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Prologue

When he was a child, he spent a lot of his time looking at the ceiling—wooden, old, and just about ready to collapse.

“Mom... I’m sorry...”

His mother placed a wet towel on his forehead, her face dark and clouded. “Raid... Haven’t I already told you not to push yourself?”

Such an expression, too, was a familiar sight. Day after day, sigh after sigh, not once did her expression brighten. She always took care not to sigh in her young child’s presence, but that only caused Raid more pain, for he was made constantly aware of just how much of a burden he was in this poor and desolate village.

The door opened with a creak, followed by the sound of heavy footsteps.

“Oh... Welcome home, dear,” said his mother.

“Yeah...” His father’s expression didn’t look any brighter than his mother’s as the man responded curtly to his wife’s greeting.

“How did your work go today...?”

“Hah... How else? With just one arm, a single tree’s the best I can manage in a day.” The man hung his head, exhaustion evident on his face. When Raid’s father lost his left arm in the war, he was handed a paltry sum and kicked out of the army in all but name. “Still, it’s better than nothing... I guess all my training paid off somehow. Besides, there aren’t many healthy men in this village, and securing firewood’s a matter of life or death, so the village heads were really thankful.” Smiling weakly, his father set down his bag with a dull thud. Several small and misshapen potatoes rolled over the floor. When he turned to the boy on the bed, his eyebrows drew together. “Raid’s sick again...?”

“Yes... Gurd found him collapsed in the woods.”

The man cast his eyes down, silent for a long while before finally breathing

out a sigh. “I see...”

Raid knew he couldn’t blame his father for looking so resigned. For men born in impoverished villages, joining the army was the only way to survive. While the war rapidly exacerbated poverty in Altane, it also provided steady work for those willing to take up arms. However, Raid was too weak to fight in the war. Worse yet, he was too weak to even pass each cruel winter without fear of being snuffed out like a candle in the wind...and surely too weak to waste any of their meager food on. Yet, his parents never abandoned him.

“Raid, why did you go into the woods?” His father frowned, a hint of irritation seeping into his voice. “I’m sure you know how weak your body is.”

The boy turned his hazy, feverish eyes to his father. “I wanted to...practice holding an axe...”

“An axe...?”

“I can’t become a soldier...so I want to at least help chop wood...” Raid knew that joining the army was beyond him, but he still wanted to help his father, who struggled to chop wood with his only remaining arm.

A small smile formed on his father’s lips. “I see... Then I’ll teach you once you get better.”

“Really...?”

“Yeah. I may be chopping wood now, but I used to wield a much bigger and cooler battle-axe back on the battlefield, you know?” The man placed a hand on Raid’s head and mustered his best smile for the boy. “So make sure to rest up and get well soon.”

Raid’s mother watched the father and son with a small smile on her lips.

When he thought back on it, this was one of the few times Raid could recall his parents smiling. Alas, even this meager happiness could not last. The closer winter drew, the more they struggled to get by each day. With hunger setting in, his parents’ quarrels grew more frequent, and soon they began taking it out on Raid as well, raining harsh words down on the young child.

But to Raid, his mother was still his mother. And to his mother, Raid was still

her one and only precious child in this world. One day, with tears streaming down her cheeks, she cried out, “Why? Why are you so weak?!” She was looking at him, her frail child. But she was also lamenting herself, the powerless mother who could do nothing for her poor boy—not even able to stop herself from lashing out at him.

She must have been at her limit—Raid knew, and he wanted to save her. He was useless, no more than baggage, but he still had one option available.

“Once you get on that carriage, you’ll never make it back to the village.”

The children had whispered frightful rumors among themselves—rumors of a slave merchant’s carriage. Parents beset by poverty faced the desperate need to get rid of mouths to feed, yet oftentimes they had no heart to kill their own children. For such cornered souls, this carriage came with the temptation of a far more merciful choice: sell the children off in exchange for some food and coin.

The children of the village spoke of this in fear, but to Raid, this was his one and only hope. He could save his parents by disappearing. They would no longer have to carry a burden like him. Even if he was worth no more than spare change or a measly scrap of bread, he could finally be of help to them.

So when the slave carriage arrived one night, Raid ran away from home with the intent to sell himself off before his parents could notice. However, the world would not grant him even this one wish.

“Oh? What’s a kid doing out here on his own so late at night?”

He had tried to cut through the woods to avoid the villagers’ eyes, but a lone man called out to him. The face beneath the hood was illuminated by the moonlight: a gentle smile and a touch of sleek silver hair peeking through.

Raid regarded the man with caution. “Don’t tell the villagers,” he said.

“Hm... I’m not so sure about that. It’s dangerous at night. Besides, your parents must be worried.”

“Even then, I have to go. For them,” Raid muttered as he gazed at the carriage’s light in the distance. “If I become a slave, mom and dad will get paid... I can finally help them.”

“Did you decide that for yourself?”

“Yeah. So please keep quiet about this and let me go.”

The man stroked his chin for a moment, his eyes trailing over the boy. “A Hero or a Sage,” he said suddenly. “Which do you want to be?”

Raid stared at the man in bewilderment. “What...?”

“It’s an important question. Your answer will greatly affect your future.” The man casually drew his eyes away from him and to the light of the slave carriage. “You’re a smart kid. You understood your powerlessness, figured out the best option available to you, and took action to help your parents.” His gaze fell back to Raid. “So even if you get on that carriage and sell yourself off, someday you will be treasured. People will praise your profound wisdom and come to hail you as the Sage. But...”

The man peered down at Raid, his deep, ocean-blue eyes shimmering under the moonlight. “If you were granted the choice, what would you want to be?”

Raid already had his answer.

He had always hated himself for being so weak, loathed himself for being so helpless.

“I...want to be a hero, stronger than anyone else,” he answered with clenched fists. “I hate that I cause nothing but trouble for my parents. I hate that I’m too frail to even help my dad. I’m just so weak and helpless, and I hate it... I *hate* it all!” Tears welled up in his eyes, gushing forth along with the emotions he’d been suppressing.

The man quietly smiled and nodded. “But it’s tough, you know, being a Hero. Your mom, your dad, and everyone in the world will fear you and your immense power.”

“It’s still better than being weak,” the boy mumbled.

“No, it’s not,” replied the man, his voice taking on a sharper tone for the first time. “I know a child just like you—a child who sought strength to pursue her ideals. She became stronger than anyone else...and turned the whole world into her enemy. After all that, she ended up alone, wallowing in despair.” The man’s

eyes looked far away, as if gazing at some distant future. “That child dreamed of peace and happiness for everyone around her. She hoped with all her heart...but we used her. We used her, and we even designated her as ‘evil’ without ever understanding her true feelings.”

A pained, bitter smile twisted the man’s lips, like a sinner harboring his regrets. Then, he cast his eyes down and gazed at Raid once more. “Even then, do you still wish to become a Hero?”

“If I can, then yeah.”

“Wow. You really gave that a lot of thought...”

“I’m weak. I wouldn’t know how that strong child feels.” Raid fell ill from the tiniest bit of activity and could hardly even grip an axe. A weakling like him wouldn’t understand the troubles of the strong. “So I want to become strong. I can understand those who are weak like me, but not those who are strong like that child.”

Raid was born weak and couldn’t do many things that others took for granted. “Normal” people never understood how he felt, and that only pained him even more. So Raid knew, at least, how sad it was to be all alone.

“So if I could become just as strong as that child, if I could come to know her...” Raid looked up at the man, his eyes wide and clear. “I’m sure I’d want to be friends with her too.”

The man looked at him, momentarily stunned to silence, before huffing out an airy laugh. “Ha ha... I see now. That’s why you’ll make ‘Hero’...” he mumbled, his voice trailing off as he broke out into a bright smile.

The man quietly stood. “Then you’d better not get on that carriage. You should become a Hero.”

Raid frowned. “I told you—I’m weak, so I can’t.”

“It’s all right. Keep training every day, and it’ll all work out,” the man promised as he held his hand up facing Raid. “For the Heroes,” he whispered, “have entrusted all their hopes onto you.”

That was the last thing Raid heard before he lost consciousness that night.

Chapter One

At this point in the year, the students of the Institute had long settled into their morning routines. Today, however, something was amiss: Raid sat in his classroom, elbows propped on the desk while stifling a huge yawn.

Wisel raised a brow. “What’s wrong, Raid? Didn’t get enough sleep?”

“Yeah,” Raid mumbled. “I don’t usually dream, but I had one this morning, and I just can’t seem to shake the sleep off...”

Beside him, Eluria bobbed her head. “Raid was floaty this morning.”

“How unusual,” Millis mused. “So, Lady Eluria, *you* took the helm today?”

“No. I was also floaty.”

“What a severe shortage of brain cells,” Millis whispered, aghast.

“It was horrible,” Eluria agreed, slumping glumly. “Raid was so floaty, my milk tea was about five degrees cooler than usual, my bath was two degrees too hot, and he only prepared my uniform but forgot my undergarments.”

Millis’s eyes gleamed with pity. “Oh, Raid... You work so hard every morning...”

“But thanks to that work,” Raid said, “I’ve gotten very good at handling Eluria’s floatiness.” By classifying her floatiness into levels, Raid was now able to spur on her awakening with great efficiency. His efforts had truly paid off.

“So, what kind of dream did you have?” Wisel asked.

