

5 The Hero and the Sage, Reincarnated and Engaged

Author: Washiro Fujiki
Illustrator: Heiro



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Table of Contents

Cover

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Epilogue

Afterword

Color Illustrations

Bonus Short Story

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Prologue

Looking back, my life has been the subject of envy for many, but things hadn't always been like that. Life was different back when I still lived in a poor village—that is, until the day a certain man came to visit.

"Mister, you dropped your money."

The man turned around and shot me a dubious look. "Huh? Who're you? Haven't seen you around, kid."

"I live here. I just don't leave the house."

"Huh... Oh, yeah. The chief mentioned something 'bout a couple begging to sell off their kid—said they'd take any price, even!" The man burst into laughter as he looked down on me.

I must have looked like a tattered rag back then. Malnutrition led to a skinny body and stunted growth, and my overall poor health painted a sickly pallor over my skin.

Most would find the man's words far too harsh to say to a child's face, but he spoke the truth. The villagers hated me, as did my parents—all because I was born with a weak body that only grew weaker still from our impoverished condition. Whereas other kids began helping around the village from the moment they were able, I could hardly spend a day outside without falling ill. Most children eventually headed for the imperial capital to sign up for the army, but I didn't even know if I'd make it to adulthood before dropping dead for one reason or another.

It stood to reason that my parents wanted to sell me off to a slave merchant. After all, everybody dreamed of escaping poverty, and getting rid of one useless mouth to feed—maybe even earning some paltry change for it—was as good a first step as any. From there, they could have a new child, send *them* off to the imperial army, and regularly receive their allowances or even condolence money in the end.

Even a child like me could see where they were coming from. And that was why...I had to take matters into my own hands.

"Returning a stranger's money, eh? Well, aren't you a good kid? Or maybe stupid's a better word." The man sneered. "If you'd just kept your mouth shut and taken it back home, maybe then your parents would have finally loved you."

Despite his mockery, I met the man's gaze head-on. "But don't you need this money? A thousand silvers is a lot."

The look on the man's face changed in an instant. "This...is a gold coin," he said slowly. "You know how much it's worth?"

"A thousand silvers, right?"

"How'd you know?"

"The village chief once received a gold coin from someone and used it to buy three months' worth of food for everyone in the village. My parents paid him in silver. I counted that—and the number of households in this village—and figured out that one gold coin is worth around a thousand silvers."

The man narrowed his eyes. "Did your parents teach you?"

"No. I just think about all sorts of things while I'm cooped up at home. Never know when it might come in handy."

Literacy and arithmetic weren't common skill sets in poor and desolate villages like ours. The exceptions were the village chief and a few others who regularly handled negotiations with passing peddlers, and they lived more comfortable lives than the other villagers. Comparing their lifestyles and workloads to that of the more impoverished households like mine, I came to the realization that some people could earn their keep even without getting involved in physical labor.

It wasn't very difficult for me to reach this conclusion. After all, sickly as I was, what else could I do while stuck in my house but *think*?

And with this discovery, I had found the path I needed to take.

"Say, kid—how old are you?"

"I just turned six. I can do basic math, and some simple reading and writing too. I can learn faster if someone teaches me."

"Hah!" The man barked out a laugh. "Well, well. Looks like I've

got myself an interesting little *guest* today." He looked me in the eye and asked, "So, what are you telling me all this for?"

There was an intrigued glint in his eyes—that was what I'd been waiting for. I quietly met his gaze and muttered, "I want you to sell me as a slave."

This was the story of how I sold myself into slavery.

I knew back then that it was the best option available to me. All that was left for me in the village was to rot away as useless baggage. That being said, I couldn't just wait for someone to sell me off—otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to communicate my own worth. My value didn't lie in physical labor, and I needed to prove that myself—I didn't want to be sold off for cheap, after all.

This one move opened up my future, and sure enough, it also changed my life.

I absorbed everything the slave merchant taught me, all the way until he sold me off to an imperial scholar who was desperate for an assistant. My meals were provided and my clothes were clean. Gone were the days of shivering in a dilapidated shack under the biting cold, waiting for death's embrace.

Finally, I could live my life as a *person*.

I absorbed whatever knowledge passed through my hands in my work as the scholar's assistant. Sometimes, I sought out knowledge of my own volition to satisfy the intellectual curiosity brewing within. I didn't hesitate, for I knew what the future had in store for me.

In time, I was no longer the useless little boy of a poor village. I was one who'd acquired knowledge beyond measure, grasped the laws of this world, and attained wisdom that rivaled the divine.

This was the story of Raid Freeden, the man once known as the Sage.

Chapter One

One month after the invasion of the Altanian army led by Dian, Raid and Eluria once again gathered with their allies at Palmare Magic Institute.

"I will now announce the operational results of the World Tree," said Eluria as she slowly raised two thumbs up. "Ten out of ten. A perfect score."

"Wow. Not even the tiniest issue?" Raid said.

"Nope. There are several points that can't be judged in the short term, but this full month of smooth operation is already plenty indicative of success."

"Well, that's great. I can tell you gave it your all."

"Mm-hmm. I sure did."

A warm and cozy atmosphere budded in the room as Raid patted Eluria on the head, and Eluria accepted the gesture with an eager nod. As if to shatter the mood, however, a heavy and exasperated sigh cut through the air.

"What the hell am I even watching?"

"Ooh! Nice one, Dian! You also get a perfect score for that reaction!" Elise cheered.

"Perfect score, my ass. Who *wouldn't* react this way after seeing the Hero and the Demon Lord like this? If anything, I'd expect *you* to be more thrown off by this, Wallus Caldwin." Dian propped his cheek on his fist and clicked his tongue. "Also, can somebody tell me why the Demon Lord is getting head pats from the Hero while sitting on his lap?"

"Obviously, it's her reward for working so hard," Raid replied.

"Raid's lap is very comfy," Eluria added.

"Goddammit, that's not what I meant. I don't care about her reward *or* your comfy lap. Aren't we supposed to be having a serious meeting here? So what the hell's up with all this...*flirting*? And why

isn't anyone saying anything about it?"

"We're already used to it," came four deeply unamused voices.

"Shit, are you saying I have to get used to this too?" Dian slumped and let out a resigned groan before lifting his face back up. "Whatever. You said you wanted a briefing on the First World, yeah?"

"That's right," Raid said. "You've already shared some stuff with us in bits and pieces, but it's about time we make sure everyone's on the same page."

"Uh-huh... Well, I get bringing in you two and Wallus, and also the black-haired woman I saw in the ruins..." Dian dragged his gaze from Raid and Eluria to Elise, then to Alma, before finally narrowing his eyes. "But why do *these brats* need this intel?"

Millis and Wisel gulped under his dubious glare. Coarse speech aside, Dian was right to doubt their presence in this meeting. After all, they were just students.

Regardless, Raid had valid reasons for inviting them here today.

"We'll be bringing them along, that's why," he told Dian. "We can't have them going in blind, now can we?"

Dian whipped his glare to Raid. "You're bringing *them* to the First World? Are you crazy?"

"Not at all. You see, Wisel's the one who came up with the technique that nullified your army's self-destruct spells, and he's also studied the weapons and devices we confiscated from you guys. He'll be tagging along to perform whatever maintenance and adjustments are needed on the other side."

Wisel awkwardly cleared his throat. "Of course, this doesn't make me an invaluable asset by any means, but I'm still the most knowledgeable technician in our group, so I'd like to lend my aid where possible."

"Tsk... Fine, four-eyes. I've heard about you from Bracchio's report. If that's why you studied our stuff, then it makes sense for you to be here." Next, Dian turned his piercing gaze to Millis. "So, what about this one?"

"Hello! I'm an ordinary girl from the boonies!"

"Get outta here," Dian snapped.

"B-But I just arrived!"

"All right, all right," Raid said in a placating tone. "She's coming with us too, so just let her stay. Besides, from what you've told us, she also needs to be in the know, doesn't she?"

"You're shittin' me... I'm exhausted already," Dian grumbled as he sluggishly turned to face Millis. "Fine, whatever. You—ask your questions first, then I'll answer."

"Hmm, in that case... What's that 'First World' thingy you mentioned earlier?"

"It's the timeline we came from," Dian replied, picking up a fruit from the table and taking a bite. "This world you live in is a timeline that branched off from ours; we call it the Second World. Normally, it'd be unthinkable for a timeline to branch off and establish itself as its own. You can travel to the past and alter whatever you want, but the world is ultimately driven toward the same outcome, so—"

"Dumb it down a bit, please and thank you!"

Dian's eye twitched before he slowly spoke again. "Traveling back in time and changing the past will *not* change the future. Or *shouldn't*, anyway. But the Hero and the Demon Lord can warp the laws of the world. Both of them simultaneously jumping back to the past triggered the establishment of a new world that—"

"Dumb it down just a *teeny* bit more, please and thank you again!"

"A new world was born 'cause of those two lovebirds."

"Nice and simple! Thank you very much!"

"Was that all I had to say this whole time...?"

Millis nodded emphatically. "Everything automatically makes sense when those two are involved!"



"Millis is such a fast learner," Eluria mused.

"More like she just straight-up rewired her brain," Raid said.

Dian whipped his head around with a glare. "You two shut up. It's all your fault."

"But, um..." Millis said, fidgeting. "Can't you join us too, Mr. Dian? I think it'd be better for the whole operation if you—and, well, whoever else came with you—joined us and guided us while we're there, right? I mean, compared to filling us in as complete newbies over here..."

"No can do. The others are one thing, but *I* can't afford to go back." Dian's face warped in disgust. "In our world, the Hero is embedded with a rule of absolute subservience to the emperor. It's to keep us in check since we hold the power to overthrow the nation overnight."

"Oh... So, you *can* join, but then you'd be forced to fight us?"

"Got that right. As for the others, no use bringing them along either. Their self-destruct spells will go off with a single word from anyone with enough authority." Dian and his men were only free because they were here in the Second World. The moment they stepped back into the First World, they would once again fall under Altane's influence. "So we can give you all the info you need, but that's it."

"I can't join either..." Elise meekly added. "Wallus's memory succession magic was made by Eluria back when she was the Demon Lord. The First World is brimming with her mana, so who knows what'll happen if I go there? Worst-case scenario, I could also end up turning against you all."

Alma sighed, scratching her head. "It's not just Elise—the other special-class magicians wouldn't be of much help either. It's not like we have experience dealing with all the anti-magic technology they've got over there. At best, they could probably provide a little support..."

Not to mention, besides all the reasons that barred them from going to the First World, there were also circumstances that begged them to *stay* in the Second World.

"By now, the higher-ups have probably assumed that our

operation has failed and started prepping a second invasion plan," Dian continued. "But setting aside those two exceptions, this world's fighting force ain't all that promising. Take that woman over there, for example," he said, glancing at Alma. "With magicians on your level, you'd need several to even dream of just *holding off* a Hero."

Alma scratched her head. "We're the strongest magicians in this world, though..."

"For this era, sure. To us, though? You're all just tossing around a buncha outdated tech. It was developed differently from ours, but we've still got countless ways to shut it all down."

"Well, credit where credit is due, they can still hold off a Hero," Elise said with a rueful smile. "So the other special-classers can stay here and buy time until Raid and the others come back from the First World."

Speed was the key for this expedition, hence they settled on sending a small elite force into the First World with Raid and Eluria in the lead. Regardless, many foes stood in their way.

"They've got Viteos with them," Raid sighed. "Since this whole invasion was his idea, I wouldn't be surprised if they made a few more reckless attempts."

Viteos had been the Altanian emperor a thousand years ago when Raid was active as the Hero. He was a tyrant at worst and a fool at best, but nevertheless he sat on the throne for half a century thanks to the authority he was born with and the support of his vassals. After Raid's death, the Hero and the Sage's subordinates led a rebellion and took down the empire, at which point Viteos fled and vanished off the face of the world—not so figuratively, as Dian's information had revealed to them.

"By the way, is that guy back on the throne over in your world?" Raid asked.

Dian sighed. "Do I even need to answer? Sounds like you know him well enough."

"Oh, I know him *very* well. Let's see... He's an arrogant dolt who thinks the world revolves around him just because he was born with imperial blood. He can't do anything on his own yet acts like we owe him the air we breathe. Yet, for all that he's a hopeless idiot, he can

still be so devious in the most annoying ways. A real piece of work, that one."

"N-No mercy!" Millis whispered, aghast. "Is he really your former boss?!"

"I had to deal with that guy for *decades*. So yeah, I've got a bone or two to pick with him," Raid grumbled. Viteos's arrogance and recklessness had caused unending grief for the soldiers and citizens alike.

"Yeah, sounds about right... But unfortunately, he's not *just* an emperor in our world," Dian mumbled, his expression warping bitterly. "Our forces came to the Second World to assassinate the Demon Lord, but nothing changed—naturally, since our timelines had already diverged. So they set their sights on recreating Hero, and that led them to reach out to Viteos."

"They got him to retrieve my sword, didn't they?"

"Right. In the First World, Emperor Viteos Altane was a prominent historical figure. He took over his father's imperial expansion project and succeeded in colonizing more than half of the continent. He was someone we could rely on... Well, that's what they were hoping for, anyway."

In a sense, they hadn't been wrong to make such an assumption. Altane had military superiority over other nations thanks to their advanced machinery. Without variables like the Hero and the Sage in the First World, the empire must have steadily expanded its territory. But at the same time, this steady success meant Altane never learned from its vicious ways, eventually leading to the birth of the Demon Lord...and the impending end of their world.

"Add to that glorious past his current achievement of bringing us the Hero's sword, and, well..." Dian shrugged. "Viteos is now enjoying power and authority an emperor could only dream of. He's practically a living god over there."

Raid groaned. "As if his head wasn't big enough already..."

"Hah, you said it. The empire's bigwigs have been reduced to a flock of brainless yes-men." From their perspective, a great hero of the past had returned and brought them a sliver of hope amid their dying world. Deplorable as it was, their blind devotion was

understandable to an extent. “But the results speak for themselves: We’re just barely holding on. Only three people, myself included, were found to be compatible with the Hero’s power. Two of us were sent to the front lines to repel the Calamities, but things are steadily getting worse. We’re even starting to see casualties among noncombatants.”

“So, in typical Altane fashion, they decided to switch over to this Second World invasion plan, right?”

“Probably. I mean, it’s already been ten years since Viteos crossed over to our world. Was about time for a change in strategy.”

Raid scoffed. “I’m sure there’s more to it than just that.”

The Viteos Altane that Raid had known wasn’t one to strive for a noble cause—he was selfish and materialistic through and through. Most likely, his thought process went a little more like this:

Since crossing over to the First World, he had been enjoying power and status like never before. But ten years had gone by; he wasn’t getting any younger, nor was their world’s situation improving. If he wanted to keep reveling in luxury, then he needed to come up with a better plan.

That sounded a lot more like Viteos as Raid knew him.

“On top of the Calamities, you’ll have to deal with those old fogeys in Altane too. It’d be one thing if you could just kill ’em all—”

“But you don’t want that, do you?” Raid said.

Dian pursed his lips and shook his head. “I’ve watched far too many people die in this conflict. The only reason I’m not among them...is because I just so happened to be a Hero.”

Raid could sympathize with the sentiment. Not many were lucky enough to survive like him; most were powerless in the face of the world’s tragedies and perished namelessly in some forgotten corner. Raid had witnessed such deaths time and time again, many of which he’d had to avert his eyes from because of the weight of his responsibilities.

Death was a constant presence in his life, a shadow that always lingered. He used his immense power to escape its clutches, then reached out to bring along whoever he could. In time, the desire to save two more lives for every death he witnessed permeated his

very being.

And that must have been why he became the Hero.

"It wasn't just some coincidence," he told Dian. "You were chosen as a Hero *because* you understood the weight of life. Isn't that why those guys entrusted you with theirs?"

"Hah... You tryin' to comfort me? What, 'cause you're an actual hero?"

"I'm just speaking from experience. Think of it as an old man's ramblings."

"Oh yeah?" Dian's lips curled into a small, almost soft smile. "Guess I'll keep that in mind, then."

Suddenly, Millis shot her hand up into the air. "Excuse me! I am still very much confused and would like to ask a question!"

Dian's face instantly fell. "Shoot, blondie. I'll answer every last one you've got. You're the most worrying part of this plan, after all."

Millis lowered her hand with creased brows. "Like Wisel, I accepted Raid's invitation because I want to help in any way I can...but are you sure you need *me* there? I'm still inexperienced as a magician, and it's not like I have anything special to offer like Wisel... Honestly, wouldn't I just drag you all down?"

Millis's excellent mana had brought her to the Institute as a scholarship student, and she'd also gained practical skills and experience under Eluria's tutelage. However, that only made her stand out among the student body—as a *magician*, she was by no means an indispensable unit. In a place full of unknowns, Millis wasn't confident she could carry her own weight just yet. Even the other special-class magicians could probably contribute more than her, despite all the aforementioned problems.

She whipped her head up with a gasp. "Could it be that...a hidden power slumbers within me?!"

"Not a chance," said Dian.

"You could've let me dream, even for a second!"

"In the First World, Millis Lambut was said to have spent her entire life in the secluded land of Norberg while surrounded by sheep and cattle."

"The bumpkin life just won't let me go, not even in another

world!” Millis wailed as she raised her fist, poised to swing it down on the desk—but then she froze, blinked, then tilted her head. “Wait... Hang on. You mean there are records of my life there? But why?”

Dian raised an eyebrow. “Whaddya mean, ‘why’? I already told those two,” he said, glancing at Raid and Eluria. “Besides, Wallus Caldwin should know. Isn’t that why you were invited to the Institute?”

Under Dian’s questioning gaze, the three nodded and said in perfect sync, “We didn’t tell her ’cause we thought her reaction would be funny.”

“Do you see this?! *This* is how they treat me over here!” Millis cried.

Dian slowly glanced between all of them before letting out a sigh. “I get it. So you want *me* to explain, is that it? God...” He shook his head before facing Millis again. “At present, in the First World, all unpolluted lands are under Altane’s jurisdiction. You can jump into the dimensional gap and land yourselves on the other side, sure, but Altane will detect your presence and hunt you down in no time. Not to mention you’ve got no allies over there.”

The man’s gaze drifted to Eluria as he spoke. If the Demon Lord—the culprit behind their crisis—set foot in their world once more, no doubt everyone in the First World would raise all arms to eliminate her once and for all. They could fight back, but that would bring about many more unnecessary sacrifices along the way.

“However...” Dian narrowed his eyes. “There’s one place that’s still free from Altane’s influence.”

Millis’s eyes grew wide. “Wait, really?”

“We call it Paradise. It’s totally untouched by the Demon Lord’s polluted mana, and her Calamities never step foot in there. Allegedly, it’s the one place in our dying world that remains exactly as it was a thousand years ago.”

“‘Allegedly’...?”

“Only natives live in Paradise. Nobody else can get inside, so all we Altanians know is that the place exists,” Dian muttered as he slowly lifted his face. “In the past, when Paradise was still called

Norberg, the Demon Lord formed a contract with a young girl who lived there and designated her to watch over the land."

It sounded like a fairy tale—a fantastical story of a fateful encounter between the Demon Lord and a young village girl. Dian leaned back on his chair as he met the gaze of the girl before him.

"Her name was Millis Lambut, and she was the First Keeper of Paradise."

◇

After the briefing with Dian, Raid and Eluria joined their friends back to the capital to prepare for their expedition.

"Raid."

"What is it, Eluria?"

"How do you like your toothbrush bristles? Soft or hard?"

"Hmm... Soft, I'd say."

"Me too."

"Thought so. I've already bought us two."

"So we match. Nice." Eluria hugged a paper bag to her chest and nodded.

Their first expedition would last one month at the shortest and three at the longest. That being said, this estimate was very much subject to change depending on what they saw over on the other side. After all, there was a limit to how much they could learn from Elise and Dian alone.

Could they repel the Altanian army and the other Heroes? Could they stop the Demon Lord's mana pollution and fix the environment with their current pool of knowledge? To find their answers, they needed to confirm Altane's current movements and study the deteriorating environment of the First World. If their investigation found that a fix was available and needed right away, then it was entirely possible that they would need to extend their stay.

Of course, their very first order of business was to get to Paradise. Until then, they would have to camp out.

"I also picked out toothbrushes with sturdy handles, so we can sharpen them into hunting tools if necessary," Raid said.

"An excellent choice," Eluria praised. "We can still brush our teeth with our fingers, after all."

"Or salt, even. Used to do that back in the day..."

"Me too. You get used to it after a while."

"Like many other things, right? Speaking of, we should have everyone carry a pouch of salt each. Even weeds and bugs are just barely edible with that stuff."

"Way ahead of you."

"Awesome. It's one thing we can't go without."

"Mm-hmm. Salt fixes *everything*."

"Uh..." Wisel looked between the couple with an awkward smile. "This obsession with salt *sounds* like a joke, but somehow I can't bring myself to laugh when I think about your past..." He sighed and shook his head. "Before entering the Institute, I'd never left the capital, much less gone camping...so I'll have to leave those details to you two and Instructor Kanos."

"Actually, camping sounds right up Millis's alley, doesn't it?" Raid pointed out. "I wouldn't be surprised if she's picked up a thing or two about herbs or hunting out in the boonies... Maybe she even knows some traditional cooking techniques."

"Well, I agree with you on that, but..." Wisel slowly turned his head, directing his withering gaze to the girl herself.

"Hee... Hee hee...! A historical figure! *Me*, a historical figure! Hee hee hee!"

Wisel stared at the creepy grin on her face before turning his empty gaze back to Raid and Eluria. "I'd...rather not approach Ms. Millis right now."

"Did someone just call my historically significant name?!"

"We sure did," Raid affirmed.

"Hah! So you did! You called for me, Millis Lambut, a major historical figure!!!" Millis threw her head back and laughed, unabashedly riding the coattails of her otherworld self. Her excitement had soared through the roof ever since she'd heard from Dian that Millis Lambut was the First Keeper of Paradise.

Raid huffed. "Is it really that exciting?"

"But of course! It's not every day one gets upgraded from a

bumpkin to a major historical figure!”

“Well, I guess you *were* a pretty amazing person in the First World...”

“If I—or, well, my other self—was such a big deal, then don’t you think my descendants would’ve built me a castle or something?! Then maybe Norberg’s even *urbanized* now!”

“You’re still hung up on making your hometown prosper...” Raid sighed and shook his head.

Regardless, Millis certainly held the key to their operation. Although she wasn’t exactly the same person who’d founded Paradise, she still had the greatest chance of convincing the residents to cooperate with them. Without her, they really wouldn’t have any potential allies in the First World.

Millis’s value was clear to anyone who’d come from the First World—to Dian, who’d suggested they visit Paradise in the first place; to Elise, who’d taken Millis under her wing in the guise of a scholarship; and to the Altanian army, who’d apparently listed her as one of their targets along with Lufus and Totori.

Speaking of, Millis wasn’t the only other person on their list.

“Come on, Wisel, follow me!” Millis cheered. “Chin up and chest out!”

The boy sighed. “Don’t drag me into this...”

“But you also played a huge role in the First World! Didn’t Mr. Dian say so?”

“He was talking about my *family*, not me specifically.”

As it turned out, the Blanche family had greatly contributed to the First World’s technological development. They had combined magical technology and machinery to establish the foundations of their magic devices. After the emergence of the Demon Lord, they had extracted techniques from Sage Raid Freeden’s manuscripts to help with the efforts for survival—crafting weapons and anti-magic technology for Altane’s fight against the Calamities and developing measures to delay the spread of polluted mana, among other things.

“Even in our world, the Blanche family has always been a powerhouse among craftsmen,” Wisel said. “We only *look* poor because we devote all our funds to our research and development

efforts. So it doesn't come as a surprise that we contributed a lot in the other world."

Millis gasped. "Goodness me... Such composure, such nobility!"

"Of course, as a fellow Blanche, I'm proud of their achievements...but they're not *mine*, so it's nothing I should be bragging about."

"Suit yourself! I'm gonna brag all I want!"

"I expected no less from you, Ms. Millis." Wisel chuckled before smoothing his expression. "Anyway, now that we're done shopping, it's about time we head to the workshop."

"By that, you mean your family's workshop, right?"

"Yep. Ms. Eluria had some adjustments made on her magic gear. So did Raid, on the sword he received from the Imperial Lord."

"Oh! Did you manage to get your big sister on the job?"

"I sure did. Usually, it's a nightmare just trying to contact her since she's always wandering from place to place... But when I spoke with her last time, I managed to convince her to come show her face around the house."

"Aha. I see, I see... But Wisel, why can't *you* make those adjustments?"

"Because this commission calls for more complex and precise work, a far cry from the maintenance and prototype products I usually work on. I'm still inexperienced as a magic artificer, after all." Wisel furrowed his brows. "On the other hand, my sister, Carille Blanche, is a professional in every sense of the word. She's worked on commissions for royalty and nobility—Ms. Eluria included, of course—and has a solid track record under her belt. The best artificer of our generation."

"Wow... I've never heard you dish out such high praise," Millis marveled.

"But she's also incredibly rude."

"Nor such a blunt insult!"

Wisel sighed. "She's...*picky*, if you could even call it that. Especially with her work. If she likes you or your commission, she'll accept in a heartbeat. Otherwise, you could offer her all the riches in the world and still get snubbed. Also, our family's severe lack of

funds is largely thanks to her aimless wandering."

"Oh... I feel like all your past struggles just flashed before my eyes..."

"Anyway, her personality and behavior are questionable at best, but she's undeniably what you would call a genius. That's why I chose to study alongside her."

"Wow... My dull bumpkin brain is struggling to keep up with all this serious talk..." Millis mumbled as she cradled her head.

"You don't have to," Wisel said, waving his hand with a strained smile. "Long story short, families like ours come with their fair share of troubles and headaches."

Over the course of their conversation, Workshop Blanche had come into view. The front door was unlocked, so they filed into the workshop behind Wisel, only to find that there were no lights on inside.

Wisel stopped in his tracks and placed a hand on his chin. "Hmm... Everyone, stay on your toes."

"Huh? Why?" Millis asked.

"My sister has probably collapsed inside."

"What? What are you warning *us* for, then?! Shouldn't we call for help?!"

"No, no. I say she's collapsed, but her life isn't in danger. She probably just fainted from exhaustion and lack of sleep."

"Wow... I've never seen someone so dismissive of their sibling passing out..."

"Anyway, she gets really cranky when you wake her up, but we can't just sit here and wait all day. So, Ms. Eluria and Ms. Millis, I'd like to enlist your help."

Eluria blinked. "Us...?"

Wisel nodded. "You see, my sister loves girls. Especially cute girls. She's head over heels for them."

"I'm learning your sister's preferences before even meeting her..." Eluria mumbled.

"So," he continued, unfazed, "if either of you call her name, I'm sure she'll be up in no time—to hug you, of course."

"Good luck, Millis," Eluria said.

"Wow! You wasted *no* time shoving the task onto me!"

"I've had my fill of bear hugs from Kris..."

"So what you're saying is that *you're* more accustomed to— Ack! Goodness me, you're such a strong little lady!" Millis shrieked as Eluria held her shoulders in a vise grip and pushed her forward. "I could've sworn you've never used this kind of force on me even during training, but here you are whipping it out to hide from a hug!"

In any case, Eluria was making it very clear just how badly she hated the idea of getting a hug from a stranger. Kris's bear hugs were just barely passable in her book, given the princess was her childhood friend.

Eventually, Millis gave in and nodded, her expression brimming with resolve. "Very well. To express my sincerest gratitude for everything you've done for me, Lady Eluria, I shall bravely step into the beast's maw myself!"

Wisel nodded. "So you volunteer to be sacrificed, Ms. Millis?"

"You're supposed to defend your sister, not play along!"

"Well, I suppose she's not *that* bad. She's just utterly apathetic to males and somewhat pushy with females, but it's not like she'll eat you or anything."

"So you're saying she's annoying either way..." Millis gulped, shoulders tensely wound up as she knocked on the door. "Er... Hello? Ms. Carille? We're here for a commission we requested through Wisel..."

Silence.

"Um... Nothing happened."

"Strange," Wisel said. "Normally, she'd wake up for sure."

"Maybe she's just extra tired? I mean, you said they were complex commissions..."

"Or maybe she's collapsed from overwork."

"Why did you jump to the scarier option?! And why don't you try worrying about your sister a bit more?!" Millis whipped her head back to them in a panic. "Actually, maybe we should all go in after all! What if she's—"

Clack.

The door creaked open behind her, revealing a single pale hand from within the darkness. Slender fingers coiled around Millis's arms and dragged her into the abyss before she could even let out a scream.

Clack.

The rest of the group stared speechlessly at the closed door and the space once occupied by their friend. A few moments passed silently, not a single one of them speaking a word.

Finally, Raid slowly opened his mouth and said, "Huh. She *was* actually sucked into the beast's maw."

"It's like a horror story..." Eluria mumbled with a shudder.

"Okay, my sister aside, how about we show a bit more concern for *Ms. Millis*?" Wisel deadpanned. He stepped forward and knocked on the door with a sigh. "Carille, it's me. Looks like you're awake. We're coming in."

Wisel opened the door and they all stepped in, only to be greeted by the sight of Millis trapped in the arms of a brunette.

"Ahhh, this is the stuff... Cute girls give me life..." the woman drawled, a look of pure bliss on her face as she nuzzled her cheek against Millis's. "How old are you, cutie? Where d'you live? Can I measure your bust, waist, and hip?"

"H-Ha wa wa wa wa...?!" Millis was shaking, clearly rattled by the sudden abduction.

Unfazed, the woman continued nuzzling her cheek. "Awww, how cute... You even speak some weeeiiird language..."

Wisel looked at the woman and let out a heavy sigh. "You're the same as ever, Carille."

"Hmm?" The woman, Carille, directed her half-lidded gaze up at her brother. "Oooh, Wisel, you're home..."

"Yes, I am. That girl is my classmate. Could you let her go once you're done?"

"Mmkay... I'll be done in maaaybe three days..."

"I don't think Ms. Millis can last that long," he deadpanned.

"How can you chat so casually while I'm still stuck here?!" Millis shrieked. Having snapped back to her senses, she turned her bloodshot eyes to the brunette and said, "Ms. Carille, that's enough

hugging! Look, your clients are here!”

“Awww... But I’m almost done with the measurements...”

“You’ve been measuring me this entire time?!”

“Mm-hmm... Your height is a hundred and forty-eight centimeters, and from the top, your measurements are eighty-se—”

“Stop!!! For the sake of my dignity, I implore you to stop!” Millis freed herself from Carille’s grip, swiftly circled around the woman’s back, and clamped her mouth shut. All her training under Eluria had come in handy in such a bizarre way. In any case, Millis then gripped Carille’s head between her hands and directed her gaze to the side. “Behold! Your clients, Raid and Lady Eluria!”

Carille blinked. “Lady Eluria...?”

Under the woman’s intense gaze, Eluria jumped and hid behind Raid. A moment later, though, she bravely stuck her head out with steely resolve in her eyes. “Um... Thank you for making my magic gear,” she muttered. “It’s really well-made, so I wanted to thank you in person. I was really happy that you understood my Polyaggregate Expansion and accommodated it at my request.”

Carille’s only response to the girl’s passionate show of gratitude, however, was to freeze in place, sleepy expression and all. “Lady Eluria...in the flesh?”

“Mm-hmm. I’m Eluria Caldwin. My favorite drink is—”

“Warm milk tea.”

“Oh... A stranger knows my favorite drink...”

“Ahhh... You see, Princess Kris gave me the recording of the first ever Who Loves Eluria More Contest, and I’ve been rewatching it nonstop every day now...sooo I answered by reflex.”

“I feel like I would’ve been better off not knowing about that...”

“But wooow... Oh, wooow... So you’re the real deal... Lady Eluria in the flesh... Uh-huuuh...” Eyes half lidded, Carille bobbed her head a few times. Then, she clenched her fist, thrust it into the air, and screamed, “*My idol has come to see meeeeee!!!*” before flopping down on the ground.

Millis stared blankly at the unmoving body sprawled over the floor. “Huh? Um... What? Wisel, what happened to your sister?”

“Most likely, amid her accumulated fatigue, sleep deprivation, and

unhealthy living, all her blood rushed up to her head from the excitement of meeting Ms. Eluria."

"In other words...?"

"She passed out again."

"Nooo!!! Wake up, Ms. Carille! If you don't wake up, I'd have volunteered as a sacrifice and risked my dignity for nothing!!!" Millis grabbed Carille's shoulders and desperately shook her back and forth.

Sadly, Carille did not wake for another hour.

◇

"Whoopsie... Sorry for the waaait..." Carille said with her usual drawl. If only she hadn't been lying on Millis's lap, then her apology would have sounded a bit more sincere. "And thanks a bunch for lending me your lap, Millis..."

"Oh, it's no problem...but wouldn't you prefer Lady Eluria's lap?"

"Gosh, lie on my idol's lap? I wouldn't daaare..."

"Now I don't know how to feel about your willingness to lie on mine!"

"Awww, don't say that. I love aaall cute girls... Your lap pillow is great, and getting to stare at Eluria's legs from this low angle is perfect... Ahhh, this is the best spot in the whooole room..."

"Now I wholeheartedly understand everything you said before, Wisel..." Millis mumbled.

Wisel nodded. "My sister's a weirdo among weirdos, isn't she?"

Unfazed, Carille lazily waved her hand in the air. "Aaanyway, I can't borrow Eluria's lap... I mean, she already has a splendid fiancé by her side... She has a fiancé... Sh-She has a...!"

"Ack!" Millis yelped. "Why's she spasming all of a sudden?!"

"Just think of it as a seizure," Wisel told her. "She's sick in the head, after all."

"Like I said, you don't worry enough about your sister!"

Raid looked at the brewing chaos with a dry expression. "Uh... Should I step outside?"

