physically possible! Or else we’re gonna be mincemeat by the end of this!!!”

The crowd of students dispersed in a frenzy and rushed to their

preparations.

Wisel watched them with a satisfied nod. “That should do it. Let’s get ready too.”

Fareg clenched his fist. “I wanted to give a passionate and uplifting speech…!”

“And I’m sure that would’ve worked, but Raid said there’s no room for mistakes, so it was best to explain this in a logical and calculated manner.” This strategy had been given to them by Raid. Not only would it lead them to victory, but it would also create a beneficial scenario for those fighting in the war. “Ms. Stella’s team will employ the same strategy. With two teams running around burning scraps, the other camps will surely notice and start copying our strategy.”

“And that will still give us the advantage, since we solidified our defenses first,” Millis preened, before awkwardly scratching her cheek. “Though I guess this is kind of like cheating since Raid and Lady Eluria are more like admins this time around…”

Raid had informed them of this plan well before they were briefed on the integrated exam with the rest of the student body. They weren’t entirely sure as to *how* this would help them in the war; Raid and Eluria had refrained from giving them the details, likely because it might put them at risk of being targeted by the assailants.

But there was one thing they knew for certain:

“That man entrusted us with this task,” Fareg said, his eyes blazing with the determination to live up to Raid’s trust. This duty was not a burden; far from it, it brought him joy, as he realized the man he’d been chasing all along had now turned around and reached out to him.

“Now then, let’s head out.” A wild and spirited grin stretched over Fareg’s lips as he unsheathed his flaming sword. “The Hero and the Sage are counting on us, after all.”

□

The next reports arrived a few minutes after the start of their operation.

“Your Excellency, we have reports from all squadrons,” said Bracchio.

“What is it this time? Did they run into a pile of dog shit?”

“Er, no… The first squadron disembarked on the coastline, and reported a foul odor. Meanwhile, the second squadron encountered smoke in the mountainous region they are currently traversing.”

Dian squinted. “Smoke…?”

“According to the third squadron, the students are running around burning the aforementioned obstacles. Most likely, the sea breeze carried the smoke to the mountain valley.”

“So it’s not some orchestrated smoke screen…but just the brats runnin’ wild?” Dian clicked his tongue. Normally, he would have told his men not to bother him with such unnecessary details, but they must have been exercising caution considering the significance of the operation. “How’s the second squadron’s visibility?”

“Slightly impeded, but they are still progressing thanks to their magic detection devices,” Bracchio answered. “In fact, the smoke is helping to obscure them from potential witnesses.”

“Then proceed as planned,” Dian ordered. “If anything happens, the third squadron can just send over their manadroids as backup.”

The first squadron had been allocated the most manpower to suppress the exam venue, whereas the third squadron had been given most of their manadroids to capture the students.

Manadroids—or manabeast replicas—were mainly used for transportation and were endowed with anti-magic properties to withstand their world’s mana, polluted by the Demon Lord. The people of this new world were accustomed to hunting manabeasts, but there was no way for mere students to take down a magic-resistant manadroid. Even an experienced magician would struggle against it.

With the manadroids at their disposal, the third squadron was more than capable of suppressing the students and drawing the magicians’ attention. In the meantime, the second squadron would emerge from the mountains and circle around behind them, completing the pincer formation. Amid that chaos, the first squadron would proceed over level ground to the institute, all while remaining hidden with a magic device.

Their enemies had no means of seeing through their cover.

Their infiltration into Legnare's palace had only been discovered later, and they were only spotted in the desert when their watchguards accidentally dispelled their cover. Their enemies knew this too, of course, so they wouldn't be letting their guards down—but they couldn't possibly be expecting over five hundred soldiers boldly marching through the streets in broad daylight.

There was nothing to worry about. Some measly smoke wasn't about to throw a wrench into their plans.

And yet, Dian couldn't ignore the unease brewing in his chest.

"Bracchio, tell the second and third squadrons to use heat detection to scan their surroundings. And to the first squadron—stop the march to confirm if anything's obstructing their camouflage within the smoke."

"Yes, sir! Right away!" Bracchio turned and passed the orders to the squadrons.

Dian was receiving too many reports for his liking. Obstacles had caused the third squadron to slightly deviate from their original path. The students had just happened to light fires that sent smoke billowing into the valley. And the foul burning odor was carried by the wind to the first squadron that was farthest away.

Ideally, it was all a coincidence. But if not…

"Report, sir!" Bracchio called. "The first squadron paused to confirm their equipment but found no obstructions or malfunctions!"

"And the rest?"

"Reduced visibility remains for the second squadron, but they have detected no forces waiting in ambush! The third squadron was unable to use heat detection due to the fires, but their visibility has slightly improved and they have found no abnormalities!"

Dian clicked his tongue and scratched the scar on his face. "Guess I was worried for nothing… Damn it."

In the end, it *was* just happenstance. The smoke had simply been carried by the sea breeze all the way to the valley, and given the air currents in the area, it wasn't strange at all that the odor had reached the first squadron too. So there was no problem after all—

"Your Excellency! We've encountered a girl en route!"

—or so he'd thought, until he received an urgent report from the third squadron.

"A girl? Eluria Caldwin?"

"No... It's a young girl with a cane. She's not wearing a uniform. We suspect she is a civilian."

"Tsk... It just had to be a civilian, huh? Leaves a horrible taste in my mouth..."

"Shall we eliminate her?"

"Obviously. Feed her corpse to a manadroid and leave no traces."

"Understood. We shall proceed right—"

Ding...

Suddenly, the third squadron's message was cut off by the sound of a bell.

"What?! Our surroundings have changed...!"

Dian leaned forward. "Burgess, hey! What's going on?"

"I-I suspect spatial creation magic, sir!"

"What...?"

Spatial creation magic wasn't just any type of magic; it was an advanced technique that temporarily created an alternate plane through the coordinated operation of multiple magic devices. A large part of it had been adapted from machinery, so for it to appear here—in a world where machinery had long become obsolete—could only mean one thing.

"Wallus Caldwin..." The man who'd traveled to the past from their timeline—if he was helping them, then it all made sense. "Look around and see if that bastard's there. Hell, he might even be that civilian girl in disguise. Make sure to kill him."

"B-But it appears that girl is one of our targets for— AAAAARGH!" Burgess's scream cut through the communicator, along with other chaotic sounds in the background. It sounded like the other troops had engaged in battle.

"Bracchio! Prepare the visual display from Burgess's communicator!" Dian barked.

"Yes, sir! Processing as we speak!"

A new image popped up on their monitor—and Dian's eyes immediately snapped wide open.

"Wha—?! A-Are you fucking *kidding* me?!"

There was no mistaking it—a gigantic *dragon* filled the screen.

And as the scene moved, it soon became clear that there were three others just like it. Four massive beings loomed over the puny humans and roared out to the heavens.

Dian knew those dragons. They were the peak of all manabeasts who, in their world, had formed a contract with the humans to fight alongside the Hero against their common enemy, the Demon Lord.

“What the hell are the Guardian Dragons doing here...?!”

His question would soon be answered as the screen revealed a girl standing proudly amid the billowing dust. Her stark red hair fluttered in the breeze, gently caressing the small dragon resting atop her shoulder and nuzzling her cheek. The gesture drew a confident smile from the girl as she stabbed her cane into the ground.



The massive terracrown dragon looked sheepishly down at the angry girl with a string of rumbling whimpers.

"What? You were *holding back? Oh, all right, I guess that's— Wait, Flam! No spitting lava at people! I said no! Spit at the ground if you have to! And Eti, no, it is* not *easier to just kill them! Just go over there and sit still with Marl!"*

At first glance, it had seemed like the dragons were rampaging beyond the girl's control. However, the girl could understand them, and the dragons were roaring petulantly at her responses.

The sight was unreal. Back in their world, the Guardian Dragons were hardly even loyal to the Hero. Although they abided by the contract, they only fought alongside the Hero because of the promise they made with their first contractor—the girl who had subordinated them and came to be known as the princess of the dragons.

"Remember, Eluria asked us to play with these guys so they don't go out and do bad stuff." The girl gripped her cane, reminiscent of a scepter, as the Guardian Dragons huddled protectively around her. She stood tall and proud with confidence and dignity that lived up to her title. *"So go on,"* she said to her dragons. *"Say hi to your new playmates!"*

Lufus Lailas, once known as the Dragon Princess, had returned with her head held high.

They'd known that Lufus was in this era, but they'd heard that she had lost much of her mana and returned to her homeland after an accident at the institute. To make matters worse, their world's Lufus Lailas had only formed a *contract* with her Guardian Dragons in order to fulfill her wish—but *this* Lufus Lailas actually seemed to be *friends* with hers. If their casual banter earlier wasn't enough, there was also the fact that she'd called them by name—a gesture manabeasts only accepted from those they acknowledged as friends.

The Guardian Dragons were, without a doubt, fully obedient to Lufus Lailas—and the last thing Dian wanted was to face off against such powerful and coordinated foes.