“Oh... I know it was something that happened in the past, but I can’t really remember.” The memories were decades old, of a much harsher time in his life, so they were fragmented at best. In fact, his memories before he started training himself weren’t very clear. In any case, there wouldn’t have been much to remember anyway, living in an impoverished village just struggling to get by each day.

“Hmph... This isn’t the time to be idly chatting about dreams and whatnot.”

The four friends turned to find Fareg, arms folded with his usual haughty expression. Beside him were a ponytailed girl with black hair and a short boy with brown hair.

“It’s been a while, everyone.”

“This is extremely belated, but thank you so much for saving us before.”

Fareg’s two attendants were finally back in their uniforms, standing by his side for the first time in a long while.

Raid nodded. “Ah, that’s right. Valk, Lucas, you two are back starting today.”

“Yes. Thanks to you, we are able to return to our classes.”

“Lady Caldwin and Lord Freeden, we truly cannot thank you enough. Of course, we also extend our sincere gratitude to Lady Lambut and Lord Blanche for administering first aid.”

“Well, I get that you’re thankful to those two, but *we* didn’t really do much,” Wisel said.

“Uh-huh. The instructors took over as soon as Lady Eluria transported us.”

“Not at all,” Valk insisted, her voice solemn and tone prim. “We were told that had we not been given first aid, my arm and Lucas’s leg might have sustained lasting damage. It is all thanks to you two that we are able to come back so soon.” She curtsied and humbly lowered her head.

Beside her, Lucas nodded firmly. “Precisely as Valk said. We have been ordered by the head of House Verminant to see to it that Lord Fareg graduates without incident. Had we sustained lasting injuries, we would not have been able to fulfill the master’s orders.”

Fareg huffed. “I can graduate perfectly fine on my own capabilities, thank you very much!”

“Yes, well...” Valk sighed. “As you can see, the master had every reason to be concerned that Lord Fareg would wind up on his own, hence why we were placed by his side. So of course, House Verminant is extremely thankful to you all.”

“So *that’s* why you two stuck with him...” Millis nodded, face flat. “I had a feeling that was the case.”

“It makes so much sense, I can’t even feign shock,” Wisel agreed.

“Hang on!” Fareg snapped. “Didn’t you say you enrolled with me because we’re childhood friends?!”

“We just didn’t want to deal with your whining,” said Valk and Lucas in perfect unison.

Fareg held his head in dismay. “Agh... I can’t trust anybody in this world...!” Hearing such harsh words from his own attendants seemed to have hurt even

this hardheaded young nobleman.

In contrast, a warm smile formed on Lucas's lips. "We were worried that this exasperating young master of ours would end up all alone, so we exerted our utmost for a speedy recovery...but it seems our concerns were unfounded."

"Indeed." Valk nodded, expression similarly fond. "He told us many things about you all whenever he came to visit. We were honestly surprised to hear him talk about other people for once."

"H-Hey! Didn't I tell you not to say that in front of them?!"

"Goodness, pardon me. Very well then. I shall refrain from telling them how you came back from training and praised Lord Freeden to the high heavens, saying, *'He can't use magic but he has the most fascinating ideas.'* My lips are sealed."

"Hang on, Valk. That's not right," Lucas piped in. "Didn't Lord Fareg say, *'He's not only strong but even observes those around him very well. Good on Caldwin for finding such a good man,'* or something along those lines?"

"Oh, he's said both *and* so much more. I've honestly lost track of it all."

"Please, stop...! I can't— I can't take any more!" Fareg cried, rolling on the floor while holding his head. Suffice it to say his childhood friends knew exactly which of his buttons to press. "You're still my attendants... Do you think you can just talk to me like—"

"Oh, apologies, we seem to have forgotten to report," Valk brazenly cut in. "Just the other day, the master recalled our assignment."

"That's way too late! You should've mentioned that much sooner!" Fareg snapped.

"After hearing reports of Lord Fareg's recent activities, the master judged that he was no longer likely to end up on his own. Thus, we may now return to our usual dynamic." With that, Lucas gave a big nod as his face slackened into a bright and comfortable smile. "Jeez, the master sure gave us a tough gig this time around, huh, Valk?"

"You said it," Valk agreed with a huff. "I was contemplating punching our

young master myself back when he pointed his magic gear at Ms. Lambut in the cafeteria. Such a hopeless case, really."

"I know! He's acted up like that so many times since we were kids, then always came crying to us that he couldn't make any other friends. He just never learns, does he?"

"Stop digging up stories of my childhood!!!" Fareg screamed yet again.

"He has truly been far too rude to you all," Valk said, casually ignoring Fareg's wails. "Please rest assured, Lucas and I will ensure it never happens again by sharing with you the young master's top one hundred most embarrassing childhood stories."

"Ooh, which should we start with?" Lucas grinned. "Maybe that time he wet his bed and was so embarrassed that he came crying to me in the middle of the night, begging to swap bedsheets? Or maybe that time he charged into the bath because he thought you were a boy, then got spanked by his wet nurse till his butt turned bright red?"

"AAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!" Fareg began bashing his head over the ground, each childhood story backing him farther into a corner both mentally and emotionally. The dynamic of these three childhood friends was getting clearer by the second.

"In any case," Valk continued, "we hope you can get along well with our young master, however problematic he may be."

"Oh, actually, would you prefer we speak formally like earlier?" Lucas asked.

"I'd say nah," Raid replied. "Eluria and I don't mind. As for Wisel and Millis, you'll be teammates for the integrated exam, so you'd best get comfortable around one another now."

"Then don't mind if I do." Lucas beamed. "Thanks again, everyone!"

"We will do our best to pull our own weight," Valk said with a light bow.

With these two, plus their mentally battered young master beside them, their team for the integrated exam was finally complete.

"Speaking of," Lucas said. "We've heard from the young master that we'll be

part of your team, but are you sure it's okay...?"

"As retainers of House Verminant, we are confident that we can hold our own..." Valk frowned. "However, over the past month, we have failed to keep up with our training as we focused on recuperating."

Unlike the simulation exam, the integrated exam would be held with magic institutes from across the land. A generous two weeks were allocated for it, but there wasn't much leeway when factoring in the exam preparations and the travel time to the host institute.

However, Raid and Eluria had already factored Valk and Lucas's addition to the team in their plans while teaching. "We've heard about your magic from the kid," Raid said. "The roles were also decided under the assumption that you two wouldn't be at a hundred percent yet, so no problems there."

Eluria nodded, confidently clenching her fist. "Raid and I discussed things, and everything looks good."

Raid was in charge of their team's general strategy, while Eluria made the minute adjustments and optimizations with her input as a magician. There was no doubt they would be able to operate as a proper unit. That said, there was just one thing that was entirely up to them:

"As long as you two work like your life depends on it," Raid and Eluria finished.

Valk solemnly gazed into the distance. "I see now. This must be why the young master returned as a tattered rag every day."

"Looks like we're destined for the same fate soon..." Lucas chuckled dryly.

It was unfortunate that they'd have to exert themselves so soon after recovering, but given the time constraints, cramming couldn't be avoided.

Raid shrugged. "Eluria and I will be getting pretty busy over there, preparing for our special exam and conducting an investigation, but we'll find time to look over your form and give you advice, so don't sweat it."

"An investigation?" Millis tilted her head. "Is there something going on in Palmare?"

Their upcoming integrated exam was set in Palmare, a small country on the continent's eastern coast. Aside from facing the vast eastern sea, it was also home to rivers both above and below ground, as well as many lakes. The abundance and variety of these bodies of water had earned it the nickname of "Water Capital." It was also famous as a tourist destination in the eastern region.

However, Raid's eyes were set elsewhere. "Just so you know, we're not going sightseeing," he told Millis. "Eluria and I are going to investigate *west* of Palmare."

Millis frowned. "But isn't west of Palmare...just a ginormous desert?"

"And a ton of ruins." Eluria nodded.

Wisel's ears perked up at the word, his eyes widening in realization. "I see. You're going to investigate the *past*, aren't you?"

"That we are," Raid affirmed.

A thousand years ago, the eastern region of the continent had been unified under Altane. Now it had been wiped off the map and some of the finer topography around the region had changed, but that desert region was unmistakably where Altane's imperial capital once stood—a shift that seemed unnatural in Raid's eyes. Granted, the capital was never blessed with thriving flora or fauna, and what little they had was often mowed down for land development. Still, it was hard to believe the entire area had transformed into a desert within a millennium. Hence, there was a high chance the dramatic change was someone's effort to cover up Altane's existence.

"Ms. Alma has been there once herself," said Eluria, "but we don't want to miss anything, so we've decided to take a closer look ourselves."

"Besides," Raid added, "we're taking a separate exam, so we can get that over with quickly and free up our schedule. Then we can investigate more."

"Get it over with...?" Millis balked. "Um, your exam *is* going to be handled by special-class magicians, isn't it?"

"Eh. We'll manage," said the couple.

“You’re brushing off the era’s greatest magicians like specks of dust!” Millis lamented, vehemently shaking her head.

Meanwhile, Fareg knit his brow. “A desert region with lots of ruins... Are you talking about Libynia Desert?”

Raid turned to him. “Oh? You know about it?”