"No, it's okaaay..." Carille murmured. "I may be a sorry excuse of

a human, what with my lifestyle and wallet in shambles, but I won't stoop so low as to ruin my idol's happiness... I'm happy for her, really... I swear..." Alas, it sounded less like she was reassuring Raid and more like she was trying to convince herself. In fact, paired with her lifeless eyes, it was almost as if she were mumbling out a string of curses.

Raid watched her with creased brows as he furtively leaned over and whispered to Wisel, "Hey, are you sure our commissions are all right?"

"She's a certified weirdo, no doubt about that—but I can also guarantee you that she's the best of the best when it comes to designing and upgrading magic gear." Wisel turned to his sister and asked, "Carille, where are the commissioned items?"

"Uhhh, in those boxes over there... The smaller one is Eluria's, and the bigger one is for the detestable fiancé who's monopolizing her..."

Raid squinted. "Sounds to me like you're not quite over it yet."

"I'm happy for her, but I need time to process all my grief and anger..."

"Well, I have a faster way." Raid turned to his side. "Eluria, if you would."

The girl nodded and faced Carille. "Raid is a really good person. Please don't hate him."

"Yes, ma'am! Your wish is my command!!!"

Raid chuckled dryly. "Eluria, have you ever considered starting a cult?"

She shuddered and vigorously shook her head. "Don't say that... Kris might actually try to pull it off." Worse yet, the princess actually had all the power in the nation to make it happen.

Setting the frightening thought aside, Raid approached the large box Carille had pointed to and opened it. Inside, he found a very familiar broadsword; it looked exactly the same as the last time he'd seen it, save for a tassel and ornament now attached to its hilt.

He studied the sword with an arched eyebrow. "Is this all you added?"

"Uhhh, rude much? I'll have you know those were reaaally hard

to make...” Carille stuck her bottom lip out in a pout. “Wisel and Headmaster Elise told me that you have some weeeird mana that renders you unable to use magic gear and devices... Am I right, Mr. Fiancé?”

“Yeah. My mana thrashes any mana circuits directly, so even the gear’s protective features are useless.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh... Aaand that’s where this Legnarian magic sword comes into play. Unlike ordinary magic gear, this sword contains mana within, which is supplied to the protective features to keep it from breaking so easily... Buuut then the force of all that mana wears down the sword...”

As Wisel had explained before, Legnarian magic swords were essentially containers of mana shaped into weapons—they were made with materials that could store mana, then processed and forged into a weapon by blacksmiths using a secret Legnarian art. Hence, they were better categorized as a subtype of magic gear with a unique characteristic of mana storage.

As for Raid’s sword in particular, Mifuru had spent an entire millennium injecting it with her own mana, making it incomparably sturdier than ordinary magic swords and robust enough to withstand Raid’s mana. However, that was all it was—sturdy, not *unbreakable*. Naturally, its durability would gradually wear down along with the stored mana—and since his sword’s protective features cost more mana than normal, Mifuru had warned him that this sword couldn’t last forever. Thus, they had reached out to Carille in hopes of somehow remedying this issue.

“Sooo, long story short,” Carille continued, “I added in a mechanism that would dilute your mana.”

Raid frowned. “Dilute my mana...?”

“Uh-huuuh... Do you know Skiffy’s First Law of Mana?”

“I do,” Eluria replied. “It states that mana disperses from a high-density space to low-density spaces.”

“Oh my gosh! So cute, so smart—my number one idol! I love you forever!!!”

“I’m...not sure what to do with such a sudden confession,” Eluria murmured.

"Aaanyway," Carille continued, twirling her finger in the air. "Basically, we cast magic by gathering and condensing mana... After that, it disperses into areas of the atmosphere that have a low density of mana..."

Wisel gasped and looked up. "So you added a mechanism that ejects the dispersed mana before it can linger?"

"Uh-huh, uh-huh. You got it," Carille drawled. "If the sword gets worn down from the user's unique mana...then best to send it on its way before it can even deal the damage."

Raid looked between the three with creases between his eyebrows. "Sorry, this is all too technical for me. Could someone explain?"

"Mm... Simply put, Carille added a feature that stops your dispersed mana from hanging around your sword," Eluria said, moving her hands like she was kneading something together. "Mana passes through mana circuits, where it is compressed, mixed, and combined to trigger all sorts of phenomena. Once used, it's then dismantled and dispersed into the surroundings."

"And mine works that way too?"

"In a way, yes, if we consider that your power stems from the spell called Hero. Anyway, it takes time for mana to disassemble and disperse into the surroundings. So Carille posits that during this time, your unique mana must be lingering in and around your sword, consequently wearing it down and damaging it."

"Sooo," Carille piped in, "I amped up the mana disassembly speed...then installed some directionality features to guide it outward...so it disperses quickly and safely into the surroundings." She let out a big yawn before saying, "Go on, give it a whirl..."

Raid took his broadsword out of the box, gripped it with both hands, then let his power surge through his body. It was a familiar sensation—nothing felt out of place. "Feels the same as always."

"Uh-huuuh. 'Cause I essentially just enhanced the stabilization... Everything else is untouched. Wouldn't wanna change the feel of the weapon for you, right?" Carille lazily tilted her head to the side. "Sooo, how's it looking, Wisel?"

"Hmm... High-density mana is dispersing into the surroundings.

The new mechanism is certainly working. Since Raid didn't feel anything off, it should be all good to go."

"Aaand this also proves my diagnosis was correct..."

"Yeah..." Brows furrowed, Wisel fiddled with his magic glasses. "The tassel accelerates the mana disassembly, while additional protection and directionalism is installed into the ornament, right?"

"Oooh, you got it in one go... That's my little brother for you," Carille drawled. "By the way, since you're more familiar with Mr. Fiancé's mana, d'ya think this arrangement will suffice for practical use?"

"It should work fine," Wisel decided. "The mana disassembly is very thorough, leaving little to no burden on the sword. Unless, of course, he constantly uses a wide-range high-density attack like the one he used in the simulation exam...but I doubt that'll happen too often."

"Nice, nice... Glad it aaall worked out. Gosh, it was reaaally hard, you know? Picking out the right materials, plotting the mana circuits... I racked my head trying to fit it all into such small ornaments. I even had to inscribe it all myself..."

"Wouldn't you usually call in an inscriber?" Raid asked.

"Yeaaah, but nobody would accept... The circuits are too complex, and there's hardly any space to work with... But I can promise you I got the job done," she said with a sluggish wave of her hand. "I learned the basics of inscribing in the institute, and I'm suuuper experienced working with magic gear, after all."

Despite her nonchalant tone, this was by no means an ordinary feat. Although they both worked with magic gears and devices, artificers and inscribers were different occupations for a reason: They each demanded very different skill sets.

Artificers needed the creativity to conceptualize magic gear; the technical prowess to arrange a mana circuit layout; and broad knowledge and skill to combine it all into an actual product. All of this called for immense effort and practice, as well as a dash of talent.

The work of an inscriber, however, called for talent and talent alone. Of course, effort and practice didn't go unrewarded, but too

many core aspects of an inscriber's work hinged on one's innate skills: a large enough mana pool to inscribe mana into circuits; senses sharp enough to perceive and control the invisible and delicate flow of mana; and the ability to perfectly replicate an artificer's mana circuit layouts, to name a few.

One would be hard-pressed to find someone who could work as both an artificer and an inscriber. In this specific case, it could be said that nobody but *Carille* was up to the task. After all, where else could you find someone knowledgeable enough to assess Raid's unknown mana, perceptive enough to discern the core issue and pin down a solution before meeting the man himself, and skilled enough to even handle the mana circuit inscription herself when nobody else would take the job?

Raid smiled. "I appreciate it. Thanks to you, I can now fight freely."

"It's just this once, okaaay? Usually, I only ever take custom orders from girls... I made an exception 'cause you're Eluria's fiancé..."

"Really now? Then I guess you'd prefer feedback from Eluria," Raid said, casting his fiancée a glance.

Eluria nodded. "I'm impressed you managed everything by yourself. You're incredible, Carille."

"Hooraaay! My idol praised me!!!" Carille cheered, looking just about ready to ascend to the heavens.

"Consider it my thanks for the spontaneous confession earlier." Eluria gave the woman applause, apparently no longer fazed by her sudden bursts of energy.

Once she calmed down, Carille gestured to the other box with a lazy smile. "Aaand next up is your gear, Eluria."

"Okay. Let me take a look." Eluria opened up the package and found her familiar staff resting inside. Right beneath the orb on the tip was an unfamiliar component. "There's something here..."

"Simply put, it's an addition I made especially for your Polyaggregate Expansion," Carille drawled. "I got some inspiration from a study that Edward Freeden recently published..."

Eluria blinked. "Oh. Raid's big brother."

“Ohhh? Reaaally?”

Raid shot the woman a withering gaze. “We have the same last name...”

“My bad, my bad... I only think of you as Mr. Fiancé...” Carille shrugged, not the slightest bit of shame in her expression. Her apathy toward Raid was clear as day. “But anyway, it was a great read... Intricately replicating stored mana and deploying it alongside the caster’s original mana by means of compartmentalization... I know a lot of it’s got to do with Special-Class Magician Alma Kanos’s skill, but still... Wooow.”

“Mm-hmm. Ms. Alma was also really impressed.”

“Aaanyway... Thanks to that, your gear can now store your magic itself... That way, you can piece it all together with your Polyaggregate Expansion to swiftly deploy large-scale magic even stronger than that of the tenth stratum...”

Eluria gripped her magic gear and nodded. “Mm. Thank you.”

She had been thinking of enhancing her magic ever since their battle against the Calamity off the coast of Palmare. Eluria was incomparably stronger than all the magicians in this world—special-classers included—but she hadn’t had enough power to finish off the Calamity on her own. But the First World they would be heading to soon was crawling with these Calamities. Thus, Eluria had resolved that she at least needed the power to single-handedly deal with these monsters.

She nodded confidently. “Power solves everything.”

Raid shot her a flat look. “You know, if there’s anything I’ve learned about you in our time together, it’s that you’re even more of a meathead than me.”

“Incorrect. You’ve contended against me, so we’re about the same.”

“Well, sure... But you’re the only person who’d ever think of solving that issue by using Polyaggregate Expansion on tenth-stratum magic.”

Eluria’s Polyaggregate Expansion was a technique that built up magic with *spells* instead of mana. Normally, she stacked up spells of various strata to increase the density of the final product, but it took

time for it to reach the tenth stratum. However, this new feature essentially solved that issue and granted her the ability to stack up magic using *tenth-stratum spells*. It was the type of insane solution that only Eluria could ever cook up.

"Carille, did you do the inscriptions for this one too?" Eluria asked.

"Uh-huuuh... The circuits for this one aren't as complex, but I could only make it thanks to some tech Headmaster Elise gave me under the condition that I keep quiet about it...sooo I couldn't ask for outside help."

"I can tell you worked hard on it."

"For you, my idol, I'll do *anything*!" Carille crowed with another burst of energy before swiftly reverting to her sluggish self. "Ohhh... But I had to sacrifice some mana efficiency, so just watch out for that..."

Eluria twirled her staff around with a hum, then stared at it for a short while. Finally, she nodded and handed it over to Millis. "Here."

Millis blinked at the staff in her hands. "Pardon?"

"I know you can do it."

"Do *what*?! Why is the ball suddenly in my court?!"

"Ohhh?" Carille tilted her head. "Millis, are you a magic inscriber?"

"No, I'm a magician..."

"But she's also the Device Doctor," Eluria added.

"Ack! My thoughtless bragging has come back to bite me in the butt!"

Carille hummed. "I've already done the best that I can... Which parts do you want fixed, Eluria?"

"The joint between this new component and the staff. And a few others."

"Awww... But the circuits are so densely packed there... It'll be a nightmare working on them..."

Millis raised an eyebrow. "Why not just use layered or intersecting circuits?"

"Gosh, that's too high-level even for me... I've considered it, of course, but such three-dimensional inscription calls for more skills than I can offer..."

"But Millis can do it," Eluria repeated.

"Again, why're you pushing this onto me?!" Millis sighed and scratched her head. "Well, I suppose I *could* give it a try..." She grabbed a nearby iron plate and, while keeping her eyes on Eluria's staff, ran her finger along the surface. "Okay. For starters, I've replicated the circuits."

Carille blinked. "Eh?"

"So, what changes should I make from here?"

"Uh... Layer the circuits on both ends, then wrap them under the circuits up front..."

"Roger that! What about the depth? Any specifications?"

"Er... Maybe 3.78 degrees lower than the ones above...?"

"So around this much, right?" Millis weaved her finger over the iron plate for a while before flipping it over and showing it to Carille. "Well? Will this do?"

Carille's drowsy eyes snapped wide open for the first time as she intently trailed her gaze over the circuits. "Seriously...?"

"Huh? Did I get something wrong?"

"The depth is just right, and the circuits are incredibly stable, even in the narrowing portions... The curved circuits I spent five days carving are perfectly replicated, down to the radius and slope... And they're all immaculately layered to boot... Wooow... This must be what perfection looks like..."

"Do you mean to say I'm awesome?!"

"'Awesome'? No, no, that's an understatement. With this level of accuracy, I don't know if I'd even call you human. *Are* you human? Maybe we should check."

"Whoa! My work was so good, it knocked you into speaking clearly!"

Eluria nodded. "That's the Device Doctor for you."

"The weird nickname makes it sound a lot less impressive!" Millis cradled her head, clearly regretting running her mouth.

Carille gave the mana circuits one last look-over before nodding solemnly. "With this level of skill, I highly recommend you strive to become a magic inscriber instead. I've never seen mana circuits so perfectly recreated before. It'd be such a shame if you don't let your

talent shine."

"I-Is it really *that* impressive...?"

"At the very least, I'd love to have you as my exclusive inscriber. I have so many blueprints I've had to scrap because they were too complex... People like you are a godsend to us artificers." Carille looked Millis in the eye, passion blazing behind her gaze. "So, Millis, make sure you become a magic inscriber and come work for our family, okay?"

"Er... But I want to become a magician so I can brag to everyone back home—"

"If you become an inscriber, you can brag to everyone in the world *and* leave your name in the history books."

Millis grabbed Carille's hand and gave it a firm shake. "From this day forth, I shall diligently walk the path of a magic inscriber!!!"

"Hooraaay... Got myself the best business partner in the wooorld..." Carille cheered, back to her lazy drawl now that she'd secured a powerful asset for the future. "Okaaay, I've got a bunch of my scrapped plans right here... Let's give 'em a try and if they work out, we can apply 'em to Eluria's gear..."

"More upgrades for me. Nice," Eluria mumbled with a clenched fist.

Beside her, Millis raised her fists to the air and cheered, "Huzzah! I'm taking my first steps into becoming an *actual* historical figure!!!"

Raid watched with an amused huff as the girls began cheering and whooping among themselves. Then, he cast a glance to his side and smiled softly. "Why the long face, Wisel?"

Wisel's expression was as impassive as ever. However, his fists were clenched and trembling by his sides. "I was just thinking...that the world is so unfair," he admitted, unfurling his hands with a heavy sigh. "I could tell that your power was some form of magic, but that's all. My sister, though—she pinpointed the core issue and devised a feasible solution. She even perfectly accommodated all of Ms. Eluria's requests."

His lips warped into a bitter, self-deprecating smile. "Watching my sister is like having my mediocrity shoved right into my face. Each peek I catch into her world makes me realize, time and time again,

that I don't belong there—that I *can't* belong there, no matter how hard I try." Wisel's confession quietly left his lips as his gaze, filled with somber desire, remained fixed on his sister. "I guess some things in this world...just aren't meant for me."

By no means was Wisel lacking in the effort department. In fact, having watched his sister up close for so long, he must have pushed himself much further than the ordinary person in the hopes that he could someday catch up to her. However, the harder he worked and the closer he got to his goal, the taller and more daunting the wall known as "talent" loomed before his eyes.

Wisel huffed. "Sorry, I'm just rambling nonsense here... Don't mind me."

"It's not nonsense," said Raid. "Basically, you're saying you're an ordinary guy."

"Well, that's...terribly blunt of you."

"Because I don't see it as a bad thing. I think it's a matter of perspective."

Wisel knit his brow. "Perspective?"

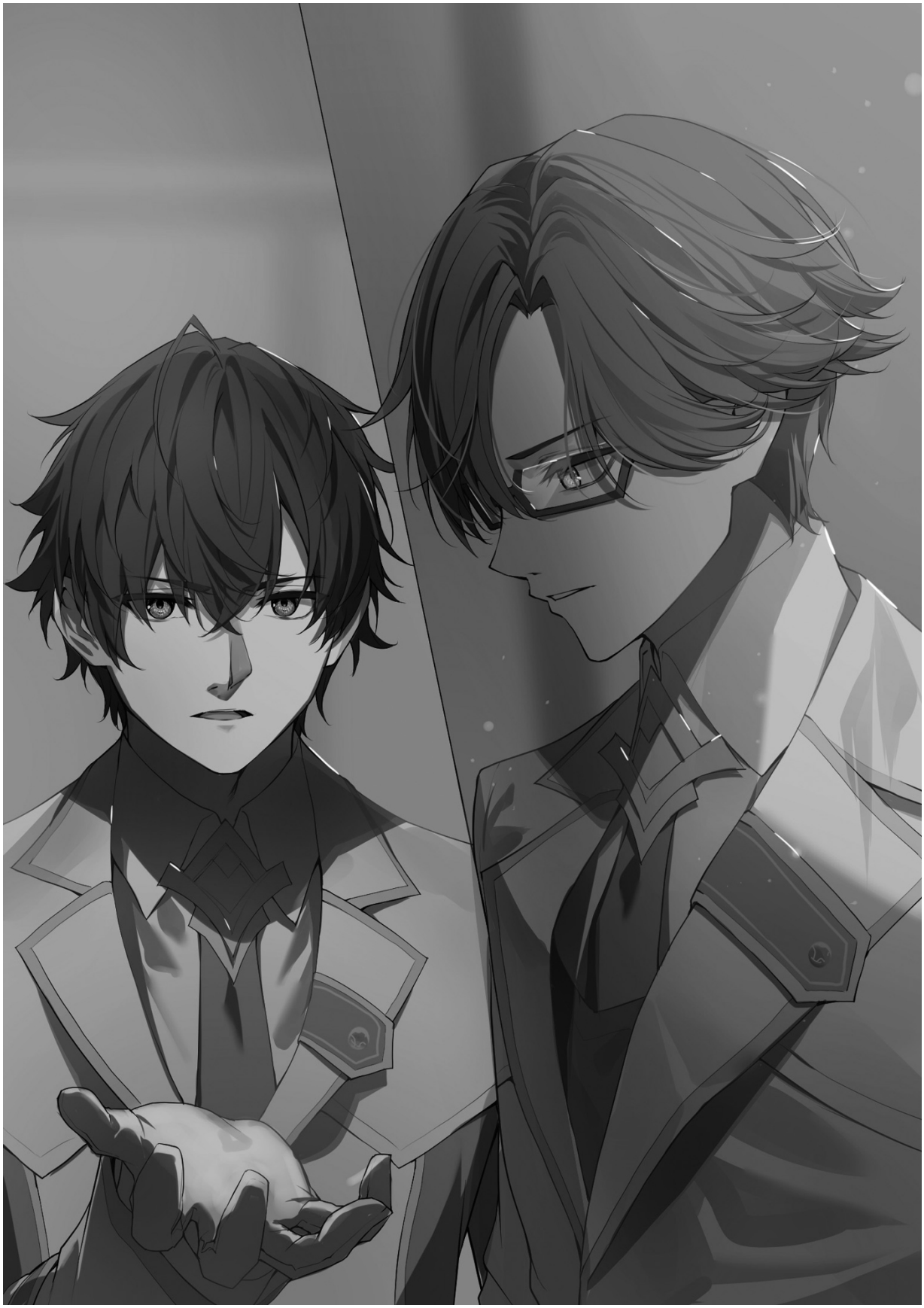
Raid nodded. "Everyone looks up to talented people. They're like the sun—dazzling and far out of reach. But put another way, it means nobody can ever understand them."

Wisel squinted. "And that makes it better to be untalented?"

"No, that's not what I'm getting at. Think of it this way—what do you think would happen to the world if everyone were a genius like your sister?"

"Well... Many fields and industries would advance?"

"Wrong. Humanity would be done for—because everything a genius has *dies* along with them. Their research? Only *they* understand it. Their skill? Only *they* can pull it off. There's nothing to pass on, nothing to teach or share."



If all humans became geniuses in their respective fields, then the troubling skill gap would certainly disappear—but in exchange, whatever their genius birthed could no longer be passed onto the next generation. Geniuses could dish out one masterpiece after another, but none of it would contribute to humanity's development as a whole.

"And that is why humanity needs the ordinary," Raid continued. "They can never catch up to geniuses, but they can grasp even just a portion of their brilliance as long as they keep walking the same path. Then, they can all band together, share their thoughts, and lend each other a hand in their struggle for perfection. And this is only possible because they are ordinary people—because they cannot understand geniuses...but they can understand *each other*."

Geniuses ran alone, forging a path behind them—while everyone else ran together.

"The mortification of not understanding is a very human emotion. It births sympathy for others who suffer the same plight as well as motivation to share one's knowledge with them. This is how knowledge and skills are passed down in the world—all thanks to those who demean themselves as 'ordinary.'"

"And that's how humanity has progressed through the ages... Is that what you're saying?"

"Exactly. I'm sure you can understand, coming from a family with such a long history. All the more since you've watched your genius sister from a young age."

Wisel frowned. "I understand...but it's still hard to accept."

"I'm sure it is. I mean, I can't just walk up to you and say, '*You lack talent, so just spend your life passing down whatever the talented make*,' and expect it to solve all your problems." Raid grinned. "But that's why I said it's a matter of perspective. So look at it this way: Geniuses are *nothing* without the ordinary."

"S-Such forceful logic..."

"But is it wrong? Geniuses can impact an entire era, but only the ordinary have power over the endless possibilities of the future. So I think the ordinary are more important to humanity." Raid gave Wisel's hunched back a hearty slap. "Lack of talent isn't anything to

be ashamed of. You poured all your effort into chasing after a genius, and none of that will go to waste. It's passionate folks like you who build the future for humanity."

A small smile finally made its way onto Wisel's lips. "Seriously... I don't know how to react, getting all this advice from someone who *appears to be* my age."

Raid grinned. "Huh. Should I get Eluria to make me look older or something?"

"That sounds interesting, actually. Maybe then it wouldn't feel so weird," Wisel said with a light laugh.

"Raid, Wisel!" Millis suddenly called. "Could you come over, please? We'd like to hear your thoughts on this matter!"

"Coming," Wisel called back.

Raid arched a brow. "What? You need me too?"

"Yes, sir! Your opinion would be highly appreciated!"

Raid and Wisel exchanged perplexed glances as they made their way back to the girls. What they found when they got there...was Eluria and Carille seemingly facing off.

"This is nonnegotiable," Eluria muttered, eyes narrowed.

Carille's languid, half-lidded eyes glinted resolutely. "I can't back down on this, not even for my idol..."

The boys looked between the two of them in bewilderment. "What's going on here?"

Millis got between the two girls, waving her hands placatingly. "Now, now, ladies! Let's hear what the boys have to say, shall we?"

Eluria turned to Raid and Wisel. "We're debating whether maid uniforms need to have frills."

Instantly, Wisel's gaze turned empty and distant. "Oh..."

"Wow, Wisel! Looks like you already figured things out!" Millis cheered.

"It's not a maid's uniform without frills," Carille drawled, swiftly returning to the debate. "The more frills there are, the cuter it is."

"Frills are unnecessary," Eluria insisted, shaking her head. "They get in the way."

Raid sent Millis a withering look. "Uh, how did you get *here* from talking about mana circuits?"

"You see, we were talking about what sort of features we could add to Lady Eluria's gear, then the conversation shifted to Ms. Alma's gear. We figured we could do all sorts of stuff if we could use cloth too, like she does with her flag."

Raid nodded. "Okay. That's an acceptable tangent."

"And then I said that I wanted to add frills to the magicians' uniforms," said Carille.

"And I said it was unnecessary," Eluria added.

"But then I insisted that frills make all girls cuter—"

"Okay, I see where things started to go wrong," Raid deadpanned.

Wisel pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and sighed. "I'm really sorry about my sister..." The exhaustion in his voice spoke volumes of his struggles over the years.

In any case, seeing as the girls weren't letting up, this seemed to have developed into a debate of massive importance.

"Frills are a hindrance. Maids move around a lot when they work."

"But they also welcome guests, don't they? Sooo it's also important for them to dress nicely..."

"They get in the way during combat."

"Then just embed the frills with mana circuits..."

"The wavy shape isn't conducive to mana circuits."

"Surely Millis can do something about that..."

"Then it can't be mass-produced. It'd be unnecessarily costly too."

Wisel groaned. "What in the world are we listening to...?"

"My, what a coincidence. I've been wondering the very same thing for the past ten minutes," Millis said with an empty gaze. "By the way, you might be interested to know that depending on the outcome of this debate, Lady Eluria may be forced to wear a maid's uniform. I'll have to wear one either way."

"What? Why?"

"You see, when I was pincered by the heads of the pro-frills and anti-frills factions, I thoughtlessly answered, 'It doesn't really matter, does it?' and ended up making them *both* mad..." Millis sighed, staring off into the distance like she'd resigned herself to her fate.

“Sooo,” Carille cut in, “we decided to ask for the boys’ opinions... Well?”

Raid shrugged. “I mean, it doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“Ahaaa... There it is, that dismissive answer... Boys will be boys, I guess...”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I just think Eluria would look cute in anything, frills or no frills.”

Millis gasped. “Whoa! Smooth! Too smooth!”

Raid turned to Wisel with a smile. “So, Wisel, I guess it’s all up to you to break the tie.”

“Wait! Why are you passing *me* this bomb?!”

“Because it seems like things are gonna drag on for a bit. I need to be on my way.” Raid spun on his heel and patted Wisel on the shoulder on his way out of the workshop. “After all, there’s another guy who needs to hear the same pep talk I just gave you.”

◇

After leaving Workshop Blanche, Raid hailed a nearby fiacre and got off in front of a mansion in the capital’s upper layer. He got the attention of one of the mansion’s servants and was let through to the estate’s garden, where he found exactly who he was looking for.

“Looks like you’re hard at work, kid.”

Fareg froze in place, mid-swing with his training sword in hand, before turning to Raid with furrowed brows. “Don’t call me that here. We’re in the Verminant estate. It’ll set a bad example for the servants.”

“But Valk literally just told me, ‘The kid is in the garden.’”

“Damn it! No wonder the other servants have been tripping over their words when calling out to me recently! They were about to call me ‘kid’ and just corrected themselves at the last second, weren’t they...?!”

“They must’ve had a lot of pent-up frustration, considering your old attitude...”

“No, stop! Don’t remind me! After I came back, they’ve been speaking with me more openly and comfortably, and that made me

realize how much they must've hated me before! I holed up in my room and beat myself up over it for three whole days!" Fareg wailed, boisterous as always. Eventually, he settled down and smoothed his expression with a quiet sigh. "So? What have you come here for?"

"You've heard, haven't you? About the ultra-sized manabeast that appeared off the coast of Palmare and the people from another world who summoned it here to invade us."

When they started up the World Tree in preparation for their expedition to the First World, they had made sure to explain the current situation to the representatives of each continent—to the king of Vegalta, who ruled over the central continent of Etrulia; to the head chief of Celios in the west; and to the Imperial Lord of Legnare in the east. To prepare for the possibility of a second invasion, this information was further shared with not only special-class magicians but also prominent magician households. Naturally, House Verminant was among them.

Fareg frowned and nodded. "I've heard from my father. He said that you subjugated the ultra-sized manabeast and repelled the invasion from the shadows while the integrated exam was ongoing... He also said that you will be leading the first expedition to the other world."

"Yeah. Eluria and I are going 'cause we've got business over there and our strength is indispensable. Millis and Wisel are tagging along for other reasons, and Alma will be there to protect them and for her magic's versatility. Besides them..." Raid paused for a moment before looking Fareg in the eye with a piercing gaze. "I'm not taking anyone else."

Fareg winced, tightening his grip on his training sword. "Because I'm weak?"

"Yes," Raid replied bluntly. "You can't be counted on in battle. The other three are tagging along because they have roles to fulfill. Anybody else—even special-classers—will just be baggage."

His words were harsh, but they were the truth. They had managed to prevail over Dian's invasion with such a small team only thanks to the element of surprise—their enemies were underestimating them, and Raid took full advantage of that with his

past experiences. Not to mention they had the home advantage—many things were in their favor then.

But things would be different this time.

"We have no clear picture of what's going on in the other world, and the only way for us to know is to dive right into enemy territory. Eluria and I can handle ourselves, but we will already need to divert some of our attention to protecting three others."

"And why...are you telling me this?"

"Because knowing you, I figured you'd probably demand to join us. So I came here to shut you down before you get any funny ideas."

"Hah... It seems you take me for a fool." Fareg shrugged and shook his head. "I'd be useless in battle. I know that—*anyone* would, seeing you and Caldwin in action. Even geniuses are nothing compared to you two."

Born with the mana and talent to live up to his family's prestige, Fareg had been praised as a genius by the world around him. His self-confidence was steadfast and unwavering, so much so that it had festered into arrogance. But over time, he'd realized that his talent was not one of a kind—that there were far greater heights in this world that he couldn't even dream of reaching.

Thus, Fareg was more aware of that overwhelming gap than anyone else. Even so, his eyes blazed with a resolute will as he met Raid's gaze and said, "Take me with you, Raid Freeden."

A dry laugh spilled from Raid's smirking lips. "Seriously... You're every bit the fool I take you for."

"I know I'm too weak to be counted on in battle. Even so, I want to go with you."

"No. I'm not taking you with me, and that's final."

"I'm aware of the danger! But even if it means risking my life, I just—!"

The moment Fareg took a desperate step forward, Raid *slammed* the heel of his palm against the boy's chest. Fareg collapsed breathlessly to the ground as Raid slowly rolled his shoulders. "So you're prepared to risk your life? Yeah, I know. And that's why I said...I can't take you along, *brat*."

Fareg gasped for air, just barely managing to look up—only to be met with a chilling glare. Raid's expression was cruel, nothing like Fareg had ever seen before.

"Death is the worst thing that could happen to you out there, but not for the reasons you might think," Raid muttered darkly. "You see, before the enemy kills you, they'll want to draw out some intel first. So they'll start by binding you to make sure you can't escape. Then they'll break your legs for good measure. Then they'll snap your arms so you can't retaliate. If you've still got some fight left in you, though, they'll take one eye or ear. You know why? Because you've got two of those, so you'd have another one left—to *see* them and *hear* them as they break you down, bit by bit, just up until you can no longer live as a human. Then, once they draw that intel out of you, they'll feed you to the manabeasts to buy time for their escape. Or kill you in front of your allies to mess with their heads. Or dump you in the middle of a trap so they can get a two-for-one kill if someone tries to save you."

As if driving home the point, Raid grabbed Fareg by the neck and raised him up in the air. "Do you get it now? Your death alone gives the enemy too many cards to play, and that's why returning *alive* is always the number one priority out in the field." Raid's icy glare pierced through Fareg. "So, you said you wanna risk your life? Well, so can anybody else—doesn't make it a good move. And since that's all you're bringing to the table, I've decided to leave you behind."

Raid threw Fareg to the ground and watched as the boy gripped the soil beneath his hands with wheezing breaths.

"But if I don't risk my life...then I can't even dream of chasing after you...!" Fareg crawled over the ground and grabbed his fallen training sword. "Is it so wrong of me...to want to catch up to the person I look up to?!" His legs trembled as he painstakingly got back on his feet, eyes blazing with the same longing and desire Raid had seen in Wisel's eyes.

"I know that I'm weak! Even as a person, I'm lacking in so many ways! I understand that now! And it's all...thanks to you!" Fareg cried, tears spilling down his cheeks.

Raid had taught him that there was always someone above him,

corrected his arrogant behavior, and showed him the path he should be walking in life. Ever since then, Fareg had been watching him from behind, staring in awe and desperately trying to catch up, almost like a fascinated child.

"To me, you're just like the heroes I always looked up to!"



Everyone admired heroes at some point in their lives. Saving others and fighting evil—such fairy tales naturally inspired its readers to strive to do the same. Fareg must have been one such starry-eyed child at one point, all the more since he actually had the power to fight for others.

"I know I can never be as good as you...but I just want to keep chasing after you, to keep getting closer to the hero I've always looked up to..."

Fareg was brave to lay his heart bare like this—to acknowledge his weakness and strive to be better—but Raid had already seen many brave people throughout his life. Many of them had risked their lives, only to meet a tragic death at the very end.

"You'll never catch up to me." His words were as merciless as ever, but this time, Raid spoke with a smile. "So...I guess you'll just have to spend your entire life trying." He raised his hand and offered the boy his fist. "Can't do that if you die, can you? But as long as you're alive, you'll eventually get close enough to step into my shadow. I know you've got it in you—you're a tough one, after all. Never once backed down even after witnessing the gap between us."

Fareg may have whined and complained on more than one occasion, but he never once gave up or slacked off on his training. Even without anybody watching, he'd come to the garden today to train by himself. He had a strong will and a hardworking spirit.

"You never know if you'll catch up or how long it'll take, but still you continue to swing your sword and strive for greater heights. Even if you never manage to become like me, nobody would dare to look down on you—because everything you have, you built up with your own two hands." Nobody in this world would mock someone who tenaciously forged ahead even in the face of a harsh reality. "So keep striving, and keep struggling. In the process, you'll definitely live a life you can be proud of. You can do that, can't you?"

Fareg slowly looked up, his pained expression now nowhere to be seen. Instead, his eyes were blazing with a new resolve as he met Raid's gaze. The boy slowly lifted his hand and bumped his fist against Raid's. "I will. I swear it on my name."