"Third squadron, use your weapons to smash that alternate plane to bits," Dian ordered. "Spatial magic falls right apart if you hit it with enough condensed mana!"

Burgess grunted. *“Y-Your Excellency… Our magic gear and gadgets are not working!”*

“Cut the bullshit! Then blow yourselves up to blast a hole—” Dian froze, only then realizing the *true* target of these equipment malfunctions.

“Our self-destruct spell…is also not working.”

Their enemies must have locked them into that space…to seal off their means of suicide. How they’d managed to do it, Dian had no clue, nor did he have the time to theorize. Their biggest problem now was the fact that their soldiers were trapped in an isolated plane—meaning they could drop like flies and *none* of it would contribute to opening the gate. Their souls and mana would remain trapped in the plane, left to slowly but surely dissipate as time passed within. They could start hacking and slashing at one another, but it would all be for naught in the end.

They couldn’t kill themselves, nor could they escape. Worse yet, Lufus Lailas—likely the cornerstone of this spell—was protected by her Guardian Dragons.

“Send troops from the second squadron!” Dian barked, setting his eyes on what could still be done. “Scan the mana around the third squadron’s location and find a way to externally shatter the spatial—”

“Th-This is the second squadron! We are under attack by a magician of this timeline and—”

“First squadron reporting! We are trapped in an alternate plane and are currently engaged in battle with an unidentified army!”

The two harried reports swiftly shut him down.

Dian stared at the monitor in disbelief. Everything should have gone smoothly. Success was practically guaranteed for this plan, and their enemies—no, their *prey*—shouldn’t have even been able to see them.

“So how…” he muttered, the chaos on the screen reflecting shakily in his eyes. “How the hell is this happening…?”

□

Moments ago, the second squadron had been ordered by headquarters to scan their surroundings with heat detection—and Viktor, the commanding officer, was more than happy to oblige.

Although this timeline's technology was vastly inferior to theirs, the inhabitants had developed some mana detection and concealment techniques, no doubt thanks to their hyperfocus on the field of magic. It wasn't quite advanced enough to pull the wool over the Altanians' eyes, but better safe than sorry—and heat detection was a surefire way to ensure *nothing* slipped past them.

Heat detection—or the idea of determining location through body heat—was just one of the many blessings the Sage had left their world in the distant past. Likewise, the Sage's research, along with Altanian machinery, had jointly formed the foundation of their world's magic gadgets—technology similar to this world's "magic devices," but ultimately unknown to them. The enemy might've heard about it if Wallus Caldwin was in their midst, but that didn't mean they could do anything about it. Whether it was heat detection or the first squadron's camouflage, this timeline was simply technologically inferior.

Alas, this clear advantage became the root of their complacency.

"No reactions from our heat detector. Visibility remains impaired, but we shall proceed to our target position," Viktor reported to headquarters before turning back to his troops. "Resume the march. Operate the heat detector at regular intervals and continue scanning our surroundings for any beings. We must reach our designated position by the—"

Ding…

The clear chime of a bell cut through their smoky surroundings, and the world instantly warped around them.

"What? What happened?!"

"I-I don't know, sir! The vanguard stumbled over something, and suddenly the smoke cleared and we appeared to have been teleported…!"

"No…" Viktor narrowed his eyes. "This isn't teleportation—we've been caught in a magically crafted space."

Bare rock jutted out around them, much like the valley they had been marching through just moments ago, but there was a new, very obvious addition to their surroundings: rock walls looming over them like a prison.

"My, my," crooned a woman's voice. "It appears our guests have finally arrived."

The troops craned their necks—and right there, sitting comfortably atop a massive boulder, was a woman whose eyes glinted as coldly as her silver locks. She breezily twirled a fan in her hand and let out a quiet sigh. “I was very close to suspecting this was all a rather elaborate prank. Perhaps Ms. Kyla has rubbed off on me? Alas, it seems it’s time to get to work after all.”

Viktor turned to his troops and roared, “That woman is a magician! Eliminate her at once!”

His men reacted swiftly, but no sooner had they reached for their anti-magic firearms than they all stumbled and lurched forward—by no random bout of clumsiness, of course.

“Th-The ground, it’s…!”

“It’s endowment magic! They’ve applied it to the ground!”

Viktor and his men struggled as they sank into the ground beneath them like a murky swamp. Far above, the silver-haired woman snapped her fan open and smiled pleasantly at the spectacle. “How thoroughly disappointing. Is my presence even necessary, I wonder?”

“Dispel it! Remove the endowment at once!” Viktor barked at his men.

“W-We’ve already tried, sir! Neither magic nor our gadgets are working!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! This timeline shouldn’t have the skill or technology to nullify our magic!”

Wallus Caldwin could have lent them a hand, of course, but no craftsman in this timeline should have been skilled enough to replicate their technology. Alas, there was no denying the reality before them.

“My, this is very effective,” mused the woman. “Little girl or not, I suppose she isn’t the headmaster for nothing.” Her lips curled into a leisurely smile as she uttered, “Now, *bind those men and crucify them*.”

With a flourish of her fan, the ground warped and morphed like it had a mind of its own. It entangled the soldiers’ arms, and with their legs still trapped in the earth, Viktor’s squadron was effectively sealed in place.

Viktor could tell at first glance that the woman had cast endowment magic, but at the same time he was astounded by her proficiency. Softening the ground was one thing, but making it

employ such specific movements required complex formulae and precise mana control—and she had skillfully executed it against an entire squadron of soldiers with just a single order.

Viktor gritted his teeth. “An outdated magician dares…!”

After their soldiers in the desert had been overpowered, they had made sure to investigate any possible threats to their operation. The so-called special-class magicians of this timeline seemed rather formidable, so orders were given to take caution and suppress them with numbers upon contact.

However, this woman had not come up in their investigation.

“‘Outdated,’ you say? Why, I’m quite offended. I may not look it, but before my child was born, I fought on the front lines and had even been praised as the Enchantress of the Sage’s bloodline.”

The Sage of this timeline referred to Eluria Caldwin. So if this woman was of her bloodline…

“Was Alicia Caldwin, former special-class magician, not worth your time, good sirs?” The woman’s lips curled into a daring smile. “But, ah, I suppose it’s in poor taste to demean you while your magic has been sealed. This may be just the right task for a retiree such as myself.”

Alicia shrugged and leisurely tilted her head. “Now, how shall I busy myself while keeping watch? Hmm… Ah, yes. I’ve yet to prepare my lecture for the young man who dragged his mother-in-law into this mess…”

Viktor gnashed his teeth at the woman’s breezy expression as he attempted to tug his arms free.

“I would advise against that,” said Alicia. “You wouldn’t want to tear your arms off, now would you?”

Viktor scoffed. “What do you think, woman? Why would we care about an arm or two?”

Limbs be damned, they had a mission to accomplish—and they knew that everything would be over if they died in this space. But they weren’t out of options just yet. He and his subordinates could slowly wear Alicia down, and once they killed her, this space would collapse and they would be free to go—whoever was left, anyway. Then they could rescue the other squadrons and resume the operation.

If doing so could save the people of their world, then…

“We could ask for no better death,” Viktor declared with a

fanatic grin.

Alicia quietly sighed. “I applaud your resolve. I, too, would give my life for my dearest daughter, hence why I stand before you now. Of course, that’s setting aside the fact that my daughter is stronger than me…”

A moment of distraction—Viktor did not miss it. He freed himself from his binds and closed in on Alicia in a flash.

Altanian soldiers were not powerless without their magic, courtesy of their rigorous training regimen. In their ruined world, the human body was no longer a temple. To survive, they’d even taken drugs that stimulated their physical growth. Those who lived in this peaceful world would never know the lengths they went to survive.

“*Diiiiiiiiiie!!!*” Viktor roared as he drew a dagger and thrust it toward Alicia—

Clang!

His blade hit a hard object, the sound ringing clearly through the air. Viktor looked up in shock and found a large shadow—an *armored figure*—looming over him. Was it a human? Viktor couldn’t tell. He felt no life from it, and all he could see beyond the helmet’s gap was rock.

It was only then that Viktor realized: this, too, was something Alicia had made with endowment magic—a stone puppet.

“Galleon,” called the woman as her gaze slid to the armored figure. “Knock him out for me, please.”

Instantly, countless iron fists rained down on Viktor’s face. The blows were so heavy, he could neither cry out nor groan in anguish.

“You shouldn’t have undone his bonds, Alicia,” chided the stone puppet, Galleon.

“But he looked just about ready to tear his arms off. The children told us to keep them alive, remember?”

“But you could have gotten hurt. My heart froze for a second there.”

“I knew you’d protect me.”

“Of course. That’s what a husband does.”

Alicia sighed. “Really, you speak at just the right volume when you use your magic.”

“Your stone puppet is a marvelous creation, but my voice gets muffled whenever I possess it. To compensate, I speak louder on

regular occasions."

"Shouldn't you speak louder while possessing it?"

Alicia and the stone puppet's conversation reached Viktor's ears as his consciousness faded.