“Of course I do. Libynia Desert is the largest manabeast-infested land in the eastern region. Investigations there have stalled because of the harsh environment, and use of large-scale magic is also prohibited due to the risk of damaging the ruins... Moreover, there have been many sightings of unidentified manabeasts.” Fareg turned to Valk and Lucas with a grimace, likely recalling the armored dragon they’d encountered during the simulation exam. “Besides, Libynia Desert is not solely under Palmare’s jurisdiction; it’s jointly managed and monitored by its adjacent territories. Even a special-class magician can’t easily gain permission to enter. Perhaps with status like mine or Caldwin’s, you could manage, but then you’d still need *months* for the whole process.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that,” Raid said as his gaze slid to the front of the classroom. Alma was leaning against the door, letting out a huge and leisurely yawn. The corner of Raid’s lips quirked up. “You see, we happen to have some pretty powerful aces up our sleeves.”

◇

Raid and Eluria followed Alma out of the classroom and into a drawing room. The moment they stepped inside, Eluria was swept away at lightning speed.

“ELURIAAAAA!!!” Princess Kris squealed, nuzzling her cheek against the girl’s. “Ahhh! So soft, so squishy! All hail Eluria’s puffy cheeks!”

“All hail my puffy cheeks...” Eluria mumbled, staring blankly at the ceiling, resigned to her fate. Raid thought the princess had only been so enthusiastic last time because it had been their long-awaited reunion, but now it was looking like this was just her standard greeting for her dear friend.

“Um... Excuse me, Your Highness.” Alma stared at the bizarre creature before her and cleared her throat. “Could we move on to our discussion?”

“No, give me a moment! I’ve yet to replenish my stock of Eluria-ness!”

“Ah, okay. Then let’s just proceed as is, shall we?”

“But Ms. Alma...” Eluria trembled, looking to her teacher and seeking salvation. “My cheeks... My cheeks will die...!”

“Believe in your puffy cheeks and hang in there,” said Alma with a shrug. “Anyway, you’ve gotten permission to enter Libynia Desert, right, Your Highness?”

Princess Kris smirked. “But of course! I’ve already sent notice of your short-term investigation to Palmare’s government and the adjacent territories.” The princess smoothed her smug expression before she continued, “In their efforts to suppress manabeast attacks, the adjacent territories expend tremendous funds on monitoring the desert and stationing their own magicians to guard the area. None of them would dare turn down the chance for several special-class magicians to step in and do away with some of the manabeasts.”

Manabeasts, compared to other wildlife, caused horrendous damage to human settlements. Not only did they harm people and property, but the reconstruction, compensation, and aid needed after the damage was done led to continuous long-term expenses. Hence, magicians were deployed around Designated Danger Zones to prevent manabeast attacks. However, magicians were limited in number, cost more than ordinary patrol guards, and were still needed in other Designated Danger Zones.

Moreover, when it came to Libynia Desert, it wasn’t a simple matter of sending in magicians to hunt the manabeasts. They would have to move within the harsh environment with limited supplies and safeguard the unexplored ruins. The manabeasts in the area were relatively intelligent, so the magicians would have to keep a constant eye out for counterattacks and retaliation until the very end. With many factors at play, the desert wasn’t an easy location to step into.

However, special-class magicians could easily brave all these conditions.

“If several special-class magicians cull the manabeasts in the desert,” Princess Kris continued, “the adjacent territories would finally get some breathing room. They could even conjure new countermeasures depending on the investigation results and spare funds.”

Special-class magicians were on a completely different level when it came not just to power and knowledge, but also to applying those skills in the field. They could handle the strongest of manabeasts and knew their way around the harshest environments. Even a post-investigation surprise attack would mean nothing in the face of their decisive precision. Clearly, they were the right people for the job. The only reasons these personnel had never been sent to investigate Libynia Desert before were because there was a very low chance of the desert manabeasts breaching into human settlements, the current measures were sufficient, and the limited number of special-class magicians had been scattered around, prioritizing other Designated Danger Zones.

"Raid Freeden possesses a yet unknown power, and Eluria Caldwin's limits have yet to be fully grasped. For these two exceptional students, two special-class magicians have been invited to dispense their exam..." Princess Kris smiled. "With Alma Kanos, your class instructor, that completes the investigation team of three special-class magicians. A quite satisfactory lineup, no?"

"Well, you've certainly played your cards very nicely... Still, it's almost scary how you wrapped all the adjacent territories around your fingers so quickly..." Alma shuddered.

"For the most part, I've simply made good use of the royal family's status. Nonetheless, I will have you know I've taken part in my fair share of projects and plans. Could I pride myself as a royal without the ability to persuade and move the people?" Princess Kris proudly held her head up, but she soon lowered it to glare at Alma. "And I take it Raid and Eluria will be accompanying you on your investigation?"

Alma smiled. "Hmm? I've just unofficially hired two porters, that's all."

"No need to make excuses before me. I've long noticed that you're involved with them in some way. Besides, if Eluria *must* accompany you, then I can simply order you to protect her with your life." Princess Kris pulled Eluria closer and squished their cheeks together. "And you will never be pardoned if you so much as allow a scratch on this adorable face!"

Alma shrugged. "On cheeks *that* puffy? She'd probably be fine."

“Certainly! When you put it that way, I feel much more assured!”

“Your expectations are too heavy for my cheeks...” Eluria drooped, thoroughly discouraged by the ridiculous exchange.

“Oh...” Then, Alma turned to the princess once more. “Speaking of, Your Highness, who are the two other special-class magicians participating?”

“The pair who preside over Legnare,” she answered. “It seems they’ve been planning to cross over to this continent for a separate investigation. The Magicians’ Association has relayed to us that they are to conduct Raid and Eluria’s exam in between this business.”

“Ugh... They just *had* to choose the tricky ones, didn’t they?” Alma grumbled, creasing her brows.

Raid turned to her and asked, “Tricky? Not just strong?”

“Hm... I think Eluria could give you a better answer.”

“Mm... If they’re magicians from Legnare, then ‘tricky’ does fit.” Eluria visibly grimaced, a rather rare expression on the girl. “Magic originated from magecraft, but Legnarian magic has incorporated a unique eastern practice called ‘sorcery.’ It has its differences from the magic we use on this side of the world.”

Raid hummed. “Oh, right... We’re actually involved with Legnare now.”

Beyond the eastern sea was another vast piece of land: the eastern continent, Legnare. A thousand years ago, no more was known about it than its existence and name, thanks to the Legnarians fortunate enough to wash up on shore. Generally, the weather around the eastern sea was too treacherous for sailing, so it was seen as a continent of mystery.

At present, the climate had significantly stabilized thanks to the revitalization of natural mana, and magical technology had also allowed for safer sailing. Around three centuries back, Vegalta had opened up diplomatic relations with Legnare, unveiling much about the mysterious and distant continent. One of these mysteries was sorcery, their unique art that stood apart from magecraft.

“Yeah, I’ve read a bit about it from the magic history books...” Raid tilted his

head. “Still, are magecraft and sorcery *that* different?”

“Mm-hmm. They’re as different as muffins and scones.”

“So they’re practically the same...” Raid deadpanned.

Eluria knit her brows in discontent. “They’re *different*,” she insisted. It seemed they were so different, in fact, that she felt the need to puff up her already puffy cheeks.

“I’d say they’re more distinct than you think, Your Excellency,” Alma piped in. “Vegalta specializes in anti-manabeast combat from mid-to long-range, but Legnare’s magic is more inclined to man-to-man battles since they have a prominent history of settling local disputes through duels and fights.”

“So they’re completely different...” Raid sighed.

“But I think Eluria was trying to refer to their essence,” Alma said.

“Yes!” The girl bobbed her head, happy she was understood. “Magecraft often operates externally, while sorcery tends to apply internally.”

Raid furrowed his brows. “Simply put...?”

“Simply put, magecraft does stuff like making flames and ice with mana. But sorcery is mostly for strengthening the arms or hardening the legs.”

“Ohhh... So what they influence with mana differs.”

“Uh-huh. Muffins are soft, scones are crunchy.” Eluria gestured passionately as she made sure to extend her metaphor to the difference between the sweets.

Setting that aside, Raid finally understood the core difference between magecraft and sorcery. Magecraft manifested mana externally to produce matter like flames or ice. Meanwhile, sorcery converted mana internally to apply physical enhancement and unique qualities. With the emergence of magic gear, both ultimately converged into *magic*, but their fundamental formulae and mana application were different. Essentially, they merely looked similar but were actually applied in different ways.

“Also, Legnarian magic has this thing called an ‘equibinding formula’ that greatly strengthens their magic in exchange for setting a condition that would

forcibly shut it down."

"*That's* what makes them so tricky," Alma grumbled. "It's hard to find that condition the first time around, and even when you find it, their strengthened magic makes it really hard to dispel. With Vegaltan magic, you use mist or smoke to disrupt your opponent's sight, but Legnarian magic works internally, so they can directly rob you of your sight and hearing... You can't just fight them the way you always do."

Raid's eyes lit up. "Oh...? That *does* sound trickier than your typical magic."

Eluria nodded. "You wouldn't be able to punch or grab their magic."

"Well, even if they seal my five senses, I could just sock 'em after finding them with my sixth."

"Only you'd think up and actually push through with such a ridiculous plan, Raid."

"Wouldn't you be able to manage something similar?"

"Mm-hmm. I'd draw from my past experiences and on-field observations to analyze the enemy's thought process and movement patterns, predict their next move, then strike preemptively or lay a trap."