"Great. I've got high hopes for you. You're the only person I've

taught my swordsmanship to, after all." Raid grinned, then drew his hand back and shrugged. "Anyway, I'll come check on you every now and then. So prepare for a beating if I ever catch you slacking."

Fareg blinked. "What?"

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"You'll...check on me every now and then?"

"I mean, a teacher's gotta keep tabs on his student, right?"

"No, that's not what I meant... Aren't you crossing over to the other timeline for good?"

"Hmm? No, we plan to come back regularly."

Fareg's jaw dropped. "What?!"

"Our first expedition should last around a month, until we get a bunch of stuff done."

"I-Is another world really only worth such a quick trip?!"

"Well, maybe not exactly one month. From what I've heard, the timelines are kinda warped, so the time in our worlds progresses a bit differently... Oh? Did you think we were saying our final farewells or something?"

"Of course I did! I heard you're going to another *world*—and for such a dangerous mission, no less! Who *wouldn't* assume we're never seeing each other again?!"

"Whoops, my bad. Guess I forgot to tell you."

"Show a little more remorse! You put me to the test and grabbed me by the throat for this!"

Raid chuckled and waved his hand. "Don't worry, kid. This Hero you look up to is the strongest one out there. Besides, I can't just drop dead when someone's still chasing after me, can I?" Raid's lips stretched into a broad and fearless grin. "I'm everyone's Hero—I gotta take responsibility and come back safe."

Chapter Two

There was no special reason as to why I stopped at that land. Perhaps it was for a brief rest, as a migratory bird would on a branch. A short stop on my tireless journey around the continent, where I'd thrashed and rampaged, lashing out like a child at all the insolent fools who had trampled over my dreams. I punished them and destroyed everything they had built, but it was never enough to appease the anger within me.

So after this brief moment, I would take to the skies once more. Anger and hatred still burned bright within me, like a perpetual flame that devoured everything in its path. So long as it kept burning, I would never forgive them.

This was my duty as the one who'd brought magic into this accursed world.

"Get lost."

With a snap of my fingers, the clouds coiling around the mountaintop dispersed. A sea of stars adorned the night sky, while the moonlight streamed down and bathed me in its gentle glow.

Looking up at the sky had become a routine, but not for any reason I could name. Had I spent too much of my life cooped up in my room doing research? Had I grown tired of the stagnant air in the imperial capital? Or perhaps...I just wanted to avert my eyes from the ground that was crawling with all these detestable bugs.

Whatever the reason, I frequently found my eyes drawn toward the sky in recent days. However, the sight evoked neither thought nor emotion in me. I just stared and stared, and nothing more. The beauty of the stars, the sublimity of the moon, the vastness of the night sky—none of it tugged at my heartstrings. Once I got tired of this view, I could cover up the sky and stars with another snap of my fingers. If the sight of the moon ever irked me, I could smash it to bits in a second. Even the night sky was at my mercy, so there

was nothing profound about it in my eyes.

Why, then, were my eyes always drawn toward it? In search of the answer to this question, I always allowed my gaze to linger on the sky, no matter how banal it looked.

Regardless, had I not indulged in such childish curiosity...perhaps I never would have met *her*.

"Whoaaaaa!"

A boisterous voice rang through the air right as I sensed a presence behind me. When I turned around, I found a young girl staring in slack-jawed awe at the sea of stars hanging above us.

"Holy smokes! I've been hiking up here every night to eat dinner all by my pitiful lonesome, but never in my almost two decades of life have I ever laid eyes on such a stunning night sky! This miraculous sight must be my reward for all the good deeds I've racked up in my— *Aaaaah!*"

The girl interrupted her own nonsensical rambling with a screech, falling to her butt as she pointed a trembling finger at me.

"A-A person! All the way up here! In the middle of the night! When even the locals never come this far! C-Could it be?! Did someone lose their footing in these mountains and fall to their death...only to return as a ghost?! S-Stay back! Back, I say! I have a packed meal, and I'm not afraid to use it! Now, random ghost of the mountains—take this offering and be appeased!"

After another round of ramblings, the girl got on her knees and offered me a cloth-wrapped package. Naturally, my first impression of her was that she talked far too much.

"How's that?! Is it working?!"

"No."

"Nooooo! It's the unappeasable type!"

I did not reply.

"Huh? Oh, wait... Are you alive?"

I only stared at her.

"Such intimidating silence! I can feel your anger from all the way over here!"

"No."

"Can I take that to mean 'No, I'm not angry'?!"

"Sure. But you talk too much."

"Aw, shucks. Sorry about that... By the way, since you're a living being, may I ask how you got here?"

"I flew."

"Ohhh! Are you one of those fancy-shmancy 'magicians' from the capital?!"

"You could say that."

"Wow, oh wow... So humans beat pigs to the punch, huh...?"

I'd just told her that she talked too much, but clearly she hadn't taken it to heart, nor did my curt responses discourage her in any way. I didn't find her unpleasant, though. I didn't think *anything* of her, like many things in this world now. To me, this was just like talking to a small animal by the roadside—nonsensical, meaningless, and forgettable.

"Whoops... We ended up talking for quite a while."

"Only you were talking."

"Aha ha, I guess so. Anyway, it's getting late. My village is nearby—would you like to stay the night?"

"No."

"Aw, don't be shy now—"

"I'm the Demon Lord. I'll be fine."

The Demon Lord, the great sinner who wielded magic to massacre mankind—that was the name the humans had come to call me by. It was the name they uttered, voices seething with wrath and loathing, whenever they witnessed me killing their brethren. As was it the name they cursed with their dying breaths. The Demon Lord had become a symbol of fear for humans, so much so that even those in settlements more remote than this one would have known to cry and beg for their lives before me.

"Oh... I think I've heard that name around town. Something about a criminal rampaging all over the continent..."

So surely, this girl would be the same—or so I'd thought at the time.

"So, what's your name?"

"My...name?"

"Yeah. I mean, look at you—you're so cute! How could I call you

by such a morbid title? Besides, I need a name to give to the villagers later, right?" The girl's smile was bright and innocent, untainted by even the knowledge of my identity. "By the way, I'm Millis Lambut! Would you like to be my friend?"

And so, it was under the gazes of the stars that I met my very first friend.

◇

The preparations for their expedition to the First World progressed smoothly. The World Tree was stable, forces were gathering to repel the incoming second invasion, and Elise and Dian were continuously working on improving the magical technology and skills of this world.

Finally, the day of departure was upon them.

"Time to head off," Raid declared as he hefted his broadsword over his shoulder. He and the rest of the group behind him were all dressed in comfortable clothes for the trip.

Millis pouted. "Aw... We don't get a send-off party? No food, no streamers, no nothing?"

Raid shook his head. "Of course not. Only a select few know about the First World and our expedition. We can't waste our time explaining to the masses why kids like us are being sent on such a perilous mission."

The day was young, and not a single soul could be seen in the vicinity; the ocean around them was devoid of any seafaring vessels. Only their small group of five stood at the base of the World Tree.

Their mission was to address the issues in the First World. For matters here involving the second invasion, preparations had been made to incrementally release information to the public so as to minimize chaos and confusion. Hence, Raid had turned down their allies' offer for a send-off party and simply settled for a more casual goodbye—"See ya," to be specific—as they had every intention of coming back.

"Oh, I know, I know," said Millis. "I'm just joking around while I still can. I doubt I'll have the mental space for it once we cross over."

Wisel nodded. “We need to brace ourselves or we might lose our lives.”

Eluria looked between her friends and quietly said, “You can still back out if you’re afraid.”

“Don’t say that now, Lady Eluria! We wouldn’t back out after coming this far.”

“Ms. Millis is right. We already decided to lend you our strength. Every day since then has been spent preparing for this trip.”

Under Eluria’s tutelage, Millis and Wisel had been making their own preparations for the expedition—namely, learning everything they needed for survival. How to act in an unfamiliar place, how to pinpoint their location by reading the stars and mana veins, how to secure their safety with the environment, how to deal with emergency situations, how to craft makeshift tools with natural resources—it was a whole crash course on survival.

Millis shuddered. “I sure hope we won’t have to eat bugs over there...”

“Yeah,” Wisel muttered. “Just remembering the taste of a deepcrawler’s larvae is making me nauseous...”

Raid cocked his head. “Well, I get that they taste horrible, but a handful is enough to keep you fed for the whole day. They’re great bugs, no?”

“Your Excellency, that’s not the problem... Most people balk at the *idea* of eating bugs,” Alma pointed out with a dreary gaze.

“Huh. Understandable, I guess... Does it ever bother *you*, Eluria?”

“Not when I’m in a rush. But I mush them into balls when I have the time.”

“Really? Didn’t take you for the type to care about how it looks...”

“I’m not, but Tiana always gets mad. ‘A pretty girl like you shouldn’t be eating bugs!’ she says, so I make them look like a snack when others are around.”

Raid raised an eyebrow. “It’s all the same once it’s in your stomach, though... You can even fix the taste with salt.”

Eluria smirked. “I knew it. Salt *does* fix everything.”

Millis clenched her hands into trembling fists. “Curses! I would have thought nothing of this conversation just a month ago, but now

I wholeheartedly agree!”

“All hail salt...!” Wisel agreed, bitterly biting his lips.

Alma looked between the students with pity. “Looks like you two went through a lot while His Excellency and I were busy with the other preparations...” Then, she cleared her throat, drawing their attention. “Now then, let’s have a quick briefing before we depart. As confirmed by Dian, our point of arrival in the First World will be right here—above the sea, off the coast of Palmare. For transportation, I’ll summon some help from my Hope’s Brigade. Our end destination is Paradise.”

Millis hummed. “But isn’t the entire central continent, save for Paradise, extremely dangerous and crawling with Calamities?”

“For the most part, yes. I’ve been told there’s a defensive outpost set up in Arctica in the northeast, where an Altanian army is stationed with another Hero, so we can’t afford any detours. We’ll be making a beeline for Norberg, where Paradise is located.”

Wisel furrowed his brows. “This won’t be easy. Sir Dian said that the areas around Norberg are especially rife with Calamities, completely isolating it ever since the onset of the mana pollution.”

“Apparently, when the three Heroes were selected, the idea of reaching Paradise was floated around for a while, but it never came to fruition out of fear of losing precious military strength. They’re sure it exists, though; they’ve received transmissions from Paradise, using some sort of communicator.”

“And you’re saying we have to charge through all those Calamities with just five people? Actually, only Raid and Lady Eluria will be fighting, so this plan is even more reckless than it sounds...” Millis slowly slid her gaze to the side, Wisel and Alma following suit. With all their eyes gathered on the couple, Millis beamed and said, “But what do *you two* have to say about all this?”

“We’ll just crush them all,” Raid and Eluria said in unison.

Millis whooped. “Such a meathead remark, but it works because it’s coming from you two!”

“You have my wholehearted trust,” Wisel said with a solemn nod.

Alma sighed. “I’m sure Altane isn’t expecting such a brute-force solution either...”

"Calamities aside," Eluria cut in, raising her hand, "I believe we should be more worried about the polluted mana."

"Er... You're referring to how we mustn't use ambient mana, right?" asked Millis.

"Correct. It could harm your gear or even affect the spell itself, so make sure to use only your internal mana. Of course, this means higher mana consumption and slower recovery speed, so pay special attention to your mana management."

Alma sighed. "What a harsh world for magicians... His Excellency has his own unique kind of mana, while Eluria already has more than enough on her own, but I always use ambient mana to supply all my magically crafted vessels. I really am limited to logistic support this time around."

"I'm quite confident in my mana pool, but I'd hardly be useful in combat," Millis muttered sheepishly. "I just need to focus on self-defense, right? I'll make sure to be ready with my barriers and shields."

Eluria nodded. "Only Raid and I will fight. If any of you accidentally intake the polluted mana—Wisel, we'll be counting on you to shut down their gear."

"Roger that. I'll mend the gear, while Ms. Millis will handle the circuits."

"You can count on me! The magic inscribers Ms. Carille introduced to me have already taught me the ropes—just the bare minimum, of course, but Ms. Carille has sent me off with her personal approval!" During their busy preparation phase, Millis had made time to visit Workshop Blanche to learn from some magic inscribers. She was overwhelmingly lacking in theoretical knowledge and practical experience, but she'd filled in the gap with her natural talent, innate senses, and precise mana control. By the end, Carille had guaranteed Millis was a cut above the average inscriber. "This is the one thing I'm confident I can be of help with. Why, Ms. Carille was so impressed, she even insisted I marry into her family!"

Wisel sighed. "So my sister has finally given up on finding a male spouse..."

"She was gushing about using you to become my sister-in-law,

actually.”

“That damn woman always says whatever she wants...!”

“Now, now, I’m sure she just meant to encourage me to get along with you. After all, we’ll be working together a lot more once I become a magic inscriber!”

Wisel cradled his head. “Oh, Ms. Millis... Clearly, you’ve yet to understand how my sister’s brain works...”

“What? No way! Surely, it was no more than an innocent little joke, right?” Millis laughed as she heartily patted Wisel’s shoulder.

Raid and Eluria quietly watched the two before grimly shaking their heads.

“This doesn’t bode well,” Eluria muttered.

“Not in the least,” Raid agreed.

Millis blinked. “Huh? Is there a problem?”

“You see, a thousand years ago, there was a certain superstition among the soldiers,” Eluria explained.

Raid nodded. “A guy in the army promised his fiancée that they would get married once he returned from war, only to die in action soon after. This happened to some others as well, so they say that talking about love or romance right before battle means you’re going to die in—”

Millis whipped her head around, eyes bloodshot. “Wisel! Let me slap you!!!”

“How am I even supposed to respond to that?” the boy deadpanned.

“We need to balance out all that marriage talk! Just let me slap you, snap your glasses in half, then cuss you out—that should do it!”

“I think that’ll deal more mental than physical damage to me...”

Raid chuckled and turned his attention back to the World Tree. “All right. Time to go.”

Eluria nodded and laid her hand on the World Tree’s roots. An enormous cavity opened up, housing pure darkness as far as the eye could see. What fate awaited them on the other side? They had no way of knowing—but Raid simply looked over his allies, and his lips stretched into a fearless grin.

“Let’s hop on over, save the world, then come back home for a

nice, warm meal!”

Everyone nodded and jumped straight into the World Tree—into a new and unknown world.

◇

An unknown sensation enveloped them as they leaped into the World Tree. It felt vaguely akin to sinking into the ocean or falling through the air, but somehow gentler and more bizarre.

Soon, light emerged beyond the darkness, and the next thing they knew, they were falling through the sky. Their gentle descent violently shifted into a rush of wind against their bodies—a harsher sensation, yet less alien to them.

“Huh. That wasn’t as intense as I thought it’d be,” Raid mused.

“Went by quickly too,” Eluria added.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I don’t think falling through the sky is the best time for a leisurely chat!” Millis screamed, splaying her arms and legs as she—along with Wisel and Alma—plummeted through the air.

“Right.” Raid turned his gaze downward. “Let’s have a look at this world, shall we?”

Spread out before them in the distance was a vast continent. Its topography was vaguely similar to the land they called home, but the similarities ended there—a thick purple haze engulfed the entire landmass like a heavy shadow, blocking out the sunlight and the blue sky.

The sight made a bitter smile tug on Raid’s lips. “I don’t know what the end of the world looks like, but that definitely fits the bill.”

Eluria nodded. “All that mana, visible to the naked eye... The density must be off the charts. That’s not the kind of place humans —or any living beings—can survive in.”

Mana was like medicine—it brought about many blessings, but in excess, it was deadly poison. Take manabeasts, for example. Mana veins ran deep underground, pooling at certain points before gushing toward the surface. These dense bursts of mana impacted the surroundings, spurring the flora and fauna to adapt and evolve

accordingly—this was how manabeasts were born. Specifically, their bodily changes were geared toward diluting and expending their excessive internal mana, which was why they grew larger bodies or developed unique organs and abilities. Some mated with other beasts before the gigantism set in, while others consumed mana-rich vegetation, ultimately leading to the birth of entirely new species.

However, manabeasts were not simply harmful creatures. Their very presence aided in the dilution and purification of environmental mana, and so humans had ultimately chosen the path of coexistence.

In the First World, though, it seemed the choice was out of their hands.

"No creatures would have time to adapt to mana this dense and overwhelming. And with no manabeasts, mana lingers undiluted on the surface. The mana veins underground can no longer reabsorb and balance the ambient mana either." Eluria's expression warped bitterly as she cast her gaze over the land. "This...is a *dead world*."

And its murderer was none other than Eluria. It was a version of herself who'd ultimately walked a different path, but seeing the morbid extent of her resolve left her heart storming with unplaceable emotions.

"Hey, keep your chin up." Raid smiled, resting his hand on her head. "Didn't you come here to fix all this?"

Eluria's lips loosened into a small smile. "Yeah. I'll fix it for sure."

A warm and cozy atmosphere bloomed around the couple. As for the three companions watching them—

"Save your flirting for later, please!!!" they shrieked, struggling to maintain their posture in midair.

"Whoops, you're right. We're almost there." Raid chuckled as he breezily brandished his broadsword.

Eluria followed suit, twirling her staff in her hands with ease. "I forgot we were still falling."

"I'll head in first, Eluria. Support me."

"Got it. Off you go." Eluria leisurely waved her hand.

Fixing his grip on his broadsword, Raid twisted his body and *kicked* at the air. A foothold had formed perfectly at his feet,

propelling him forward—and it had been set there, of course, by none other than Eluria. She had picked up on his intentions after that short exchange; from there, she manifested another foothold, then another, then another, all at just the right spots when Raid needed a boost.

As he closed in on the ocean surface, Raid lowered his sword by his waist and grinned. "Time to try my hand at fishing!"

The tail end of his declaration was cut off by the booming sound of his impact against the ocean surface. Neither the force of the crash nor the water pressure disturbed his posture in the slightest as he felt, vividly and clearly, the power surging through his body.

Long ago, Raid and Eluria had strived to maintain the "war" between their nations while minimizing the damage and losses to both their armies. However, this was no easy feat, and they had encountered many obstacles before they managed to reach that equilibrium.

Once, extremists in Vegalta had set their eyes on the formidability of Eluria's magicians' regiment and worked with a foreign nation to procure some magicians of their own. At the time, Altane's Minister of Foreign Affairs had been traveling with the Hero in order to hold peace talks with Vegalta—and this was where the extremists chose to strike. Employing magicians and mages alike, they prepared an altar and ritual that would rain down stars upon their route to the peace talks. Everything had been planned down to the letter, and the extremists spared no expense—be it money, time, or even their own land—to ensure the death of the Hero.

Alas, their schemes would not come to fruition.

All the time and manpower they had devoted to this plan—even their resolve to sacrifice themselves if need be—were nothing before the Hero, for he simply sliced through the rain of stars with a single slash. In later days, the Minister of Foreign Affairs would pen in his report: "It was as if a beast had crushed and swallowed the stars in a single bite so large, it even swallowed the vast sea of clouds far above."

"Starcrusher."

With a perfectly level swing, Raid carved out a half-moon shape

with his blade. The force pushed the ocean back and blasted seawater into the air, along with some sand and other crushed particles, mingling into a dust cloud up in the sky. Among them, however, were several dark and squirming figures.

Raid's eyes darted from one figure to the next. Skinny human limbs on a scaly serpentine body. An enormous mouth on a miniature face. Countless tentacles crawling out of a giant eyeball. Grotesque jaws growing on distorted shells. The shadowy figures came in all shapes and sizes, but they were monsters all the same.

"So, those are the 'Offspring'?"

These monsters were Offspring, creatures born from Calamities. Quite literally, they sprung forth from the Calamities' mana-absorbing bodies and were scattered along their trail. They helped their "parents" absorb ambient mana, progress the world's pollution, and eliminate any life-forms in sight. Offspring were weaker than Calamities but still significantly tougher than the manabeasts of the Second World; Dian had told them that they needed dozens of magicians just to take down one.

Needless to say, the Hero and the Sage were exceptions.

"That didn't do them in? Guess there's no need to hold back, then." Raid nodded at the sky. "Have at 'em, Eluria."

Instantly, the dust cloud froze in the air.

"I'll clean them out in one fell swoop." Eluria pointed her staff at the dust cloud before quietly swinging it downward. "Sandblades of Judgment."

As if spurred on by her words, the frozen particles trembled before merging into countless blades that tore the monsters apart. They gouged through their tough skin before burrowing into the monsters' flesh and blowing them up from inside.

Once all the Offspring had been reduced to indistinct chunks of flesh, Eluria descended to the seafloor, grabbed Raid's hand, and flew them to a nearby coast.

"Huh. Could've sworn I've seen you use that one before," Raid mused. "The last time was definitely less gory, though."

"Mm... You're talking about the time I destroyed a bunch of Altanian ships?"

"Sure am. When a detached force tried to circle around the warfront."

It had happened back in the early days of their rivalry. Vegalta had set up their front lines along the coast, so the Altanian army had attempted a pincer attack with a naval force. Their target had been Eluria, the Vegaltan army's strongest soldier, but the naval force later sent back just one short message to the main army: "Operation failure. All forces annihilated." From there, the surviving soldiers gave more detailed reports: "We failed to reach the shore because of a sandstorm. It shredded our ships into scraps and threw us all overboard."

Incidentally, Raid had been with the naval force for this operation.

"Tough times," he grumbled. "I tried to tell my dumb superior that it wouldn't work, but he just wouldn't listen. And since all our ships were gone, I had to punch the ground to make some land for us to stand on."

"Mm-hmm. I remember seeing the unnatural terrain later on and thinking you must've done something crazy again."

"You're calling *me* crazy? Who's the one who did all that *remotely* while fighting on the front lines? You should've seen the soldiers' faces. They thought it was the end of the world."

Eluria smugly puffed up her chest. "As they say, every battle is won before it is ever fought."

At the time, Eluria had been the only real magician in Vegalta, and the extent of the threat posed by magic had yet to be known to all, leading to many similarly pitiful clashes. But that battle had marked the end of that era—from there, Altane was forced to acknowledge that magic was a threat to their nation.

Suddenly, a large shadow loomed over Raid and Eluria. They looked up and found several small saddled dragons coming in for a landing. On the dragons' backs were their three companions—plus one more person.

"Ooh! Lookin' young, gramps!"

Raid looked up at the familiar voice. "Hey, Felius. Long time no see."

"Whoa, that calm reaction—okay, you're *definitely* gramps. But it's

so weird that you look ten years younger than me."

"That's *my* line. I'm talking to someone who died a millennium ago."

"Aha! True that." Felius's loosely tied brown hair swayed behind her as she flashed a toothy grin.

Raid would never forget that smile. In the past, Felius had been betrayed by her tribe and sold off to some slave merchants. For her ability to communicate with manabeasts, she had been put on display and lived day after day like an animal in the zoo. By the time Raid had saved her, she no longer knew how to trust others. She was an empty husk, blank and expressionless, even after she'd applied for the front lines with a desire to somehow be of use.

Once she'd accomplished her training and been promoted to a soldier, Raid had told her: "You never know when or where you'll die, so make sure you smile every day. When your comrades look back on the time they spent with you, wouldn't you want them to remember you that way?"

That was the first time Raid had seen her smile. It was an awkward imitation of his own grin, with tears streaming down her face to boot, but that had been the start of her path to slowly regaining her human emotions. As she aged, her smile only grew more vibrant and youthful—although she seemed to have stuck to copying his smile.

Raid had watched Felius through many of her ups and downs in life. So he knew, without a shadow of doubt, that this woman in front of him was Felius.

"Man, you really are something, Alma," he said. "I feel like I've been sent back to the past."

"It's ultimately just a recreation," Alma replied with a shrug, still saddled on her dragon. "But they have the same mana and all the memories stored within, so they're pretty much the same person, aren't they?"

"For real. As someone who knew them personally, I can vouch for it."

"Heh. I'm not a special-class magician for nothing!" Alma folded her arms with an exceedingly smug expression—rightfully so, as it

couldn’t have been easy to so accurately replicate a human being from the past. Even Raid, with his lack of expertise on the subject, knew she deserved all the praise.

“Well, but...” Alma immediately deflated. “There *is* a downside to this thing.”

“A downside...?”

“It’d be faster if you see—or, well, *hear* it for yourself.” The woman dejectedly raised her flag and gave it a little shake.

“How dare you speak to His Excellency in such a manner?! It seems you’ve yet to understand what it means to be my descendant. To show disrespect to His Excellency is to disrespect our legacy as his loyal subordinates. Why, you might as well be flinging mud all over the trust and faith I myself spent my life building up under his __”

“Now I get to have my ear nagged off by your fanboy every now and then,” Alma deadpanned.

Raid sighed. “Even death can’t stop Ryatt from dishing out his long-winded lectures...”

“I-Is that His Excellency Freeden I hear?!”

Following Ryatt’s scream, two more voices rang in the air.

“Wait, seriously?! Where is he?! I still can’t see him, that puny man!”

“Ugh... Blo, keep it down, will you?”

“What do you mean?! I’m whispering!”

“That’s *your whisper? Seriously, I envy Felius. I wanna leave the garrison too...”*

Raid listened with an amused smile. “Blofeld and Vance, huh? What about the others?”

“Whoaaaaa! It sounds like Raid but also not!”

“You really won’t keep it down, huh? Anyway, gramps is in his teens now. Of course he’ll sound different.”

Then, two new voices piped in.

“Hmm? What’s going on? Can they hear us out there?”

“Wait, then maybe Lady Eluria’s out there now! Hello, hello! It’s me, Zelsis!”

“Ugh, you’re so embarrassing! Back off! Lynthia’s here too! Can

you hear me, Lady Eluria?!"

"I hear you both, Zelsis and Lynthia," said Eluria.

"She sounds as cute as ever!!!" both magicians screeched.

Like an avalanche, countless voices begin to pipe up and cheer from within Alma's flag. Raid and Eluria exchanged a glance, nodded, and opened their mouths to speak.

"*Attention!*"

The clamor died instantly, the cacophony of voices falling silent under their leaders' commands. Though their figures were nowhere to be seen, Raid and Eluria could easily imagine their soldiers standing in formation and at attention, their eyes full of trust and reverence.

Raid turned to Alma. "You can manage a bit more, can't you? Bring out Ryatt and Tiana for us."

Tensed by the sudden silence, Alma stiffly nodded and manifested two more figures before Raid and Eluria: a young black-haired man standing straight with a standard in hand and a golden-haired lady holding a bejeweled staff.

Raid and Eluria met the firm and unwavering gazes of their adjutants.

"Standard-bearer Ryatt Kanos, relay my message to all troops."

"Same orders, Second-in-Command Tiana von Vegalta."

"We're about to go save this world," Raid began. "It's a crazy plan, others would say, but you should know us well enough by now."

Eluria continued, "We fought for fifty years—each individual battle as enemies, but the war as a whole as implicit allies—all to fulfill the dream we had for the world. Everything we did, we did so our will would be inherited even beyond our time."

A thousand years ago, the Hero and the Sage fought for fifty long years. They stood on opposing sides of the battlefield while cradling the same dream for the world. Many were inspired to share the same vision and fought under their banners. When their leaders passed, the soldiers carried on their will and achieved the peaceful world they had always dreamed of.

Raid and Eluria couldn't have asked for better subordinates in the

past—nor could they find any here in the future.

"So lend this Hero a hand, just one more time."

"The Sage needs your help as well, please."

Before the bright smiles of their precious superiors, Ryatt and Tiana had only one answer. Their hands flew up into prim salutes as tears trailed down their cheeks.

"I would be honored to accompany you into battle, Your Excellency Freeden!"

"I am always happy to support you, Master Caldwin!"



Raid watched his crying subordinate with a fond smile. "And here come the waterworks," he teased. "For such a stern guy who even had the guts to scold *me* sometimes, you always burst into tears the moment you get emotional."

Eluria nodded. "Tiana has always been like this too, ever since the day I took her under my wing. A big crybaby."

"I can once again walk alongside my dearest general! How could I *not* cry?!"

"Precisely! This is like a miracle to us!"

After Raid's and Eluria's deaths, Ryatt and Tiana had inherited their legacies and built the world anew. Not once had they expected to be reunited in such a way—across time and space, as if defying all logic. A miracle had brought them back to the people they respected the most, and it was truly—

"Okay, we're done. Send 'em back, Alma," said Raid.

"A'ight. Buh-bye, you two," Alma drawled.

"Your Excellency?!" Ryatt cried.

"We're still having a moment here!" Tiana wailed.

Raid arched a brow. "But we've got a mission to get to. Time's a-wastin'."

Eluria bobbed her head. "Efficiency is important out in the field."

Ryatt's and Tiana's figures slowly faded away.

"Your Excellency! Nooo! Nooooo!!!"

"I haven't even hugged Lady Eluria yet! At least let me smell her, please!!!"

Alma slumped. "As if it wasn't bad enough before..."

"Sorry 'bout that... I'll give him a good scolding when we have the time."

"Me too. I'll need a word with *all* of them," Eluria muttered.

Millis watched the whole sequence of events with a shudder. "Those two are as merciless as ever..."

"And their subordinates are still as, uh...*loyal* as ever," Wisel added with a dry chuckle.

In any case, with all that out of the way, their group finally began

their journey through the contaminated land.

◇

Their expedition through the polluted continent progressed smoothly.

"Cleanup's done," Raid announced as he mowed down several monster corpses with his broadsword. He threw a glance over his shoulder to his companions. "Tertiary rest point. As usual, I'll keep watch. Millis and Wisel, rest while keeping secondary vigilance. Alma, focus on recovering your mana."

"Roger that," Wisel replied, shifting in his seat on the wagon. "Still, it's not like we're any more exhausted than Instructor Kanos."

"True..." Beside him, Millis sheepishly scratched her cheek. "In fact, I feel bad not doing anything."

From the coachman's seat, Felius turned around and shook her head. "Trust me, you're just not feeling it yet, probably because you're too wound up. You aren't used to military expeditions, so the mental strain is there for sure. You'd better rest up while you can."

"Uh-huh. What she said," Vance piped in. "If you don't rest up now, it'll all come crashing down on you later. And if that happens while we're in action, well, *then* you'll be dragging us down."

Millis clutched her chest. "I feel like a new farmhand learning the ropes from a patient granny...!"

"Well, they're veterans who lived through an age of war and strife. Meanwhile, we grew up in an era of peace..." Wisel chuckled. "It's still a bit surreal talking to the dead, but I'll gratefully take whatever advice they have for us."

"When you put it like that, aren't they kind of like our seniors? Seeing as we've all trained under Raid, I mean!"

"Ha ha ha! Didn't think I'd be taking care of newbies after death," Vance mused as he lined up their rations in front of them.

The value of Hope's Brigade extended beyond combat. After all, it was essentially an army of war veterans—times might have changed, but their knowledge and experience were valuable nonetheless. With Raid and Eluria in the lead, Felius guided their dragon-led wagon

through smoother terrain while locating paths with a more open view of their surroundings. Meanwhile, Vance was in charge of logistics; he kept tabs on their rations and scanned the environment to calculate appropriate rest points.

Beyond these two, they had many more experts they could summon on command. In a sense, it was a pocket-sized army—a rich vault of knowledge and experience, all packed into one spell. In terms of versatility alone, Alma had effectively surpassed both Raid and Eluria in one fell swoop—and the benefits didn't even stop there.

"Hmmm... The little descendant's mana looks all good. What do you think, Zel?" asked Lynthia.

"Same thoughts here," Zelsis replied. "It took a bit of time to catch up on all the new developments in the field, but the foundations are still exactly as when we taught them; I'm pretty confident in my judgment by now."

Alma gave them a sheepish grin. "Thanks for all the help, you two. I couldn't have rounded out this spell so quickly on my own... It was worth chugging all those mana recovery drinks."

Hope's Brigade had recreated the soldiers of the Allied Army through the memories and personalities stored in the mana-woven flag, but these memories could also be expanded upon through the conversion and addition of Alma's own mana. What this meant was that not only could this spell extract past knowledge and skills, but it could also *update* this expertise. Not one to waste such a golden opportunity, Alma shared her modern-day knowledge with the Allied Army's lead magicians, earning fresh pairs of eyes that helped her improve her spell by leaps and bounds in a short span of time.

"You're just as extraordinary as we are," Raid mused. "Just in a different way."

Alma scratched her head. "Well, I won't deny it... Still, I can't really compare to you two, can I?"

"It's not about comparing... Anyway, trust me—you're not much different from us. You've got a well-trained army plus all the support you could ever need—logistics, supplies, medicine, you name it. You could single-handedly wage war against an entire country."

"And by saying that, you're naturally implying that you and Eluria could as well," Alma deadpanned.

Raid shrugged. "Of course we can. Especially if it's just a matter of mowing everything down."

"Man, the world would've been long gone if we weren't such nice folks, huh?"

"For sure. Though...I guess that's exactly what happened here," Raid muttered as he shifted his gaze to Eluria. Her face was scrunched up as she clutched her staff which she'd stabbed firmly into the ground. She had been spending their breaks analyzing the polluted mana in the air. "Hey, how's it looking?" he asked her.

"Not...very good," she admitted, a rare tone of defeat in her voice. "Honestly, it's entirely possible that I won't be able to purify it all."

Raid quietly stepped beside her. "Really? Even for you?"

"Polluted mana is spreading around the continent through the mana veins underground. In other words, the mana veins themselves are polluted, so things get real dicey." Eluria lifted her head and gazed at the monster corpses off to the side. "Imagine dumping poison into a city's water system, except the poison has a mind of its own and can fight back. Take it all down, sure, but it'll spread to its surroundings and regenerate infinitely."

"Ugh... Sounds like a headache."

"Mm. So, even if we defeat the Calamities, the polluted mana will keep spreading through the mana veins and a new Calamity will eventually be born elsewhere. This magic was made to operate endlessly—*persistently*—no matter what may come to pass." A dark shadow cast over Eluria's face. "I must have been...so terribly disillusioned."