"This takes me back... It's been a while since I last used my magic in combat," mused the stone puppet. *"I've rarely had the chance since you retired."*

"Ah, yes. Without me, you can only use basic magic, but nevertheless, you maintain your standing as a first-class magician. Very impressive, dear."

"I could only achieve what I did because I was with you, so I only saw it as fitting for me to put in my own effort—to stand proudly at your side as your husband."

"Well, I suppose I've no reason to complain. We've been together since childhood, and you're the only one who can withstand my endowment magic... You even came with me when I became a special-class magician."

The stone puppet laughed heartily. *"I had to put in the effort so my beloved wouldn't fall out of love with me."*

Alicia slightly frowned and averted her gaze. "And I suppose that's why I decided to be with you as well," she muttered.

The atmosphere around the duo was warm and lighthearted, a stark contrast to the desperation and anger of the struggling soldiers trapped far below and the battered face of their commander convulsing on the ground at Alicia's feet.

As his vision gradually faded to darkness, Viktor had only one question on his mind:

What the hell am I even listening to right now?

And with that, everything turned black.

■

Meanwhile, Alma was lying in wait downwind from the main road.

"Ughhh... I'm sooo booored..."

"Woof..."

"You bored too, huh, Shefri? Well, you gotta wait with me a bit longer," she said, reaching down to pet the dog. "Don't worry, I'll make sure you're reunited with Eluria once we're done here."

“Woof!”

Then, Alma turned her gaze to the scenery as she thought back to Raid’s briefing:

According to him, one of the Altanian army’s squadrons would be heading for the magic institute. Their route? Down the main road—straight and simple. Clearly, they were confident in their stealth and camouflage, if their infiltration into Legnare’s palace was anything to go by. From this, Raid predicted that the Altanians would rather go through the shortest public route than skulk through the shadows.

In any case, this squadron would move to their designated station in compact formation before the troops scatter to execute the operation. And as per Raid’s assumption, there would be at least two more squadrons moving in the same way. Why bother with such clustered movement? There were two reasons: Their camouflage skills were just that good, and the desert encounter had made them wary of Raid and Eluria’s group. Since they could easily camouflage themselves, they might as well move with all forces available to guarantee their plans went smoothly. This ensured they would have enough numbers to fend off Raid and Eluria’s group…as well as to activate the ritual via suicide in the event that they failed.

With that in mind, a single squadron was likely composed of at least a hundred soldiers. Given that they had approximately a thousand soldiers to work with though, that was an easy arrangement. Dealing with the students was theoretically a simple task, so by Raid’s calculations, the squadron in charge of that would be assigned just two hundred soldiers, give or take, while the squadron tasked with securing the perimeter would have about three hundred. The remaining half of their forces would be allocated to capturing and suppressing the VIPs in the venue.

All this, Raid had postulated based on his past experiences. He took the enemy’s objectives, priorities, and mindset, then weaved it all into an elaborate vision of their army composition, task distribution, and strategic positioning and pathing.

And as it turned out, his predictions were right on the nose.

“Alma,” called Elise through the communicator. *“We’ve engaged with the enemy.”*

“Roger that,” Alma drawled. “So, who’s the lucky winner?”

“It’s Lufus.”

“Ah… She’s in charge of the route that His Excellency diverted with the exam scraps, isn’t she?”

Once Raid was privy to the exam task, he had dictated where to place each of the scrap piles. When asked what for, he’d simply answered, *“Just a bit of harassment.”* He’d looked through the map, picked out the easiest route for a squadron to march through, and set the students’ scrap bases in spots that ever so slightly obstructed their path. The Altanian squadrons would undoubtedly choose to err on the side of caution—to safely circle around the obstructions—rather than force their way through and risk the entire operation.

This rerouting would buy the students more time to burn their scraps, and unbeknownst to the Altanian soldiers, it would also ensnare them deeper into Raid’s trap. Their new route was right in the path of the sea breeze, which allowed the smoke to reach them. Their view of the exam grounds would also be obstructed, courtesy of the rolling hills and the afforested area between them.

All the while, the Altanian soldiers would be none the wiser, for they were fully confident in their superior skills and thorough preparations. As a result, the squadron marching through the valley would be surrounded by the smoke carried by the sea breeze, while the squadron heading down the main road—where Alma was stationed—would be assaulted by a burning odor.

“I’m guessing they’ll run into the Caldwin couple pretty soon. Doubt those guys noticed the strings at their feet in all that smoke,” Alma mused.

The Caldwins, invited to this operation by Raid himself, had lain in wait inside the magically crafted space so the enemies couldn’t possibly detect them. All that was left was for the soldiers to trip on Alicia’s strings—camouflaged by her endowment magic—and activate the magic device that would send them all into the alternate plane. A simple trick, really, but as Raid had explained, the more high-strung the enemy, the more likely they were to overlook simpler matters.

Alma sighed. “Man, when will we get *our* turn, huh, Shefri?”

“Woof woof!”

“Uh… What are you doing, Alma?”

“Having a little chitchat with Shefri to pass the time. No idea

what she's saying though."

"You know, they say women get married later when they have a pet…"

Alma glared. "Oh, you've crossed the line. I'll remember this."

"Cut me some slack! Unlike you, I'm nowhere near bored enough to talk to a dog! In fact, I've got my hands full monitoring the spaces and nullifying all their magic!" Elise snapped as the endless clacking of her devices carried through with her voice.

According to Elise, she could monitor everything that went on inside the dimensions of her spatial magic—or, as she'd called it, "spatial creation magic." Hence, she had been tasked with sabotaging the enemies' magic gear using Wisel's technique, Rupture. It was much easier to get the timing right with all the targets bunched together in their respective spaces, but that was a small comfort. She still had to simultaneously monitor three different spaces and shut down every soldier's magic at just the right time—it was beyond taxing, to say the least.

"They might start acting outside of our predictions, so stop lounging around and—"

"Oh, it's fine," Alma insisted. "Everything's going according to His Excellency's plan, isn't it?"

Raid might have been an experienced general in the past, but Elise still had every right to maintain a margin of doubt. Alma, on the other hand, had complete faith in Raid. Every word she'd read of House Kanos's journal kept any doubt from even entering her mind.

"Never thought I'd get to witness it myself," she mused as she rested her chin on Shefri's head.

The Hero's adjutant, Ryatt, had recorded Raid's feats in great detail. Among them was one particularly legendary achievement:

"Over fifty years of war…and *not a single battle lost*," Alma muttered. "Seriously, what a monster."

Of course, Raid *had* lost territory to Vegalta on occasion, so he wasn't entirely "undefeated." However, those privy to the unspoken code of the Hero and the Sage knew that these were intentional losses meant to balance the scales of war.

Barring their skirmishes with Vegalta, Raid had consistently secured his army's victory. Terrain, weather, environment, and even human mentality—Raid had used anything and everything to

his advantage, protecting Altane's vast territory across countless battles over fifty long years. He had even taken down one of his enemy's strategic locations while facing an army a hundred times larger than his, all without suffering a single casualty.

Disbelief had been Alma's first reaction upon reading the journal entry, but now her lingering doubts had been completely dispelled. After all, she had witnessed Raid's resourcefulness firsthand—how he'd used their small group to make the thousand-strong Altanian army dance on the palm of his hand.

Alma snapped out of her reverie when Shefri whipped her head around and began barking in a certain direction.

"Oh? They're finally here." She got on her feet and faced the area Shefri indicated.

The Altanian army had superior stealth and camouflage skills, so what Shefri had picked up on was not their scent, but rather, *lack thereof*. The burning odor from the integrated exam was, as Raid had termed it, their "invisible net." The Altanians were capable of erasing any trace of their presence, but they would also be erasing scents that should have been there. Hence, they took advantage of that by getting Shefri to sniff out any scentless patches of space.

"Could you show me the general range, maybe with your head?"

Shefri barked and swiped her nose across the air.

"Ooh, what a smart girl! Wanna come with me once we're done?"

"Woof! Woof woof! Woof woof woof woof woof!!!"

"No idea what you're saying, but that's a rejection if I've ever heard one... Oh well." Alma shrugged and gently set the dog back down on the ground. "I've gotta go now. You're free to head back to Eluria."

Shefri let out a happy bark and spared no time dissipating into countless beads of light.

Alma watched the dog's eager departure with drooped shoulders, before pulling herself together and lifting her head back up. "Welp. Off to work, I guess."

A skeletal arm emerged right by her feet. Alma hopped onto its hand and allowed it to propel her into the air—in the direction Shefri had indicated. Her eyes darted around, swiftly scanning the

ground below, as she took out a handbell from her pocket.

Ding!

Instantly, the world shifted and Alma's surroundings transformed into a vast wasteland—and with it, hundreds of Altanian soldiers seemingly appeared out of thin air.

The black-haired woman looked down with a scoff. "His Excellency was right. There's gotta be nearly five hundred of 'em."

Alma had been stationed closest to the squadron in charge of suppressing the institute, so these numbers made sense. Elise would be sealing off their magic, but she had also warned them that Altanian soldiers had artificially strengthened bodies. Fighting five hundred of them was too big a burden even for a special-class magician like Alma. After all, in this world, magical combat had been developed to fight manabeasts; no one in this era had experience fighting actual human wars.