"Huh... That sounds a lot cooler and way more logical than just calling it a sixth sense."

"Memories and experiences are not parts of the five senses, so calling it a sixth sense isn't wrong."

"Um, excuse me? Mr. and Mrs. Overpowered? Please don't forget that we ordinary beings are currently in your presence," Alma called, eyes narrowed in exasperation. "And by the way, you lost Her Highness ages ago."

Raid and Eluria turned their gazes to Princess Kris only to find she had long given up on following their battle discourse. Her jaw was slack and gaze empty as she stared out the window and listlessly mumbled, *"What a cute little bird..."* Unlike Eluria's disciple, Tiana, who was well-versed in combat, it seemed Princess Kris was more of a politician.

Just then, Raid recalled something else he wanted to talk about. "By the way,

Princess Kris, could we speak with your other self for a moment?”

The princess narrowed her eyes. “Now...?”

“Yes. Alma is an ally who knows about our past and the circumstances surrounding our present. I don’t foresee any problems with her meeting your other self.”

“I see. Very well then.” The slight wariness fell from Princess Kris’s expression as she placed her hand over her chest in relief. Quietly, she closed her eyes—and by the time they fluttered open, the air about her had changed. “What business do you have with me, Raid Freeden?”

Raid held a hand up in greeting. “Sorry ’bout this, Tiana. I wanted to ask you something.”

“I hoped you wouldn’t call for me so casually. I am currently very busy redeveloping the eastern region after revoking my status as royalty. Moreover...” Tiana turned to Alma, eyes narrowed sharply. “I’ve placed my trust in *you*, Raid Freeden, but I would appreciate it if you could exclude outsiders from our conversations.”

“Alma’s not exactly an outsider. She’s the descendant of my subordinate standard-bearer, Ryatt.”

Instantly, the look in Tiana’s eyes changed. “Sir Ryatt’s descendant, you say?”

The last time they’d met, Tiana had mentioned that she was cooperating with the remnants of the Altanian army. Considering Ryatt had been able to pass down his journal, he was probably the one who’d incited the rebellion against Altane—and from there, he had more than likely come into contact with Tiana.

“I see... I’ve heard about you from Kris. The special-class magician of Kanos descent...” Tiana muttered as she slowly stood from her seat and approached Alma. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Alma Kanos. I am Tiana von Vegalta.”

“Ah...” Alma’s face stiffened, a rare display of nerves. “I suspected you were notable from how His Excellency was acting... Still, I never thought I would ever meet such a grand historical figure of Vegalta.”

Alma shifted awkwardly as Tiana carefully trailed her gaze over her figure.

“Are you living a good life?” Tiana asked.

“Um... Yes? Hunting manabeasts counts as a good life, I suppose...”

“Ah, yes. You *are* a special-class magician after all. You must have worked very hard to get to where you are now.”

“Well, I’ve certainly put in my best effort. I won’t deny that.”

“Very good. Do take care of your health as well.” Tiana placed a hand on Alma’s shoulder, her face loosening into a gentle smile.

Alma’s eyes swam in bewilderment. “Y-Yes... Thank you...?”

Raid watched curiously, wondering why Alma had caught Tiana’s interest. The thought was soon banished, however, when Tiana returned her attention to him, her face an impassive mask once more. “So, why did you call me?”

“Oh... I wanted to ask how Altane fell.” This information could have been a vital clue. He’d refrained from asking last time out of consideration for the master and disciple’s tearful reunion, but no doubt they needed to know: how exactly had Altane’s existence been purged from history?

Tiana somberly nodded. “Very well. Although I can only provide an overview due to our limited time, I shall share with you how Altane collapsed after the Hero and the Sage’s deaths. Of course, do keep in mind that anything I know of the Altanian army’s movement is secondhand information from Sir Ryatt.”

Tiana took a short pause as she gathered her thoughts. “The Hero’s adjutant and standard-bearer, Sir Ryatt, brought the Hero’s equipment and news of his death back to the imperial capital,” she began, her expression warping bitterly. “However, the emperor of Altane responded with despicable mockery for their own Hero. Sir Ryatt led his brethren in the army, fellows who had received the Hero’s teachings, and raised their flag in revolt. With the help of the Vegaltan army, they suppressed and took control of various strategic locations. In a mere few years, the imperial capital fell to ruin.”

Raid thought back to the emperor he had once served and sighed. “What a dreary end for that old coot. Serves him right,” he said, shrugging.

Altane was once a grand empire that had comprised more than half the

continent, but the emperor and the capital's elite were rotten to their cores. "Emperor" was far too grand a title for someone who hardly cared for his country's future. The man only thought of living lavishly and protecting his status, while the country's upper echelon was basically a gathering of mindless yes-men who hoped to tag along for the ride. On countless occasions, Raid had presented proposals on how to better the country's governance, but not a single one came to fruition. At best, they had responded to their Hero with plastered smiles and empty flattery.

"So?" Raid asked. "What happened to that old coot in the end?"

"The post-revolt investigation revealed that his corpse was not found, and the remaining imperial family could not be located either. It is suspected that they fled through the eastern sea toward Legnare, but..."

"They probably went to sleep with the fishes before they even got close to the other side," Raid finished. There were means to sail to Legnare back then, but the eastern sea was fraught with complex sea currents and aquatic manabeasts, so their chances of reaching the other shore in one piece would have been practically nil.

"The imperial family and aristocrats were stripped of their status and wealth," Tiana continued. "After we dismantled the empire, we offered food and supplies to the eastern territories who surrendered to us. At present, Vegalta is progressively leading efforts to stabilize and revitalize the eastern region's terrestrial mana."

"Wow... It's only been ten years for you since we died, right? And you've already done all that? Color me impressed."

"But of course. I am the esteemed Sage's disciple," Tiana preened as she puffed her chest out.

"That's my disciple," Eluria chimed in, happily clapping for her.

Raid thought it was more Tiana's own ability than Eluria's influence...but they both looked very satisfied with themselves, so he let them be.

"After the empire's collapse, Sir Ryatt and the former Altanian army took the helm in encouraging the remaining eastern territories to surrender. Thanks to

their great effort, all that was needed of me was to mediate as Vegalta's representative and to offer my knowledge and expertise in magic. But what aided our progress more than anything else...was none other than the Hero." Tiana's lips softened into a smile as she looked at Raid. "Now I know why you spent fifty years of your life heading out into the battlefield... Although I'm not sure how to feel, only learning of your efforts after everything is over."

Raid frowned. "Ryatt told you about that too?"

"Yes. He said whenever you advanced the army into battle, you would also head for impoverished areas nearby and provide proposals and plans that could improve the common people's capacity for self-sufficiency. Magecraft research had been fragmented at best within Altane, yet on your own you observed our magic and ultimately deduced that the cause for Altane's poor harvests lay in the terrestrial mana. Why, you even indexed the eastern region's mana geysers with the magic devices you'd looted during the war... You certainly kept yourself busy over the years, to say the least," Tiana finished with a pointed glare.

Raid's lips twisted into an awkward smile. The bigwigs of his nation had always refused to hear him out. Wary of the Hero's great power, they even went so far as to appoint him as general to send him far off to the distant battlefield. Raid made good use of this attempt at exile by dropping by settlements near the front lines, doing what he could to abate their poverty by presenting and executing those proposals that the empire had rejected. Whenever he stepped into Vegaltan territory, he'd personally investigate the differences between their lands, eventually arriving at the hypothesis that mana was the cause of Altane's barren environment. He even looted magic gear and documents from the battlefield to compile his investigation records.

"Truth be told, I was beyond stunned when I saw your papers." Tiana sighed. "Even we Vegaltans had to admit that many of your investigation records were terrifyingly precise. Moreover, without them, our revitalization efforts in the eastern region would have ended up a large-scale project spanning *centuries*."

Raid scratched his head. "I just did what I could manage on my own... It's not that big of a deal."

“Oh, none of that drivel, please. Your numerous proposals go without saying, but in mere decades you were able to comprehend magecraft and magic with hardly anything to go by. Why, if your absurd power hadn’t led you to become the Hero, I’ve no doubt you would have become the Sage of Altane instead.” Tiana sighed and turned her gaze to Eluria next. “And Lady Eluria, you were aware of his project, yes?”

“I didn’t know what he was after exactly,” she replied. “But I noticed a pattern in Raid’s advances that told me he was trying to investigate something. I just made sure to leave some magic devices wherever he was likely to pop up.”

“Ah, I thought so.” Raid nodded. “Most of the stuff I was able to get my hands on was broken but never beyond repair, so I had a feeling...”

“Mm-hmm. Even after a decade, nothing I left behind was ever applied to the military or used to counter magic, so I figured it was your own little project and let it be.”

“And since you weren’t stopping me even though you probably noticed, I always made sure to choose a predictable advance route so that Vegalta’s army would arrive by the time I was done investigating. Then we’d have a bout at the end.”

“Right. Since you were moving so predictably, I did get an inkling you wanted to use the battle to erase the traces of your investigation...”

Raid and Eluria bobbed their heads, very much satisfied by their millennium-old exchange. Meanwhile, Tiana looked between the two in exasperation. “I’ve never seen people treat the battlefield as their own little pen pal mailbox...” she said with a sigh. “In any case, that concludes my briefing of the events following your deaths. Do you have any other questions?”

Raid hummed. “Oh... Could I ask you to pass Ryatt a message?”