Just as Raid had said moments ago, either of them could easily destroy the world if they so wished. The reason that hadn't happened in the Second World was because the Hero and the Sage had found each other and became allies in their pursuit for a beautiful world—a dream that eventually came to be. Eluria must have had similar ideals in this world, but they were ultimately crushed under the malice of humanity.

And so, the Demon Lord despaired, for humans were such hopeless and wretched beings. If they refused to change their ways, then so too would the Demon Lord carve their fate in stone: a broken world, a lifeless land, and a slow yet inevitable death for all. Cry and struggle as they might, not even a miracle would save them from their doom. The anger and resentment that ravaged her heart manifested in this incurable poison she'd condemned the entire continent to.

For better or for worse, Eluria could sympathize—but things were different now.

"It's not like you to sound so defeated already," said Raid, setting a hand as gentle as a smile on her head. "The Sage I know is the type of person who'd make the impossible possible. How else would she have held her ground against a monster who was feared even in his own country?"

Altane should have seized the entire continent a millennium ago, just as it had in the First World. The empire had everything they could have ever needed—vast territory, overwhelming manpower, and a Hero who could single-handedly topple an entire army. Nobody doubted it would come to fruition—and the one who proved them all wrong had been none other than the Sage. Her ability to defy all odds had drawn Raid's interest, and that was how they'd formed an unspoken bond that held strong across the war-torn battlefield. Raid had acknowledged her long ago, and he knew he wasn't wrong in his judgment.

"You can find the answer. I believe in you," he whispered fondly. "And I'll stick by you through it all, even if it takes us another fifty years."

A small smile finally bloomed on Eluria's lips. "Mm. I know I can do it...because you're with me now."

"For sure. Nobody works harder than you."

"You know it." Eluria held her head up high, looking like her usual self again. "But...I do have a tiny problem."

"Which is?"

"I don't have enough time."

"You mean...to analyze the magic and come up with a solution?"

"Mm-hmm. I don't doubt that I can figure it out eventually, since the creator was just a different version of me. I'm not starting from scratch either, so that should shorten the process."

"So, how long do you wager it'll take?"

"Around two hundred years."

Raid sighed. "We'll be long dead by then..."

"Yeah," Eluria muttered dejectedly. "I wouldn't even be a granny—just a grave."

"Things would've been different if you were still an elf."

"Rejected." Eluria adamantly shook her head. "Then we wouldn't match, nor would I get to stay with you forever." Raid had just promised her that he would stick by her through it all—he certainly couldn't just kick the bucket and leave her behind. "Or...I could pass my research down to my descendants, like Ms. Alma's family did."

"So kids, huh? Then we'd have to raise our kid to be like us, then they'd have to do the same for their kids... Doesn't seem very feasible."

"Being an only child is a bit lonely. I want six."

Raid blinked. "Why six...?"

"Because that's how many mana branches I discovered."

"Oh. Well, how 'bout a plus one for me?"

"Seven, then? Not bad at all... Deal."

"Now hold on just a goddamn second!" Millis snapped, jumping between them. "What even *is* this conversation?!"

Raid raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean? We're talking about the future."

"Okay, yeah, I get that! You're planning for your lovely future family—great! But shouldn't you be a bit more, oh, I don't know—*embarrassed* about it?!"

"Are you really expecting that from an old man like me?"

"You know, you should try acting your physical age once in a while. It could be good for you!"

Raid sighed. "I don't know what to tell you... We've already met each other's families, and it's always been a given that the future of the Caldwin bloodline is in our hands, so of course we're gonna have a kid. Or seven."

“N-No, what I mean is...for that, you’ll have to do *stuff* with Lady Eluria, right?! You know—the funny business, the hanky-panky, the good ol’ bedroom rodeo?!”

“Why are you suddenly talking like a scandalized old man?”

“Ack! The grandpas from the sticks have rubbed off on me!” Millis flushed in embarrassment, her entire spiel fully backfiring on her.

In any case, there was nothing new or embarrassing about this topic. Raid and Eluria were in love with one another, and their families had approved their betrothal, so it was only a matter of course that after their wedding, they would proceed to have a child. After all, was that not simply how humans lived their lives?

“We’re not a bunch of prepubescent teenagers. Why should we be—” Raid turned to the girl beside him in search of agreement but instead found an averted gaze, flushed ears, and trembling shoulders. He solemnly turned back to Millis. “Let’s stop talking about this.”

“Well, you sure backtracked fast!”

Raid sighed and looked back at Eluria. “I’m guessing you hadn’t been thinking about it since we segued in from a pretty serious topic.”

The girl was silent for a long while before finally squeaking out a yes. It seemed like she genuinely hadn’t been thinking that far. Eluria meekly faced Raid again, eyes screwed shut as she made a circle with her hands as a show of approval in lieu of two thumbs up. “But since it’s you...I give the plan a full ten out of ten.”



Raid nodded. “Long story short, my future wife is adorable. End of conversation.”

Millis clenched her fist. “Such a forced yet wholesome conclusion...!”

“I really don’t know why you’re stressing over this... Anyway, we’ve got bigger fish to fry, so let’s move on.” Raid clapped his hands. “Eluria, do you remember what Elise told us about our reincarnation?”

“Mm... About how we ended up reincarnating together?”

“Yeah. It was pretty convoluted...” Raid sighed.

After Eluria’s passing in the past, Raid had made his way into Vegalta’s capital to see her, not once retaliating against the soldiers to show he wasn’t there to fight. The countless wounds he’d sustained on his trek eventually led to his death by her casket, ultimately causing them both to reincarnate a thousand years into the future.

“Elise said that Hero’s reincarnation feature activated upon my death and dragged you with me, right?”

“Mm-hmm. Because of that, things got kind of mixed up along the way,” she muttered, tucking her hair behind her ears.

In actuality, there was another key to Eluria’s reincarnation besides her proximity to Raid—and that was her *cause of death*, or more specifically, the lack of mana in her body. The Divine mana that burst forth upon Raid’s death had been drawn to her empty vessel, like water streaming into an empty cup, attaching her to the reincarnation process. However, because Hero only worked on humans, Eluria had then been reincarnated as a human instead of an elf, with all of her memories intact as well.

Incidentally, this influence went both ways. In their world, Eluria’s existence in the past had been artificially arranged by Wallus. Thus, upon her death and reincarnation, she had been flung forward to her original era—a thousand years later—to mend this discrepancy, meaning she was essentially “reincarnating into herself,” which was why she looked exactly the same as she had in the past. This shouldn’t have been the case for Raid, but by Eluria’s influence, he also retained his past appearance upon reincarnation.

It was a series of coincidences that had brought the two to a miraculous reunion.

"She also said that the whole mess skewed the date of your birth a bit, didn't she?" Raid continued.

"Yeah. I should've originally been born fifty years earlier, but it must've been delayed because no human around that time was compatible with my mana."

"Then things clearly don't match up," Raid muttered as he turned to Millis.

The girl blinked. "Huh? Me?"

"Yes, you. From what Dian said, in this world, Eluria met you after she became the Demon Lord—meaning there was at least a fifty-year gap during which she managed to invent magic, discover that humans were misusing it, and begin making moves to destroy the world." They didn't know for sure when exactly Eluria and Millis had met in this world, but since it was said that the Demon Lord met a *young girl*, it might be safe to assume that Eluria had been more or less sixty years old at the time. "Eluria, how long did it take you to invent magic on our timeline?"

"Hmm... Around a century?"

"In other words, you invented it much faster in this world—which shouldn't have happened, at least not with such a wide margin, since you're essentially the same person."

In order to build up Vegalta into a Magic Kingdom, Wallus must have instilled some useful information into Eluria on occasion, so she hadn't been working entirely from scratch—but even then, it had taken her an entire *century*. Clearly, this world's Eluria had invented magic abnormally quickly. She must have been provided significant assistance during the research phase to speed up the process, but that would mean she'd proven to Altane at an early stage that her craft was worth investing in...or she didn't need to prove it, because she was working on something left behind by a *trustworthy source*—say, for example, a certain ancient manuscript that nobody but Eluria could decipher. Then it would make sense for Altane to give her preferential treatment and offer their utmost assistance, even if she was of a persecuted race.

That was how important this manuscript was to them—for it had been left behind by a man known in their world as the Sage.

"The Sage's Codex," Raid muttered thoughtfully. "Therein lies all our answers."

In the First World, Raid Freeden had been known as the Sage. He was the reason that magic and Heroes existed in this world. The research and knowledge he left behind could contain the solution to the polluted mana eating away at the world.

Eluria hummed. "I *have* noticed some small differences compared to my magic... The me in this world likely had some other information or knowledge at her disposal."

"The same probably goes for Hero," Raid added. "Anyway, since all these Calamities and polluted mana were created based on the Codex, you could come up with a remedy if we get our hands on it, right?"

"Mm-hmm. Absolutely."

In the Second World, Eluria had invented magic almost entirely on her own. If they could get her all the necessary information, she should be able to analyze and reverse the Demon Lord's magic much more quickly.

"Just sucks that we don't even know where the Sage's Codex is."

Alma sighed. "If only you two could just barge into the capital and snatch it from them..."

Raid shrugged. "We could, but we know nothing about the enemy—their numbers, strength, formations, what have you. Going in blind will slow us down for sure, giving them enough time to realize that we're after the Codex and, worse yet, enough time to *dispose* of it. A frontal assault isn't an option for us just yet."

They could be sure that Altane had the Sage's Codex because they'd managed to create new Heroes. However, their group couldn't carelessly step into Altanian territory just yet; there were preparations to be made and information to be gathered, such as the enemy's numbers and positions, and most importantly, the Codex's location.

"Anyway, the situation's still far from dire," Raid concluded. "We haven't even gotten to our first destination yet."

"'Far from dire'...? Only you and Eluria think that," Alma deadpanned as she pointed up ahead. Amid the jagged mountains in the distance was a faint light. The thick coat of mana pollution coiled around one particular spot, allowing the warm sunlight to stream down upon a land blanketed in lush and verdant greenery. It was a stark contrast to all the waste and decay they had seen on their journey here, like a garden reserved for the gods—a place befitting of the name of *Paradise*.

They were close enough to spot it with their naked eyes, but their group was currently circling around the mountains instead of making a beeline for it—for one simple reason.

"So, what do we do about *those guys*?" Alma lowered her finger by a nudge, now pointing at several dragon-headed giants lurking around the mountains. They weren't quite as big as the Calamity that had appeared in Palmare but were clearly in a different league from the monsters they'd been mowing down on the way here. The fact that they could spot them so easily from this far away was proof enough of their massive size.

"There are thirty-six of 'em in total, right?" Raid said.

Alma nodded. "With baddies like these roaming around, it's no wonder nobody's ever made it to Paradise."

"Don't forget all the Offspring we had to fight along the way. Imagine making your way through all that and managing to get this close, only to see so many Calamities..." They couldn't have been the first ones to have made the journey to Paradise. Whoever else had tried must have despaired at this sight—they'd come all this way, clinging to their last hope at a better life, only to find an insurmountable wall just one step away. It almost felt like an intentional, malicious arrangement.

"Honestly, I don't know why I'm even asking, but...you and Eluria can beat those things, right?"

"Easily," the two affirmed.

"Yeah, I figured... Anyway, that's great and all, but the problem is their positions." Alma spread out a map, furrowing her brows as she rested her cheek on her fist. The giants were roaming around the immediate vicinity of Paradise—too close for comfort should combat

ensue. Not to mention that because the giants were all lingering around the same general area, any contact with one would immediately attract the others.

"How about you hold 'em in place and I crush 'em one by one?" Raid suggested.

"Mm, no..." Eluria shook her head. "That might be tough. I could freeze them like I did in Palmare, but it wouldn't last long because of all this polluted mana."

"Then they'd flatten me like a pancake..."

"I'm sure you could manage eventually, but if we take too long, a new Calamity will just emerge from the polluted mana. Then we'd be going in circles."

"If anything, *we'd* be at a disadvantage because we have to rest and eat. Pretty sure they don't have to bother with all that." Raid folded his arms and sighed.

"What a conundrum," Eluria muttered.

Millis meekly raised her hand. "Er... Is there an option to *not* fight?"

Raid and Eluria cocked their heads. "Not...fight?"

"Have you never heard those two words together?!"

"No, no, that's not what we meant," said Raid. "Paradise is located halfway up the mountain, so our only choice is to cut through those fellas before we start making our way up, right?"

They had also considered charging through without engaging in combat, but Paradise was too far for Raid and Eluria to keep everyone safe while running from the giants—not to mention all the things that could go wrong along the way. Even if they managed to get to Paradise that way, there was no guarantee they could get in immediately. Eluria suspected several layers of barriers and defenses had been set up around Paradise to eliminate the influence of the polluted mana. To force their way in, they'd need time to analyze it. Or they could try to convince the residents to let them in, but they couldn't exactly hold negotiations with the giants charging at them. In any case, the plan wasn't feasible, so they'd scrapped it pretty quickly.

"Then what about going through the underground lake?" Millis

suggested.

Raid squinted. “The underground lake?”

“It connects to the river at the foot of the mountain, then emerges right around halfway up. We should be able to safely make our way to Paradise through there.”

“Oh, right... This is basically your hometown.”

“Yes! The scenery’s changed so much that I could hardly recognize the place, but after circling around for a bit, I finally got my bearings. Now I’m certain that Paradise is up in Mt. Dad.”

“Could you not randomly name the mountains?” Raid deadpanned.

“Tell that to the people in my hometown! Incidentally, the slightly smaller mountain beside it is the mom, and the rest lined up over there are all their little children.” Millis cleared her throat. “It may look a bit different, but Norberg is where I was born and raised. Shortcuts, bypasses, hidden trails, secret caves—leave it to me to navigate!”

Millis flashed their group a toothy grin and declared, “This place is practically my backyard!”

◇

After their break, they plotted a new route to Paradise following Millis’s guidance—and the results were astounding.

“Wow... I’m impressed you knew about this tunnel,” Raid said.

Millis chuckled smugly. “There’s not much else to do out in the sticks, after all!”

Their group was currently walking through a tunnel on their way to the underground lake. The entrance had been so obscure, they never would have found it without Millis.

“Manabeasts called rithmoles used to live around here,” she told them.

Wisel frowned. “You ventured near manabeast habitats in your childhood?”

“Well, yes, but rithmoles are typically harmless,” Millis explained. “They look like huge moles and help fertilize the soil.”

Eluria nodded. “I heard that they’re very smart creatures. They hardly show up around people but can still understand human speech.”

“Righto, Lady Eluria! If you share some produce with them, they return the favor later on. You can even ask them for help sometimes. They were treated like local deities, actually!”

Raid hummed. “I’ve heard of them too. Never seen one, though.”

“Oh. Well, that’s because they only show themselves to girls. If they encounter a boy, they usually just ignore them.”

“And...why is that?”

Millis shrugged. “Because they like girls. So we get special treatment.”

“Wow...” Raid said flatly.

“But like I said, they’re completely harmless, even to men. Whenever I went out by myself, they’d pop right out of the ground and play with me. I’d also visit them here from time to time, then they’d come out of the walls and shake their heads as a greeting... They were nice fellas, really.” Millis sighed and her brow furrowed. “So...it’s a little sad, seeing their home like this.” Her quiet mutter vanished quickly within the underground path, now empty and lifeless—a stark and jarring contrast to the vivid memories she had of this place in their world.

“Hey, keep your chin up. Eluria said they were a clever bunch, didn’t she? They must’ve fled when the pollution set in, made new burrows someplace else, and continued chasing after girls there.”

Millis somberly sighed. “Yes, you’re right... And then they do the little dance they always do whenever they meet a girl...”

“I...kind of wanna see that,” Eluria muttered.

“I’ve seen it, and it’s great,” Alma remarked with a grin. “You should really check it out if you have the chance.”

According to Millis, rithmoles dug out these paths underground and even solidified the walls by mixing argillaceous material with their saliva. Eluria also added that the polluted mana in the surface actually covered up what little mana their bodies were emitting, helping keep them concealed underground. They couldn’t have asked for a more suitable infiltration route.

One downside to it was that smaller Offspring could actually worm their way into this burrow system through the smaller, branching paths. Normally, this meant the crew would still have to be on their toes, but the lighthearted chatter filling the air was a testament to their smooth and unhindered progress through the tunnel—thanks to no bout of fortune, but rather to a certain small girl walking at the very front of their group.

"Grampa," called the girl, a somewhat awkward lisp in her speech. "Sounds. From the second hole ahead."

"Got it. Thanks, Echalot."

"I do good work."

Raid grinned and ruffled her hair. "Uh-huh. You do the *best* work."

Echalot had been a scout for Altane long ago. She'd grown up amid the long, harsh winters of the northern region in an ethnic group that lived in underground caves. Her background granted her exceptionally heightened senses—a great boon for secretly gathering enemy information and executing overt operations—and her small body allowed her to nimbly slip through the narrowest escape routes to make it back alive with the intel she'd gathered.

Incidentally, Raid had worked with this girl for a full *decade*.

Echalot petulantly glared at Raid. "Grampa... You always do that. Stop it."

"Hah! You still react the same way."

"I'm not a kid... I'm twenty-eight," she grumbled.

Echalot *looked* like a child, but she was very much a fully grown woman. Living in tight underground spaces had made her people naturally develop smaller bodies, making them look much, much younger than their age.

Long ago, Echalot had made her way to the front lines to volunteer for the army, hoping to send some money back home, only to be shooed away after being mistaken for a lost child. When she'd persistently held her ground, the soldiers had then assumed she was a child slave acting under the orders of her master and attempted to catch her. She'd deftly slipped right past them and gone directly to Raid to plead her case. Naturally, he had welcomed her into his army, but unfortunately for Echalot, she couldn't escape the fate of

being mistaken for a child at every turn. Seeing her get mad and sulky had been a common sight in their army.

"Wow... You're so small yet older than me," Millis mused with a dopey smile as she lifted the small woman in her arms.

"You. Girl with blonde hair and blue eyes. Why carry me?"

"Sorry, you're just so cute..."

"I am kind. But I will get mad."

"That sulky pout is so adorable!"

Alma cleared her throat. "Uh, Millis? I'd let her down if I were you. She's pretty scary when she gets mad."

"Aw, come on, Ms. Alma! How bad could she—"

"She can kill a bear with her bare hands."

Millis instantly dropped Echalot and swiftly prostrated herself to the ground. "My sincerest apologies, Ms. Echalot!"

Echalot's people were small-bodied but had enormous physical strength. In fact, one of their customs included chasing off cave-dwelling beasts bare-handed.

"If I recall correctly, she's also a skilled assassin, isn't she?" Alma said as she turned to Raid.

"Yep. During training, she'd knock out all her peers by herself. I can't tell you how many enemy soldiers and commanders let their guards down and got their necks snapped just 'cause she looked like a kid."

Echalot bobbed her head. "I am strong. I can beat taller *and* bigger-breasted women," she said, glaring at two particular girls in their group as she slowly shuffled closer like a beast cornering its prey.

"She's definitely holding a grudge!" Millis wailed.

"And now she's glaring at me too! Thanks a bunch, Millis!" Alma exclaimed.

Raid sighed and shook his head. "I'm glad you girls are having fun, but stay on your toes, okay?" He walked ahead and got rid of the Offspring that Echalot had located. "Wisel, how much more ground have we got to cover till the lake?"

"Not much," Wisel answered. "Once we get there, we're going to set up camp and analyze the barrier, right?"

"Yep. Pretty sure we should be close enough. If we can project our voices through the barrier, then we'll initiate the negotiations."

Wisel nodded. "Roger that. I'll start preparing as well."

Eluria suspected that the barriers surrounding Paradise were meant to completely shut out most things along with the polluted mana. Forcibly breaching it could negatively impact Paradise, so their plan was to analyze it and open a small gap through which they could establish communications.

"In any case," Wisel muttered, taking something out of his bag, "I managed to make this thing with Sir Dian's help, but I still can't believe it can transmit messages."

Raid leaned over. "Ooh. Is that the electric communicator you made?"

"Yes. I managed to make it since it's structured similarly to magic communicators, but I can only tip my hat to whoever came up with this device without relying on magic or mana."

According to Dian, although Paradise had been isolated for a thousand years now, they had been regularly sending out transmissions using ancient electric communicators. This only seemed to work one way, though, as they showed no indications of having received Altane's messages. Hopefully, their group could manage to deliver their message after partially prying open the barriers.

"I know that thing," Eluria piped in. "Your messengers always carried one, right, Raid? The one that beeps a lot?"

"You're talking about the radio waves," he affirmed. "We used it in my latter years. It was still in the trial phase, though, so only my troops ever got to use them. Seems they were developed into magic communicators after Vegalta took over."

"Seriously, what *haven't* you influenced?" Wisel deadpanned.

"'Nothing' is usually my safe assumption," Eluria said, nodding.

Raid shrugged. "Listen, all I did was find a skilled technician who'd humor all my unreasonable requests. If their inventions were passed down through the ages and contributed to humanity's development, then I'm happy for 'em." Oftentimes, Raid was given more credit than he was due because he stood in the limelight.

Regardless, he was genuinely happy to see traces of the personnel he'd handpicked so far into the future.

"Stop."

His fond reminiscence was cut short when Echalot suddenly thrust her arms to the side.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Many...loud sounds."

Millis gulped. "Y-You mean there's something in the underground lake?!"

"No," Echalot muttered. "Above. Both near and far. Loud sounds...getting closer."

Raid's eyes instantly snapped wide open. He whipped his head around and yelled, "Eluria! Take everyone to the lake—*now*!"

The girl wasted no time heeding his order. She grabbed their four companions and rushed through the tunnel.

Not even a second later, a gigantic foot *smashed* through the ceiling.

Broadsword already drawn, Raid swung against the foot and knocked it away, using the recoil to leap into the air and follow the rest of the group. Once the end of the tunnel entered his sight, he threw himself to the ground and rolled in right by the others. "Tch... Is everyone safe?!"

"Don't worry. They're all here." Eluria glanced at their companions who were still wrapped in her streams of light before her expression soured. "But it looks like...things just took a turn for the worse."

The underground lake glistened under the light streaming in from the exit, which was surrounded by some remnant man-made structures—a sign of human activity in the area long ago. Normally, the opening should have given them a peek at the mountain outside, but instead all they could see were several gigantic shadows swaying and blurring, every single one getting bigger—*closer*—to this underground lake.

Raid huffed. "Just our luck. *Now* they deviate from their paths?"

"It could be that they were programmed to attack any presences within a certain range of Paradise," Eluria proposed. "We tried to circumvent that by passing underground..."

"But once we got this far up, we entered their detection range and belatedly triggered them," Raid finished with a nod.

Now that they'd detected the outsiders, all the nearby Calamities were coming in to attack. Light disappeared from the underground space, blocked by a gigantic bloodred eye staring straight at their group.

Raid sighed. "Guess our fun little stroll is over."

"Mm. At least we're in a better position now," Eluria muttered.

If these giants had been placed here to protect Paradise, then Raid and Eluria just had to make sure to fight with Paradise directly behind them; that way, they could ensure none of the damage from the fight would reach the place. Then, by sticking to defense, they could hopefully buy enough time for Millis to negotiate with the residents of Paradise to allow them entry.

"There are thirty-six of 'em, right? Then we can have half each," said Raid.

Eluria hummed. "But they might revive, so how about we compete to see who can beat the most?"

"Oh, that's not a bad idea. Looks like we might be wiping everything but Paradise off the map today."

Millis sniffled. "Oh, my poor hometown... I will never forget you..."

"My condolences, Ms. Millis, but I think we'd better focus on looking out for ourselves."

Alma sighed. "It's always a struggle trying not to get caught up in the chaos whenever those two let loose..."

They slipped in a few lighthearted remarks while tensing up and standing ready for battle. The bloodred eye loomed ominously above them, while Raid and Eluria held their ground and glared back.

Soon, however, Raid's daring glare turned into a dubious squint. "What's...going on?"

"It's not moving," Eluria noted.

The Calamity was simply frozen in place, showing no signs of moving once it laid its eye on their group.

"Mil...lis..."

Out of nowhere, a voice rang through the air. It hadn't come from

any of them, nor did it sound like something produced by ordinary vocal cords.

Millis's eyes grew wide, her expression turning slack in shock. "Huh...?"

Before she could say anything else, though, the giant pulled back from the opening, and the ground shook under its footsteps.

"Grampa," Echalot whispered. "All the sounds...are going away."

Raid narrowed his eyes, perplexed by the incomprehensible turn of events. "What in the—"

"I'm here, I'm here, I'm heeere! I've got you now, naughty little runaway!"

All of a sudden, a bright female voice rang through the dreary underground space. A small figure valiantly leaped from the opening, backlit by the meager light from outside, and landed perfectly on the ground—before slipping and sliding on the moist surface.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! I just remembered! This is an underground lake, so it's slippery when wet— *Aaaah!!!*" Finally, the girl lost her balance and fell square on her back, then began rolling and writhing over the ground. "Owww, it huuurts...! The physical damage assaulting my back, and the mental damage from the stares of pity piercing me from all directions! A merciless two-hit combo! Waaah...!"

Overcome by a very strong sense of déjà vu, Raid took a step closer to the girl. "Hey, little missy. Are you from Paradise?"

The girl looked up, blinking. "Huh? Wait, who are you people?! I don't recognize you—and that's saying something, since I know all my neighbors *and* their livestock, down to the last little newborn chick!"

"We came from outside."

"Ooh! So you're *strangers*!" she exclaimed, eyes sparkling.

"Looks like somebody didn't learn the stranger danger rule..." Raid chuckled dryly as he knelt down to the girl's eye level. "I'm Raid. We passed underground and came all the way here to visit Paradise."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh... I see! Well, this must be your lucky day, because I'm just who you need!" The girl stuck her chest out and

proudly declared, “I am Norn Lambut, the Keeper of Paradise!”



Chapter Three

Millis Lambut was a strange human. Or perhaps "pushy" was a better word.

"I've brought a new friend!"

Her boldness in dragging me to her village and introducing me to her neighbors was like nothing I'd ever experienced with a human before. Oddly enough, the villagers weren't any different.

"Oh my, Millis, dearie. I didn't know you had non-animal friends."

"Well, I'll be! Here I thought 'Demon Lord' was the name you gave to a new mole 'round the block."

"Your first new friend in ages, and she's an *elf*? Wow, maybe outside of the village you're just a human repellent!"

"Argh! Darn you brutally honest hillbillies...!"

Such had been the extent of their reactions when Millis introduced me as the Demon Lord. So, during my stay, I decided to speak with them—to ask them why they weren't afraid of me.

Their answers were all...very strange.

"Hmmm... Well, we *have* heard about some scary Demon Lord runnin' around, but it's all just hearsay in the end, isn't it?"

"I can show you that it's not."

"Oh me, oh my. How scary. Yes, that would probably leave us shakin' in our boots...but what can we do? If we all end up dead 'cause of this, then I suppose that means we were just a bunch of ignorant hillbillies after all."

It wasn't just that smiley old lady.

"You're sayin' others might come attacking us 'cause you're the Demon Lord?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm sure you've done your fair share of bad deeds, so they'd have every reason to come huntin' you down...but if they kill us too, then that'd mean they're not much different from you,

wouldn’t you say?”

“Or maybe I’m just so evil that it’s worth the sacrifice.”

“Oh, really?”

“That’s how the rest of humanity sees it.”

“Lass, if you were such a horrendous villain, then we’d all be mincemeat by now. Besides, we country folk are a narrow-minded bunch; we don’t give a hoot ’bout what anyone else says—just what we’ve seen. And as far as we can see, you’re Millis’s friend.”

Even this old man answered my question with a hearty laugh.

I tried asking several others, but their answers were all the same. This village was full of strange humans, all far too soft for their own good.

In the end, I decided to ask Millis herself.

“Pardon? You’re wondering why nobody is chasing you out?”

“Yes. I’ve killed your brethren.”

“Hmm... But you had a reason for doing so, didn’t you, Lady Eluria?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s that.” Millis shrugged, surprisingly indifferent. “You see, murder is a sin. We believe that too—not because the law says so, but because we know it in our hearts. So...” She slowly lifted her face and looked me in the eye. “I would only resort to killing someone if I had a grave reason that compelled me to act despite knowing the weight of murder.”

“But I might have just killed them on a whim.”

“Then we wouldn’t be here now, would we? You would have offed me the moment I started causing a ruckus up in the mountains. But that didn’t happen—which means you’re not the type of person to kill for no reason.” Millis wore a smile as bright as always. “I don’t know why you killed people, and I probably wouldn’t understand even if you told me. In that case, who am I to judge you? How could I dictate the righteousness or evilness of your actions when I know nothing about your motives?”

Contrary to her usual attitude, Millis fostered thoughts so profound, she almost seemed wise beyond her years. She knew nothing of my motives, so she couldn’t condemn me as evil—nor

could she say for certain that I was good. Her opinion had struck me as rather indifferent, and surely there were some people who would even criticize her for such an aloof stance. But to me...her answer was rather pleasant.

"I have another question."

"Of course! What is it?"

"Why do you call me 'Lady Eluria'?"

"I mean, you're called the Demon *Lord*, so shouldn't I at least address you a bit more respectfully? Also, you're so pretty, so it just seems fitting to call you a lady!"

"I see." My lips curled into a small, imperceptible smile as I rose to my feet. "Millis."

"Huh? Wait, *now* you finally call me by my name?!"

"Mm-hmm. Didn't you say you wanted to be friends?"

What little emotion remained in the corner of my heart brewed into desire—a small wish to grant my first friend the chance to witness my dream. From these bloodstained hands, I would entrust it to her, because I had a feeling that she would be able to understand.

"Bear witness," I muttered as I slowly raised my hand. "This...is *my* magic."

With a snap of my fingers, our surroundings changed instantly. Vast stretches of rolling meadows, rich forests and lush vegetation, clear rivers and sparkling lakes—a world of nature and abundance was formed amid the rocky mountains.

Millis looked around with wide and stunned eyes. "This is..."

"Paradise as I envisioned it," I answered. "I give this to you. I want you to watch over it."

"What?! B-But I'm just an ordinary village girl—I know nothing about magic!"

"It's okay, you'll figure it out. You have the eyes for it, Millis." I lifted my foot and took a step into the air, then another, then another, leisurely strolling up toward the sky. "If you protect this paradise, then you will all survive."

I'd already taken the first steps; there was no turning back now. Time would pass like a cruel mistress, perhaps someday leaving my

heart in tatters and my very soul an empty husk, but this wrath and hatred would stay with me forever.

Then, sooner or later, everything would come to an end—the foolish humans, this wretched world, and even the Demon Lord herself.

"So please...remember my dream for me."

And so, leaving my dream to my one and only friend, I once again took to the skies without looking back. This was the last time in my long, long existence that I ever showed compassion to humans.

From then on, Demon Lord Eluria Caldwin would usher the world to ruin.

◇

After briefly introducing themselves, their group was guided into Paradise.

"Wow... It really *is* Paradise," Alma marveled as she looked around.

A vibrant blue sky stretched out far above with not a single cloud in sight. The crops and cattle bathed under the warm sunlight, and the air was filled with the idyllic sounds of the cows and sheep. People worked amid the fields, smiling and laughing as they chatted with their neighbors.

Since they'd just stepped out of a ravaged world crawling with grotesque monsters, the contrast was almost *jarring*.

"M-My hometown, it's so...*developed*!" Millis exclaimed. "Paddy fields, orchards—all the things we couldn't set up because of the terrain and climate! And are those pigs and water buffalos I see?! Even ducks and turkeys! I thought we'd only ever have cows, sheep, and chicken around here! What an upgrade to the livestock lineup—self-sufficiency at its peak!"

"Your hometown's finally prospering. Good on ya," said Raid.

"This isn't exactly the type of development I was hoping for, though!" she cried.

"I think the type of development you *are* hoping for isn't very

feasible, location-wise...” Wisel muttered.

“Well, fine, I *did* think a castle was a bit much to ask for. But still, this is just...a fancier rural village! I’m not too sure how to feel about it...”

“Still, it’s way bigger than it looked from the outside, isn’t it?” Alma noted.

Eluria nodded. “The space has probably been enlarged with spatial magic. It looks normal from the foot of the mountain; only when you enter do you see its ‘true’ size.”

At the front of the group, Norn spun on her heels to face them. “I wasn’t expecting such high praise... I’m not quite sure how to respond. Is this place really that unusual to outsiders?”

“Oh, it’s unusual, all right. In more ways than one,” Raid replied.

“Hmm, really? I mean, I do know that things are getting pretty bad outside...”

“What about the other residents? Do they know too?”

“Not in detail, no. Everyone knows the history of Paradise and how it came to be, but typically, only we Keepers can step foot outside.”

“So nobody but you can leave Paradise?”

“Oh, not necessarily. It’s just, well...it’s a little complicated,” Norn muttered, averting her gaze.

Seeing that, Raid decided to change the topic. “In any case, it’s really impressive that you’re the Keeper at such a young age. How old are you, exactly?”

“I’m thirteen this year! I’ve been the Keeper since I was ten!”

“Wow, that’s really young. Is your predecessor still around?”

“Um... My mom was the previous Keeper, and my granny before her. You see, only the women of the Lambut family get to be Keepers.” Norn raised her hand and began to enumerate on her fingers. “The eldest—my granny—manages the village. Then, my mom helps her while also teaching me everything I need to know to be the Keeper... And that’s why I’m the current Keeper!”

In other words, Norn was the Keeper in name, but she was still learning the ropes from her mother.

“Ta-da! This is my house!” Norn stopped in front of a house much

bigger and more well-built than the ones they'd seen on the way here. "Granny Crusche! I've brought some strangers home!"

"Okay, dearie..." said an elderly woman seated out in the garden. "But I think you mean *guests*, not strangers."