So this time around, she would have to leave it to the *veterans*.

"I've done my part—now you guys do yours!" Blue and white fluttered in the air as Alma waved her flag. She slowly descended—and the moment her feet touched the ground, her mana expanded immensely. "Hope's Brigade!"

Alma's shadow stretched beneath her feet, and from the darkness came not her usual black skeletons, but rather, a *giant*. He towered over Alma and the Altanian soldiers, looking around before letting out a hearty laugh.

"Bah ha ha ha! So this is our next battlefield, I see!"

Alma had never seen this man before, but she recognized him nonetheless: Blofeld, a man with an abnormally large body—an atavist who'd inherited the blood of the ancient giant race. In the distant past, he had used his overwhelming power to rule the thieves and bandits in felling cities and towns, until his attempt to invade neighboring Altanian territory ended in failure when Raid defeated him in a single blow. Afterward, he and his subordinates were spared from the death sentence by working under Raid's command. Henceforth, Blofeld used his large build for the Altanian army and earned great contributions by taking down numerous camps and fortresses.

"Where the hell is Raid?! Did I accidentally squash him or somethin'?!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Blo. Gramps would've knocked you out

long before you could even come close to squashing him," snapped a woman riding on a flying dragon.

Her name was Felius. She was originally a Celiosian tribeswoman but had been sold into a slave market for her ability to communicate with manabeasts. Raid had rescued her when he'd gone there to expose the market. Thereafter, Felius strongly insisted on entering the Altanian army as a frontline soldier, then went on to organize a battalion of manabeast tamers. They not only contributed to logistics and transport but also gave their army a significant advantage over various terrains, including aerial and aquatic combat. She had recorded many achievements despite her young age at the time.

"Don't you think so too, Vance?"

"Huh... Actually, forget knocking him out—gramps would've sent him *flying* and crushed a hill or two for sure. So...maybe he actually *did* step on him?" said a man on a chariot with a hearty laugh.

His name was Vance. He had entered the Altanian army as a military engineer but was later discovered to have been redirecting the army's supplies to an orphanage for over five years. He was then given two options: to pay exorbitant penalty fees or to face the death penalty. Before he was pressed to choose, however, Raid took interest in his skill and had his debt written off in exchange for transfer into his forces. Since then, Vance had supported the soldiers by managing their rations and logistics. In battle, he would take his chariots, pulled by horses or powered by machinery, and charge through the warfront.

These were the stories of Ryatt's comrades in arms as recorded in his journal. Alma knew their stories intimately and had woven them into a spell akin to her Dead Man's Brigade.

However, she hadn't only summoned soldiers of the *Altanian* army today.

A man in a blue and white uniform stepped forward and squinted. "Whoaaa... Are those guys over there modern-day magicians?"

"Wait, really? They look super bulky though..." a woman, dressed in a similar uniform, mumbled beside him with magic gear in hand. "Don't they look more like Altanian soldiers, Zel?"

The man was Zelsis, and the woman was Lynthia. Both had

been magicians under Vegalta's magician division. After the fall of the great Altanian empire, they played significant roles in raising the next generation of magic users. Zelsis spearheaded the establishment of basic training for magical combat, while Lynthia recorded many of the Sage's magical theories and studies into books for future generations.

This was only the beginning. One after another, brave spirits emerged from Alma's shadow—and every single one of them she knew very well.

What Ryatt had left her in the desert was the Allied Army's register from a thousand years ago. It included not only the soldiers' pictures, taken with a magic camera, but also Ryatt's detailed record of their backgrounds, achievements, personalities, and behavior. Using that information and her magic, Alma had re-created the army of the past.

But neither the register nor the journal could perfectly re-create entire human beings, especially not to the level where they could hold free conversations. The last piece of the puzzle—what tied everything together—laid in the Allied Army's flag. Each manaworm thread woven into the flag had been embedded with different mana—the mana of each and every member of the Allied Army. Their memories were stored and preserved within, and by extracting that mana and incorporating it into the spell, Alma had molded together an advanced replica of humans who had lived in the distant past.

And of course, among these replicas...

"You must be the Kanos descendant," came a placid voice.

Alma slowly turned and saw a man with black hair and eyes very similar to hers. His stoic expression revealed little emotion, but a strong and unwavering will burned behind his eyes.

"It's nice to meet you, Ryatt Kanos," she said.

Ryatt nodded curtly. "Well done. I see you are as skilled a magician as they say you are."

"Well, you know..." Alma grinned and shrugged. "I guess I *was* good enough to meet my ancestor's crazy expectations for—*Yowch*!"

"Such crass speech," chastised the man who just landed a chop on her head. "I am your ancestor, so you must take care to show proper respect."

“My own spell is scolding me!” she squawked indignantly.

“You couldn’t possibly speak to His Excellency in the same manner, could you? There might have been changes to social customs and norms over the past millennium, but it is unthinkable to approach His Excellency without proper etiquette and respect in your—”

“Ahhh! Okay, okay, I get it already, Mr. Fanboy!” Alma wailed as she held her head in dismay. “You can nag my ears off later! Save it for *later*, please!”

“She’s right, Ryatt.”

Alma turned toward the new voice and found a woman clad in armor bearing the crest of Vegalta’s royal family. She looked familiar, and Alma immediately realized why—she could easily pass as Princess Kris’s older sister. However, her movements were incredibly gallant and refined, giving off the aura of a warrior who’d overcome countless battlefields.

“Please excuse him. He can be rather awkward at times. He’s just unsure of how to interact with his descendant,” said Tiana with a gentle smile. “It’s been a while…or so I would like to say, but given you’ve completed your spell, I must be a replica, yes?”

“That’s correct. If Princess Kris were here too, I’d feel like I was seeing double…”

Tiana beamed. “Well, that just means…we would get to shower Lady Eluria with *twice* the love!”

Alma held her head and groaned. “Oh, right… You were the *Sage’s* fangirl…”

According to Ryatt’s comments, Tiana’s passionate love for Eluria had relapsed after reuniting with her across time. At the time of his writing, she had taken to sleeping and cuddling with a doll made in Eluria’s likeness. It sounded like just the kind of news that would make Vegalta’s citizens faint in shock.

“But before that, it appears we have a battle to win,” said Tiana as she looked around.

The Allied Army had already engaged in battle…but there was no chance of their allies falling to the enemy.

“Ha ha ha! This undying body is great! I can run as wild as I want!”

“You’re still using up Ryatt’s descendant’s mana with every wound! So just fight like we always do—prioritize coming out

alive!”

“Come to think of it, we can’t kill the enemies either, right? Well, I guess that’s nothing new. It’s how we always fought against the Vegaltans.”

“Aha ha… Doesn’t make it any easier, though…”

“Aw, don’t say that. We’re the only army out there who can fight this way, so hold your head up high!”

The replicated soldiers were impervious to damage, but in exchange, they consumed Alma’s mana. Edward had done his utmost to help her minimize the spell’s mana consumption, but it was still incomparably more costly than her Dead Man’s Brigade. Still, since each soldier possessed individual thought, Alma no longer needed to exert any of her energy on complex commands. Not to mention they each possessed their own memories and skills, making every individual soldier much stronger than the average skeleton in her Dead Man’s Brigade.

“Alma Kanos.” The corners of Ryatt’s lips curved upward. “You are now His Excellency’s proxy. Give a word of encouragement to your soldiers.”

Alma returned the smile before taking in a deep breath and raising the flag high in the air. “All forces, attention!!!” she bellowed, her gaze sweeping over the warriors who’d come to fight from the distant past. “Don’t kill, and don’t die! That is the philosophy that the Hero and the Sage have upheld across the years—the *hope* that they left for the world! Your bodies may be long gone, but let their resolve remain carved into your very souls!”

Spirited roars resounded across the battlefield, shaking the ground with their undaunted valor.

“Past this flag of blue and white,” Alma declared, “is the future you will build with your very own hands!”



□

Failure.

That was the first word that came to Dian's mind as he gazed upon the screens before him.

He pressed his hand over the scar on his face and scoffed. "Hah… You've gotta be shittin' me."

This operation should have been a guaranteed success… It should have saved everyone in their world. They had a mission to fulfill no matter the cost, no matter how cruel and inhumane the means, no matter if corpses—enemies or allies—piled up as high as the mountains. His role as the Hero—his *responsibility*—was to see it through to the end.

And yet, now…

"Your Excellency—"

"Shut up," Dian hissed. "How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that, Bracchio?" He slowly stood with a cold glare. "I'll head to the surface and smash those spatial spells to bits. The rest of you stand by."

This wasn't over just yet. Their squadrons might have been captured, but the Hero was still standing. He could just destroy their spatial magic and have his soldiers activate their suicide spells—but Dian knew their enemies wouldn't allow that.

As if on cue, a great tremor rattled the submarine.

"What was that?!" Bracchio yelled.

"A-A magical attack, sir!" answered the helmsman.