“Very well. I’m sure he would love to hear from you. He even cried with the kids after I told him you were safe and sound a thousand years in the future.”

Raid’s eyes glinted sharply. “The *kids*?”

Tiana gasped and slapped her hand over her mouth, but it was too late—Raid had pieced it all together. Since the Caldwin name still existed today, Tiana

must have had children to pass it down to. The same went for Ryatt, who carried his family name Kanos. Now, when Raid thought about Tiana and Ryatt's involvement with one another, how much Ryatt had apparently shared with her, and Tiana's reaction to Alma, he could only come to one conclusion.

A smile formed on his lips. "Well, now. This is cause for celebration."

Although the war had ended and many things had changed, Tiana was once Vegaltan royalty and Ryatt was once an Altanian soldier, so Raid could understand why they'd chosen to keep things secret. Still, former enemies could finally join hands and live in peace—that alone brought Raid great happiness, for that was the kind of world he'd always hoped to see a thousand years ago.

"Then could you pass my congratulations to Ryatt?" Raid grinned. "That guy's practically a walking, talking, breathing code of conduct, so I don't think he needs to be told to take good care of you."

A subtle blush spread over Tiana's cheeks as she averted her gaze and nodded.

"And one more thing," he added. "Could you tell him to find my sword and to return it to its place?"

Tiana narrowed her eyes. "Your sword?"

"Yep. This is important, so make sure to pass it to him verbatim."

A thousand years ago, Raid had wielded a sword he'd treated as his partner. He'd used it without much thought in the past, but it came back to mind now that he knew a bit more about his own power.

Eluria hummed. "Come to think of it, Raid, how did you get that sword?"

"It was mixed in among the weapons donated to me. Back then, I kept breaking every weapon I got my hands on, so I reached out to all the forges I could and asked them to give me whatever weapons they could spare, scraps and all." No weapon had been able to withstand his power, no matter how much he held back, so Raid was willing to take even the dullest weapons as long as he could swing something around. Among those "scraps," however, was the broadsword that later became the symbol of the Hero. "That sword never broke

under my power—and if it turns out it was actually made to accommodate my mana to begin with, then it could be a clue for us," he explained.

"So," Raid continued, turning back to Tiana, "tell Ryatt to make sure to leave it there."

Tiana squinted. "Hm... Understood. I will pass the message in its entirety to Sir Ryatt." Finally, she nodded and cast a glance at the wall clock. "It's almost time. I shall excuse myself now."

"Okay. See you later, Tiana," said Eluria.

"Could I pat your head before I go, Lady Eluria?"

The girl frowned, and after much, *much* deliberation, she finally wrung out a small nod.

"You don't have to look so petulant about it..." Tiana's shoulders slumped at the excessive reluctance as she placed her hand on Eluria's head. It seemed no petulant pouting was going to stop her from giving those head pats. "Come now, Alma. You too."

"Huh? Me too?"

"Consider it your ancestor's blessing," said Tiana. "The Kanos bloodline's faith in the Hero remained unshaken till the very end. I pray that as their descendant, you may become his strength whenever need be."

Alma pursed her lips and nodded. "I will exert my utmost to fulfill that duty in place of my ancestor, Ryatt Kanos," she somberly declared.

Tiana gently patted her head, a smile on her lips. Somehow, it felt as if time had stretched out through the warm touch shared between the two.

“Finally, Raid Freeden,” said Tiana as she turned her head. “I leave Lady Eluria in your hands.”

“Sure thing. I already look after her every day.”

“I hope you know that my master is *not* some pet cat... Besides, that was not what I meant.” Tiana smiled once more. “When you came running back then... When you stood by your true feelings even at the risk of your own life... I was truly very happy.” Quietly, respectfully, Tiana lowered her head to Raid. “We of the past pray that those feelings will bear fruit in this distant future.”

That could only mean one thing, and Raid felt her words weren’t hers alone. Surely, this was also the wish of the man who deeply respected the Hero in the distant past. Their sincere wish had now been delivered to him across the throes of time.

Raid found a bright smile stretching over his face. “Yeah. You can count on me.”

◇

As soon as Tiana left, Princess Kris returned to the palace. To be precise, she was *dragged back* to the palace by Serbas as she cried out in protest, “But I haven’t replenished enough Eluria-ness yeeet...!” She’d mentioned getting permission to enter Libynia Desert from the adjacent territories, so her hands were probably full with all sorts of meetings and correspondences, on top of her regular workload.

That day, Raid saw off the wailing princess with sincere gratitude in his heart. Today, however, his mind was calm and sharp as he faced a new task before him. “Eluria, it’s time to check your luggage,” he declared.

The girl nodded solemnly. “Mm.”

“Did you pack your clothes?”

“I have a whole week’s worth.”

“Including your undergarments?”

“Mm-hmm. They’re definitely in there.”

“How about your favorite pillow?”

“The Fluffiest Fluffy Pillow has been packed.”

“Tea leaves and bath salts for your morning tea and bath?”

“I’ve packed enough for an expedition and then some.”

“Good. I’ll double-check too.” Raid opened her travel bag and began sorting through its contents.

Alma watched this exchange while slumped languidly over their dorm couch. “What is she, a kid going on her first sleepover?”

“Don’t make light of Eluria’s floatiness,” Raid warned. “She can easily wake up *hours* later than usual when sleeping in an unfamiliar environment. New clothes might exacerbate her floatiness if she’s not comfortable in them, so we can’t risk having to buy new ones over there.”

“My floatiness has yet to reveal its true power,” Eluria agreed with clenched fists.

“And that’s why we have His Excellency casually looking through a girl’s clothes and undergarments, and that girl being totally okay with it...? I just don’t know what to make of you two,” Alma sighed.

“Why should an almost ninety-year-old geezer get all flustered by a girl’s underwear?” Raid deadpanned.

“I don’t mind. Tiana used to prepare my stuff for me, and now our estate’s servants do the same,” said Eluria.

“Huh. Well, you know what? I just realized I actually don’t care about all that either.” Alma was much like Raid and Eluria, a fighter who didn’t sweat the small stuff; she shrugged it off rather easily. In any case, she hadn’t come all the way to their dorm just to watch them pack their luggage. “So? You called me here to talk about the past, right?”

“Right.” Raid nodded. “What do you think about what Tiana said?”

“Hmmm... I’d wager the concealment happened *after* the eastern region’s redevelopment, wouldn’t you say? It very much succeeded, looking at how things are now. Had people’s memories been manipulated in some way right

after Altane's downfall, the redevelopment wouldn't have gone so smoothly."

"Did Ryatt mention in his journal when exactly they finished everything?"

"Not specifically, no... Though, there *was* one part where he said, *'Without the documents His Excellency left behind, we couldn't have even been able to come up with the estimate of a hundred years for the eastern region's restoration.'* Lady Tiana mentioned something similar, so it probably took them around that long."

"Then it's practically guaranteed that an elf is involved," Raid concluded.

Alma frowned, her brow raised quizzically. "Well, that silver-haired elf did come up as a suspect for that incident with Lufus Lailas...but that doesn't necessarily have to connect to the historical revision case, does it?"

However, Raid decisively shook his head. "Minus certain exceptions, elves are the longest-living race after manabeasts and can easily live across a hundred years. And since history was wholly altered without anyone's notice, it's hard to think they did it incrementally by passing the task down to their descendants." Had the past been erased bit by bit, an inconsistency should have cropped up at some point, then *somebody* should have noticed something was up. However, for an entire millennium, not a single soul had realized that changes had been made to history.

"True..." Alma mumbled. "Honestly, before I met you, I almost wondered if my ancestor's journal was actually a novel or some work of fiction. No matter how hard I looked, there was never any mention or traces of a large nation on par with Vegalta. The only thing I could find..." Her eyes blew wide open as she snapped her head up. "The only thing I could find was that *elven* love story between the Hero and the Sage."

Even if somebody had managed to notice an oddity in history, they would simply brush it off as a story once they found a similar legend or tale already in existence. And of course, they would have no means of confirming whether it was true to life or mere fiction.

"I gave it a read myself, and the Hero was just described as a human from the enemy forces," Alma recalled. "So I always thought that since Vegalta tended to worship the Sage, this story focused on her humanity as seen by the elves..."

Raid hummed. “It was probably left as a decoy or diversion for anyone who’d notice something was off.” In essence, that trace of the Hero’s existence served as a container to catch brewing suspicions. This then connected to why the story had been passed down orally. “Seeing as the elves could pass the story on orally, they mustn’t have been affected by whatever record or memory manipulation was going on—not just because of their oral traditions...but because that was also how the history alterer wanted things.”

At present, Raid and Eluria had yet to confirm anyone had been reincarnated aside from themselves, most likely because reincarnation was no easy task. The same could be said for time travel. In the realm of Time known to Tiana, the “hole” that allowed her easy passage could only be found a thousand years ago and in this current era. If time were so easily traveled, there would have been more of these holes in Time. This mysterious third party must have crossed over to the past in some way but then lost their means of time travel thereafter.

“In the first place,” Raid continued, “it was practically a miracle that the Hero and the Sage existed in the same era. Even *that* might have been intentionally devised.”