Raid turned to her and bowed his head. "You must be the village chief. You have our sincerest thanks for welcoming us into Paradise."

"Oh, please, be at ease. Besides being the Keepers of Paradise, we Lambuts are no more than another household in this village." Crusche turned to Norn as the creases in her face deepened. "Norn, dear, go and prepare the rooms with Mithra and the others, will you? We need a place for the guests to rest. Granny will talk with them in the meantime."

"Okey dokey! See ya later, strangers!" Norn waved her hand with a bright smile before running into the house.

After seeing her off, Crusche gestured to some chairs nearby. "Please, take a seat. I apologize that we don't have enough for all of you."

"You've no need to apologize. Our visit was very sudden," said Raid. "We came here because we needed to speak with the residents of Paradise in order to stop the deterioration of the world."

"Ah, yes... I, too, wanted to speak with you personally after what Norn told me through the radio—about the reason for your visit...as well as your names." Crusche's eyes narrowed into slits, suspicion and criticism brewing behind her gentle features. "Sage Raid Freeden, Demon Lord Eluria Caldwin...and even our ancestor, Millis Lambut... Pray tell, what compelled you to use their names?"

Her suspicion was only natural. In the First World, the Sage was a revered historical figure, the Demon Lord was the culprit of the world's destruction, and Millis Lambut was the First Keeper of Paradise. Who *wouldn't* be displeased by some random folks suddenly popping up and using their names?

Unfortunately, they couldn't afford to be completely truthful to Crusche. Isolated as it was, nobody in Paradise had any idea of how the rest of humanity was trying to survive. Time travel, branching worlds, reincarnation—Raid couldn't suddenly drop all that on them, even if it *was* the most honest approach he could take, lest he invite

her suspicions to grow and fester even more.

In such situations, it was best to go with a *simpler* version of the truth.

"The circumstances are too complex for me to explain at length," he began. "But I can assure you that this girl here is undoubtedly Millis Lambut. All of us have come here from a thousand years ago."

"Well, that's...certainly quite the claim."

"But it is the truth. We want to be honest with you, even if it means sounding more suspicious. As Millis Lambut's descendants, you should have records or anecdotes that can confirm her identity, correct?"

This was their number one reason for bringing Millis along. They couldn't have collected her answers in advance, since whatever questions they could come up with would, at best, have been based on Dian's information—in other words, an outsider's meager knowledge of the First Keeper. Besides, there was a high chance the people of Paradise might want to judge Millis based on her immediate reactions—Raid and Eluria would have done the same, given the girl's unique personality.

Crusche quietly huffed. "I see... Yes, you are right. Certain stories have only been passed down among our family. If this girl can answer my questions, then your claims will hold more credibility."

Raid nodded. "I hope that with this, you can at least trust our intentions. Of course, I understand that you will remain wary of us—we are outsiders, after all."

"No, I am not wary. You are all strong enough to reach this place, yet you still offer us respect and courtesy." She smiled gently before turning to Millis. "Now then, I would like you to answer a few questions. Although, in the event that you *are* our ancestor, I'm afraid this may come across as rude."

Millis gulped. "N-Not at all! Please, go ahead!"

Crusche slowly nodded, her gentle gaze turning sharp and serious. "When Millis Lambut first wet her bed, how did she try to hide it?"

The girl instantly fell to her knees. "Aaagh... I thought I was going to answer some questions, not undergo torturous

interrogation...!”

“All kids wet their bed at some point. Just go ahead and answer,” Raid said, shrugging.

“You don’t understand! I’ve locked this memory away deep into my brain because it’s too embarrassing to even look back on! How am I supposed to answer?!”

“Either overcome your shame, or they’ll think you’re a fake and we’re all doomed.”

“Okay, okay, fine! I get it—I’ll answer!” Millis gritted her teeth before painstakingly opening her mouth. “It happened right after we finished shearing the sheep, so I draped my comforter over one and told my mother...that it had grown a new coat! I’d said it so proudly too!”

“That is so stupid,” said Raid. “But it’s creative, I’ll give you that.”

Eluria smiled. “I quite like it, actually.”

“By the way, after that, my mother said, ‘Think of the poor sheep that had to wear your pee-stained comforter!’ and gave me a knuckle sandwich... Life is so unfair...”

“*That’s* what she got mad about? She really is your mother,” Wisel mused.

“A very Lambutesque personality,” Eluria agreed.

“What is that even supposed to mean?!” Millis cried.

Meanwhile, Crusche looked between them and quietly nodded. “Very well. Next question: Where did you hide your treasure?”

“Er... In a box, which I buried in the woods nearby.”

“Correct. You drew a map to this spot, then hid it in a stuffed toy, yes?”

“And then I forgot and washed the stuffed toy, so the map got drenched...!”

Crusche asked, and Millis answered. After a few more exchanges of past anecdotes, Crusche nodded with a gentle smile on her face. “This next question will be my last,” she muttered as she met Millis’s gaze. “How many ‘precious neighbors’ did you have in the past?”

Millis’s eyebrows shot up before she somberly hung her head. From her reaction alone, those “neighbors” must have been dearly precious to her indeed—so much so that even here in a different

world, she still recognized them by heart. No matter how long had passed...or how different they now looked.

"Thirty-six," Millis quietly answered as she lifted her head. "That's the number of rithmoles...who protected this land."

As if responding to Millis's words, a cry sounded in the distance—then another and another, until the voices overlapped into a resounding ensemble of wild noises. The Calamities, the dragon-headed giants, were all roaring toward Paradise.

Crusche listened to their roars and smiled. "Our ancestor, Millis Lambut, called the creatures of this land her friends—the cows, the sheep, and even the rithmoles up in the mountains. It mattered not that they were manabeasts; to her, they were precious neighbors who protected these people and this land. She treated them like she would a human and even called them by their names."

Millis hung her head. "And eventually, they called my name in return."

Back in the underground tunnel, one of the giants had called Millis's name. She herself didn't know if she'd felt it instinctively or if their mana felt familiar to her—either way, she'd realized at that moment that her precious neighbors were still protecting this land to this day.

"A thousand years ago, Millis Lambut formed a contract with the Demon Lord," Crusche explained. "Millis Lambut's lineage would become the Keepers of Paradise, designating Norberg as the one and only land permitted to live in the cleansed world."

"That must be when...the rithmoles decided to help me, right?"

Crusche nodded. "Because of their friendship with Millis Lambut and their attachment to the people of Norberg, the rithmoles beseeched the Demon Lord for bodies that could survive through the cleansing of the world...so they could become the guardians of Paradise."

"Those fellas never change..." Millis's lips curled into a bittersweet smile. "They always popped out of the ground the moment they sensed any of us were in trouble."

For her, these memories were still fresh in her mind; in their world, it had hardly been a year since she'd left her hometown to

study in the capital. Despite that, the thought of her precious neighbors and the millennium they'd spent protecting this land, even at the cost of transforming into monsters themselves, left a heartache of longing in her chest.

"Truth be told, I only came here because I wanted to help Raid and Lady Eluria as their friend. The whole end-of-the-world crisis going on here, well... Deep inside, I've probably been thinking that it's none of my business." With a steely gaze, Millis lifted her head and turned to the dragon-headed giants in the distance. "But now, I want to help the rithmoles too. So please, there must be something I can do for them—"

"Nothing. Probably."

"Look, I know I'm not all that strong, but it's the thought that— Wait." Millis blinked and whipped her head around at the sudden voice.

Right there on the ground behind her...was a giant mole. It sniffed at the air, its nose twitching as it cocked its head. *"Hello. We back!"*

"Oh my," said Crusche. "Are you done with your work already, Persimo?"

"Yes, done. No one else around."

Following the first one, two more rithmoles popped their heads out of the ground.

"Me also! Find no one."

"Everywhere, clear!"

Crusche smiled. "Thank you, everyone. We've set some fruits over there—go and have your fill."

"Hooray! Fruits!" cheered all three rithmoles as they bobbed their heads.

"Hang on a second! The serious mood I just built up was shattered in an instant!" Millis snapped, smashing her fist on the ground. "Didn't you say their appearances had changed?!"

"Indeed I did," said Crusche. "But they eventually got lonely, so they made a spell that allowed them to manifest their consciousness in their previous form so that they could come by and chat with us."

"We made spell!"

"Not talking, lonely..."

Millis's jaw dropped. "To think that...the village isn't the only thing that's evolved all these years!"

Eluria hummed. "Manabeasts live semipermanent lives so long as they can constantly intake mana. Those with enough intelligence like the Guardian Dragons can even use magic, although I've never heard of them putting together such a complex spell..."

"Eh heh. Thank you!"

"Girl praise us! We happy!"

Millis clenched her fist in frustration. "I can't believe these simpleminded dolts are better at magic than me...!"

The rithmoles, however, only responded by pleasantly swaying to and fro.

"Millis, feel different?"

"Me think too. Change a little."

"Maybe, she leave home. Find boyfriend?"

"Is handsome? Maybe rich?"

"Why are you all talking like nosy relatives at a family reunion?!" Millis snapped.

"They must have picked up a thing or two over the past millennium they've lived." A gentle smile formed on Crusche's lips. "I no longer doubt your identity. The fact that they willingly appeared before you is better proof than anything. With that settled, I would like to have a more in-depth discussion with you..." She trailed off as the corners of her eyes crinkled with a pleasant smile, the creases stretching around her cheeks. "But our first order of business...is to hold a welcome feast for our first guests in ages!"

◆

After that, their group was officially welcomed into Paradise. All five hundred residents gathered to celebrate, giddy from seeing the first outsiders in a thousand years. Needless to say, the torrent of questions was relentless; as a result, the girls later found themselves soaking in the hot spring while gazing exhaustedly at the night sky.

"Finally free..." they mumbled in unison the moment they got in.

“I mean, I don’t blame them,” Alma muttered. “I’d be full of questions too if I lived in isolation for a millennium... At least the chief kept the part about us being from another world a secret, otherwise we’d have been in for a whole lot more...”

Millis sighed. “After all this time, the people of Norberg are still hillbillies at their core... I am both terribly sad and incredibly proud...”

“I’m sorry for leaving everything to you two,” Eluria said meekly. She’d certainly come a long way from the start of her student life, but remaining steadfast in the face of such a huge crowd and their barrage of questions was still too tall a task for her, so it had been entirely up to Alma and Millis to deal with the villagers.

In the meantime, Raid had gone to discuss things with Crusche. Wisel tagged along to record their conversation to help fill the others in later on. Eluria, on the other hand, had gone around Paradise to study the magic left behind by the Demon Lord.

“I had a very productive walk. Thank you, Norn.” Eluria smiled and patted the girl’s head.

Norn beamed. “Not at all! I’m glad to have been of help, Lady Eluria!”

Unlike the villagers, Norn had been given the full explanation. Although she was still too young to comprehend everything, she at least understood that Eluria was the Demon Lord she’d learned about in history—not the heinous villain the rest of the world viewed her as, but the friend of their First Keeper Millis Lambut, as well as the creator of Paradise. So naturally, Norn was absolutely smitten with Eluria—she’d even perched atop her lap.

“Lady Eluria, what about tomorrow? Where are we going next? I could tell you about the lake’s water purifier or our soil preservation mechanism, and other stuff too!”

“Great. Then let’s go on another walk tomorrow.”

“Yaaay! I have lots more places to show you!”

Norn had accompanied Eluria on her walk, telling her about the village and sharing the things she knew. She was a great help, and she was clearly proud of herself for it. As for Eluria, getting to talk about magic with Norn all day was a treat. She’d even learned

something new along the way.

"Norn is a skilled inscriber," Eluria told her companions. "It must run in the family."

"Oho, is that true? As your ancestor, I couldn't be any prouder!" Millis preened.

Norn dubiously narrowed her eyes. "Just to be sure...are you *really* our ancestor?"

"Well, I sure hope so! I don't want to deal with an identity crisis on top of everything else!"

"But you said you didn't know about our family's All-Seeing Eyes. Our ancestor would have."

This was another thing Eluria had learned from her time with Norn: Those of Lambut blood were born with special eyes that granted them photographic memory, excellent spatial and depth perception, and an intuitive understanding of all this visual information that allowed for optimized physical movement.

In hindsight, perhaps this shouldn't have come as much of a surprise. Not only could Millis inscribe mana circuits with perfect accuracy, but she could also perceive a mana device's internal structure at a glance. Another example Eluria could look back on was how swiftly Millis had acclimated to her training. Her high-level intake of visual stimulus and intuitive understanding gave Millis more room to actively think and process information, allowing for further improvement down the road.

It was an unparalleled ability that could stand out in any field. If she had gotten into technology, then she would have made for an excellent inventor; in military studies, an astute strategist; and in magic, perhaps even a Sage. In fact, had Millis Lambut stepped into the limelight in the First World, she would have undoubtedly been hailed as the reincarnation of Sage Raid Freeden. Of course, that never happened either in this world or theirs—for one simple reason.

"How would I know about that? I'm just an ordinary country girl who takes care of sheep and goats all day!" Millis huffed, indignantly puffing up her cheeks.

The Lambuts were born in the remote land of Norberg and spent their days as ordinary and leisurely cattle breeders, with very little

interaction with the outside world. Frankly speaking, it was the epitome of wasted talent.

"Besides," Millis continued, "it *seems* like some incredible ability, but isn't it kinda...boring?"

Norn pouted. "I...agree, actually."

"Right? I mean, look at Raid and Lady Eluria—their awesomeness is clear as day! Fixing magic devices, though? If you ask me, that's just part of life out here in the sticks. I always figured it was, you know...one of those skills we countryside folk just naturally picked up."

"I get that! I also want awesome and flashy magic! The kind that goes *ka-boom* and *sha-blam* and *pa-zow*!"

"You said it! You really are my descendant!" Millis grabbed Norn's hand, and the two exchanged a passionate handshake with identically sparkling gazes. There was no better proof of their blood relation than this.

Most likely, this personality of hers was another reason Millis's talent had remained hidden for so long. It was rather unusual to see someone end up on a path completely separate from their talent, but then again, Millis was always full of surprises.

Alma turned to Eluria and asked, "So, how were the results of your walk?"

"Mm... The magic in Paradise is very diverse, but it's all simple enough that I can recreate them even at my current level."

Paradise was fitted with a wide variety of magic spells, from the spatial expansion they'd observed upon entry to all forms of nature regulation: climate, soil quality, and ecosystem, to name a few—all things that needed to be regulated in order to ensure that the residents could survive under total isolation. Impressively, all of these spells functioned independently while folded into a single box called "Paradise."

"But the more I studied the spells...the more I truly felt that they were made by me."

Eluria had already made something similar to this Paradise in their world—the World Tree, too, was fitted with numerous independent spells in a synergistic arrangement. The two may have

looked different on the outside, but they both had Eluria's signature style written all over them.

"Not to mention, the scenery is very familiar to me."

"What? Do you mean you've seen it before?" Alma asked.

"Mm-hmm. It's all very similar to my old elven settlement." Eluria looked up at the twinkling stars as her gaze grew distant, recalling a past long gone. "The forest we lived in, the mountains nearby, the river flowing between them, and the human settlement in the distance... It's all very nostalgic."

Eluria pursed her lips and hung her head as she recalled those fading memories of her childhood, those sweet and simple days when she was no more than an innocent child. The Demon Lord must have spent her childhood differently under Altane's rule, but the feelings she carried for her hometown likely weren't much different from Eluria's. With all that in mind, Eluria felt like she finally understood how the Demon Lord had felt as she'd created this Paradise.

"I'm sure...I just didn't want to give up."

Her innocent childhood dream had been to realize a world where people lived happily thanks to magic. When humanity trampled all over her wish and forged along a wretched path, the Demon Lord had decided to lead the world to ruin with her own magic. Even so, she couldn't simply abandon her heart's deepest desires.

"Most of the spells around here...are solutions to problems I'd pondered on as a child," Eluria muttered. "Why must we plow the fields? Why do bugs fly around trees and flowers? Where does the water from the well come from? I learned the answers...and sought to simplify them with magic."

Magic had been born from such innocent little questions and the purehearted desire of a child to make life simpler for her brethren. As a small and powerless child, Eluria had watched the adults sweat and struggle in her place. She had also watched her mother care for her and the house in place of her frequently absent father. This burden had built a wall between her and her mother—and so, her lonely little mind had conjured up a plan: If she could just make life easier for her mother, then maybe her mother would finally turn her

way and show her some love. And perhaps, if all things went well, she could help alleviate the wall between elves and humans as well. The innocent little child back then had placed her hopes in such a future.

And so, Eluria Caldwin invented magic—as a way to create water on the spot instead of trekking all the way to the river; to produce fertile soil near the village instead of foraging for fruits and seeds out in the forest; to create traps and arrowheads on the spot instead of preparing them before hunting; to create fire from nothing instead of gathering firewood and flint. She had believed, with all her heart, that magic would make everyone's lives much better.

"From what I've seen today, despite the complex magical aggregation, each individual spell is clearly compartmentalized and simplified...so that anyone who's even just dabbled in magic can easily manage them."

It was the very essence of magic as Eluria had envisioned it—a means for anyone and everyone to lead peaceful and happy lives. Magic had been misused in the First World, but the Demon Lord must have believed that she could trust Millis Lambut and the people of Norberg with it—and so, she handed them this tiny garden filled to the brim with her dreams. Eluria could sense her past self's sincerest wishes scattered all over this land.

"If she knew that Paradise was still standing today...I'm sure she would be really happy."

Some humans in this world understood her dream and passed it down through generations. Surely, it wouldn't be enough to quell the anger and hatred within her, but at the very least, she would have known that she was not foolish to have dreamed of what she had.

"I'm starting to feel like moving in once everything's over."

"What?!" Millis exclaimed. "Lady Eluria...living in the boonies?! I can't even begin to imagine!"

"Why not? As a former elf, I enjoy living amid nature. Not to mention it's perfect for indulging in my hobbies—reading books, napping under a tree, and enjoying a nice cup of warm milk tea..."

"No way! Countryside life is harder than you think! Between plowing the fields and taking care of the livestock, you'd hardly have

any time to indulge yourself! I'm telling you, it's hard out here!"

"You say that as we stand in the very land where all those problems have been solved with magic," Eluria pointed out.

"Darn it, you're right! My own hometown is proving me wrong!"

Norn hummed. "I *have* heard that life used to be hard long ago, when people couldn't use magic for work. We gave it a try too, as a neat little enriching experience, but I honestly can't imagine doing it every day."

"Could you *not* treat my daily life like some weekend self-improvement workshop?! What will you country folk have left without your grit and hard work?!"

"You really *are* our ancestor," Norn said flatly. "You're so behind the times."

"Well, sorry for coming from a thousand years ago! Besides, am I wrong? Look at you and your squishy little cheeks!" Millis snapped, taking her frustrations out on the poor girl's cheeks.

"But my squishy cheeks haf nufing to do wif the ewa...!" Norn whined.

Eluria and Alma watched the two with a mix of fondness and exasperation. Still, Millis was just being Millis, so they were about to divert their attention elsewhere—when Norn suddenly pulled back and raised her hand.

"I just remembered—I have a question for you, dear ancestor!"

"Ask away, dear descendant!"

"I'd like to know about your husband!"

Millis blinked. "My...husband?"

"Oh, she's got a point," Alma said. "You have descendants, so you must've had a spouse, right?"

"Hold your horses, Ms. Alma. I might have also just given up like you, you know?"

"Are you asking for this?" Alma raised her fist.

"But," Eluria cut in, "Norn is very similar to you. I feel like she's a direct descendant." Naturally, she could spot some differences between them, but that was natural considering an entire millennium had passed. Even then, Millis and Norn were both blue-eyed blondes. They *had* to be directly related. "Millis, do you have

siblings?”

“Well, no... But in the boonies, it’s not rare for couples to experience a sudden burst of passionate love in their later years, so maybe these Lambuts are my future sibling’s descendants...?”

Norn shook her head. “No, that cannot be. Your wedding ceremony was recorded in our history books. We are undoubtedly your direct descendants.”

“Not even my love life was spared from your scrutiny...! What *don’t* you guys keep in your records?!”

Alma cocked her head. “Huh? Then why not check those records for info on her spouse?”

“Hmm, well...” Norn scratched her cheek. “The books record what kind of person he was, but he used a pseudonym. You see, he moved here from the capital to retire in seclusion.”

“So you’re telling me my husband was some suspicious fellow?!”

“Well, he probably wasn’t a bad person. After moving in, he contributed a lot to Paradise by maintaining the machines and magic devices, among other things.” Norn shrugged. “So, I was hoping to ask you if anyone came to mind.”

“Hmm...” Eluria creased her brow and folded her arms. “What kind of person was he?”

“Er... It was said that he used to develop machines and magic devices in the capital.”

“So he made machines and magic devices,” Eluria muttered.

“Apparently, he came from quite the renowned family. After hitting a wall and feeling the limit of his abilities, he abandoned his right of succession and came to our village.”

“He came from a renowned family...but felt the limits of his abilities.”

“After that, Millis Lambut met the Demon Lord and established Paradise. However, she was faced with many problems from the outset, such as how to manage and maintain the place and keep it running far into the future. Just as she was struggling, this person offered to share his knowledge and skills. Our ancestor was so moved, she proposed to him on the spot.”

“That’s so stupid and impulsive,” Millis said. “Exactly the type of

thing I'd do!"

"By the way," Norn continued, "his fake name was Lesi W. Atel."

Millis's eyes swirled in growing confusion. "A completely unfamiliar name... As if I wasn't already confused enough!"

Off to the side, however, Alma poked Eluria's back and whispered, "You know, I happen to know a word spelled 'atel.'"

"Me too," Eluria replied. "I figured you'd be familiar."

"It's from the Altanian language, isn't it? I used to refer to it as an ancient language because I didn't know about Altane yet... Anyway, that's the language Ryatt's journal was written in. A simple language chart was passed down along with it."

"Mm-hmm. Our continental language originated from Altanian before branching off to the west."

"Yeah. But that didn't happen here, since Altane took over the world."

"Generally, yes, although I'm sure some western language remains in surnames or location names."

"So," Alma continued, "according to Ryatt's journal, 'atel vexillum' means 'black flag.'"

"If I recall correctly, 'atel' specifically means 'faded black.' Altane has several words for 'black.' The glossy kind is 'niger,' by the way. Raid said that his army was full of volunteer soldiers, so they were mockingly called 'atel' by the regular soldiers of the empire."

"Wow, Eluria. Seems you become talkative when it's about magic *and* His Excellency."

Eluria pouted. "Back to the topic at hand."

"Okay, okay... Ah, by the way, Vegalta's language was also different in the past, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. The language used in Raid and my original era is now called Old Vegaltan. After Vegalta united the continent, it developed into a common language."

"So, what's 'black' in Old Vegaltan?"

"Noir."

"And white?"

"I can't say," Eluria said with a small, creeping smile. "And, well, I also can't tell you...to try spelling the rest of his name backward."

“Aha. I see, I see...”

“Mm-hmm. I really can’t say. After all, it’s more fun this way.” Eluria bobbed her head, eyes sparkling. She felt like she finally understood why Millis always got excited when Eluria sought her out for advice on Raid. This was actually really fun.



Meanwhile, Millis was still cradling her head in confusion. “Uhhh, let’s see... Either we haven’t met yet, or I didn’t meet him because history played out differently in our world...”

“I refuse to accept that,” Norn said bluntly.

“What do you mean?! It’s not like I can control what actually happened!”

“But the history books said you two were a wonderful, close couple till old age! He’d even told you his real name, but you apparently wrote, ‘It’s our little secret,’ in your diary! Clearly, you were head over heels for him!”

“Lady Eluria! Please help me jump back in time and punch myself!” Millis cried.

“‘Our little secret’... Heh. I like that.” Eluria smiled.

“Well, Millis, color me impressed. Didn’t know you had it in you,” Alma teased.

“Aaargh! Curse you, Lesi W. Atel, and your mysterious ways of rewiring my brain!!!” Millis screamed, grabbing her hair in frustration.

“I wonder who he could be,” Eluria and Alma drawled out in complete monotone despite the smiles curling on their faces.

In the end, Millis never figured out the identity of her mysterious future husband, and they certainly wouldn’t tell her. After all, in an entirely new world with such a vastly different history, the two of them had managed to find one another once again. Surely, even without such boorish intervention...they would find themselves drawn to one another all the same.

◇

After enjoying a warm welcome from the residents of Paradise, Raid and Wisel were led by Crusche to the basement of the Lambut house.

“Wow,” Wisel marveled. “It’s like an entirely different world down here...”

Beneath the sprawling nature and abundant greenery on the surface lay a world of artificial complexities. The basement was

completely covered in metal plates engraved with intricate mana circuits, installed with reinforcement and protection that prevented the chamber from deteriorating. This space alone was plenty of proof that the First World was far more advanced than their own.

"This chamber is the work of our First Keeper," Crusche began. "It was conceptualized by her spouse, Lesi W. Atel, while she inscribed all the circuits. It is used to manage and maintain Paradise, and it also serves as a hub for all the information future generations will need to run the place."

"I see... So she was able to comprehend the Demon Lord's magic with the Lambut family's All-Seeing Eyes but lacked the ability to replicate it—and that was where her spouse came in to fill the gaps."

Crusche nodded. "Lesi had retired after abandoning his family name, but he was still a very skilled technician."

"I can tell." A small smile formed on Wisel's lips as he ran his fingers along the walls. "There's nothing novel about his work, but it's been crafted diligently with full respect for the basics. It gets the job done *and* it's easy to maintain—it's clearly been made with its users in mind. I've never met this person...but as an artificer, I feel like I could definitely take a page from his book."

Raid watched the boy with a furtive smirk. It seemed like this chamber had motivated him. "Wisel, could you study the machines and devices around here? Just pick up whatever you can—Ms. Crusche and I will have a little discussion in the meantime."

"Roger that. These look simple enough, so it shouldn't take me too long."

Raid watched as Wisel left before taking his seat and facing Crusche. "Now then," he began. "Thank you very much for finding us a private space for this discussion."

"Not at all," replied the elderly woman. "Also, you may speak freely with me. We're the only ones here, and besides, I'm more accustomed to plain speech anyway. I wouldn't want any discomfort —on your end or mine—to impair our discussion."

"Ah, well, if you insist...I guess I'll talk comfortably, then." Raid let out a quiet huff before meeting Crusche's gaze once more. "I'll get straight to the point. I'm here to negotiate with you, Crusche

Lambut, village chief of Paradise."

"Hmm... Negotiate what, if I may ask?"

"We want to use Paradise to fulfill our objective in this world."

Crusche's eyebrows knit together at his blunt statement. "And that objective of yours is...?"

"To clear the mana pollution ravaging the land and to return this world to a safe and habitable state."

"I see... Unfortunately, I cannot accept your demand."

Raid shrugged. "Yeah, I figured."

"Oh my..." The creases between Crusche's brows smoothed out. "Looks can be deceiving, I suppose."

"For sure. I mean, I'm almost ninety on the inside. I've seen and learned many things throughout my life, so rest assured, I can piece together the reason for your rejection."

Paradise was an invaluable location in the First World. It was the only place free of the Demon Lord's pollution, as well as her Calamities and their Offspring. Anybody would want to move in here to survive. But unfortunately, this place wasn't as pragmatic as it seemed.

"Firstly, there's a limit to how much you can expand your village's space with magic. That's why you've maintained a population of around five hundred over the past millennium."

Paradise was safe from external threats and had everything its residents ever needed to live. Had nature run its course, its population would have exponentially increased over time—and yet they had remained at a humble five hundred people, almost as if they were intentionally maintaining the suitable population that Paradise was capable of supporting.

"This is just a guess, but the birth rate is also managed with magic, isn't it?"

Crusche narrowed her eyes. "What makes you say that?"

"Because it'd normally be unthinkable for humans to survive in isolation for a thousand years," he answered. "You see, I've surveyed my fair share of remote islands. All the inbreeding going on in those places severely decreases the birth rates of healthy children, and their lack of immunity cuts down their lifespan too. I've seen an

island where the oldest person was in their thirties."

Raid had visited remote islands under the pretense of conducting a survey and found that not only were they so lacking in immunity that the lightest cold could kill, but most tribes had even made a practice of kidnapping any outsiders who'd washed ashore and forcing them into helping dilute their tribe's weak bloodline. Even then, the longest surviving tribes were centuries old at best.

Meanwhile, Paradise had been isolated for an entire millennium yet housed elderly people like Crusche herself, meaning there must have been *something* that made it work differently from the rest—and if the residents were truly just ordinary cattle breeders, then that "something" could only have been magic.

"For as long as you Lambuts continue to oversee this land, the people of Paradise can quite literally exist forever. You have no incentive to accept outsiders. In fact, interacting with the outside world could birth discord and introduce issues to your system here. It only makes sense for you to turn my offer down."

"It is as you say. We are a people who were spared by the Demon Lord, the friend of our First Keeper. Alas, the same cannot be said for the humans outside. Getting involved with them could negatively impact our land—risk our very existence, at worst—and so we, as a village, have agreed to avoid interacting with the outside world."

Raid had thought that would be the case. His suspicions had been brewing ever since he'd first heard about Paradise from Dian, when he'd told them that Altane knew very little about Paradise because of the inability to engage in proper two-way communication. The lack of response from Paradise could have been due to its unique isolation mechanisms preventing them from receiving Altane's messages...or it could have been that Paradise was *intentionally* avoiding holding talks with them.

"I've heard that Altane had actually planned an invasion in the early years of Paradise's formation," said Crusche.

"Not that it could have ever pushed through, 'cause of all the Calamities and Offspring prowling outside," Raid replied. "In any case, you ignored their messages to avoid stirring up conflict, but

instead of just shutting them out completely, you sent out transmissions anyway to show that Paradise still stands as a way to give them hope. Not bad at all."

The Lambut family had persistently ignored Altane's messages not out of a desire to monopolize this safe haven, but because they didn't wish to become the source of further conflict and chaos for the survivors outside. Had any Lambuts harbored impure ambitions, they would have already had everything they needed to dominate Altane at the negotiation table—but that had never happened. The Demon Lord had granted them countless blessings for their ancestor's kindness, and it was simply in the nature of the Lambuts and the villagers of Paradise to want to repay the trust she had placed in them.

Alas, nothing could last forever.

Raid quietly sighed. "So, will Paradise stand by its hands-off approach?"

"That is our intention, yes... As friends of Demon Lord Eluria Caldwin, it is our duty to pass down her ideals and to build a utopia once this world has been purified."

"That won't be easy, though... But I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that?"

Crusche immediately pursed her lips. Her lack of response was, in itself, telling.

Now certain of his theory, Raid narrowed his eyes and whispered, "Paradise will perish along with the rest of humanity, won't it?"

Disillusioned by mankind, the Demon Lord had chosen to return the world to a blank slate upon which the people of Paradise would rebuild society as she had originally envisioned it. In essence, the Demon Lord had entrusted the world to them.

"The fall of humanity would be marked by the complete takeover of polluted mana. In a world like that, there's no way anybody could survive, much less build the world anew. But it's hard to believe that the genius who invented magic and drove the world to ruin hadn't thought that far ahead."

Thus, Raid worked under the assumption that she *had* looked that far and planned everything accordingly.

"We call it polluted mana, but it's essentially born from the Demon Lord. If she can manipulate it as she pleases, then it stands to reason that she can make it disappear as well—by eliminating its *source*."

This reason was what had led the humans of the First World to travel to the past to target Eluria's life, although their plan had ultimately ended in failure. In any case, the point still stood that the Demon Lord was capable of dealing with all the mana pollution in the world.

"Most likely, she set up some sort of spell that would activate once all humans outside of Paradise are gone. That spell would gather all the polluted mana in the world and hurl it at the source, triggering an offsetting effect that would clear everything from the world."

With the exception of Paradise, upon which she'd sowed the seeds of her dreams, the Demon Lord had lost all hope in humanity and its future. Time and time again, she'd watched as humans repeated history—the very same history that had caused her despair. She was hurt, and she was afraid; she never wanted to experience that ever again. Destroying humanity was her punishment for the fools who trampled over her dreams, as well as her means of taking responsibility for creating magic. But if she truly didn't want to taste the same despair ever again, then these were mere preludes to her *real* goal.

"She decided...to end her own life with magic," Raid quietly muttered. "A truly fitting end for the 'Demon Lord.'"

Her magic would have changed the world and purged humanity. The blood of all life would be on her hands, the weight of her sins heavy on her back. Carrying it all, she would finally wield her magic one last time to erase the ultimate evil from the world—her grand and somber finale as the birth mother of magic.

"Put bluntly, it's the ultimate worldwide suicide plan. Her magic changed the world for the worse and hurt many people, so she'd take responsibility till the very end before finally offing herself. That's just how much magic means to her...and how heavy the responsibility she holds as its creator." Whether it was right or wrong

wasn't the point. Raid just knew that this was how Eluria Caldwin would think.

He sighed and shook his head. "Anyway, as I was saying: Paradise will perish once everything ends. You may be maintaining the place with ambient mana, but a few things like the expanded space are boons of the Demon Lord's mana. Things won't be the same after she's gone." And with that change, Paradise as it was now would start to come apart at the seams. "The people here are able to survive thanks to Paradise's systems. Even without the rest of humanity and the mana pollution in the equation, there's no guarantee they can survive in the outside world."

In Paradise, everything was optimized for human life, from the self-sufficiency to the regulated birth rate and population. Could people who were born and raised in such an insulated, sheltered environment survive outside? The answer was a resounding *no*. So many things could go wrong for them in the outside world—and when that happened, Paradise would no longer be standing to welcome them back under its wing. This situation would only worsen in time, snowballing into an irredeemable conundrum by the time the rest of humanity was completely purged.

Unfortunately, it seemed problems were already brewing internally.