"Then hurry and dive deeper! They cannot reach us if we—"

"I…" The helmsman paled. "I am unable…!"

Outside the window, the unending darkness had transformed into a thick wall of ice. They stared at it, wide-eyed.

"Wh-What is…"

Dian clicked his tongue. "Ain't it obvious? The Demon Lord froze the sea, and us along with it."

It no longer came as a surprise to him. Eluria Caldwin had already done this once—she'd cast this ridiculous spell to protect the people from the Calamity. And seeing as they had perfectly sealed off all the squadrons, it only made sense that they had also been able to pinpoint the underwater location of their base.

Then they must have also predicted that the Hero would try to move out to free the soldiers. With the enemy's leader right here, Raid and Eluria would have left the squadrons to their allies and come here to deal with Dian themselves.

But Dian was fine with that.

"Bracchio, the rest of you remain here on standby. If they find you, surrender."

Bracchio clenched his fist. "I cannot comply, Your Excellency. We must accompany you."

"You dying here won't accomplish anything, and our enemies are a buncha softies who won't even kill the rest of our soldiers out there. I'm sure they'll let you live."

"Then why…" Bracchio's expression warped bitterly. "Why did you send out nearly everyone…without leaving the minimum number of sacrifices here?!"

Their initial plan had been to leave just enough forces in the submarine so that, if worse came to worst and the operation failed, they still had enough sacrifices at their base to open the gate. However, that backup plan was no longer available to them—for one reason and one reason only.

"Tell me, Your Excellency! Why did you change our plan?!" Bracchio yelled with clenched fists.

Dian himself had forcibly changed the personnel allocation for the operation. He had claimed that the enemy was so inferior to them that they were better off allocating their forces toward capturing the VIPs in preparation for the next stage of their plan, rather than wasting them on a safety net they would never need to use. Had he not done that, then perhaps they would not be facing such a catastrophic failure.

But Dian…was fine with that too.

"I've told you a million times already, Bracchio." He grinned as he hefted his battle-axe over his shoulder. "I'm the Hero, not some mighty general. So I changed the plan on a whim and messed up—so what?"

A thoughtless decision led to a foolish failure, and every bit of it was Dian's fault. Simple as that, nothing more.

Truly, he couldn't think of a better way to end it all.

"When you see Burgess, Viktor, and Rendi, tell 'em this," he said with a smirk. "You screwed up big time following an idiot like me.

Too bad, huh?”

Without waiting for a response, Dian threw the hatch open and slammed his weapon against the ice wall. It crumbled perfectly into a round tunnel, as if they were never expecting it to keep him trapped in the first place.

Dian scoffed. “Seriously… Can they see the future or somethin’?”

He stomped his feet into the rounded ice walls and slowly climbed up—to the surface of this frozen sea, where everything would come to an end. When the light at the top glinted harshly against his eyes, Dian kicked off the ice and leaped out in one swift jump.

“Ohh. You came out faster than I thought,” mused a breezy voice behind him.

Dian landed smoothly on the icy surface and slowly turned around. Two people stood starkly against the frozen world. One was Eluria Caldwin, the culprit behind their world’s impending doom. And the other was the man whose unfathomable wisdom had saved the people of their world across a thousand years.

“Raid Freeden…”

The young man’s lips stretched into a toothy grin. “Hey, don’t feel too bad about getting one-upped by a brat like me. I *am* a geezer on the inside, for what it’s worth—almost ninety, in fact. And I’m sure you had your hands full just surviving in your world, so it’s not like you’d have as much experience as I do fighting human wars.”

He was right on the mark. No one in their world had any time to fight among themselves, much less experience large-scale wars against other human forces. So even if someone else had taken the helm of their operation and proceeded with the initial arrangement, the result probably wouldn’t have been much different.

But success was practically guaranteed for this operation. Dian had believed that at the start…and he still believed that now.

“Shut your goddamned mouth.” Dian’s lips stretched into a vicious grin as he brandished his battle-axe. “As long as I, Dian, am here…we will not fail. This,” he growled, “is my role as the Hero.” His words swelled with absolute confidence, not a hint of unfounded bravado to be gleaned. The fate of humanity rested on his back, and those eyes reflected every bit of his resolve.

Raid met Dian's resolute glare and smiled. "You look and talk like a thug, but that's quite the sense of responsibility you have. Though I guess otherwise you'd have no right to go 'round calling yourself the Hero."

"Rusty ol' geezer. I'll wipe that smug smirk off your damn mug."

"Well, I *am* your senior. I get to act a little cool, don't I?"

Dian scoffed. "Yeah, I get it. Gloat all you want. I already know it won't be easy to kill the Hero and the Demon Lord together."

Eluria Caldwin was nowhere near as strong in this world as she had been as the Demon Lord, but she could still single-handedly face off against hordes of magicians. Paired with Raid, who possessed the Hero's power, it was no easy fight even for Dian.

But surprisingly, Raid shook his head and said, "Eluria won't be fighting."

"I won't," Eluria immediately promised, stabbing her staff into the ice. "My role is to keep the sea frozen throughout your fight. I don't plan on interfering in any other way. I just…" Her ocean-blue eyes narrowed as she stared right at Dian. "I just want to watch you. To see for myself."

Dian met her gaze with a dubious glare, but he couldn't sense any hidden intentions behind the deep blue oceans of her eyes. Just as she'd said, she was simply watching him.

"Besides," Raid added, "we can't afford to kill you, can we?"

Dian clenched his fist and gritted his teeth. They already knew. Raid and Eluria knew full well how Dian was hoping to "end" things, yet still they stood before him now.

Raid met his scathing glare with a daring smile as he pointed his sword at Dian. "Come. To get what you want…you'll have to give me your all."

◇

The man—Dian, as he'd called himself earlier—stared at Raid in shock for a moment. Then, his lips curled up snidely as malice burned behind his red eyes.

"You've gotta be the most annoying bastard I've ever met," he hissed. "I racked my brain a thousand times over for the best possible outcome, even steeled my resolve for what had to be done…but here you are, one step ahead. It pisses me the hell off."

Dian gripped his battle-axe and lowered his posture, like a spring ready to burst forth. “I guess...there’s only one thing left for me to do!” He let loose a single broad swing with his massive weapon, producing an immense force packed with the Hero’s destructive power.

Raid, however, simply glared at the deadly attack heading straight for him and brandished his broadsword. “I have to agree,” he muttered. “This is much simpler than racking your brain, isn’t it?!” Power surged through his body, all unleashed through his own sword swing.

Identical forces clashed in the air, shattering their icy foothold and launching glistening fragments into the air.

Behind the shimmering curtain, Dian’s face warped bitterly. “Tsk. You’re drawing out your power more easily now.”

“Well, I didn’t have my sword before. But now, I’m back in my element.” Raid easily lifted Mifuru’s sword with one hand. Having been exposed to mana for a millennium, the sword—as per Eluria’s analysis—had developed excellent mana resistance and affinity. Thus, it could bear the Hero’s unique mana while gradually adapting to it, essentially serving as the perfect conduit for his power.

But Dian knew the Hero’s power intimately, and he knew that wouldn’t be enough. “You’ve got another thing coming if you think you’ve got me beat with just that!” he roared as he gripped his battle-axe overhead and swung it downward, launching yet another torrent of power.

Raid raised his sword to face the strike, when suddenly—the shock wave *compressed* into a single point, turning from a looming wave to a razor-sharp spear tip.

Raid sucked in a breath and shifted his posture. Instead of unleashing his own attack, he drew his sword to the side and—at just the right moment—diverted Dian’s blow to the right. The spear tip was small, but it was so densely packed with energy that it gouged deep into the ice and formed massive cracks over the surface.

“Not bad. You’d be mincemeat right about now if you’d tried to block that,” Dian sneered. “Though I can promise you that would’ve been the *better* way to go.”

Raid narrowed his eyes. “If that could kill me, the Sage would’ve

done me in long ago," he mumbled as he gripped his right arm, now tattered from the impact.

He was starting to understand what made the Hero's power different. Normally, once power was unleashed from the human body, it could no longer be controlled. One could swing their sword and unleash a wave of energy, but thereafter it would be out of the wielder's hands.

However, Dian—or rather, the *Hero*—was different.

"You can freely manipulate your own power," Raid muttered.

"Hero" was both a title and a spell, in which the title bearer was free to manipulate the spell's power. Of course, gathering it to one point as Dian had done was but one of many ways to do so.

"The hell're you standin' around for? Is that how my 'senior' fights?!" Dian dragged his battle-axe behind him, running a deep cut over the icy surface, before swinging it into the air. The shock wave, however, did not continue along the ground—instead, it shot up into the sky before raining back down.

Raid watched the approaching attack and, at the very last second, raised his broadsword to parry the blow overhead.

Dian clicked his tongue. "You fight clever for a Hero."

Dian was manipulating his power—that was all, yet the effects were tremendous. If Raid tried to read the attack's trajectory, Dian could simply change its direction. If Raid tried to block or offset it, Dian could compress it at the last second and pierce right through.