A pair of great rivaling powers existed in the same era, and their fight decided the fate of two large nations. On one hand, Eluria’s story clearly began with her invention of magic. The origin of Raid’s power, however, was completely shrouded in mystery. It was hard to think that when Eluria invented magic, an anomaly like Raid just so happened to be born into the same era. This pointed to one conclusion:

“A thousand years ago,” Raid declared, “history had already been changed.”

He narrowed his eyes as his thoughts returned to their earlier discussion. “This person’s goal was to change history, as well as to continuously observe these changes. So they couldn’t reincarnate like us or time travel like Tiana, since that would just be going from point A to point B. No, they’d need something more like immortality...or even memory succession.”

Alma frowned. “You mean...this mastermind has been alive for a thousand years now?”

“That’s just a guess. I mean, that way, they could not only observe the world’s

events but also step in to fix things should anything go awry." Altering history would no doubt cause a ripple effect to the future. Thus, it was only logical for this mastermind to choose a means that would allow them to respond to unforeseen circumstances. "By the way, Eluria, can magic pass memories down or achieve immortality?"

The girl hummed, deep in thought. "It would depend on the details and specifications, but just like reincarnation, it should theoretically be possible. Since this person can alter memories and records, they should also be able to pass down their memories—kind of like forging a split personality."

"Well, since they're from the future, their magic must be a cut above anything we know," Raid agreed. "All things considered, we might as well assume it's within the realm of possibility."

"I guess it's not *too* unbelievable, since you guys are something of a precedent..." Alma sighed. "Still, we might be dealing with someone from the *future*? Really? I'd be speechless if it turns out to be true..."

"No need to look at it that way," Raid said. "Eluria's magic used to look like some futuristic technique to me too. Heck, Eluria probably saw me as the wielder of some crazy, unknown power not even magic could explain. But we still faced off against each other."

"In a way, this is right up our alley," Eluria agreed with a nod. "But what will you do, Raid?"

"What do you mean?"

"What will you do...when we find that person who changed history?" Eluria looked him straight in the eye and muttered, "The armored dragons and Lufus... That person might be doing more than just changing history—and some people have already gotten hurt in the process."

The armored dragons had caused Valk and Lucas some very serious injuries, and some other students were also lightly wounded during the evacuation. As for Lufus, all her life force could have easily been converted into mana, taking her life with it, had Eluria not stepped in.

"Should we kill the perpetrator?" the girl seemed to be asking with her gaze.

To that, Raid simply shrugged. “Well, ‘kill or be killed’ was practically our era’s mantra, so I won’t hesitate if they turn out to be an irredeemable villain.”

Eluria squinted. “You mean they might *not* be?”

“Right. Let’s say this person’s already changed the past. Well, what’s the world like now?”

“It’s very peaceful,” she answered.

“In other words, we can’t say for certain that what they’ve done is evil. Those two incidents you mentioned could also be related to the future in some way, and we just don’t know how.”

Eluria indignantly puffed her cheeks. “I get it... I get it, but what happened to Lufus was just... Hngh...”

Certainly, regardless of the reason, Lufus’s future as a magician and even her own life had been put at risk. Moreover, the Guardian Dragons had allegedly been ordered by the Hero to kill Eluria. It felt like there was still something off between that chilling order and the mastermind’s goal of changing history.

“Well, the armored dragons were so blatant, it almost felt like some sort of message... As for Lufus, perhaps that was their way of finding a means to return her life force. In both cases, the fact that they happened in front of us meant they believed we’d be able to handle it.”

“I don’t need some stranger placing high hopes on me,” Eluria grumbled, her lip stuck out in a pout. “But...” She calmly nodded. “If you say so, Raid, then I’ll trust you.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Smiling wryly, Raid placed his hand on Eluria’s head and turned to Alma. “In any case, our goal for now will be to secure this mastermind and get an explanation out of them. I don’t mind cooperating if they’re doing something reasonable, but otherwise I guess we can just go ahead and kill them without remorse.”

“Uh, yeah... I’m sure you can, given how casually you said that last part...” Alma mumbled.

“They’re dragging the whole world into their plan. If they aren’t plotting

anything good, then they should be prepared to face death all the more." Raid enjoyed battle but not murder. This time around, murder would merely be a necessary means if it turned out this mastermind was trying to bring harm to countless people and couldn't be dissuaded.

"Anyway, that's all I wanted to discuss," he said. "When are we heading to Palmare?"

"Probably a bit earlier than the students, since the investigation's our main goal," Alma replied. "That said, when we actually start our investigation is ultimately up to when the Legnare duo show up."

"Now that you mention it, are you acquainted? You're all special-class magicians."

"I guess we are. But those two are kind of like Legnare-exclusive magicians, so they hardly cross over except for ceremonies and events." Alma frowned, creasing her brow. "They must be on some pretty important business to come all the way to Vegalta...yet they're taking part in our investigation. Curious, hm?"

Raid narrowed his eyes. "You're saying their business might be related to ours?"

"It's a possibility, that's all. I wouldn't know unless I ask them in person."

Just then, there was a light knock on the door, carried into the room along with a voice through a magic sound pipe. *"Raid, Lady Eluria, are you home?"*

"Millis?" Raid answered. "What's up? You don't usually visit us here."

"We've made some plans, actually! And since you've both returned to your room, I came to pass the message on everyone's behalf."

"Ah... Well, we're just about done here anyway. Come right in."

Raid opened the door, and Millis shuffled inside. "Pardon the intrusion... Huh? Ms. Alma's here too? Were you having some important discussion?"

Alma shrugged. "I'd say it was pretty important, sure."

"Uh-oh! My ordinary civilian senses are tingling! There's danger up ahead!"

Alma waved her off. “It’s not that big of a deal. We were just talking about how we should head to Libynia Desert early for our investigation.”

“Ohhh! Then it seems I’ve come at just the right time!” Millis exclaimed, placing a hand over her chest. “You see, we, too, have decided to head over early!”

“‘We’?” Raid cocked his head. “You mean the entire team?”

“Yessiree! As it turns out, House Verminant has a villa and training facilities near Palmare. We thought we’d best get some practice in with our whole team for the exam, now that we have the two latecomers!”

“Oh?” Raid smiled. “That’s a great idea right there. You’ve already decided on your roles, but there’s still lots you can gain from actually training together before the exam.” Valk and Lucas had been assigned their roles, albeit based on the information Fareg had shared with the team beforehand. Some things could change in actual practice, so the team should certainly make use of the training facilities to make any necessary adjustments.

“We know that you two are going to take a separate exam,” Millis continued, “but Fareg suggested inviting you so we can seek your advice and assistance if need be.”

Raid arched his brow. “He did? Now that’s something you don’t see every day.”

“Actually, it was only after Valk and Lucas told him, *‘After all the help they’ve given you despite all the trouble you’ve caused them, it’s only right you invite them over!’* while pulling on his ear that he extended the invitation.”

“Okay, *that* sounds more like him.”

“Well, I think he was also just being considerate since you’re both so busy,” Millis said with a crooked smile. If only he could show a bit of that consideration to others outside their group, then perhaps Fareg could finally make more friends.

“In that case, could we stay in the villa until we meet up with the Legnare duo?” Raid asked.

“I don’t mind,” Alma replied. “Saves us the trouble of finding accommodations, and besides, House Verminant’s villa would serve as a better meetup spot than anything else.”

“I agree too,” Eluria chimed in. “This is a better use of our time than just waiting around.”

Millis looked at them all and smiled broadly. “Then it’s decided! Please don’t forget to pack for it!”

Raid raised a brow. “Hm? Do we need anything else in particular?”

“What are you saying, Raid?! Do you have any idea where we’re headed? Water Capital Palmare, that’s where! Of course, the Verminant villa located there would hardly be bereft of water!” A wide, playful grin stretched over Millis’s face as she pointed to the heavens with all her might. “Bring your swimsuits and floaties, my dearest friends, ’cause we’re all gonna have a *splashing* good time!”

Chapter Two

Long ago, where Palmare now stood on the eastern coast of the continent, there was a desolate fishing harbor. Since it was close to the imperial capital of Altane, war ships and transport ships often lined the port, carrying supplies and taxes from various lands. Sailors unloaded crate after crate to be taken by the supervising official back to the imperial capital to line the coffers of the wealthy elites. Sometimes, children who had practically sold themselves off to the army disembarked along with the goods.

Sailors and children alike, those riding these ships wore faces marred with despair and resignation, no different from corpses. Hence, Altanians mockingly referred to these as “slave ships.” The fishermen who braved the treacherous eastern sea would often look upon the sailors of these slave ships with disdain, causing endless tension between the two groups.

These were Raid’s associations with this place from his past life, so he was quite curious about present-day Palmare. How had his subordinates reshaped and rebuilt the eastern region? Seeing the fruits of their efforts with his own eyes was the least he could do for those he would never see again.

However, those fruits far exceeded his expectations.

“Welcome to Water Capital Palmare!!!”

The moment they arrived at the harbor, a group of women cheerily welcomed them with small fireworks and lively drumming, almost as if they’d stepped right into a festival. There was even a mascot—“Palma,” or so his name tag read—dancing just behind them.

“Thank you very much for visiting us!” the women crowed, all cheer and smiles as they distributed pamphlets to the group.

“Oh... Thank you,” Raid said, accepting with an awkward smile.

“Palmare is a land deeply entwined with water! The most cutting-edge magic devices are used to control the currents and put on wonderful water shows,

and the surrounding scenery alone is filled with many wondrous natural sights! We hope you enjoy your stay to your hearts' content!" Completing their enthusiastic introduction, the ladies saw them off with waving hands.