"When we first met Norn, she mentioned something about a 'naughty little runaway,'" Raid recalled. "It seems like someone was trying to escape Paradise."

Crusche sighed. "I will not deny that. Such people have appeared every now and then—people who are dissatisfied by our unchanging life, suspicious of our isolation, or simply curious about the outside world."

"And that's one of the many things your family oversees, is it?"

"Correct. That is why only we Lambuts are permitted to step outside—to bring back the runaways...or, god forbid we don't make it in time, to confirm their death. In the case of the latter, we proceed with measures to fill in the space they leave behind."

"I see... So the giants were there as Norn's bodyguards, huh?"

"Yes. Only the rithmoles never attack us. The same cannot be

said for the other beasts around Paradise."

By "beasts," Crusche was probably referring to the Offspring outside. It seemed the giants not only protected Paradise from outside threats but also kept the other Calamities and Offspring at bay in the case of a potential runaway. "Then I want your opinion not as a Keeper of Paradise, but as the leader of your village: Tell me, do you think you and your descendants can survive as you are now?"

Crusche grimly pursed her lips. She'd said so herself—runaways were a regular occurrence, if still somewhat rare. As things were now, it wasn't much of an impediment to Paradise's survival, but once that frequency rose and the number of runaways breached half of their population, then Paradise could very well collapse in on itself before humanity could even perish outside.

However, even so, they were left with no choice.

"I'm afraid my answer matters not... Our promise with the Demon Lord gave us everything we have, so all we can do is strive to keep it. This land of Paradise is our number one priority, for we are utterly powerless without it."

They were no more than ordinary humans who had been granted the right to reside in Paradise. Should they abandon this land, all that was waiting for them was to be trampled and subjugated by the humans outside, if not branded as traitors for staying cooped up in safety all these years. Their only other option, however, was to abide by their ancient oath as the shadow of ruin slowly crawled toward them from the horizon.

Paradise was a fantastical utopia, a marvelous safe haven—a fleeting garden walled on all sides with no exit in sight.

"With all that in mind, I have a proposal for you."

Crusche narrowed her eyes. "And what would that be?"

Raid smiled. "Relinquish Paradise to us."

Silence reigned over the space around them before Crusche finally spoke. "Do you expect me to agree to that?"

"Nope. Even setting aside your promise with the Demon Lord, this place is still your home and your precious ancestral land. I'm not asking you to hand it over just like that."

"In other words...you have something to offer in exchange."

"Exactly," Raid said, nodding. "Keep with the status quo and you'll be consigning your people to ruin in the distant future. Seek change now and all that's waiting for you is conflict and discord with the outside world. Neither sound very appealing. So, what we're offering you is *information* and *status* that will provide you as much leverage outside as Paradise would."

"Status, you say...?"

"Yep. You see, our goal is to save the world, so we're gonna end up with some land and status along the way—your family can have it all."

"Er... May I ask what exactly you're referring to?"

"The nation of Altane and the emperor's throne."

Crusche blinked. "Pardon...?"

"Oh, you see, there's this human country called Altane in the outside world..."

"I don't need an explanation for that," Crusche deadpanned.

Raid chuckled. "Okay. Basically, Altane's kind of standing in our way of saving the world, so we need to crush it before we can move on with our plan. That said, it's a bit of a waste, isn't it? I mean, it *is* an entire country. So why not just swap out the imperial family for you Lambuts?"

"You...aren't teasing this old woman, are you?"

"Of course not. You're the descendants of the one and only human to be acknowledged by the Demon Lord. If not you, then who else would be worthy of governing the new empire?"

Negotiations aside, those were his true feelings. Once upon a time, Demon Lord Eluria Caldwin had dreamed of a happy world, and Millis Lambut had been the friend she deemed worthy of entrusting with this dream. So, who was Raid to doubt her judgment? He wanted to prove that her dream was not wrong—that magic had simply ended up in the wrong hands, but Eluria Caldwin's dream in and of itself was not futile.

"In actuality, where we come from, magic is being used properly. It's probably been misused here and there, but the Second World has undoubtedly managed to achieve the Demon Lord's dream."

"But..." Crusche frowned. "The people of this world have no reason to follow us if we relinquish Paradise. Even here, the villagers only accept us as their chief because of our special eyes and all the boons we received from the Demon Lord."

The Lambut family was only significant within the context of Paradise. The moment they let go of this place, nobody would have reason to abide by their rule—and a ruler with no authority over their people was bound for ruin and overthrow. All the more for the Lambuts, as they were no more than ordinary humans.

Raid and Eluria could step in to help, but they would be no better than crutches—far from a lasting solution. Brute force could, at most, serve as a deterrent against rebellion, but only for as long as Raid and Eluria were alive. And since they were both humans, that certainly wouldn't be for a very long time, meaning the end result wouldn't change. Hence, they needed to present the Lambut family with a new form of leverage to replace Paradise.

"If you accept our conditions," Raid continued, "we'll offer your family core information on the World Tree."

"The...World Tree?"

"A conglomeration of spells made to eliminate and purify polluted mana," Raid supplied. "Apparently, even if we solve the mana pollution of this world, the mana veins will still need to be regularly maintained and revitalized, or else they'll just revert back. That's where the World Tree comes in—and we're going to need people to watch over it."

"Ah..." Crusche nodded. "So, you wish to make us Keepers of the World Tree?"

"Right. The World Tree is a complex network of intricate spells. Normally, only its creator could oversee it, but you Lambuts—with your All-Seeing Eyes—are an exception. As long as we offer you the intel that you need, you should be able to manage it."

Continuous management and maintenance of the World Tree was imperative to the survival of this scarred world. However, the creator of the Tree was an unparalleled genius known in this world as the Demon Lord and in their world as the Sage. Nobody could match the breadth of her magical knowledge or the extent of her skill. Hence,

their original plan had been to divide the World Tree's management into several fields and categories, the most important of which—involving the Tree's core—would be passed down to Millis Lambut's descendants. This method would secure the World Tree's stability for the world and solid status for the people of Paradise.

However, things changed with the Lambut family's All-Seeing Eyes in the picture. With that ability, the Lambuts could single-handedly fulfill the task of protecting the World Tree and consequently become irreplaceable to the new world.

"In the Second World, the eastern continent of Legnare is ruled by their Imperial Lord, the very symbol of their nation. However, the country itself is run not under a monarchy but through a parliament due to the different religions and customs in each region... I'm thinking you Lambuts can utilize a similar system."

People sought justification for their leaders to stand in power, whether it be a special ability, a military accomplishment, or a precious pedigree. In Mifuru's case, multiple things worked in her favor: Legnare's collective reverence toward beastdwellers for their excellent sorcery and status as long-lived divine emissaries, and her personal achievement of bringing the God of Victory to their land. In the case of the Lambut family, their background as natives of Paradise and their unique ability would serve them well—far more than raw power, in fact.

"Overwhelming strength like mine or Eluria's can complicate things. For example, using strength and power as leverage in this case could sow discord among the people. Fortunately, an ability like your family's is just right for the job."

A good founder did not guarantee good descendants—Altane was the prime example of this. The great empire traced its humble beginnings to an era of constant tussles and skirmishes among the small nations occupying the eastern region. Its founders had sought to quell the strife by bringing the territories together into one large country. But from there, technology drifted to their land from the eastern continent, and with much research and development, Altane had attained military power far surpassing its neighbors. Its founding ideals were buried beneath its growing might, ultimately twisting

and warping into its very antithesis: an empire of conquest and war.

In any case, regardless of the ruler's disposition, people naturally feared overwhelming power. When afraid, people avoided speaking out; and when people didn't speak out, the nation transformed into a dictatorship. However, there was little need for worry in this regard when the ruler's leverage over their people was not overwhelming strength but simply a *valuable role*.

"They need you to keep the world running, but they can always keep you in check in the event that you start harboring ill intent. Or, more bluntly put, they'll treat you courteously for the most part but will be ready to give you a whack over the head the moment you get carried away."

"And that is why you deem our family the most suitable to lead the new country?"

"Yep. Rest assured, we've got your back until you can stand on your own feet. Resources for learning politics and governance, assistance and protection until systems are established, and preliminary plans for development and reform—it's all ready. Nothing I've said today was offered to you on a whim."

"Is that so? I suppose it's a wonderful plan, if we can simply look past the fact that we must abandon our hometown, delve into political conflict and power struggles, and never again live life as we know it."

Raid huffed. "Yeah... Abandoning Paradise and stepping into the new world means life will never be the same for you. And that's why this is an *offer* and nothing more—you know, just one more option to your list." Making this choice was tantamount to abandoning the peaceful days they'd known all their life and consigning their descendants to bear the weight of a nation on their shoulders. It was a heavy decision that needed equal resolve to make. "You don't need to answer me right away. The enemy probably doesn't even know that we're here in Paradise. We've got a plan B ready, so we just need some time for preparations and—"

"Unnecessary," Crusche interjected, her lips curling into a smile. "You've no need to wait. You see, as you grow old amid such unchanging scenery, your thoughts tend to wander. Are we truly

fulfilling our promise with the Demon Lord? Are we not just living in indulgence? Is this how we must live as people? These questions festered in our minds, leading to the emergence of the aforementioned runaways."

Sorrow glimmered in Crusche's blue eyes, reflecting her memories of witnessing her neighbors meet their ends beyond the borders of Paradise. As a Keeper herself, she must have observed the growing doubts among the residents. Powerless to quell their doubts or even keep them safe, Crusche herself had come to question the meaning behind their endless days.

"Long ago, the Demon Lord befriended Millis Lambut and granted us Paradise so we could survive amid this ravaged world. In that case, the Demon Lord's true wish...must have been for the Lambut lineage to survive. I believe that she would not have wanted us to reject change and cling to Paradise if it meant our ruin." Crusche lifted her face, her eyes shining with resolve and hope for her people's future. "Although I will need to hear more details on your plan, know that I am very much open to relinquishing Paradise to you. However, before that, I wish to ask you a question."

Raid shrugged. "Sure thing. No need for secrets between us at this point."

"You came here to save a world that is not yours and are even willingly relinquishing the country you will gain in the process—what for?"

"Well, Eluria's reason is clear-cut; she wants to take responsibility for her past self's actions. As for me...it's simple, really."

As they learned more about the crisis that the Demon Lord had condemned this world to, Raid had begun to wonder: What would they do if there was no other way to save this world besides Eluria Caldwin's death, as the Demon Lord had originally planned? When forced to place her life and the lives of all humans in the First World on a scale, to which side would it tilt in Eluria Caldwin's heart? Could she make the choice to abandon this world of strangers while knowing that she had caused their suffering, in one way or another?

The answer was *no*. If the kindhearted girl who'd created magic to make the world a better place was told that she had to offer up

her life to save mankind, then she would do so without an ounce of hesitation. But naturally, Raid didn't want that—nobody did.

So, jumping timelines, saving the world, crushing an empire—what was Raid doing all this for? The answer was simple:

"I just want my bride to be happy."

Something was standing in the way of their happy future, so he was taking action to crush that possibility and make a new choice available to her—that was all he was doing.

"There's no way Eluria would be able to live with herself knowing she'd abandoned an entire world to suffer, and I definitely don't want to see her looking so down every day. This world needs to be peaceful so that we can spend our days happily till we grow old and gray."

"Oh my, that's certainly a very simple reason... In that case, it seems you two will be living the leisurely countryside life in our stead."

"Sounds great, actually. Paradise would be a neat option... But anyway, we need this place to save this world, not because we're reserving it as our retirement home." Raid straightened his back. "I've been told that Paradise regularly sends out transmissions, but you must be receiving the outside world's messages as well, right?"

"Oh? How did you know?"

"How *wouldn't* I? You literally stopped me from explaining Altane earlier—which means you're aware of its existence."

Nations rose and fell with the passage of time. The people of Paradise might have known about Altane a millennium ago, but they should have had no means of knowing it still stood today. After all, it could very well have fallen and been replaced by a new country, just as it had once absorbed Vegalta. Yet Crusche had instantly interrupted his explanation, meaning they must have been gathering information from the outside somehow.

"Since you can receive transmissions," Raid continued, "I'm guessing the point of reception is fixed. Such old tech couldn't possibly transmit over the ocean to Altane...so probably to their outpost on this continent?"

Crusche sighed. "You are correct. Of course, we cannot afford to

engage in discussion with them. We simply record the information they send and then later 'respond' with an unrelated message."

"Well, yeah. Establishing a conversation could encourage them to force their way into this safe haven, after all, leading to further sacrifices."

The Calamities and Offspring around Paradise made it nigh impossible for anyone but their group to reach it. Had Paradise carelessly established communications with the outside, however, that might have spurred them on to attempt an invasion anyway, ultimately accelerating mankind's ruin. The Lambut family's active decision to avoid this outcome spoke volumes of their sharp senses and perception.

That being said, there was no longer any need for caution now that they'd decided to relinquish Paradise.

"Once we finish our discussions and get our preparations underway, I'm gonna need to use the communicator to transmit a message to Altane's outpost here on this continent."

"Understood. And your message?"

Raid looked Crusche in the eye and grinned. "We're declaring war against the Altanian empire."

Chapter Four

Why did nothing ever go his way?

The frustration had haunted him all throughout his life. Every time he closed his eyes, memories of failure after failure seemed to dance vividly on the back of his eyelids.

It was unthinkable. He was a superior being, a cut above the rest. He had obeyed his strict father's every word and done everything in his power to please him. He had chased after his father, tracing his footsteps and mimicking his every move, for he was certain that this had been the right path—that following his father would never lead him astray.

This truth was indisputable, for his father was the very embodiment of imperial glory—the sixteenth emperor of Altane, the grand empire that ruled over the entire eastern region of the central continent of Etrulia. He reigned atop the world, shining down upon the measly masses crawling far below. Any who displeased him or rebelled were mercilessly purged and beheaded. Wielding absolute power and unfettered authority, he had the very world in the palm of his hands—that was the emperor, and that was his father.

And so, that was what he himself strove to be—what he had dedicated his entire life to being. Yet, nothing ever went his way. Everything had been smooth sailing for his father, yet the moment he himself sat upon the throne seemed to signal the start of an avalanche of misfortunes—one that had yet to stop, even to this day.

"That concludes my report on the central continent, Lord Viteos."

Hands clasped atop his lap, Viteos slowly nodded. "I see... A sad state of affairs, as always."

"Indeed. The Demon Lord's threat lingers to this day. The pollution has nearly eaten away at the central continent, our proud homeland, save for the northeastern region. We are slowly expanding our territory thanks to the new Heroes, but the progress

is not much to speak of...”

Had he been alone in this room, Viteos would have been pulling his hair out by now. According to the humans of this world, Viteos Altane had been a prominent figure even in their empire’s long history, known as the emperor who annexed the most land for their nation. Two millennia ago, he expanded the empire’s territory and went on to unite the entire central continent of Etrulia under Altane’s banner.

But history as Viteos knew it in *his* world had been different. Vegalta, with its blasted new magical arts, had fended off his invasion till the very end. Worse yet, Altane’s frontline troops had later raised their arms in rebellion, merged with the Vegaltan army of magicians, and taken down the imperial capital in the blink of an eye. Viteos had managed to escape with his life, but alas, his only way out had led him to this ruined world. It seemed luck was never quite on his side.

Before that, the people of the future had contacted him saying they wanted to kill that accursed Sage, Eluria Caldwin—and kill her they had, much to Viteos’s delight. That had been the happiest moment of his life, for he was finally rid of the sole reason their invasions into Vegalta had always failed. Fifty long years on the throne, and hardly any progress had been made in Altane’s conquest, all because they had been unable to breach past Vegalta into the western region. The most he had to show for his efforts were some small nations and a few instances of internal strife.

Back then, Viteos had been ready to leap and dance in joy. He’d thought that all his problems had been solved. But this didn’t last too long—in no time at all, Altane had been felled by the rebellion.

And so, he’d wanted to ask himself again: Why did nothing ever go his way?

As if the Sage of the enemy nation hadn’t been enough of a problem, he’d had an even bigger headache in his own empire: the monster strong enough to rival the Sage. That man should have been a vassal of the empire yet had dared to scowl in the face of his emperor. The peasant of lowly birth had even used his shrewd ways to twist his imperial decrees to his advantage. Viteos could have

easily branded him a traitor for such presumptuous behavior, but the man's military achievements were irrefutable, as was his popularity among the citizens for some bizarre reason. Not to mention Viteos couldn't afford to execute him, lest their forces succumb to the Sage's overwhelming power. The most Viteos could manage had been removing the man from his post, yet the cumbersome fool who'd replaced him lost what little territory they'd gained from Vegalta, prompting Viteos to begrudgingly return that monster to his position.

If it hadn't been for those two, Viteos would have been lauded as one of the greatest emperors of all time. This world was undeniable and irrefutable proof that his failure had been no fault of his own. It was all because of his poor luck, or perhaps the fools flocking around him, or perhaps the world he'd been born into, or perhaps a combination of it all. But none of it was *his* fault. After all, what was a genius to do when everything in the world conspired to drag him down?

Now, he was finally free of those two. Here in this First World, things would surely be different. And yet...

"Any report from Hero Dian in the Second World?"

"No... We've yet to hear anything from them. It's been quite some time since their last status report, so it is highly likely that their operation failed and they have all been killed."

Viteos huffed. "It's a good thing that we gave them those self-destruct mechanisms. The loss of a Hero is a big strike to us, but at least we've minimized our losses by preventing their capture or betrayal."

"It is as you say, Lord Viteos. Their deaths will surely build us a path to Altane's glory."

Viteos had devised the plan to abandon this ruined First World and colonize the Second World, and the people of this world had been all too happy to agree. Why, the previous emperor—this man before him now—had even begged him to save them with tears of joy in his eyes. The invasion had been promptly put into motion.

However, in the early stages of the plan, their vanguard unit had sent them a disturbing report: Eluria Caldwin was alive—in a future

era, no less—and she was accompanied by a powerful, unknown man.

Viteos was no fool; it had taken him no longer than a second to realize that those two—the sources of all his problems—must have somehow come back to life. He didn't know how, but logic and reason hardly mattered in the face of the Sage's miraculous wisdom and the Hero's unfathomable strength. Viteos had learned that the hard way over fifty long years.

In any case, the realization had left concern brewing within him, but to halt the plan simply because of two risk factors would be to drag mud all over his dignity as the emperor, hence he had chosen to proceed as planned. That choice had ultimately cost them one of their Heroes, but perhaps this wasn't such a bad outcome—after all, Dian had also been showing signs of opposition much like that monster had in the past. One problem had eliminated another—that wasn't a bad outcome for Viteos in the slightest.

Of course, all would have been well had Dian actually succeeded. But even though he hadn't, it simply meant that Dian had been far more useless than Viteos had expected. All in all, none of the responsibility fell on Viteos's shoulders.

They still had some time before this world fell to ruin. Now that they had the information they needed about the Second World, it was simply a matter of sending all their forces in to get rid of the nuisances and take over their new land. Thus, their next step was to thoroughly prepare their forces, which should prove to be of little issue since there was nobody in this world to stand in his way.

"Apologies for the interruption, Your Majesty!" A soldier barged into their meeting room, pale as a sheet.

"What insolence! You dare barge in while Lord Viteos and I are still—"

"I will accept any punishment! However, this matter is urgent and of utmost importance to our nation's safety! Please, allow me to report!" The soldier took a brief moment to catch his breath before continuing with a trembling voice. "We have received a transmission from our outpost in the central continent of Etrulia... They state that they have been attacked and annihilated. The transmission cut off

immediately after that."

"What?! Preposterous!" cried the previous emperor. "One of our Heroes is stationed there! Not even a Calamity could completely annihilate it while—"

"The culprit...was not a Calamity," said the soldier, his legs shaking under him. "It was..." He momentarily pursed his lips, like he could not dare speak that name, but soon he gathered his resolve and lifted his face. "It was Demon Lord Eluria Caldwin."

A *slam* cut through the room as soon as the soldier finished speaking. The previous emperor's face was red with anger, his fist shaking atop the table. "This cannot be! She returned to the past after falling for Wallus and the past Hero's words! She should be living in the Second World right now!"

"However, according to Hero Ariel's report, the attacker was a silver-haired girl who introduced herself as the Demon Lord before slaughtering our forces with magic... Since then, we've yet to hear of her status or whereabouts, so we believe the information must be trustworthy..."

Once again, Viteos had to wonder: Why did nothing ever go his way? How had Sage Eluria Caldwin crossed over to this world? And how had she managed to make her way around the Calamity-infested central continent, locate their outpost, and launch an attack? Had he been alone in this room, he would have followed after the previous emperor and punched the table himself.

"O-One more thing," the soldier added nervously. "During her last transmission, Hero Ariel instructed us to pass along the Demon Lord's message to you verbatim... However, I couldn't possibly speak such impudent words with my own mouth—"

"Do you think this is the time for that?!" the previous emperor snapped. "Hurry up and tell us! What did the Demon Lord say?!"

The soldier nodded hesitantly, then slowly opened his mouth. "'Raid Freeden is coming to sock the foolish emperor in the face.'"

Appearances be damned, Viteos went ahead and punched the table anyway.

■

“Sacrificing all these lives to save those wastes of space? It’s the shittiest idea I’ve heard in my entire life.”

That was what Dian, her fellow Hero, had told her before he’d crossed the dimensional gap to the Second World. That man talked and acted like a thug, but he was an honest and upright person at heart. He hated this operation so much that he’d dared to utter his complaints even if they could have gotten him executed.

But the fact of the matter was that they didn’t have any other feasible plan. Their world was slowly but surely crawling toward its death, and the only way to save humanity was to migrate to the Second World—and if they needed to dirty their hands along the way, so be it. To protect the people even at the cost of one’s honor and dignity was at the core of being a Hero—that had been the belief of the very first Hero who’d put everything on the line to use the spell even before it had been proven to work. Without the original Hero’s courage and determination, none of them would have been here today.

So now, it was her turn to bear the burden.

“Lady Ariel, it is time.”

Quiet knocks followed by a muffled voice urged Ariel to pry open her eyes. “Ah... Sorry, Trix. I was taking a break.”

“My apologies for disturbing you,” said a woman in a military uniform with an apologetic smile. “You have been very busy eliminating the Offspring and repelling the Calamities around the area for our investigation. So please, rest as much as you need.”

At present, humanity was capable of eliminating Offspring, but the Calamities—few as they were in number—were still far too powerful. At most, the Heroes could fend them off, but eventually more Offspring would manifest and the Calamities would resume their efforts to cross over to the eastern continent—rinse and repeat. That was essentially the life of those stationed here in the outpost. It was strenuous, perhaps, but not exhausting. Besides, this wasn’t exactly the time to be lying about.

“So, what were the results of the investigation?” Ariel asked.

“The immense mana signal came from the southeastern region of the continent,” Trix reported. “That area is crawling with Calamities

and Offspring due to Paradise, so we were unable to investigate ashore. However, we've made some concerning discoveries."

"Hmm. Go on."

"We spotted corpses of Calamities in nearby waters."

Ariel's eyes grew wide. "What? Could it be that Dian has returned?!"

"The mana signal certainly indicated that there had been travel through the dimensional gap. However, the capital has not received any report of operation success. Even if they've returned, it is likely that they have failed and retreated. Then, perhaps by some unforeseen circumstances, they were incapable of making it to our outpost or the capital and instead disembarked on the southeastern coast...which indicates a high likelihood that any remaining forces have already been annihilated."

Ariel heaved out a sigh. "I see..."

She and Dian weren't friends, no, but they were fellow Heroes and allies at the very least. They agreed on many things, and Ariel was also quite fond of the honest man hidden deep beneath his rough exterior. Viteos didn't seem to approve of him, but Dian was undoubtedly worthy of his title as a Hero—she believed so every time she saw how much he cared for his subordinates and the citizens. More than anything, she'd never wanted to lose him like this. In fact, she had actually been hoping that they could be friends someday.

Ariel silently mourned for the friendship that would never be before quietly nodding. "Trix, tell everyone that today's patrols are to be halted. Open the gifts from the capital and make merry. Today will be a day for regaining our spirits."

"Understood. I shall pass the order. But before I leave..." Trix's lips curled into a wry smile. "I would like to make sure you are properly dressed."

Ariel scowled. "I told you I was resting."

"In your undergarments and chemise?"

The moment she returned from her patrol, Ariel had gone straight to the shower and commendably managed to dry her hair before falling asleep right there in the chair the very instant she'd shut her

eyes. The exhaustion and nerves over the past few days must have finally caught up to her. A quick glance to the mirror revealed her long red hair completely disheveled and sticking out in many places —certainly not the best appearance to greet one's subordinate with.



Ariel pouted indignantly. “What’s the big deal? I had the door locked.”

“A Hero mustn’t sleep in her undergarments.”

“B-But it’s been ages since I last took a shower! Can you fault me for this moment of relaxation?!”

“Well, what would you have done if one of our men saw you like that?”

“What is there to do? My being female hardly means anything when I can single-handedly repel a Calamity. I’m practically a weapon—would *you* lust after a weapon?”

“Perhaps in a ‘thirteen-round naval artillery x marine radar’ type of story.”

“What does that even mean?!”

“Ah, pardon me. It’s too early for this type of talk with you, I see.” Trix cleared her throat. “In any case, I would humbly advise you to be more aware of your physical attractiveness.”

Ariel sighed. “It’s not as if I’m calling myself ugly... My role is to stand on the front lines and bathe in the blood and stench of monsters. Who would want a woman like me?”

“One of your subordinates may be into that sort of thing.”

“Who is it?! Bring him to me and I’ll kick him all the way back to the capital!”

“Unfortunately, we cannot reprimand soldiers on account of their personal preferences,” Trix replied immediately. “In any case, Lady Ariel, you are beautiful, your bust is ample, your figure is feminine—yours is a body any woman would envy and many men find attractive. That being the case, please avoid dressing inappropriately.”

Ariel sheepishly hung her head. “Am I really that popular...?”

“The fact that it bothers you makes you even cuter.”

“But shouldn’t our men have more reason to dislike me? I may be a Hero of aristocratic origins, but I’m still a girl in her mid-twenties bossing everyone around...”

“Rest assured, Lady Ariel, that all of our soldiers are very satisfied with your leadership. They say it is a better reward than their salaries.”

"Why are you suddenly talking about rewards?!"

"Incidentally, ninety percent of our male soldiers applied for our army citing you as their reason. Far from disliking you, I would say their loyalty to you is off the charts."

"I know you're joking, but I'm still afraid to hear more... Let's stop here." Ariel sighed. Disturbing as it was, hearing Trix joke around as usual helped clear her head. "Anyway, I leave the party preparations to you. Today, we are spared from eating Offspring meat... Those things taste horrid even after purification."

"I shall get right to it once you put on some pants."

"I get it, I get it! Are you my mother?!" Ariel grumbled as she yanked on a freshly washed set of military clothes.

"Lady Ariel."

"I'm putting them on already! Just give me a second!"

"This is not about the pants," Trix muttered, eyes narrowed. "I've just received a message from our sentry and lookouts—they report that something is amiss outside."

"What? Are more Offspring manifesting already? Or are the Calamities back?"

"No... Neither." The creases deepened between Trix's eyebrows as she looked at the report in her hands. "Their mana signals are *disappearing*."

"What...?"

"The mana signals of the Calamities and Offspring south of the area you just patrolled... They are all disappearing one after another."

"One after another? You mean—"

"The disappearing signals are getting closer and closer to our outpost."

Ariel finished getting dressed and rushed out of her room, leaping up into the sky for a better view the moment she stepped outside. At first glance, all she could see were the mountains in the distance —nothing appeared to be amiss. But not for long.

"It's...cold?"

The wind blowing down from the mountains was icy cold. The chill seemed to penetrate through her skin and crawl to her very

core.

Whatever was causing this couldn't be a Calamity or an Offspring, for those monsters could not engage in magical combat. Put another way, this meant that the beasts were so fearsome solely on account of their physical might...but in any case, Ariel had never heard of any exceptions.

More critically, however, Calamities never attacked one another. Some research indicated that cannibalism had been observed among *Offspring*, but Calamities were another matter entirely. They had always shown signs of intelligence, altering their routes according to their environment and even retreating when at a disadvantage. So, the fact that Calamities were also disappearing meant that whatever was approaching was some new, unknown enemy.

She considered the possibility that it was Dian and his men, but even the Heroes couldn't eliminate Calamities, at least not without significant time and effort. The rate at which all those signals were disappearing, however, indicated a much mightier and more fearsome foe than Ariel could even imagine.

"Ah...!"

Finally, she spotted something in the distance. Pale blue ice crawled over the mountain belt, as if a carpet of frost were being rolled over nature itself. The meager light seeping between the gloomy clouds glistened over the crystalline surface, painting an eerily beautiful scene. There was only one thing in this world that could make such a nonsensical landscape a reality:

Magic.

The craft born from the hands of the world's enemy, the Demon Lord—a skill so powerful and profound that humanity still used it to this day. However, the sight before Ariel was nothing like the magic she knew. She'd never heard of such large-scale magic, nor did she know of anyone who could make this happen—save for *one*.

The moment her mind led her to the answer, so did her blue-eyed gaze fall upon a figure floating in the sky. Silver hair that shimmered beneath the icy light and eyes as chilling as the ocean deep—these features were spoken of in fearful whispers among humanity to this day, for they belonged to the one who had brought ruin to this

world, whose name was carved into every human soul...

"The Demon Lord...!"

Her own horrified whisper was the last thing Ariel heard before everything went dark.

◆

Eluria Caldwin liked reading.

Research and theses on magic went without saying, but she also enjoyed history books, academic texts, biographies, dictionaries, and even adventure tales and romance novels. Ghost stories were...scary, but she would read them too. Any field and genre was hers to enjoy; thus, Eluria Caldwin could declare with full and unwavering confidence that she loved reading.

Another thing she was confident in was her love for naps.

By Eluria's standards, naps were infinitely fascinating. Napping in her room made her feel safe enough to completely empty her mind and wake up fully reenergized. Napping under the shade of a tree while caressed by the breeze was the very epitome of cozy. Napping on a floatie with her feet dipping leisurely into the water on a sunny day was a truly serene experience. Napping face down on a sturdy rock while imagining everything the rock had seen and felt throughout its long life was a wonderful way to depart to dreamland. Napping anywhere felt good too, as long as it was under the inescapable clutches of a sudden bout of sleepiness.

Long story short, naps were great.

Eluria described them as "fascinating" because of the wide variety of flavors one could experience depending on when, where, and how the nap was initiated, but most would simply see it as a physiological phenomenon—something they had to do to survive, and nothing more. Some might have taken issue with the fact that she referred to it as a hobby at all, and she wouldn't fault them for it either.

Moving on, there was one more thing Eluria was greatly confident in—and that was her love for *walks*.

This may have come as a surprise to many, who mainly knew her for her love of books or her tendency to coop up indoors when she

was in the zone, but on the contrary, Eluria went on a lot of walks. Elven life in the forest had demanded a lot of moving around. By the time she'd enlisted in the Vegaltan army, hoping to test out her magic's practicality, she'd built up enough stamina and strength to make the cut. Physical activity promoted blood circulation, among other things, and going on walks assisted in memorization by associating thoughts with scenery.

Long story short, walks were good for the body and mind—and that was why Eluria's mood was currently as pleasant as could be.

"It's been a while since I've gone on such a long walk," she mused aloud as she strode across the ravaged continent.

Granted, she *was* in the middle of an operation, so she had to pick up the pace a bit, cast a few powerful support spells that none would usually think to use on a simple walk, and also trek over air on occasion to keep a straight path, but her legs were committing to the motion, and that was all that mattered.

Naturally, this made her a perfect target for Calamities and Offspring, but the creatures were ultimately of little hindrance to her progress.

"Ah... I forgot to ask Raid if I should unfreeze everything later," she mumbled as she threw a glance back over her shoulder.

A world of ice stretched out as far as the eye could see. Pale and glistening blue blanketed the land, freezing everything in place—even the Calamities and Offspring—as if time itself had frozen over.

"The mana felt unpleasant back when I first arrived in this world, and it's practically lethal poison to ordinary living beings...but upon closer inspection, it's actually fascinating—it's made for spells that utilize blended mana branches. The me of this world must've been a genius," Eluria muttered, nodding proudly to herself.

This world of ice was not a product of Eluria's magic, but rather a *phenomenon* she triggered by making use of the polluted mana contaminating this continent.

The reason Eluria had labeled the six mana branches as colors was because she saw the finished product—magic—as a painting. Even when blended together, mana was still just mana. You could mix paint to make new colors, adjust the brightness to produce

varying hues, or even mix them incompletely to create unique patterns, but it was only when you put it upon a canvas while considering which colors to use and where to place or layer them that they altogether formed a "painting."

Similarly, magic was the product of raw energy being given shape through complex layers of creativity and intricate processes of thought. However, much like how one could slap some random colors onto a canvas and call it a painting, the power and density of a spell made in such a slapdash way would be incomparably lower. Eluria's Polyaggregate Expansion functioned on the same logic.

In any case, her investigation of this world's polluted mana revealed that its true identity was "blended mana." In other words, it was mana that was ready to become a spell—a "color" that could, by itself, produce a painting. When mixed with a living being's natural mana, it caused a collapse to their physiological balance and consequently morphed them into Calamities and Offspring.

Thus, Eluria concluded that it was impossible to return paint from the canvas to the palette—or more literally, to completely erase polluted mana. However, she *could* tamper with the painting itself—perhaps add a new streak or extract a certain hue to adjust the existing colors. In the context of magic, this would allow her to manipulate the spell's qualities. And since she was not casting her own spell but simply using her mana to alter the qualities of existing mana, it was—by definition of magic theory—classified as a "phenomenon."

"Whoops... Gotta destroy them before I forget."

Eluria's gaze trailed over the frozen Calamities. With a snap of her finger, the living ice sculptures instantly crumbled into countless shards.