"What's wrong? You were really runnin' your mouth earlier! Too ashamed to lift your head now?!" Dian swung his battle-axe horizontally and sent a blade of energy to Raid.

Raid glared at the incoming attack without batting an eye. "Don't be getting cocky already, greenhorn." His lips stretched into a daring grin as he gripped his broadsword.

Then, the moment he sensed the energy compress into a single point, he pulled back his arm and swung his *fist*.

A dull impact sounded loudly in the air as the two powers clashed, shattering the icy floor. Behind the point of impact, however, Raid stood completely unscathed despite having taken the attack head-on.

Dian's eyes snapped open in shock. "Huh... Fucking monster."

Raid grinned. "Yep. That's what they called me before the whole 'Hero' thing caught on."

Raid had realized one vital point: Dian's attacks were *oriented*. He might have been able to freely control them in the air, but the attack itself always pointed in a certain direction—meaning it had *flanks* much weaker than its front. Thus, landing even a weaker impact from above was enough to kill the force.

Of course, not just any one could do this. Just the slightest miscalculation—the smallest deviation—and the compressed strike could easily blast through Raid's fist and end his life in an instant. Raid, however, had the nerves of steel to attempt such a thing, as well as the skill and experience to execute it.

"For fifty years, I fought against someone so strong, I had to risk my life just to drag it into a draw," said Raid as he recalled the figure of his old rival.

Raid and Eluria had a tacit agreement to avoid severe losses to their armies and territories, but they fought every battle with their lives on the line. Skill, experience, knowledge—they used everything they had and fought to surpass one another time and time again. Either of them could have dropped dead at any given point, but at least then they could pass on with a smile, for they found no shame in dying by their rival's hand.

"Not that you'd understand, of course," Raid mumbled. A sinister smile stretched his face as he took a quiet step forward—the look in his eyes had clearly changed.

Dian suppressed a shudder as he gripped his battle-axe and threw out another attack. However, the blow was coldly shut down.

"I'm putting my life on the line here," Raid growled. "But what about you? Is this all you've got for me? This miserable little fight?"

His frosty gaze sent chills down Dian's spine, and each step he took echoed eerily in his ears; something almost akin to panic squirmed in his heart. "Shut up..." Dian gritted his teeth and lifted his battle-axe. "You know *nothing* about me! You don't get to talk...about how I choose to fight!"

Another wave of power was unleashed along with Dian's roar, but yet again, it was knocked aside at its weak point, parried and negated with superior sword prowess.

"You're right. How the hell am I supposed to understand..." Raid kicked off the ground and leaped forward in a flash with his fist clenched firmly by his waist, closing in on Dian.

What was Dian trying to do? And just how much resolve had it

taken him to reach this point? Raid already knew, but even then, his expression was cold, without a shred of sympathy.

"...when you're supposed to be fighting me now...yet you're already set on *dying*?"

A punch was the simplest of attacks, and Raid had employed it many times throughout his life. But oftentimes in the past, onlookers had been left speechless by this supposedly mundane attack. They had said the sight of Raid smashing his fist against a manabeast, the force so immense it seemed to ravage the beast's insides, had been akin to witnessing a small creature being trampled under a stampede of wild beasts. And as Raid had stood atop a mountain of carcasses, the people had likened him to an abyssal ox, a manabeast known in mythology to brand sinners with its scorching hoof before sending them to the land of the dead to receive divine punishment.

And so, they had collectively named Raid's tremendous fist:

"Blazehoof."

Raid drew all the power circulating in his body to his right arm—then, he *smashed* his fist right into Dian. The blow crushed the man's black armor, thrust into his abdomen, and broke right through his mana-strengthened body.

"Agh—!" The force knocked all the wind out of Dian's lungs and smashed him deep into the icy surface, before his body bounced off several more times like a rag doll.

Raid shook his hand with a frown. "Huh. That packed a bigger punch than I thought... Is it because I can sense my mana more easily with Mifuru's sword?"

With a shake of his head, however, he drew his attention back to the front—the icy surface was crushed at several spots, forming a trail of destruction all the way to a large mound of ice shards.

"Now, then... That didn't do you in, did it? You *are* a Hero, after all."

Sure enough, the icy mound soon fell apart. Dian emerged from within and got up to his feet, but that alone must have been a great struggle. His legs trembled as if it took everything he had to merely stand. Blood spilled from his lips, and his eyes were unfocused, shaken—but even then, his gaze remained resolute. Anger burned fiercely in his red eyes.

Raid didn't wait for him to speak; he could already tell what

Dian wanted to say just from the look in his eyes. “You’re wondering why I didn’t kill you? Well, too bad—I don’t plan to.” He glared at the white-haired man, now covered in wounds, and muttered, “We’re not ending this your way—with you sacrificing yourself to save your allies and your world.”

Elise had told them that countless sacrifices were needed to move people from one timeline to another, and Raid had suspected that the future Altanians were making a gate to minimize the number of sacrifices needed.

But as it turned out, there was yet a much *smaller* minimum—just one specific person, in fact, could fix everything by paying with his life.

And Raid was looking right at him.

“The Hero’s death alone can activate the ritual and open the gate, can’t it?”

Heroes could draw from the Divine Realm’s massive pool of mana; that was how the Hero of the past had managed to send Eluria back in time. In that case, Dian must have been the same. Even if the other timeline had failed to perfectly re-create the spell, his body should have already contained enough mana to complete the ritual.

However, Dian hadn’t taken that option. Or rather, the *higher-ups* hadn’t allowed him to.

“The Hero is a valuable fighting force,” Raid said. “Although your sacrifice alone could open the gate and allow the rest of the population to move to this timeline, what of the *rest* of the operation? Without you, colonizing this world would take much longer and mean more fighting—if not render it completely unfeasible from the onset.”

The instigator of this operation must have much rather preferred to simply discard the lives of countless insignificant soldiers, especially if sacrificing the Hero meant their world wouldn’t get to take this timeline for themselves in his own lifetime.

“You couldn’t accept that, but you weren’t even allowed to kill yourself—not by the higher-ups’ orders, but by the spell embedded into your very being. I suspect that Hero is probably fixed with some sort of safety measure—one you absolutely cannot betray.”

Lifetimes of memories and abilities were a great burden on the human mind. However, Hero would lose its purpose if the reincarnators prematurely ended their lives before contributing to it, so it was easy to imagine that a safety measure had been embedded into the spell.

Dian's only other option would have been to order his own men to kill him, but he couldn't do that, nor would they have obeyed. After all, how could an ordinary soldier dare to take the Hero's life?

"The soldiers are strictly forbidden from killing the last hope of their world. So…" Raid narrowed his eyes. "You needed someone—or some*thing*—that could kill you."

Dian didn't have many options, but fortunately for him, they had planned to summon a *Calamity*. If he could have just succumbed to it after it expanded the gate, then they would have succeeded in the operation with minimal sacrifices. However, Raid and Eluria's interference had thrown a wrench in his plan. With the Calamity now gone, Dian was forced to take the next and only option left: to die by the hands of those who had eradicated the Calamity.

This was his last chance to achieve both of his goals—to save their world from destruction…and stop his subordinates from sacrificing themselves.

"Bastard… Stop talking like you know shit!" Dian gritted his teeth and gripped his battle-axe with trembling hands. "Do you take me for some suicidal freak?! Those useless pieces of trash can die in droves for all I care! Stop yapping like you know me or I'll shut you up myself!"

He mustered what little he had left to throw out one more attack, but with hardly any strength left, Raid simply raised his broadsword and blocked the blow.

To any bystander, it might have looked like a desperate struggle before looming death. But Raid knew better. As a fellow Hero, he knew better than anyone else.

"Spare me your lousy excuses," he muttered as he knocked back the battle-axe and watched Dian stumble backward. "If you were really just some hopeless scumbag…then you wouldn't have bothered asking for your soldier's name before he sacrificed himself."

In the underground ruins of the desert, Dian had stood upon

his allies' corpses. Before his last subordinate, too, joined the lifeless pile of sacrifices, Dian had asked for his name. So Dian could remember it for as long as he lived—and the soldier would know his noble death was not in vain.

Raid also remembered the names of those who had lost their lives upon the battlefield. Baxis, Rudan, Varris, Dietrude, Avril, Rosaria, Grace, Leela, Rod... All brave warriors who had stepped into the throes of war believing in Raid...and never made it back out. He hadn't forgotten a single name since.

"Shut up! Damn it, why won't you just shut up?!" Dian wildly swung his battle-axe, like a child throwing a tantrum.

Raid parried another blow as he watched Dian's expression crumble miserably.

"Why?! Why do they call me their Hero, when I'm just some lousy piece of shit?! Why do they keep following me?! Goddamned idiots, every last one of them!"

He should have already reached his limit, but he gritted his teeth and continued aimlessly swinging his battle-axe. For all the people who placed their faith in him, he stood and continued to fight.