As their group stepped into the city proper, Raid scratched his head in bewilderment. "It's...really changed a lot."

Eluria tilted her head. "What was it like before?"

"Back then, you'd see some sailors slumped over the ground looking like the world was gonna end, or maybe a few guys beaten black and blue after picking a fight with some drunk fishermen... Sometimes, workers collapsed on the side of the road, frothing from exhaustion and fatigue, but nobody ever spared them a single glance."

Eluria winced, thinking back to Altane as she'd known it in the past, and nodded with a somber expression. "I'm glad it's different now."

Indeed, the region had changed a lot—far more than Raid had expected, but not for the worse, that was for sure. A thousand years ago, nobody in Altane had time for pleasure or sightseeing; they were all just desperate to survive each day as it came. Raid's subordinates, led by Ryatt, must have taken on the eastern region's redevelopment while cradling their unfulfilled desires in their hearts.

"This place kinda feels similar to modern Vegalta's royal capital," Raid observed.

"Mm-hmm. But they use water very differently here. Fascinating," Eluria muttered as she eagerly looked around.

As those ladies had mentioned, the waterways around the city were less practical and more scenic, not only passing through the ground but even flowing along buildings and walls. Magic lighting devices illuminated the currents, dancing and sparkling in many different hues. Installations of aquatic and gravitational manipulation worked in tandem as streams rose and meandered in the air like snakes, drawing complex shapes in beautiful and artistic formations. It felt like they could just sit and watch the city itself for hours on end.

One person in particular was especially delighted by the novel cityscape.

“Ooh...! That’s Workshop Muva’s latest aquatic manipulation device! And the current is fixed and stabilized in midair with the latest new and improved model of the device that was jointly developed by Workshop Imperium and Fabrica Co.!!!” Wisel’s fists were clenched and trembling in uncontainable excitement. “Not to mention that device has even adopted magic gear functionality, making it possible to form all these complex shapes and patterns! I-I just can’t take my eyes off any of it!”

“I’d say the most surprising thing around here is your excitement, Wisel,” Raid mused.

“Lots of magic devices and gear are developed and produced here in the eastern region, probably because it’s so rich in mana ores and the like. So they have a lot more resources for creative inventions!” Wisel’s eyes, glinting ravenously beneath his glasses, darted all over the place, refusing to let even a single device go unobserved.

Here, Raid could catch a glimpse of Altane’s influence on the region. Altane had developed machinery because their land had been so poor in mana, but to make their machines, resources like coal and oil needed to be refined and processed, rendering it difficult for such technology to take root in people’s everyday lives. In stark contrast, magic devices functioned on mana, which was constantly born from the land itself and even from humans, so long as they were alive. Those of the past must have shifted the eastern region toward magic devices for this very reason, and vestiges of the region’s past technology simply remained in smaller aspects.

Alma folded her arms and looked over their group. “Someone from House Verminant will come pick us up in two hours. Until then, you’re all free to do as you please, so...”

“I’m going to check out the workshops and magic devices,” Wisel said instantly.

“I’d like to go swimsuit shopping,” Millis followed without missing a beat.

Alma sighed. “You two never change, do you?”

“That’s their strong point,” Raid said.

Eluria nodded. “Mm-hmm. Consistency is a good virtue.”

“Well, what about you two?”

“We’re going to try the local cuisine,” they answered.

“Like the wholesome couple that you are.” Alma nodded. “Anyway, Wisel, I’m sure I can trust you to take care of yourself. I guess I’ll stick with these guys, and we can all meet up after two hours.”

“Roger that. Leave a message on the communicator if anything comes up. Bye!” Wisel raised his hand, spun on his heel, and bolted off into the distance. It seemed many things called out to his artificer spirit in this city.

“A’ight,” Alma said, turning her attention to Millis. “That leaves me with this little ditz who’s only got fun and games rattling around in her head.”

“D-Ditz?! Have I truly fallen so far...?!”

“We took days off from the Institute to hold a training camp here, but *you* look like you’re about to trip over yourself just to buy swimsuits and play around.”

“Hmph! Well, I have an objection—I’ll have you know I’m not shopping for *my* swimsuit.” Millis decisively plopped her hand on Eluria’s shoulder. “I’m shopping for *Lady Eluria’s*!”

Eluria blinked, looking blank and lost. “Uh, yes... What she said.”

“I mean, she told me she doesn’t even *have* a swimsuit! Can you believe that? We might be able to make some time, so we *must* be ready to have some fun in the water!”

“Well, sure, it’s possible if you finish your training early...” Alma frowned. “But haven’t you had your fill of playing in the water back in the countryside?”

“Tut-tut, Ms. Alma. You see, we bumpkins don’t *play* in the water—we just take a dip while dressed in our work clothes and undershirts to wash off the dirt and sweat at the end of a hard day’s work. To heck with that! I want to jump into the water just for the sake of diving in and nothing else! I want to wear a stylish swimsuit and splash around by the shore while giggling and frolicking

with girls my age like there's no tomorrow!!!"

"Long story short," Alma summarized, "you really, really, *really* want to play in the water."

"Precisely! If I let this chance slip by, then my fondest memory of playing by the water would remain that one time I joined the grannies to wash off in the river, then waited for our clothes to dry while nibbling on some cold veggies!!!" Millis clenched her fists as she concluded her impassioned speech. "Therefore, I wish to carve a new memory into my brain: the image of Lady Eluria in a swimsuit! Of course, the entire scene should be picture-perfect, so Ms. Alma, you're also required to come in proper dress code."

Alma grinned. "I was planning to take it easy till our meetup, so I've already got a swimsuit."

"Oh, Ms. Alma! You're the most carefree instructor ever—and that's why you're the best!" Millis beamed, giving her a thumbs-up. Certainly, Alma never took things too seriously despite being their teacher.

"Well, I'm definitely gonna get covered in sand when we go to the desert. I at least wanted to have a fun time by the water before we left," she said, shrugging.

"So, Raid..." Millis turned her head. "Do you mind waiting for us?"

"Not at all. I can keep myself entertained just strolling around and watching the cityscape."

"Guess I'll tag along for His Excellency's walk," Alma said. "We'll come back in a bit, so just hang out in front of the shop when you're done."

"Roger that, ma'am! Over and out! Come on, Lady Eluria! Let's a-gooo!" Millis grabbed Eluria's hand and cheerily dragged her along.

"Mm... Bye." Eluria turned and waved at Raid and Alma with her free hand.

As the two girls went on their way, Raid saw them off with a curious tilt of his head. "Strange... I would've expected Millis to cook up some excuse to drag me along to help Eluria choose a swimsuit."

"And I can totally imagine you just nonchalantly picking one..." Alma

mumbled.

“Well, that didn’t happen. So either she’s being considerate of Eluria or she’s got something else planned to stick us together.”

“You guys are engaged, though—practically married already.”

“We’re just engaged. Not yet married,” Raid replied dismissively as he began walking down the street.

Alma followed after him and pressed, “But ‘not yet’ means you *want* to get married someday, right, Your Excellency?”

Raid turned to her and arched his brow. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Hey, I’m just curious. Anybody can see that you two really trust each other and genuinely enjoy one another’s company. Heck, Eluria’s hardly hiding how much she likes you. So I can’t help but wonder why you two keep denying that you’re practically husband and wife.”

“Because we’re not,” Raid answered. “We only got engaged because we wanted to settle our rivalry once and for all. We’re not actual lovers who’ve sworn our futures to each other.” They got engaged so Raid could use the Caldwin status and earn the qualifications to engage in combat—it certainly wasn’t an engagement in the most typical sense of the word. “We used to be enemies, so there wasn’t anything keeping us together. We needed this pretext of settling our rivalry and using our engagement.”

“But...you do *like* Eluria, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do.”

His unbelievably nonchalant response made Alma freeze on the spot, eyes blown wide as Raid kept walking. “Uh... You mean, like, as a *person*?”

“Pretty much. I really respect the way she earnestly pursues magic and puts all her effort toward reaching her goals. So yeah, I like her as a person.”

“Ah, right... Of course you wouldn’t get all sentimental about it. What else was I expecting from you?”

Raid shrugged. “I’ve reincarnated, sure, but I’m a geezer on the inside—way past the age to be gushing about love or romance like some pubescent boy.”

“Then...” Alma’s voice fell to a soft whisper. “Do you not see Eluria as a woman?”

Raid looked at her with a small smile. “I put my life on the line just to say goodbye to her. Of course I’m in love with her,” he said. “It’s not that I don’t have any romantic feelings for her. It’s just that my feelings of respect for her as my rival are much bigger.”

“Oh, uhhh... Right. I see?”

“You’re the one who asked. What’re you blushing for now?”

Alma cleared her throat, cheeks slightly flushed. “Well, I wasn’t expecting you to be so blunt...” She awkwardly scratched her cheeks. “But then that means your feelings are mutual—all the more you should just go ahead and get married.”

“Well, I guess that’s a logical step. But because of our past lives, I just can’t help that her status as a war buddy of sorts is much stronger to me.”

“Hmmm... So it’s almost like you’re childhood friends? Like you’ve been together for so long that it feels weird to think of her as a romantic partner?”