Once she'd figured out how to alter the polluted mana as she pleased, these Calamities no longer proved to be much of an issue—after all, they were essentially conglomerations of polluted mana. It was a simple matter to turn their very being into ice.

The Demon Lord should have been capable of this as well, which meant that the moment the entire world was contaminated with her mana, she could have easily turned everything into a world of ice or

engulfed it in a sea of flames. Frankly, she was spoiled for choice on how to destroy the world.

Thoughts and theories danced about in Eluria's mind as she continued her leisurely walk. Eventually, she crossed a mountain range and found exactly what she was looking for.

"There it is."

From high up in the sky, Eluria spotted the first signs of human activity she'd seen since she departed Paradise: the Altanian outpost in the northeastern region of the continent. She'd managed to make a beeline for this outpost thanks to the coordinates Raid had provided beforehand. Crusche had also informed them that according to the transmissions, the Hero they were after should have currently been stationed there.

Everything was in place, but there was just one problem. Eluria looked down at the outpost with a petulant frown. "I think they'll attack me before I can even say hi..."

Not that being attacked was the issue here. Firstly, these people had every right to react that way—after all, she was the villain who'd led their world to ruin. Why *wouldn't* they attack her on sight? Secondly, they could attack all they wanted—it wouldn't matter much to Eluria. She wasn't about to struggle against such a young Hero, not when she'd faced off against a *real* hero for fifty years. She had no intention of losing to anyone but Raid, nor did she think there was any greater hero in the world than him.

Eluria's lips curled into a smile. "Try again when you're stronger than Raid."

She had one objective in this outpost, and it was neither to kill their Hero nor to massacre the soldiers. After all, that would have been counterproductive to their goal of saving the world.

"Hmm... This is a good chance to try casting a spell with all this polluted mana." Eluria nodded to herself as she twirled the staff in her hands. She wanted to make use of the nature of polluted mana in tandem with her magic, and she had just the technique in mind. Rummaging through her memories, she slowly drew her right foot back. "I recall it went a little something like...this."

The first time she'd seen this technique was back when she and

Raid were still in the war, on the day a volcano erupted while the Altanian and Vegaltan armies were fighting nearby. Both their armies would have seen immense loss of life beneath the gushing lava and suffocating ashen smoke had Raid not stepped in to stop the eruption—quite literally, he'd jumped in and *stomped* on the volcano. Thanks to him, everyone returned home with their lives, and the tale of his unfathomable strength and overwhelming power birthed both fear and awe, granting him the title of Hero.

Eluria had been there to witness this feat, and the moment she saw Raid leap into the sky in one jump and smash down on the volcano with a single kick, there was only one thought in her mind:

That's so cool!

She'd had no idea how his powers worked back then, but nevertheless she had been overcome with astonishment. The sight had spurred her on to create a spell that looked just as cool, replaying that breathtaking sight in her mind over and over as she'd sought to recreate it.

However, not once in her fifty-year battle with Raid had she used this spell in front of him. The reason was simple: she was too embarrassed. A single glance would've been all Raid needed to realize what had inspired the spell, and she was afraid that he wouldn't like it at all. What if he got mad or took offense to it? Just the thought of it made her wilt. Of course, now she knew he wouldn't have reacted that way at all.

Regardless, she just couldn't resist mimicking him—he was just too cool. Besides, it made her happy to be matching with him. She'd even added a few improvements to the spell after her reincarnation. Instead of condensing the power into a single point for maximum impact, she spread out the force to expand the spell's range as wide as possible. Then, she lowered its lethality to make the spell good for neutralizing enemies. Raid had used his version to stomp out a volcano, but Eluria chose to put her own twist on it, applying her favorite ice attribute to the attack. Finally, she'd added a bit of a feminine touch. As a little bonus, she enhanced all the spell's effects with the polluted mana's help.

And so, her new and improved spell was born: a Sage-styled

Hero-inspired kick.

"Frostheel."

Eluria whipped out her right leg in an elegant arc, soundlessly draping the landscape in ice and trapping every living being in place. From the outpost in the distance all the way back to her, it was as if a road of frost had been paved just for Eluria to finish the final stretch of her walk.

"Mm. That was pretty cool, if I do say so myself," she muttered, nodding proudly.

It turned out much more effective than she'd imagined thanks to the addition of the polluted mana, but Frostheel specialized in catching targets alive, so the people trapped in the ice were safe and sound. A bit chilly for sure, but they would have to sit tight and bear with it until Eluria got what she came for.

"I might as well finish my walk before I start looking."

The girl's quiet musings faded into the frosty breeze as she resumed her leisurely stroll over the long, icy path.

■

Nobody knew what it felt like to die. After all, who had lived to tell the tale?

But at that moment, Ariel was certain that death had embraced her. The Demon Lord's overwhelming presence, the alarm bells ringing incessantly in her head—and then, the unplaceable sensation that enveloped her body the instant she'd lost consciousness.

She thought she was done for. She was *sure* of it.

So...what exactly was going on right now?

"Uhhh..."

"Hmm?"

"What...are you doing to me?"

"Pinching your cheeks because you wouldn't wake up." The girl before her—the Demon Lord, supposedly—tilted her head as she continued pinching Ariel's cheeks like a curious child.

None of this made sense. Ariel desperately replayed her memories, seeking to make sense of this situation—she'd regained

her consciousness, wondering why she wasn't dead yet, and slowly opened her eyes when she'd felt something on her face—which led them to the previous conversation.

"Are you Hero Ariel?" asked the Demon Lord.

Ariel warily narrowed her eyes. "Why are you asking?"

"I got your name from Dian."

"How do you—?!" It was only then, when she finally tried to move, that Ariel realized her hands and feet were sealed in ice. Looking around, she realized their outpost wasn't faring much better; even the walls were completely frozen.

"Now that you're awake, we can finally negotiate."

"'Negotiate'...?"

"Mm-hmm. I came here because I wanted your help with something."

"I refuse," Ariel said immediately. "If you really are the Demon Lord, then you are the enemy of Altane and all of humanity. I've no reason to negotiate with you."

The Demon Lord hummed. "Even if that means everyone here will die?"

"Every one of my soldiers has come here with the resolve to die. If your plan was to take a hostage—be it me or anyone else—then too bad for you, that won't work."

The Demon Lord pursed her lips and stared at Ariel with furrowed brows. Ariel resolutely met her gaze head-on. After a long silence, the Demon Lord slowly nodded and mumbled, "So...what do I do now?"

"Why are you asking *me*?!" Ariel snapped.

"Dian told us, 'Ariel looks and talks like some no-nonsense military woman, but she's actually a bit of a ditz, so it shouldn't be too hard to win her over.' But now..."

"Is that really how he saw me...?"

"He also said that you care for your allies, so I thought you'd at least hear me out if I said that...but you refused. Hmm, what to do..."

Ariel squinted. "There is no conversation to be had with someone holding my soldiers against their will."

"Okay. Then will you talk with me if I let them all go?"

"Hah... Do you hear yourself? Why would you throw away your bargaining chip?"

"Why not, if it means you'll hear me out? Besides..." The Demon Lord shrugged. "None of you can beat me anyway."

Her words were neither a bluff nor a brag, but a simple and undeniable *fact*. None of the people in this outpost, not even Ariel herself, had managed to *react* to the Demon Lord's spell, much less resist. They were still alive right now only because she willed it.

"So, I'll release them if you'll hear me out. You can decide whether or not to accept my proposal afterward."

Ariel sighed. "Very well. If you release everyone unharmed, then I promise to hear you out until the end without making any moves."

"All right." With a snap of the Demon Lord's fingers, the ice around Ariel's hands and feet, as well as the frost coating the walls of the room, all melted and faded away.

Ariel shot her a dubious look. "You actually did it."

"Because you promised... Oh, you must be cold. Here, have some milk tea." The Demon Lord reached into empty space and pulled out a teapot and two cups.

"And you're even serving me tea..."

"It's lukewarm, though. Just the way I like it," she said as she poured them a cup each. With such leisurely behavior, Ariel could almost believe she'd come here just for a tea party.

The door to the room slammed open, shattering the bizarrely idle air in the room. "Lady Ariel, are you okay?!"

Ariel turned her gaze to her subordinate. "Trix, make sure everyone in the outpost is safe. Do not inform them or the capital of what you've seen here. My orders are to stand by."

Trix's eyes widened as she caught sight of the Demon Lord seated across from Ariel, but for no more than a second—she swiftly bowed her head and left the room.

Eluria nodded. "Thanks for that."

"It is the bare minimum courtesy I can offer, since you released everyone practically unconditionally."

"Okay. Here's your tea, by the way."

Ariel squinted skeptically at the cup offered to her. “This isn’t poisoned, is it?”

“Your caution is commendable. Fortunately for you, I wouldn’t poison your drink”—the Demon Lord’s eyes narrowed into a cold and piercing stare—“just because your father poisoned mine to strip me of my mana.”

After the Hero and the Demon Lord had jumped back to the past, the humans of the First World had devised a plan to kill Eluria Caldwin before she could become the Demon Lord—and the person who’d accepted this mission was Ariel’s father. He had led his troops to the past, assassinated Eluria Caldwin, and brought Viteos Altane and the Hero’s sword back to their timeline. His praiseworthy feat had granted their world its one last string of hope and had even helped earn his daughter a position as a Hero later on.

Ariel’s father had struggled through a series of tireless efforts and hard-earned achievements, all to fulfill their house’s dearest wish: to restore their family’s tainted reputation. The bleak smudge upon their house’s name had withstood the passage of time and the gradual destruction of the world, subjecting their family to living year upon year in Altane with their heads hung in shame. But through her father’s sacrifice, Ariel had been selected as a Hero candidate and proven compatible with the Hero’s power, finally earning their family the recognition of the state.

Their misfortunes had all started over a thousand years ago, when they had still been a prominent household in one of Altane’s enemy nations.

“Now then...” The Demon Lord’s clear gaze seemed to bore right through her. “Shall we talk...Ariel Verminant?”

That was the name her family had earned while serving the nation of Vegalta...and the name they’d dragged through the mud the moment they’d double-crossed their homeland for Altane.

“What I want...is for you to betray Altane,” said the Demon Lord. “Give us the information we need and pass a fake report to the capital.”

Ariel narrowed her eyes. “What are you after?”

“We want to dismantle the Altanian empire and establish a new

system."

"Why go through all that trouble? You could easily destroy humanity like crushing a bug in your hands, couldn't you, Demon Lord?"

"Just 'Eluria' is fine. I'm not exactly the same person who was called the Demon Lord in this world, nor do we have the same goals. I'm here to save the First World, so I'd like to avoid unnecessary sacrifices wherever possible."

"Hah... That's quite the huge flip, no? Going from destroying the world to saving humanity?"

"Yes. Because I feel like that's my responsibility as Eluria Caldwin."

Ariel could see neither falsehood nor hesitation in her eyes. She looked wholly certain of her ability to save this world. If it had been anybody else, Ariel wouldn't have believed it—but she wasn't dealing with just anybody right now. "So you're saying you can save us...because it's magic you made yourself?"

"Mm-hmm. But I don't have enough information. So first, we need to dismantle Altane so that we can securely gather the information that we need."

"Even then, it's impossible. Whether you get the information you need by force or by some clever scheme, there isn't a single person in this world who would obey the Demon Lord."

The Demon Lord had taken *everything* from the people of the First World. Their homes, their country, their future—nothing was left for them, and it was all because of the Demon Lord. Even if she came back as a different person from a different world claiming she'd save them, not a single person would follow her lead.

"But what about the Sage?" she muttered. "Raid Freeden has come to this world with me."

His title was just as widely known as hers but infinitely more favored by the people of this world. Sage Raid Freeden had left humanity with invaluable knowledge and precious technology that had not only advanced their society but had also helped them survive the Demon Lord's rampage.

Ariel squinted. "According to the reports, the Raid Freeden of the

Second World is known as the Hero, is he not? Wouldn't he be a different person, then?"

"I'm also a different person, but the people here would still see me as the Demon Lord. Then the same likely goes for Raid Freeden. So long as the people remember that his research and findings helped them survive this long, then his name will always be a source of hope for them." It would bring the people of this world immense hope to hear that Raid Freeden came here to save them. "He may be a different person in essence, but there will probably be some things that only 'Raid Freeden' can understand—quirks in his handwriting, subtleties in his wording, and so on and so forth."

"So you're saying...he might be able to decipher the Sage's Codex."

"Exactly. In this world, I created magic from the Sage's Codex. There must be things in there that only Raid and I can understand."

A thousand years had passed, but most of the contents of the Sage's Codex remained a mystery to humanity. By now, there were too few survivors and too many monsters pressing into their lands for them to allocate any manpower toward deciphering the Codex. With ruin's footsteps creeping in from behind, Eluria's offer was a godsend. After all, who better to overturn this hopeless situation than the Hero and the Sage of the Second World?

Ariel didn't doubt that at all, and she understood it very well. But even then, she simply couldn't accept. "Still...I cannot betray Altane."

"Because your ancestors already betrayed Vegalta?"

Ariel sighed. "Did Dian tell you that too?"

"Mm-hmm. Here in the First World, Vegalta resisted Altane's expansion but ultimately succumbed when House Verminant struck a deal with Altane and betrayed their country."

Vegalta had led the small western nations to fend off Altane's invasion but had ultimately fallen at the hands of a betrayal from the inside—specifically from House Verminant, known at the time as loyal knights of the kingdom. They had double-crossed the very master they'd sworn their loyalty to, taking the sovereign's head with their own hands and submitting to Altane.

Not to mention that was only the *first* time they'd betrayed their home country.

"My father accepted the order to assassinate Eluria Caldwin in the past and killed you in the Second World, where you were known as Vegalta's Sage. It was an act that could very well have led to Vegalta's ruin once more in the second timeline."

With the power of magic, Vegalta in the Second World had been successfully fighting off Altane—but once again, House Verminant had chosen to abide by Altane's orders. To this day, Ariel could remember what her father had asked her after he'd returned to the First World with Viteos:

"Did we really do the right thing?"

They betrayed their country and led it to ruin, then went back in time only to betray it once more. Her father's forlorn features were seared into her memories. And so, on the day she became a Hero, Ariel had sworn a pledge in her heart:

"As one of the chosen Heroes, my duty lies in protecting the people and the country. I will never betray them again. And by my hand, I will clear the Verminant name of its traitorous stigma." So even if she understood that Eluria's plan was their best shot at saving the world, Ariel simply couldn't comply. This was her pride as a person and her duty as a Verminant—

"Yeah... I don't really care about all that," muttered Eluria with a wave of her hand. "I think you should betray them anyway."

"Wha... *Whaaat*?!" Ariel's jaw dropped, the impassioned resolve that had been building up in her chest now smashed to bits.

Eluria shrugged. "You know what they say: Third time's the charm."

"I don't think that saying is meant for this kind of situation!"



"But Ariel, I just don't get what's bothering you so much." Eluria held her teacup in both hands and curiously tilted her head. "Why do you feel so bad about the Verminants' betrayal?"

"What do you mean? Is it not a detestable act to betray the homeland you'd sworn loyalty to?"

"Mm... Then let's say a million lives are at risk—betraying your country will save them, while staying loyal will kill them all. Would you still prioritize your loyalty?"

"What kind of forced logic is that?!"

"It's not forced at all. Had Vegalta resisted till the very end, Altane would have thoroughly crushed them to prevent any future rebellion and to show an example to the surrounding nations. Countless more lives would have been sacrificed without the Verminants' betrayal," Eluria said, her voice calm and impassive as she spun the teaspoon in her cup. "So I don't think you need to feel bad about it. Just think of it as if your family made the best choice they could have amid that worst-case scenario. It's not like they betrayed the country out of self-interest."

Ariel frowned. "How... How are you so sure of that?"

"Because a young Verminant I know is like that." Eluria's lips formed a small smile. "If he were the type to act purely on self-interest...then he wouldn't have risked his own life just to save his friends."

For some reason, a certain memory surfaced in Ariel's mind—a journal that had been left by one of the past heads of House Verminant. It had been written soon after Vegalta had been crushed and absorbed by Altane, when House Verminant was constantly being disparaged by the Vegaltan people and mocked by the Altanians for their betrayal.

"I feel terribly for our descendants. My father gave his own head to take responsibility for his decision and to quell the people's anger, but the smear upon our family's name will likely remain till the end of time. However, I do not think his choice was wrong."

The leader of House Verminant at the time had borne the brunt of the disdain and mockery, but instead of hiding away in shame, he had taken advantage of Altane's patronage to extend support to the

former Vegaltan citizens and even the surrounding nations—all at the cost of living an impoverished and deprived life himself, so much so that it would have been hard to believe he used to be an aristocrat.

"To be a knight is to protect the people even if it means dirtying one's hands in the enemy's blood—or in this case, by smearing our name in mud. We Verminants have fulfilled our duty, and that is nothing to be ashamed of. If that is my family's will, then I shall proudly live out the rest of my life as a 'traitor.'"

The journal Ariel had read long ago...had been signed at the end by one "Fareg Verminant."

"So, like I said, there's no need to feel so bad," Eluria whispered.

Ariel huffed. "Is it really that simple...?"

"I mean, Vegalta's also at fault for being betrayed. They failed to realize that the situation had gotten so out of hand that they were at risk of betrayal. Besides, they shouldn't have even let things get that bad from the start. The moment they realized their so-called strategy of just 'fending off' Altane wasn't working, they should have begun devising alternate plans and recruiting capable personnel to __"

"Do you have a bone to pick with your own homeland or something?!" Ariel snapped. She'd heard that in the Second World, Vegalta had not only developed magic but was also prospering in many aspects as a nation. Perhaps Eluria was quite bothered to see such a stark difference between how her homeland fared between the two worlds.

"Also," Eluria continued, "in hindsight, it was a good thing that I died then, so I'm willing to drop it."

"I'm starting to wonder if *anything* bothers you at this point..."

"I mean, it was a fact that I'd let my guard down. Thanks to that, I thought to develop new spells for detecting poisons and other abnormalities after I was reincarnated. I even got to see the fruits of my pupils' labor with my own eyes. I'm quite satisfied."

"Please, don't tell my father that... He took your life after so much internal struggle, he might just lose it if he heard you give such positive feedback..." Ariel chuckled—it was a dry and exhausted

sound, but also the first time she smiled during this discussion. Finally, she heaved out a sigh and looked up at the ceiling. “Good grief... If I was going to betray Altane anyway, then I should have just gone with Dian.”

“Hmm? Why?”

“I was just thinking that we could have betrayed Viteos together—losing two Heroes would be a huge blow to Altane, after all—then gone to the Second World together and just asked you for help. Then Dian and his subordinates wouldn’t have lost their lives for—”

“On the contrary, they’re probably enjoying themselves right about now.”

“Yes, I know, they must be... Huh?”

“Speaking of Dian, he told me to give this to you once I met you.” Eluria produced a small slab from midair and handed it to Ariel. “I don’t really know much about machines, so it’s all yours.”

“This is...a recording medium. He must’ve used this because our magic devices don’t always work due to the mana pollution.” Ariel inserted the slab into a machine on the desk and waited as the recording whirred to life on the screen.

“Yo, Ariel. You’d better listen to whoever hands this recording to you. They’ve got a pretty good plan up their—”

“Your Excellency, I caught another one! I finally beat your record!”

“Shut up, Bracchio! Didn’t I tell you I’m busy right now?!”

“M-My apologies! But Burgess and Viktor refuse to pause the match for me!”

“Goddammit, it’s just fishing! You guys have been way too riled up since you lost to me the other day! And don’t you feel bad for Rendi?! The poor guy’s just been staring blankly at his rod this whole time!”

“No, wait! Rendi’s rod finally moved! But if he lets this one go, he might never get up on his feet again... Your Excellency, please offer him some words of encouragement!”

“Oh, for the love of... Ugh! Anyway, Ariel—just listen to what they say, got it? If you start barkin’ about your loyalty bullshit again, then I’m gonna call you a dumb li’l pooch the next time we meet!”

The recording came to an end just as Dian turned back to his subordinates, all fishing cheerfully in the background. Ariel stared blankly at the dark screen before slowly looking to the ceiling once more. “I just...don’t want to think anymore...”

“Have some milk tea,” Eluria offered. “It should help calm you.”

“Okay... Thanks...” Ariel took a sip from the cup Eluria offered her, downing the (now cold) milk tea in a single gulp, before gazing into the distance with a blank smile. “Okay. Guess I’ll betray them.”

“I’m glad you’ve made your decision.”

“So, what do you need from me? The number of the capital’s troops and their positions? The routines of the higher-ups? I know a bunch of other stuff too, if you need.”

“Wow, you really doubled down...” Eluria winced, drawing back a little.

In any case, Dian’s recording was all Ariel needed to see. When he had still been in this world, Dian had been struggling over what it meant to be a Hero; his personal beliefs and the cruel circumstances of their life here had clashed fiercely, cornering him mentally, but he’d hidden it all beneath his rough exterior and crude speech. But in the recording, she could see the life in his eyes again as he engaged in lighthearted banter with his subordinates. That was enough of an answer for Ariel.

“For starters,” said Eluria, “I want whatever information you can give me on their military strength. Then, tell them that this outpost was annihilated by the Demon Lord—and pass along a message for me too.”

“That should be easy. Is that really all?”

“Mm-hmm. After that, it’s Raid’s turn to act.” Eluria looked up, her eyes blazing with unwavering trust. “He said that he needed to clean up his unfinished business with his own two hands.”

□

“Raid Freeden...!”

Viteos could not suppress his boiling anger. That man had always got in his way. His speech was polite and his mannerisms courteous,

but Viteos could always see the disdain in his eyes. Nobody in the world should have even dared look at the emperor in such a way. Viteos would never forget that.

Beside him, the previous emperor gasped. "Raid Freeden? Y-You mean the legendary Sage who— *Agh*!"

Seething, Viteos struck the former emperor with his scepter. "How *dare* you call that lowly peasant a Sage?!"

That man had always received far more credit than he was due. As a measly peasant born in an impoverished village, his miserable life should have ended in starvation, or he should have been put to some use as a soldier or slave. He should have just mindlessly slaughtered their enemies like the monster that he was, but the beast dared to play human—play the *hero*, even—by saving others and improving life in the desolate villages around their land. His shrewd and crafty ways had actually earned him the title of "Hero" among the other peasants in the army, as well as the support of some naive and foolish nouveau riche, through which he'd gained connections to some of the higher-class aristocracy. Those imbeciles had then gone on to side with that monster in opposing Viteos's brilliant revolutionary policies at every turn.

Of course, Viteos had decided to purge them, stripping that monster's supporters of their positions—and if they dared to fight back, he had resolved to send them to their deaths along with all their associates and the people in their domain. Alas, none of it had come to be. That man always had helped his supporters flee—he'd given them disguises, brought them to the front lines, started a sham of a battle, and carried them out of Altane's borders as war prisoners. Then, the achievements he'd earn in these "battles" would usher a new wave of aristocratic supporters for him, rendering Viteos's efforts at purging them utterly meaningless.

All that had been left for Viteos was the dishonorable title of a tyrant. All because of that accursed man—that *monster*—Viteos never came to be known as the wise and brilliant emperor he truly was. To make matters worse, the rebellion started by that man's subordinates had eventually led to Altane's ruin in the Second World. None of it had been Viteos's fault, yet his name was the one to be

smeared in mud.

Hence, he had been deeply moved by the First World. Here, his name was rightfully praised and extolled, and the people bowed reverently before his imperial presence. This was how things should be—how things should have *always* been. Without that man in his way, Viteos would have stood at the top of the world, where he truly belonged.

However, the one flaw in this First World...was that Raid Freeden's traces still haunted him.

"The Sage? Hah! The Sage, you say! How utterly laughable!" Viteos spat as he grabbed the previous emperor by the collar. "The Raid Freeden I knew was a trifling peasant, far from being worthy of such a grand title!"

"M-My apologies...!"

Viteos clicked his tongue. Only when he threw the fool to the ground did some of his anger finally abate. "They probably managed to extract some information from Dian and his troops before they killed themselves, and thus they got the foolish idea of parading around as the Demon Lord and the Sage. Such imbeciles are hardly a threat to us."

"H-However, we have already lost contact with Ariel Verminant... Would they not constitute a threat on par with the Demon Lord herself?"

Viteos scoffed. "You forget that the Verminants of this world are traitors, shamelessly clinging to their own lives. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if that woman fell for their cajolery like the fool that she is and decided to betray us."

"I see..." the former emperor muttered. "Heroes are powerful enough to oppose the Calamities. Even if they suppressed her, they would have suffered severe damages in the fight. And even if they won her over..."

"She wouldn't be able to oppose us because of the absolute subservience to the emperor that is embedded into Hero," Viteos finished with a wicked smile. "In fact, I would love to see them march right into our territory, only to despair when Ariel stabs them in the back."

The previous emperor burst into laughter. "That sounds quite perfect for a traitor like her! She can finally live up to her family's name!"

The corner of Viteos's lips curled into a smirk. Raid Freeden and Eluria Caldwin were threats, yes—but he also had a Hero of his own.

"Father! Your Majesty, Lord Viteos!" yelled a man as he burst into the meeting room without so much as a knock. Unlike the soldier, however, he was very much permitted to do so.

"Oh, Valtos! You've come all this way!" exclaimed the previous emperor.

"But of course, father! It is my duty to protect Altane as a Hero...and to display my might as one of imperial blood!" The man, Valtos, flashed them a wide grin as he hefted a broadsword over his shoulder.

When they first recreated Hero, Viteos had learned that there were certain conditions for compatibility. Dian was the only compatible candidate in their army. They had allowed the young lady of House Verminant to participate for their contributions, and she'd proven compatible too.

However, they weren't enough—not for Viteos, at least. The moment either of them raised a flag of rebellion, the imperial family and their entire nation would be done for. Viteos did not want a repeat of the Second World—and so, he needed to select a third Hero from the imperial family. Moreover, giving him the Hero's sword further solidified their power and status in this nation. With a *true* hero, the son of their former emperor, with noble imperial blood—and not of lowly birth like that monster—they would truly be unstoppable.

It was a brilliant, most ingenious plan; Viteos was quite proud of himself.

"Ah, Valtos! Welcome, welcome!" Viteos crooned. "To take such initiative in such unfavorable circumstances, I could not be prouder to have such a noble descendant!"

"It is an honor, Your Majesty—and I have every intention of living up to your praise! With my very own hands, I shall eliminate the savages who dare to invade our capital and show them the might of

the Hero and our imperial family!”

Viteos froze. “‘Invade our capital,’ you say...?”

“Why, yes! All forces in the capital are currently intercepting the foes, but alas, soldiers or not, those of lowly birth are truly incompetent—they are struggling to hold them off. Thus, I shall head out myself. I’ve come to give my greetings before entering battle!”

The previous emperor hummed. “We haven’t received any such report...”

“’Tis a measly matter that I shall settle in no time! Hence, I instructed the soldiers not to interrupt your meeting!”

“Ooh... Yes, you’re quite right. No savage would stand a chance before you, my son! You are a Hero, after all!”

“Yes, father! I shall present you with their heads shortly!”

As he listened to the father and son’s jovial exchange, an unplaceable anxiety began to bud in Viteos’s heart. The Altanian capital was situated in the eastern continent, whereas their outpost was in the northeastern region of the central continent. Needless to say, there was a vast distance between these two places. Whether Ariel had been defeated or won over by the enemy, there remained much time for Viteos to observe the situation and secure his own safety before Raid Freeden or Eluria Caldwin could get here.

But what if that man had predicted his thoughts?

Viteos’s body was seized with a sense of foreboding as his mouth fell open. “Show me the capital, *now*.”

“Ah, please rest assured, Your Majesty. Valtos shall head over right away to—”

“Don’t make me say it twice!” he snapped.

The previous emperor—the *dim-witted fool*—flinched and hurriedly grabbed a magic device. “U-Understood... I shall display the footage from the surveillance device attached to one of our frontline soldiers.”

All the while, that man’s accursed message seemed to echo mockingly in Viteos’s mind.

“Raid Freeden is coming to sock the foolish emperor in the face.”

If he’d meant that literally, then...

"AAAAAAAAGH!!!"

A jarring, bloodcurdling scream pierced through the room the moment the previous emperor set up the device.

"Wh-Where did all these people come from?!"

"'People'?! Those aren't people! What kind of people can come back to life?!"

"Th-They're coming! R-Retreat... Retreaaat!"

Fearful cries and chaotic screams screeched from the device—until one loud and booming voice drowned it all out.

"Bah ha ha! Got that right! You'll regret it if you think of me as an ordinary person!" bellowed a giant in the distance. Each swing of his club knocked down their military facilities and guard towers, and each stomp on the ground flipped over their stone pavement. Soldiers went flying in every direction from the force of his rampage as his boisterous laughter boomed across the ruined streets. *"What're ya waiting for?! If you don't wanna die, get off your asses and get running! I've got tons of energy to spare after being cooped up for so long!"*

Viteos knew that giant—he was that despicable mountain bandit who'd escaped execution by the monster's scheming. Whenever they returned from battle, that giant would stand at the very front as they paraded through the streets in perfect formation while flourishing Altane's standard, almost as if to flaunt the Hero's return.

However, the standard fluttering behind him was no longer Altane's.

"A-Ahhh...!" Viteos would never forget that standard—it was the standard raised by those vermin who attacked the capital after the Hero and the Sage's deaths. "Why... Why are they here too?! That man's subordinates—they should have died long ago!"

"P-Please calm yourself, Lord Viteos—"

"Calm myself? Are you telling me to be calm right now?!" Viteos gripped his scepter until his knuckles turned white. "Those are the insurgents who dared turn their blades against me and chased me from my throne! Do you truly expect me to be calm before them?!"

"Oh, what's this?" Suddenly, a new voice came from the surveillance device. *"This magic device on your neck—I'm guessing it*

can transmit visuals? They use this to monitor you guys, huh? Poor things."

Viteos recognized that voice. It was so long ago that his memories of that time were beginning to fade away, but that voice alone remained vividly in his head. It was a time when his father had still been alive and he himself had been the imperial prince. Despite being no more than a young mercenary, that man had been invited to the capital for his many feats in battle. His father quite liked that the young man was called a monster and had personally initiated him into the Altanian army.

Viteos had watched the proceedings from start to finish—watched as his father, who only ever had harsh words and tough beatings for him, spoke to that young man with all smiles and praises.

"I don't know if you can hear me, but sit tight—I'm on my way."

In hindsight, Viteos realized that perhaps he had been jealous. He couldn't accept that his father would curse his own son as an incompetent fool while smiling so generously at such a lowborn monster.

"As the Hero of Altane, I'll make sure to lop your head off myself."

And now, that lowborn monster was looking down on him—the very same way his father always had.

◇

Raid released the soldier's collar and quietly rose to his feet. "I'm done with you. Go on, flee with the others. I'm not gonna kill you." He watched the pale-faced soldier nod and stagger away on shaky legs, then shifted his gaze to the man beside him. "Status report," he demanded curtly.

"As planned, our squadrons moved out from their designated positions and successfully subdued the soldiers," Ryatt reported. "After the soldiers surrendered, they were evacuated along with the citizens and are currently under surveillance. The scouting unit we sent in ahead has also subdued and confined the soldiers in the palace."

"Good. So, how's our second mana-guzzling gal holding up?" Raid

turned around and found his answer right away.

"Woo-hoo! Chug, chug, chug! Come on, keep up the pace!" Tiana cheered while clapping her hands in beat.

"L-Lady Tiana, wait... I can't... I can't drink any more...!" Alma groaned as she downed bottle after bottle of mana recovery drink.

Tiana watched the sight with a pleasant giggle. "I'm so moved... You truly are my descendant!"

"Urp... I-I'm gonna hurl..."

"Aw, don't be such a killjoy—these drinks are all on me! You're not going to waste them, are you?"

"Why's this princess talking like some pushy barhopper?!"

"Huh? Lady Eluria always encouraged me this way."

"Oh... I just imagined her clapping and chanting '*chug, chug, chug*' with her impassive face..."

"Wonderful! Doesn't that make you just want to chug, chug, and chug some more?" Tiana plopped another row of bottles in front of Alma. She'd probably gone through this exact same thing herself while honing her magic.

Normally, Raid wouldn't have had Alma summon so many soldiers, but their operation called for speed above all—in disengaging the capital's defense mechanisms and alarms, as well as in subduing and disarming the soldiers there. Vitally, they needed to avoid causing any deaths in the process, as it would give room for backlash and retaliation later on down the line—another obstacle they didn't need along the path to saving this world.

Eluria's solo mission to the outpost was a vital prerequisite for this plan to work. With all the insider information from the Hero now at their disposal, Hope's Brigade—an army of well-trained and highly experienced soldiers—could take care of the rest. Moreover, once faced with such a sudden and large-scale invasion, even the Altanian soldiers, equipped with advanced arms and technology, were swiftly thrown into chaos. Not to mention that the mysterious invaders appeared to be unkillable, leading to an instant drop in their morale.

The only downside to this plan was that Alma was burdened with maintaining this large number of forces, effectively transforming her into their second-generation mana-guzzling gal...but alas, desperate

times called for desperate measures.

"Tiana," Raid called. "You can stop right there."

"Oh my, are you sure? From the number of troops and the mana cost..." Tiana hummed. "I would say she can only maintain this spell for twenty more minutes."

"Why? You think I need more time?"

"Oh, not at all. Not for the Hero of Altane that I know."

"And there you have it. I'm just here to wrap up some of my unfinished business." Lips curling into a bitter smile, Raid turned his attention to the giant rampaging and guffawing up ahead. "Hey, Blofeld—need to let out some more steam? Then punch me with all you've got."

"What?! You mean I can hit ya like I'm tryna kill ya?!"

"Sure. Not like you've ever managed to, anyway."

"Bah ha ha ha! It's 'cause you're so strong for such a puny man!" Blofeld burst into laughter as he swung his club with all his might.