"My death alone could've saved them all, but still they give their lives with smiles on their faces...and thank *me* with their dying breaths! *Why*?!" He cried and screamed, like the dam to his heart had finally burst forth. His expression was warped in unspeakable sorrow, lamenting all the deaths that could have been avoided with just his sacrifice alone.

"Why should they have to die instead of me?! Why?!"

Many soldiers had given their lives as stepping stones for humanity's future—and all their blood was on Dian's hands. It was his meager comfort for them, that their deaths would not be in vain...and it was also his way of atoning for forcing the sacrifice on them.

"Why does our world have to do something so shitty?!"

Eluria had changed their world, but Eluria herself had been warped and twisted by the greedy humans of the distant past. None of their sins should have been Dian's or his generation's to bear.

"I'm supposed to be the Hero! Wasn't I supposed to protect them?! So why?! Why am I *killing* them?! And why do they keep

following me anyway?! Even though I… I can't…!"

Dian had been chosen as the Hero, and now it was painfully clear why. But the reality he had been born into was far too cruel for the compassion he carried deep within. The result of that were those red eyes, blazing with deep hatred and despair, all while shedding tears for others.

"Damn it… Damn it!!!"

Dian raised his battle-axe, like a lone warrior standing against the world, but with a single stroke Raid slashed his weapon in half. The axe's blade fell to the ice with an empty *clang* before dissipating into particles of light. The fading light reflected lifelessly in Dian's gaze as he fell to his knees.

"Raid Freeden, please…kill me," he whispered, voice strained and weak. "You're a Hero too, aren't you? Just let me protect them…at least once in my life."

With Dian's death alone, their world would be saved and the soldiers would no longer need to be sacrificed. But if Dian couldn't die, then his subordinates would surely choose to take their own lives to save the world.

Hero Dian couldn't accept that. He had taken on the role of protecting the world and its people. If anyone had to sacrifice their life to protect others, it had to be *him*.

Raid understood that sentiment deeply. And so, he raised his sword—and stabbed it deep into the ice. "I already told you—we don't plan on killing you."

Dian gritted his teeth. "Stop toying with me! Hurry up and kill me, or else they're all gonna kill themselves and—"

"Well, you're the only one who can stop them from doing that, so no can do," Raid said with a breezy shrug. Then, he turned around and smiled. "Well, Eluria? What did I tell you?"

The girl who'd been silently watching them nodded. "Mm-hmm. It's crystal clear to me now."

"And? What do you think?"

Eluria gave two very eager thumbs-up. "Honestly, who *wouldn't* want to help them after seeing that?"

Dian looked between the two with creased eyebrows. "What the hell are you two talking about…?"

"You think the best solution is for you to die so that you can connect our timelines without any other sacrifices, yeah?" And

certainly, that was the best option for him—but not for Raid and Eluria. There was one method that didn't need any sacrifices at all.

Raid looked down at Dian with a bright smile. "All of you just need to defect to Vegalta right now," he proudly declared. "Oh, and just to be sure—Viteos was the one who ordered this whole scheme, wasn't he?"

Dian stared at him, baffled. "What does that even matter...?"

"You see, I know that piece of shit very well. Friend or foe, he turns everyone into his pawns and makes them fight among themselves, all while he watches from his lofty throne... He also understands how tremendous the Hero's power is and would totally cling to it like a lousy leech if he needed to."

Raid had already had an inkling that Viteos was behind all this. The despicable plan reeked of him, yes, but his reluctance to use the Hero as a sacrifice was what gave him away. After all, Viteos was painfully aware of just how powerful Raid was.

"You tried to force operation failure—even came here to be killed—because you hate how Viteos does things, right? But doesn't it suck to die for that sick bastard, even indirectly? You'd be better off tossing it all to the curb and defecting to our side, don't you think?"

Dian scoffed. "So you're telling me to just abandon everyone back home? Is that it?" he growled, the hostility rekindling behind his red eyes. If Dian and his troops defected now, they would essentially be leaving their world and all the people in it to die a slow and painful death. The Hero would never choose such a massive sacrifice, even if it meant he and his soldiers would survive.

"Well then," Raid said, "we'll just have to make sure they're all safe, won't we?"

Dian froze and blinked. "What...?"

"You know, I just found out that a certain annoying bastard is still alive out there and, worse yet, has even stepped back into power. Can't have that, now can we? So I think I'm gonna barge in there and give him a good sucker punch to the face." Raid grinned and raised his fist. "And we might as well save your world while we're at it."

Eluria stepped up beside him and nodded firmly.

"We can crush those Calamities you're all stressing about," Raid

said, placing a hand on her shoulder. “I mean, Eluria made those things… Well, a different version of her did, but you get what I mean.”

“Mm-hmm. Our timelines might have diverged, but I should clean up the mess that I started. It’s only fair,” she agreed with an eager nod.

“She’s thought of ways to purify the contaminated land and mana,” Raid added. “At the very least, you can say goodbye to just sitting and waiting for the end of the world.”

“I put my back into it. We already have a hole, so we just need to use Raid’s mana to traverse it back to your timeline, run wild for a bit, and restore the environment. Mission complete, easy-peasy.”

Raid chuckled. “In fact, it’s way easier than countering this whole operation. Producing multiple units of those spatial magic devices, calculating your routes and predicting your movement, and consolidating everyone’s reports in the office… Compared to all that, this’ll just be some light exercise.”

Eluria squinted. “You say that, but you’ve barely broken a sweat this whole time.”

“Well, you kept the sea frozen throughout our whole battle, so I think you’re pretty awesome too.”

“Mm-hmm. I did great.”

“You sure did. Thanks,” Raid said as he gave her a pat on the head.

Dian looked between them until he finally opened his trembling lips. “Why…” he whispered, his voice a lost wisp in the air. “There’s nothing in it for you…yet you’d risk your lives to save our world? Just why…?”

Raid and Eluria met his pained gaze and nodded.

“Because the Hero saves the world.”

“And the Sage prays for the people’s happiness.”

Their smiles were bright and dazzling, like the light Dian’s world had long been deprived of.



Epilogue

Dian eventually ordered a ceasefire and notified his squadrons of their defection, but needless to say, getting to that point had been no smooth ride.

"Tell me what exactly you're planning on doing in our world. A ceasefire's one thing, but I'm gonna need proper grounds to get the *defection* part through those morons' thick skulls."

That had been Dian's demand of Raid and Eluria, and of course they wholeheartedly complied—not only because it was necessary, but because they also wanted Dian's objective feedback as someone with deeper knowledge of the future and greater expertise in their advanced magical technology.

And so, Dian's objective feedback had been:

"Did your parents drop you when you were babies or were you just born crazy?"

Although he'd given them both a look of complete exasperation, he found no problems with their plan and willingly notified his men of the ceasefire and their defection. Of course, this part had been an even bumpier ride...but in the end, everyone complied and they were disarmed and restrained for the time being. In all likelihood, Elise would keep them under observation for a while and release them once it was confirmed they posed no threat.

This was how their secret war with the future Altanian army came to an end. And once the dust had settled...

"Wooow... That's one big tree..." Millis mumbled as she craned her head so far back, she nearly tumbled over.

Dian had pinpointed the location of the dimensional gap connecting their timelines. Now, in that spot—off the coast of Palmare where the Calamity had appeared—stood a big tree. That being said, "big" was somewhat of an understatement.

Perhaps it was best called a "World Tree."

Its branches spread out far into the sky, and its leaves mingled among the clouds. The trunk was so thick that its width spanned as wide as a small continent. Not to mention countless roots

crawled over the deep ocean floor. This wondrous and mystical tree seemingly appeared overnight, but who exactly had placed it there was frankly no mystery.

"I made it as big as I could," Eluria preened, puffing up her chest and looking up like a proud mother. "Heh. Let's see dad try to one-up me now."

Beside her, Elise's shoulders slumped. "Ahh... I have to bear the brunt of Wallus's childish stunt for the rest of my life..."

"And since I won, *you* have to take care of this World Tree from now on."

"And now I have even more work than ever befooore...!" She wailed beneath the towering tree, punching the ground in frustration. Such a young girl, yet it seemed there was just no end to her work.

Ignoring the pitiful elf, Wisel looked up at the World Tree with a fascinated gaze. "It's humongous, but the leaves don't block the sunlight at all... How strange."

Eluria nodded. "It looks like a tree, but it's basically a huge lump of magic. I embedded the leaves and branches with transparency."

"Ah, I see. You even took the environment into consideration. Splendid magic engineering, Ms. Eluria."

"I also factored in the ocean currents when positioning the roots," Eluria continued, her eyes lighting up. "What this means is that mana born from the ocean currents will flow through the roots, making the Tree entirely self-sustaining. The roots will also abate some of the rougher currents and consequently produce more and safer sea routes to and from Legnare."

Eluria's expression swelled with pride, like a child sharing her achievements in school, and she had every right to do so. The World Tree was composed of many complex layers of magic that worked together harmoniously and even produced synergistic effects on its environment. Such a feat would have been impossible without Eluria's extraordinary prowess in handling multiple spells. With their world's current level of magical advancement, it would have taken many more years before anyone else would have even thought to create such a thing.