The force of the impact launched Raid high into the air, where he got a bird's-eye view of the entire capital. It was no carbon copy of the capital he remembered, of course, but the buildings and architecture were thoroughly familiar.

But instead of nostalgia, he was assaulted by a bitter sense of revulsion.

This eastern continent had originally been home to the nation-state of Legnare, yet not a speck of the country's unique culture and customs could be seen in this city. After fleeing from the central continent, Altane had rooted out an entire country from its home and taken this land for themselves. Not a single sign of coexistence, not a shred of respect for their culture—all that remained was crazed obsession and the desperation to cling to past glory.

It wasn't difficult to imagine how such a wretched outcome had come to be—by the hands of none other than the imperial family and their unending obsession with Altane. Long ago, Raid had borne the brunt of their foolishness time and time again, and that was why he found himself sympathizing with the Demon Lord sometimes.

Humans didn't change that easily. Time may pass, but the mistakes of today will be repeated someday in the future. So long as

the fools at the top refused to listen to reason, desperately clinging to things that didn't matter, nothing was bound to change.

So it was time to take matters into his own hands.

"If my homeland has strayed from its path...then I need to be the one to set it straight," Raid muttered solemnly to himself.

At the end of his narrowed gaze was the imperial castle—and once he'd gotten close enough, he whipped out a kick at the sturdy walls, smashing it to pieces. Amid the crumbling rubble, Raid landed quietly inside a large room, standing imposingly as if he'd always been there.

"I never thought I'd see you again...Viteos Altane."

Before him, thrown to the ground from the blast, was an elderly man. His trembling limbs pinned him in place, his eyes wide and bloodshot—but the emotion raging behind them was far too complex to simply name as either fear or anger. "Raid Freeden...!"

"Yeah, that's me," he muttered as he took a quiet step forward. "The Hero of your nation, Your Imperial Majesty."

Suddenly, a large-bodied man burst from the rubble and charged at Raid. "How dare you oppose our great empire, wicked fiend! *Raaaaah!*"

Raid had never seen the man, but the broadsword in his hands—*that* he could recognize. Without a doubt, that had been his partner on the battlefield long ago. In this world, however, the sword—brimming with immense power—served as the symbol of the Hero of Altane and had been bequeathed upon Valtos of the imperial family, the third person to prove compatible to the Hero's power, as per Ariel's intel. So this large man must have been Valtos.

But none of that mattered right now.

"No insurgent shall lay their dirty hands upon my father and His Ma— *Agh!*"

Raid breezily parried the broadsword and grabbed the man by the neck. "Sorry, bud. I'm not here to play."

"Urgh... I-I am the p-proud...Hero of Altane...!"

"Calling yourself a Hero in front of *me*? Try again when you can walk the walk."

Valtos grunted as he tried to pry Raid's hands off his neck, but to

no avail. It was like clawing at a boulder with bare hands. Raid watched him coldly—this man was hardly worth a single sword swing, no more a threat to Raid than the passing breeze. That he had announced himself as a Hero at all was the very epitome of impertinence. A true Hero would prove their might with pure and irrefutable *power*.

"If you've got business with me, you'll have to wait till after I deal with this guy." Raid tightened his grip, glaring coldly as Valtos turned red in the face and began frothing from his mouth. "So *stay out of my way*."

His low growl was followed by a loud crash as he slammed Valtos into the ground. Valtos's large body shot through the steel flooring, sending the man plummeting through floor after floor, until everything fell silent once more.

Finally, Raid lifted his head to Viteos. "Your Imperial Majesty, Emperor Viteos. Your humble subject has come to offer an apology," he said, speaking the same way he had in the past. "In order to attend my friend's funeral and to pay her my final respects, I abandoned my responsibilities as general and failed to fulfill my duties to the end. For my inability to devote myself to my homeland, I ask for your forgiveness."

Viteos stared at him, his eyes wide and bewildered. "Wh-What are you...saying...?"

"I have also come here to apologize for my failure to save you, Your Majesty. My imprudence and thoughtlessness have led to this unfavorable outcome," he continued, looking down on Viteos with pity. "You took to the throne at such a young age after the passing of the previous emperor, yet I dared to place my heavy hopes upon you. I had spent so long deluding myself into thinking that you would one day become an emperor."

"I asked you—what are you saying?!" Viteos snapped, his voice trembling. "I inherited the holy and noble blood of the imperial family, sat upon the throne as the seventeenth emperor of Altane, and ruled over the empire until my hair turned gray!"

"That was but a title granted to you by your birth—a show of your status, nothing more. What I sought from you, Your

Majesty...was for you to *be* an emperor." Of course, such a notion was most likely beyond Viteos's comprehension. "An emperor is nothing without his empire, and an empire is nothing without its people. Yet you looked down on your people and exerted no effort to fulfill your duties to them. To this day, you fail to comprehend what it means to be an emperor." And he probably never would—not when he was still the empty, thoughtless person who only ever sought to imitate his father.

"Your Majesty," Raid continued. "Do you remember how many of your subjects you have killed to this day?"

"What...? 'Killed'? When have I ever laid my hands on my subjects?!"

"Every time you made a decision that caused their deaths," Raid answered. "The soldiers who fought for their motherland. The aristocrats who were purged by your orders. Citizens who lost their lives by your policies. Every single one—do you remember them?"

"Why do I have to remember such insignificant creatures?!"

"Yes, I understand. This is how you are. Everything you did in the past and here in this world...is firm and irrefutable proof."

Viteos had caused countless deaths while he was on the throne in the past, and that hadn't changed when he took over in the First World. He'd ordered an immense number of sacrifices to send Dian and his men to the Second World, then ordered *them* to offer their lives to connect the two worlds, and had even given them the ultimatum to take their own heads should everything fail. Sometimes, the situation did truly call for such inhumane methods, but this was not one such situation.

But that wasn't the extent of the atrocities that Viteos had committed; it had already begun when they were finding new Heroes. Heroes were determined by compatibility, so how had Viteos ensured that Valtos would be chosen? The answer was simple: he slaughtered all the designated Heroes until he had been selected.

Ancient texts stated that Hero would dwell within those with the right qualities, and this was the case for the spell they'd recreated as well. Thus, Viteos ordered for the spell to be cast over and over, killing each person who had refused to take on the responsibility, all

the way until the person he'd wanted—the young man of imperial blood—had finally been selected. In his eagerness to grant the imperial family the immense power of a Hero, not once had he looked back at the mountains of corpses and sea of blood he'd formed in his wake. A truly foolish and irredeemable human till the very end.

"Your Majesty, I didn't save all those innocent lives just for you to mindlessly play around with them and discard them like toys."

Viteos's growth was frozen; it hadn't moved in a very long time, from the moment he'd decided to stop thinking for himself. To shield himself from his father's cold and uncaring gaze, Viteos had chosen to remain an immature child for life.

"I am of the belief that an emperor's every action and word is laden with great responsibility, for they stand above their people. Thus, when your actions and words have caused your people's deaths"—Raid held his sword overhead—"you must take responsibility."



The gleaming blade, his biting words, and that frigid look in his eyes—realizing where this was going, Viteos lifelessly hung his head. "Why..." he muttered, gaze empty and resigned. "I didn't do anything wrong... I was just trying to be a proper Altanian emperor..."

"Indeed, you are not at fault. When the ruler strays from their path, it is the vassals' duty to admonish them—yet I turned a blind eye and senselessly hoped that you would amend your ways. Thus, I am the one at fault."

These words were his parting gift for Viteos, because nothing else Raid said could reach him anymore. Raid had known from the moment Viteos had given him that decree following the Sage's death that all the time he'd spent waiting and believing had been for naught. Now, even faced with his inevitable death, Viteos still failed to comprehend his mistakes. So at the very least, Raid would let him pass free of guilt and remorse. No matter how irredeemable or pitiful he was, and no matter if he'd ultimately been the product of his era and birth, he at least deserved salvation in his final moments—this was Raid's duty as a former vassal of the great empire.

"Your Imperial Majesty, Emperor Viteos," said Raid for the last time. "Please pardon your subject's act of treachery."

After uttering his final words as the man's vassal, Raid swung his broadsword. The silence in the air was punctuated by a single dull *thud*, following which Raid solemnly closed his eyes.

The hatred Raid had felt for the man was real, and the atrocities he'd committed as a tyrant were inexcusable—but Raid could not deny that Viteos had been his sovereign and that he needed to end things with his own two hands. He'd always regretted that he couldn't save that irredeemable fool himself—but now, he could finally part ways with his homeland for good.

Of course, his business here was still far from over.

"Now then... Time to clean up," he muttered as he swung his sword down, whipping the blood off his blade. His gaze shifted toward the man curled up in the corner of the room. "Hey, you—old man."

"How dare you address me with such uncouth speech?! I am of

the proud and noble imperial family—”

“Wow, I’m getting a serious case of déjà vu here. Do all you folks in the imperial family talk this way? Maybe I have a few more heads to lop off after all.”

“Eek! F-Forgive me—I apologize! I take it you are Lord Raid Freeden, yes?! Oh, how could I show such disrespect to the great and legendary Sage?!” The old man—evidently a member of the imperial family—threw himself to the ground in a complete one-eighty.

Raid was tempted to ask him where all his pride went, but it seemed he’d hardly had any to begin with, seeing as he’d left everything in Viteos’s hands. The passing of time seemed to have done no favors for the imperial family’s competence. Regardless, that didn’t matter anymore.

“Order your soldiers to stand down right now,” Raid demanded. “And gather every political authority in the empire, including your family.”

“A-Are you truly going to...p-purge us?!”

“Like hell I will. My business was with Viteos and Viteos alone—I don’t plan to lay a hand on anybody else. If anything, I’m about to offer you guys a surefire way of survival in this ruined world.” Raid’s lips curled into a cunning grin. “So, how about it? Give us Altane—and we’ll give you a future.”

Epilogue

Once all the fighting in the capital had ceased, Raid gathered all the aristocrats of Altane—including the imperial family—and presented his offer.

"You will...give us Paradise?" the former emperor echoed, brows furrowed.

"That's right," Raid replied. "We will offer the imperial family and all households of authority the right to move to Paradise. In exchange, we demand the rights to dismantle and temporarily govern the entire Altanian empire."

"What?! Govern and...*dismantle* our ancient empire?! Preposterous!"

"It's a necessary step to fight against the polluted mana ravaging this world. We'll be needing manpower and personnel, among other things, but under your current bureaucracy, it'll take ages to get the permission we need. To set up a quick and efficient chain of command, it's better to start from scratch."

"Lord Freeden, if I may..." The previous emperor cleared his throat. "In that case, would it not suffice for us to temporarily grant you and your associates the highest level of authority?"

"What, so we can save your world as an act of charity?" Raid huffed. "You might not know this, so let me tell you now: Neither the Hero nor the Sage are pushovers. We came here to save your world from inevitable ruin, and the residents of Paradise are even offering their home. So now, we're demanding your country as our just reward."

"But then...what if you fail to save the world?"

"Then we'd drop dead here with the rest of humanity while you folks get to live out your lives in Paradise. Why not start another country there, if you're so dead set on being in power?"

"Er... I ask this as confirmation, and not because I doubt your

words... Is Paradise truly free of polluted mana and safe from the Calamities?”

“I can offer you the info we’ve gathered during our stay there and even set up a meeting between you and their current residents once we bring them here. If you’d like, we can also prove that we reached Paradise—though I’m sure our ability to single-handedly crush Calamities is evidence enough. In any case, we can guarantee your safety until you move into Paradise.”

“Then, say you do manage to save this world—what will happen to us then?”

“Whether you step out and live with the rest of humanity or hole up in Paradise forever, it’s all up to you. All the rights to Paradise are yours as long as you agree with our conditions.”

“But then that means...we can no longer return to our current positions.”

“Well, yeah, ’cause we’re dismantling your empire. But if you’ve earned your position once, then you should be able to earn it again, no? Moreover, when the world starts anew with a clean slate, there will be plenty of opportunities for you to grasp—if you take the chance, that is.”

“And...how many people can live in Paradise?”

“There are five hundred residents at present, but given the space and facilities, it can probably fit twice that number—just barely enough for all of you and your families, though, so don’t think of bringing any servants. We can handle the severance pay and reemployment of your current staff.”

The imperial family and aristocrats asked question after question, all of which Raid had been expecting and prepared answers for. Even then, the meeting was lengthy—understandably, as this was a huge decision on par with relinquishing Paradise. Anybody would hesitate when told to dismantle their motherland and abandon all the riches and status they had accumulated all their lives—who more than these people who desperately clung to such material wealth and worldly status amid a ruined world?

However, Raid knew very well how to deal with these kinds of people.

"You guys know me as the Sage, don't you? Well, I've already got a plan in mind, and it won't be too hard to execute with the right people and information at my disposal. Still, nothing is for certain." Raid cast his eyes down for a brief moment before sweeping his gaze across the faces in the room. "Success or failure, 'Altane' will be no more. But as long as you're alive, you can always regain your power—and the only way to do that is to stay safe within the confines of Paradise."

"Yes, we are well aware... Still, it is a difficult decision."

"I understand. But you do need to move to Paradise before we can get our plan started. The fighting might grow too intense for you to move in after."

"And what if we refuse to move to Paradise?"

"Well, like I said, we can't start our plan until we settle who gets to move in, so we'd give the Lambut family an opportunity to stay and then select from whoever else wants to move. Naturally, this will be finalized and unchangeable after the plan starts." Raid nodded. "Regardless, it's only fair that all of you get first dibs—you've governed this nation until now, and we know that handing it over to us is no easy decision."

Why did humans seek status and power? Because they enjoyed being special and standing above others.

So, how would one go about convincing such people? The answer was simple—

"So, chosen ones: Raise your hand if you wish to lead the future of humanity."

—so simple, in fact, that Raid couldn't quite stop his lips from curling into a smirk.

◇

After nearly a week full of meetings, the Altanian upper class decided to move to Paradise. From there, it took two more weeks to make the necessary preparations and complete the move. Raid and Eluria cleared up all the Offspring along the route and also had the giants sweep up the area around Paradise. With the new residents in

place, they then escorted the former residents to the capital.

"Wooow! A castle! A super-duper humongous castle!" cheered Norn, all giddy hops and sparkling eyes. "Is this our new house?!"

"Sure is," said Raid. "You and the former residents of Paradise have this castle and the aristocrats' estates all for yourselves until things settle down."

"Wowie! Oh, by the way, what's that big chair over there?"

"Eh. You can think of it as a special chair, just for you."

"Really?! I want to see how comfy it is!" Norn skipped across the room and plopped right down on the imperial throne.

Once everything was over and the dust settled, that throne would officially belong to the Lambut family. Eluria would make a new World Tree, teach Norn everything she needed to know about it, and have their family build a new country from the ground up.

Would everything go well? They didn't know, but that was how the future was always meant to be—neither a guaranteed success nor fated destruction, but an uncertain path that could branch out in whatever direction they desired. Now that they had steered the world away from certain ruin, they simply had to help steer this new country onto a good path of its own. Raid smiled as his mind wandered to thoughts of the future...but his wistful mood was cut short by a piggish cry.

"Waaah! To think... To think I'd get to witness such a grand promotion for my family...!" Millis wailed, tears streaming down her face. "You know, I was just joking when I talked about my descendants building a castle—but here it is anyway, right before my eyes! I'm so moved, the tears just won't stop!"

Raid shrugged. "They didn't build this one, though. We basically stole it."

"Let me have my moment, will you?!"

"Also," Eluria added, "once everything's settled, we'll probably have everyone move back to the central continent. So this castle will be abandoned and maybe even demolished later on."

"So I've witnessed my dreams become reality...only to watch it crumble to pieces down the line?!"

Wisel hummed. "Then you'll just have to build a new one after

the move. You could even set it up in Norberg."

"Oh, that actually sounds feasible with the giants' help," Alma mused. "Maybe we'll actually get to see Norberg turn into the capital city in the future. Who knows?"

"But we still don't know what will happen to the rithmoles without polluted mana," Eluria muttered thoughtfully. "My findings so far reveal that Calamities are like manabeasts that hyper-evolved to adapt to this extreme environment, so it might be possible to revert them back to normal. Of course, Offspring are a different matter entirely."

With Altane now in their hands, Eluria had finally gotten ahold of all the accumulated research and findings over the years. Thus, while Raid and Alma had been escorting the new tenants of Paradise across the continent, Eluria had stayed with the rest in the capital to progress her investigation into the mana pollution of this world. With some more progress, she'd determined it should be possible for her to revert the world's biosphere to its original state once everything was fixed.

"In any case..." Alma sighed and shook her head. "You're as merciless as ever, Your Excellency."

"Suddenly insulting me? What did I do?" Raid asked innocently.

"You moved all those bigwigs to Paradise."

"And what's so merciless about that? They're safe and sound, aren't they?"

"Yeah—safe and sound, and nothing more. No way those spoiled and entitled moneybags can survive life out in the sticks."

Paradise was a safe haven, but it was entirely self-sufficient. In other words, what the aristocrats used to leave to their servants, they now had to do themselves. Life in Paradise would be the complete opposite of their luxurious lifestyle, and it might even be too tough on some of them—but Raid had already known that when he made the offer.

"I never forced them, though, did I? It was always an offer," he said with a shrug. "If they can't even look that far ahead, then I don't need them here. Most of the time, organizations and countries fall not because of external threats but because of internal

incompetence."

He hadn't been lying when he'd said that they needed to centralize the authority for their plans, but the main reason Raid wanted Altane dismantled and the aristocrats moved to Paradise was to get rid of any miscellaneous variables. From now on, they would be working toward saving the world—he didn't have any time to waste on selfish aristocrats butting in for their typical power plays and greedy schemes, so he took the chance to lure them out and strip them of their power and influence.

"If they're foolish enough to be blinded by their own safety and fail to look ahead and plan for the future, then they're more than just deadweight—they're a *hindrance*."

"True... There's no benefit to keeping them here."

"And there you have it. There's no space for such a pesky lot when now's the time for us to band together to save the world."

"But some of them turned down the offer, didn't they?"

"Well, that means they're at least a tad bit smarter than the rest. And now that we're all in the same boat, they should be more cooperative. They've been briefed on our future plans, so I doubt they'll be causing us many problems."

The name "Raid Freeden" held a lot of sway in this world, all the more now that Raid himself possessed the power of a Hero. Now that he had personally briefed them on their plans, they must have come to the conclusion that cooperating now would reap them more benefits in the future.

"Any who take the initiative to offer resources or assistance are trustworthy," Raid added. "We can assign those people as temporary assistants to the Lambuts, and that should help set this new country on its way."

"Wow... Saving the world *and* prepping personnel while you're at it? It's just too easy for you, isn't it?"

"Well, things *have* gotten a whole lot easier for us now that everything's in our control. Military authority, personnel allocation, and a safe base of operations. Not to mention...we've finally gotten the information we need." Raid's gaze fell to the side, where his hand rested atop a box. The box was sealed tight with magic—

naturally, as it contained the manuscripts left behind by the venerable Sage Raid Freeden.

Raid gave the box a small pat as his lips formed into a smile. “Now then...let’s take a look at the Sage’s Codex, shall we?”

Afterword

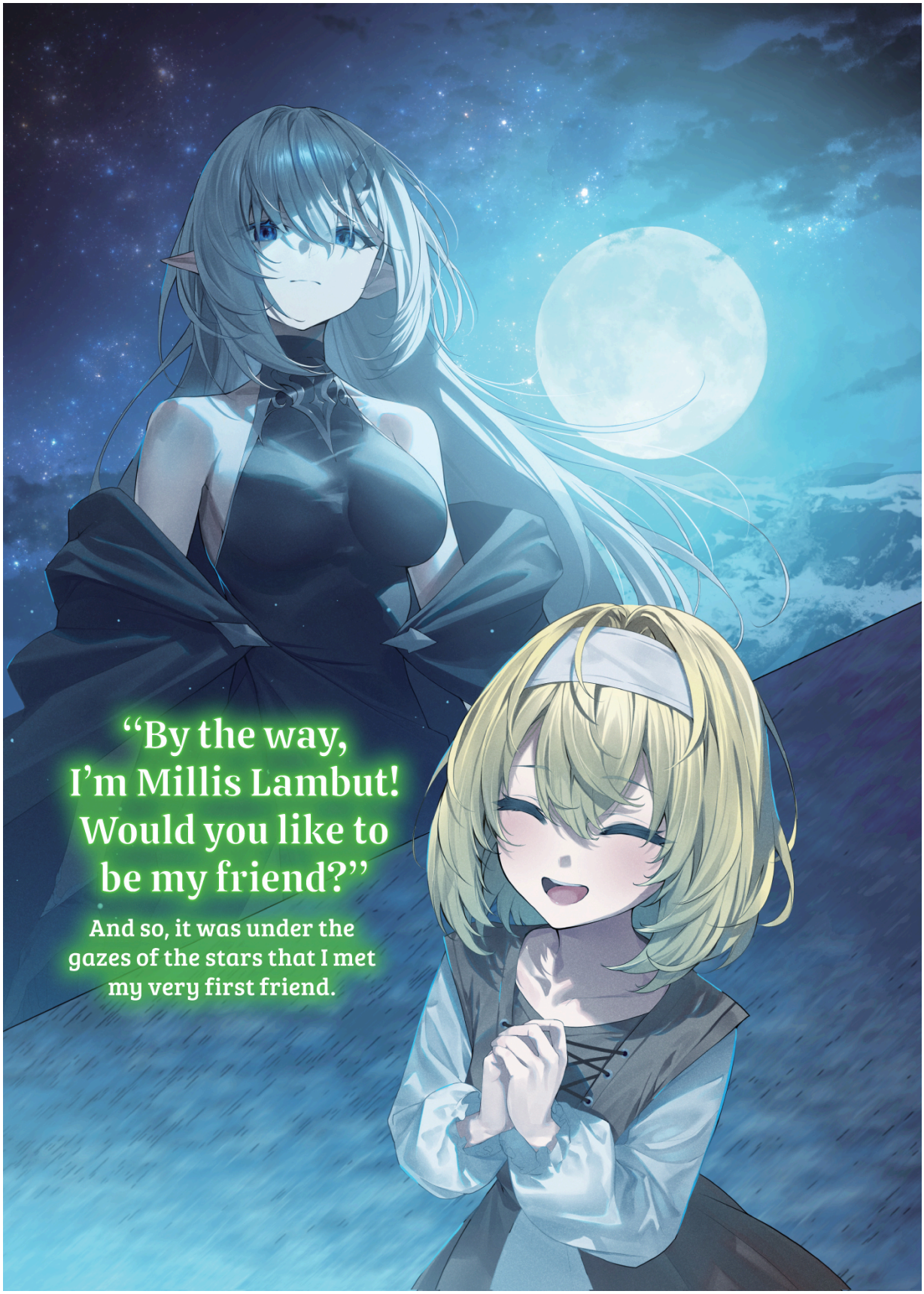
Greetings, distinguished readers. My name is Washiro Fujiki. I don’t have much space to work with this volume, so allow me to keep my message short:

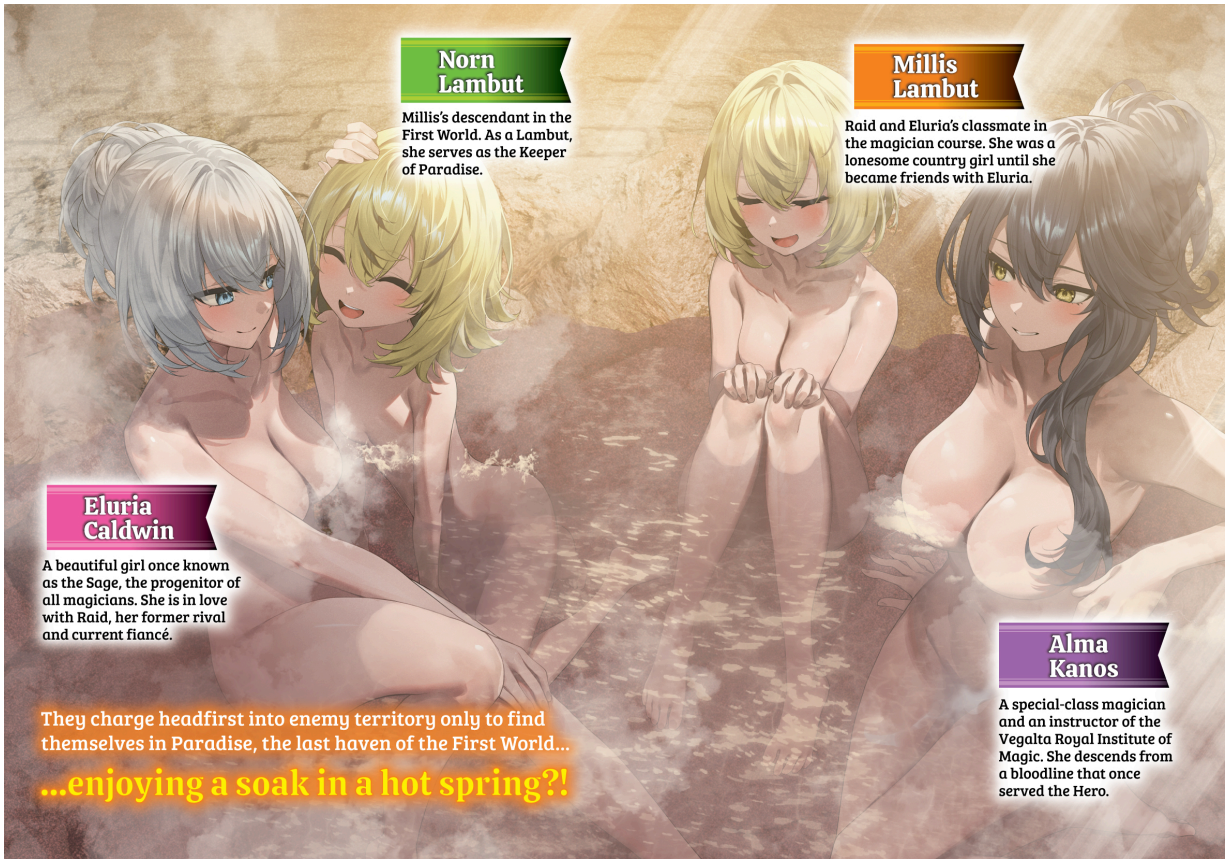
I am so terribly sorry for the delay on volume 5!!!

Know that my apology comes from the very bottom of my heart. I may have gotten sick, but that was no excuse to miss the deadline. Nuh-uh. Not only did I disappoint my readers, but I even caused trouble for everyone involved in the process... I will work hard to pull myself together. In any case, I did my best to ensure that this volume was at least worth the wait, so I hope you can forgive me...!

To my editor, Heiro the illustrator, everyone involved in my work, and the readers who purchased this volume—I am lacking in many ways, but I do hope that you are willing to join me on this ride for just a little bit longer.

Washiro Fujiki


“By the way, I’m Millis Lambut! Would you like to be my friend?”
And so, it was under the gazes of the stars that I met my very first friend.


Norn Lambut
Millis's descendant in the First World. As a Lambut, she serves as the Keeper of Paradise.
Millis Lambut
Raid and Eluria's classmate in the magician course. She was a lonesome country girl until she became friends with Eluria.
Eluria Caldwin
A beautiful girl once known as the Sage, the progenitor of all magicians. She is in love with Raid, her former rival and current fiancé.
Alma Kanos
A special-class magician and an instructor of the Vegalta Royal Institute of Magic. She descends from a bloodline that once served the Hero.
They charge headfirst into enemy territory only to find themselves in Paradise, the last haven of the First World...
...enjoying a soak in a hot spring?!


Silver hair that shimmered beneath the icy light and eyes as chilling as the ocean deep—
these features were spoken of in fearful whispers among humanity to this day, for they belonged to the one who had brought ruin to this world, whose name was carved into every human soul.
“The Demon Lord...!”

Bonus Short Story: Salt Isn't Always Salty

Food is vital to humans—indispensable to their survival, in fact. Eluria had always been of this mindset, religiously advocating that food was just as important as sleep.

"Ugh... Manabeast meat, *again*... So tough, so stinky, so gross..."

"I never thought the day would come when I'd rather eat *bugs*..."

Thus, when she saw Millis and Wisel lamenting their meal, Eluria placed her hand on her hip with a frown. "You must be grateful for your food," she scolded.

Meanwhile, Raid and Alma watched them with identically strained smiles.

"Well, I get where they're coming from," Raid said. "Despite all the effort it takes to extract the mana from the meat, it's still much leaner and tougher than ordinary animal meat. Not to mention the gamey stench is a hundred times worse too, since manabeasts tend to become omnivores to maintain their large bodies."

"You're right about that," Alma agreed. "Only a few species taste good. Typically, manabeast cuisine is more of a delicacy—not the type of thing many get the chance to try."

"And here we are, eating it for nearly an entire week now," Millis grumbled.

"We're even learning how to procure other sources of food and water while out in the wild," Wisel added. "Having nothing but disgusting meat at the end of such exhausting training is taking a heavy mental toll on me..."

Alma folded her arms. "If you ask me, it's plenty impressive that you've lasted a week under these conditions. I've seen first-class magicians throw in the towel halfway through the type of survival training you two are doing."

"The fruits of their labor are showing." Eluria nodded in satisfaction. "Ten out of ten."

Resting her chin on her hand, Alma turned to the girl and shrugged. "Then there's *you*, running that strenuous 'training' on a daily basis. Ah, so scary..."

Incidentally, this was the same type of training that Eluria had given the Vegaltan army in her past life. She'd ensured that the regimen was especially severe so that those with less than commendable moral compasses would never get their hands on a weapon as powerful as magic. In the past, hardly ten percent of participants completed the entire course; sometimes, she could even count the graduates on both her hands. Thus, seeing Wisel and Millis breeze through her training showed Eluria that they were clearly a cut above the rest.

Of course, this also served as plenty of proof that eating manabeast meat constituted rigorous training to begin with.

"You get to choose your dinner today," Eluria decided. "Manabeast meat or edible bugs?"

"Bugs," they answered without missing a beat.

Eluria nodded. "An immediate answer. This proves you're now capable of eating anything, which marks the end of this training." She reached into the bag behind her and took out a small pouch. "Starting today, salt is no longer banned from your meals."

Millis let out a huge gasp. "Wisel, look! Salt... It's salt!"

"H-Hand it over...! Quick, hurry!" Wisel demanded, eyes bloodshot.

Alma shot Eluria a dubious look. "Eluria, is that really *just* salt?"

"Mm-hmm. Just salt."

"Really? 'Cause with that kind of reaction, I would've thought you've been mixing it in with some crazy drugs."

Eluria shrugged. "Salt is necessary to the human body. It's probably just their survival instincts kicking in," she said as she sprinkled a generous pinch of salt over the manabeast meat.

Millis squealed in delight as she immediately dived in. "Yes, yes! The salt is counteracting the meat's bitter taste!"

"Ha ha ha! This is edible... Yes, with salt, *anything* is edible!!!"

Wisel howled as he wolfed down his meal.

Alma grimaced as she watched the two devour their food like ravenous beasts. "Eluria, are you *sure* that's salt?" she asked again, for good measure.

"To these two, it might just be *magic* salt," Eluria mused. To be clear though, she was certain it was just ordinary salt. Who knew why they were acting so deranged? In any case, she cleared her throat and continued, "I'm sure you two understand now. In extreme situations where you can't pick and choose your food, salt can help mellow out any unsavory flavors. It's also vital to contracting and maintaining your muscles, which keeps you in tip-top shape, ready for whatever may come your way. So after securing water, food, and shelter, always proceed to procuring salt."

"We've carved this lesson into our souls!" Millis exclaimed. "Henceforth, Wisel and I shall give the almighty salt the reverence it deserves!"

"We mustn't forget to pay our respects whenever we see an ocean or a salt lake!" Wisel added with an eager nod.

"I feel like I've just witnessed the birth of a new cult," Alma remarked dryly.

Raid chuckled. "Can't say I don't get them... I've been saved by salt countless times in the past," he said, recalling his and Eluria's tumultuous past.

"I knew it. Salt fixes everything." Eluria bobbed her head in agreement before looking up at Raid. "But too much salt is also bad."

Millis gasped. "D-Do we have to eat this meat without salt again?!"

"But I can no longer imagine life without salt...!" Wisel wailed.

Eluria shook her head. "You can still use it. We just need to tweak it a bit." She stabbed her fork into a piece of manabeast meat and continued, "A small electric jolt—which you can summon with a bit of mana—can accentuate the salty flavor while using less of the mineral itself."

Raid hummed. "First I've heard of that."

"Of course, you need access to the right mana branch for it, but

one person in a group can be responsible for casting it on everyone's food."

"How well does it accentuate the saltiness?"

"Taste for yourself," said Eluria as she offered the meat to him.

Raid accepted the food and chewed with a hum. "Ohh... You're right. It does taste saltier than usual."

"This is something even you can't do, Raid, so I'll do it for you every meal."

"You're a lifesaver. I'll never say no to yummier food."

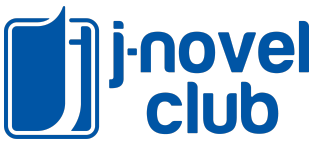
A smile bloomed on Eluria's face as she watched Raid enjoy the meat. "Mm-hmm. Here, say 'ahh,'" she said, offering yet another bite on her fork.

"Wisel... Is it just me, or does the meat suddenly taste really sweet?" Millis mumbled.

Wisel nodded. "Seems the food got saltier for *them* but sweeter for *us*. I wonder why."

"We never need sugar with these two around," Alma agreed.

The three quietly chewed on their manabeast meat as they savored the unbridled sweetness unfolding around the couple.



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The Hero and the Sage, Reincarnated and Engaged: Volume 5
by Washiro Fujiki

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