Eluria, however, had a very good reason for making this World Tree at this particular time.

"Now," she whispered, looking up at her creation with a gentle

smile, “we can save the people in the other timeline.”

The World Tree would play a vital role in saving the world that was currently headed for destruction.

“I still can’t believe you thought of connecting this to the dimensional gap and using it to absorb the polluted mana from the other timeline…” Elise mumbled.

“That’s not all,” Eluria eagerly added. “The polluted mana will be broken down into finer bits in the trunk and released through the leaves—after being treated and diluted to a harmless level, of course. And once I cross over to the other side, I plan on making another Tree over there to disseminate some of our mana to them, which should significantly speed up the process of stabilizing their environment’s mana density. Moreover, the presence of identical World Trees in both timelines should foster a much clearer pathway between our worlds. This would facilitate smoother mana transfer between them and perhaps someday even serve as a highway for people to—”

“Goodness gracious, you are just *bursting* with energy today, aren’t you?!” Elise exclaimed.

“I’m overcompensating for my lack of sleep,” Eluria said, bobbing her head. She nodded twice more than usual—a clear sign of her sleep deprivation.

She had already made preliminary blueprints and preparations, but it was still quite the feat to have made the World Tree in such a short period of time. As for why Eluria had rushed the whole project…because the Altanian soldiers were still restrained to this day.

Their love for their motherland and wariness toward the people of this world couldn’t be so easily erased, even by their superior’s orders. With their families, homes, and even their world at stake, who was to say for certain that *none* of them would think of opposing Dian’s orders?

But things should change once they saw the World Tree for themselves.

Until now, taking over this world had been their only path to survival. But with infallible proof right before their eyes—a path to salvation that called for no human sacrifice—they would come to realize that their future was no longer set in stone. To give them that hope, Eluria had devoted every waking moment to creating

this World Tree.

"But..." Millis frowned and hung her head. "I'm a bit sad that you two will be leaving..."

Raid and Eluria planned to leave for the other timeline in a few days. According to Dian, only making a new dimensional gap or expanding an existing one required an immense amount of mana. Passing through one, however, could be done pretty much the same way one would cast a teleportation spell. Of course, the mana cost was still off the charts, but it wasn't anything the Hero couldn't supply.

So naturally...

"It's not like we'll be gone forever," Raid said with a shrug.

Millis blinked. "Huh...? Wait, really?"

"I mean, we'll probably be a little busy at first. You know, assessing their world's crisis, dealing with their Calamities, and making another World Tree..."

"Th-That sounds more than just 'a little busy'!"

"That said, we do need supplies and resources to keep working there, so after we finish all that, we'll bring Dian over and explain the whole situation to the people on that side... Anyway, we'll probably be coming back pretty often."

"Er... How often, exactly?"

Raid shrugged. "Eh. Maybe once or twice a year."

"Wow... It's almost like coming home for the holidays..." Millis mumbled as she gazed blankly into the distance.

Wisel sighed. "Should we even be surprised anymore? That's just like them, isn't it?" He looked like he'd already given up on mustering any sort of reaction to Raid and Eluria's shenanigans.

"Eluria and I will hop in first, then we plan on bringing Alma and a few others," Raid continued. "We'll probably need more help in the future, so you two better hurry up and become magicians as soon as you can."

Millis turned to Wisel with an empty gaze. "Did you hear that? Now he's asking *us* to do crazy stuff too."

Wisel hummed. "Normally, it takes nearly a decade to earn the qualifications, but thanks to your training, we can probably maintain much higher grades than other students. Considering we still have to gain some practical work experience though, we could probably manage four years at the shortest."

“I got *my* qualifications in a few months,” Raid pointed out.

“Well, *I* am trapped within the confines of common sense,” Wisel retorted, warily raising his fists. “Are you testing me, Raid?”

“Give it to him, Wisel!” Millis cheered, throwing a few empty punches into the air. “It’s time for us to vent our frustrations from training! Show him the power of us ordinary folk!”

Although they’d turned out a little weird, Raid was relieved to see his friends had become ever more reliable. Just as he was nodding in satisfaction, he felt a small tug on his clothes.

“Raid,” whispered the girl beside him.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“I’m sleepy…”

“Oh… You *did* say you were lacking sleep. Then you should head back to the institute first and—”

“Carry me…”

Raid stared at Eluria for a good few seconds, watching as the girl drowsily rubbed her eyes, before realization finally set in. “No way… You’re so sleep deprived that you got floaty *while awake*?!”

Millis gasped. “Lady Eluria’s floatiness is…evolving?!”

“So until now, we’ve just barely scratched the surface…!” Wisel exclaimed.

Ignoring the series of comical reactions, Eluria clung to Raid and drowsily looked up at him. “Raid… Carry…”

“Okay, okay…” Raid sighed and turned to his friends. “I’ll take Eluria back to the institute. If anything else happens, Elise will handle it.”

“You’re so good at adding to my workload!” Elise shrieked.

“I haven’t really added anything… Anyway, see ya.” Raid hefted Eluria onto his back and headed for the institute.

His pace was leisurely and the breeze was cool. It felt like he’d finally gotten a breather after the whirlwind of incidents the past few weeks.

Just then, he felt Eluria quietly nuzzle her face against his back. “Warm…”

“Uh-huh. I always keep my back nice and warm for my regular passenger.”

“Mm. It makes me feel so comfy…so content,” she mumbled, a bit of clarity returning to her speech. “This is just the kind of feeling I wanted to spread with magic… Spending time with the

person you love, chatting about nothing in particular, laughing at each other's jokes, and walking through life hand in hand... I wanted everyone to experience that kind of happiness too."

The girl quietly confessed her dearest wish. It hadn't come true just yet...but now, it was on the cusp of becoming her reality. With the Hero and the Sage together, anything was possible—even the fulfillment of the dear and precious wish she had given up on long ago.

"Raid," she whispered. "I love you."

The one simple sentence she'd never been able to say in the past—now, she found it in herself to tell him.

Then Raid, too, found his voice—to tell her what he couldn't in the distant past, but by some miracle now had the chance to a thousand years later.

"I've actually been in love with you for a long time now."

With a bright smile on his face, Raid finally completed his millennium-old confession.



Afterword

Greetings, distinguished readers. My name is Washiro Fujiki.

I've managed to avoid starting this volume's afterword with an apology, all thanks to my editor generously giving me more time in my schedule. But before I get into this volume's contents, please allow me to scream:

The Hero and the Sage, Reincarnated and Engaged's manga volume 1 has been reprinted! HOORAAAAAY!!!

This is truly cause for celebration. I've been writing for eight years now, but this is my first time having a volume reprinted. The war cry I unleashed when I heard the news was so loud, it scared the bejeezus out of my cat.

But that didn't stop me from once again screaming at the top of my lungs every time I read Riku Nishi-sensei's drafts and manuscripts—especially when I see how incredibly and unbelievably super-duper ultra adorable Eluria is!!! If you have yet to check it out, please do give it a try at Gangan Online. I promise you, Eluria's cuteness will make you leap with joy.

With that wonderful news out of the way, let me proceed with this volume's contents. I've packed quite a lot into this volume, partly because I made some adjustments back in Volume 3…but mostly to fulfill my dream of adding a graceful black-haired red-eyed Yamato Nadeshiko beauty into the story! Huzzah!

Truth be told, I've actually had her planned from early on in the outline stage. You see, this story is about two rivals forming a romantic relationship in their next life—so why not add in a *romantic rival* as well, right?! Makes perfect sense to me! I've known from the start what kind of relationship she would have with Raid and how everything would wrap up in the end. I'm very grateful to have finally written her into the story. As a human, I only have decades to live, so I spent quite some time imagining how the passage of time could affect someone. I thought it would be lovely if, despite everything, her feelings remained unchanged.

Well? That was a pretty good passage, wasn't it? Last volume, I exposed myself as the kind of author who'd dish out a cliché

swimsuit episode, so this has surely restored my reputation. That being said, I shall continue to commit the same crime, for I believe that beautiful girls smiling in swimsuits can cure anything in this world.

Now that things are back on track, let me give my words of thanks:

To my editor, I've done quite well this volume, so I would like to say I've regained my right to speak. I'm a very simple person; I received lots of praise this time, so I will keep giving it my all.

To Heiro, thank you for all the wonderful illustrations. I clasp my hands together in worship every time I receive your illustrations.

To Riku Nishi, whenever I look through your work, I repeatedly mutter "cute" like some sort of incantation. I suspect your art emits negative ions.

Finally, to everyone involved in the production of this book, as well as the readers who gave this novel a chance, I offer you my sincerest thanks.

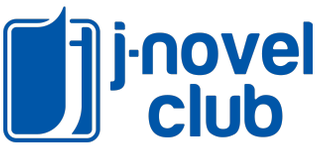
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The Hero and the Sage, Reincarnated and Engaged: Volume 4
by Washiro Fujiki

Translated by Joey Antonio
Edited by Emlyn Dornemann

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Original Japanese edition published in 2023 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: April 2025