“Something like that.” There was no mistake that he had more than just friendly feelings for Eluria. But as they’d spent over fifty long years fighting on the battlefield, something else had gradually overpowered those feelings of love within him.

“So...” Raid murmured. “I need to settle my rivalry with her. Once we bring an end to this fifty-year-long relationship, only then can we finally start things over from a blank slate.” Raid and Eluria’s relationship had frozen in time. A thousand years ago, they clashed as rivals and ran through the battlefield as war buddies. So long as they didn’t put a period to punctuate this relationship, they couldn’t yet step forward into a new one. “So until we settle things, we’ll just be engaged and nothing more.”

Alma sighed. “I get it... But that’s just how *you* feel. What if Eluria ignores all that past life business and starts showing interest?”

“If that were the case, she wouldn’t have done something as roundabout as proposing this engagement.”

“We’re talking about Eluria here, you know? Don’t you think it’s possible she just overthought it and lost her cool? Or maybe she was so happy to see you again that she completely forgot to confess.”

“Either of those sound likely, for sure...” Thinking back to their reunion in this era, Raid found a wry smile forming on his lips. “Well, it’s definitely possible. But since she’s also insisting we’re ‘not yet married,’ then she’s probably of the same mind to settle things first, then discuss our feelings after.”

“Hm... So you’ve picked up on her intentions through your deep connection? Is that it?”

“It’s nothing so grand. It’s just...” Raid scratched his cheek, a small and bashful smile making its way on his face. “I’d be happy if she felt the same way, that’s all.”

◆

Millis brought Eluria to a charming clothing store that catered to tourists and visitors. From outfits following the eastern region’s fashion to native dresses and accessories from Legnare, a wide variety of clothes were displayed on the racks. Of course, it wouldn’t have been the Water Capital without one whole section dedicated to swimsuits of all colors and designs.

“I’ve never seen so many different swimsuits in one place, even in the capital...” Eluria mumbled in awe.

“Well, the western region’s climate is pretty diverse,” Millis explained, “whereas the temperature in the eastern region is typically stable and sees very little variance. In some other places, people even walk around in their swimsuits.”

“Wow. You know a lot about this.”

“Oh, of course I do...” Millis chuckled. “Whenever visitors came to our village to sightsee or recuperate, they’d often come up to this very obviously purebred country girl right here and shove all their fancy travel stories right in my face! How could I *not* know?!” Millis raged, swinging her fist around in frustration.

Eluria patted her shoulder in comfort. “Today, I’ve discovered one of the reasons for your obsession with the city.” She hoped her friend could at least

have her fill of city life while she was a student.

“Now then, Lady Eluria, let’s pick out your swimsuit.”

“Mm... I’ll leave it to your judgment.”

“That simply won’t do!” Millis grabbed her shoulders and looked her in the eye. “Do you know why I refrained from bringing Raid to help pick out your swimsuit?”

“You *wanted* to?”

“Because!” The girl pressed on, her expression serious as can be. “Because unlike underwear, we put on swimwear for others to see—and especially, the *first time* always leaves a big impression!”

“Just like when I encounter a new spell or rare technique in battle.”

“The way your mind so smoothly segued from swimsuits to combat leaves me fraught with concern, but you’re not wrong, so I’m willing to just nod and move on.” Millis cleared her throat and continued, “Now imagine this: you will choose your own swimsuit.”

“I will choose my own swimsuit,” Eluria parroted.

“And Raid will see it for the first time.”

“Raid will see it.”

“He’s actually a very attentive and considerate guy, so he will undoubtedly compliment you. Then, Lady Eluria, how would you feel?”

“I’d want him to pat my head too.”

“Ah...yes. Of course. You lovebirds have been flirting in ways even we haven’t yet seen. Why am I not surprised?” Millis groaned and tilted her head, apparently dissatisfied with Eluria’s answer. “Okay then, let’s say Raid has complimented you and patted your head. *Now* how do you feel?”

“Very happy.”

“Yes! Exactly! You feel happy when you’re complimented!”

“He he. I got the right answer,” Eluria preened.

“Anybody would be happy to receive a compliment, but what if you chose the swimsuit yourself? You’d feel *double* the happiness, that’s what! Therefore, ’tis not I but *you*, Lady Eluria, who must choose your swimsuit!”

“Mm... I understand.” Millis made a very good point. After all, Eluria first started taking notice of Raid on the battlefield when he’d complimented her magic, which she’d poured her blood, sweat, and tears into. “Okay. I’ll choose one myself.”

“That’s the spirit! I’m right here if you need any help narrowing it down. Let’s pick out the best swimsuit ever and knock Raid’s socks off!” Millis clenched her fists, looking far more excited than Eluria. Still, her enthusiasm was contagious and, more than anything, encouraging.

“Then...” Eluria hummed. “I’d prefer a white one.”

“White, huh? All right... How about the style?”

“Um... Something similar to my undergarments would be nice, since I’m already used to that. I also don’t want to feel the fabric sticking to my skin when it’s wet, as much as possible.”

“I suppose that rules out one-pieces... A bikini, then? It’s rather revealing, but how about going all the way and charming Raid with a bold one?!”

“Th-That’s too embarrassing...!”

“Right, I figured... It’s certainly embarrassing, especially since he’ll know you chose it yourself. Regardless, I don’t think Raid will be very fazed, considering how he takes care of you every day...” Millis nodded, taking each of Eluria’s awkward specifications as she narrowed down her choices. “In that case, let’s buy a coverup—oh, and a wide-brimmed hat too! It won’t be as revealing if you keep the coverup on while you’re out of the water, and the hat will add to the overall outfit, dispersing the focus on the swimsuit itself!”

Eluria blinked, wide-eyed. “Millis is so...strategic...?”

“He he! You may refer to me as your swimsuit advisor henceforth!”

“What’ll happen if I do?”

“Not much. But it’ll really hype me up!!!” Millis declared, proudly puffing her

chest out.

“Ah.” Eluria nodded and applauded the girl—as long as Millis was happy.

“Anyway,” she said, moving on. “We’ve got our color, so next let’s settle the design and patterns, shall we?”

“Okay. I want to rule out frills.”

“Hm? Do you not like frills?”

“They’re fluttery and distracting when I fly around with magic. They’d also get caught on tree branches and enemy attacks in battle.”

Millis slumped. “I never considered that combat functionality would be part of your criteria when choosing a swimsuit...”

“One must always be prepared for battle—anytime, anywhere.”

“You’re not *wrong*...but I feel like you’re not quite right either.”

“Actually, we are here for training, after all. You should prepare yourself too, Millis.”

“Urgh... The ominous scent of extra training...!”

“But you’re helping me pick out a swimsuit, so if you work hard, I’ll make sure you get to play.”

“Y-You don’t mean you’re going to ‘play’ around with me in a *spar*, right?!”

Eluria indignantly puffed her cheeks. “I wouldn’t trick you like that...” she grumbled, then nodded. “The playtime would be your reward for helping me out.”

“Oh, well... I’m not really doing much, honestly.”

“But I never would have chosen so carefully if not for you.” In her past life, Eluria had poured all her attention into research and magic, and even avoided others because she was far too shy, so she never cared much about her clothes or appearance. Selecting her wardrobe had been Tiana’s job a thousand years ago and was Alicia’s in the present. Eluria never got to experience choosing her clothes for herself. “It’s my first time picking out something for myself to show to someone else... This is actually kind of fun.”

Millis nodded and smiled. “Goodness, what a lucky man Raid is... His wifey’s over here working so hard to make her hubby happy.”

“We’re *engaged*—not yet married.”

“Or so you claim, while having ‘I love Raid’ written all over your face all day long...”

Eluria frowned. “But I haven’t been able to tell him that I like him...” All this time, she hadn’t once conveyed her feelings to him. They were together now for their engagement, but they weren’t *together* in the truest, most genuine sense.

However, Eluria had already decided when she would reveal her feelings. “Until I tell him how I feel, we’re only engaged,” she declared. “We agreed to this engagement to settle which of us is stronger, so I won’t say anything until we fulfill that promise.”

“Ooh... So you’re going to fulfill your millennium-old promise, settle things once and for all, then confess your true feelings at the very end! My, how dramatic!”

“A perfect plan, if I do say so myself.”

“Then you’ll confess to him no matter the outcome of your final battle, right?”

“No. Only if I win.”

Millis blinked and tilted her head. “Hm...?”

Eluria crumpled her brows in displeasure. “Confessing after losing is like asking for pity... That’s so uncool.”

“You’re holding on to your pride as the Sage *here*, of all instances? Really?!”

“I like Raid. But if we fight, I’m going for the win.” Once she confessed her feelings, they would probably never fight all out ever again. That would be their final battle, so she wanted to give it her all until the very end. “So, Millis, I want you to cheer me on.”

“Oh, sure... I’ll cheer you on while being forced to watch you two being lovey-dovey until then... Alas, ’tis my fate as an ordinary civilian...” Millis sighed,

gazing into the distance.

Eluria, on the other hand, clenched her fists with a fiery passion. “Mm-hmm. I’ll do my best.”

As the girls ended their conversation carrying two completely opposite emotions, an unfamiliar voice cut in from behind. “Excuse me, little missies. Could I borrow a moment of your time?”

Eluria and Millis slowly turned around and found a petite young girl standing before them. Her dazzling golden hair was streaked with a few black strands, and she was clad in traditional Legnarian clothing, the sort rarely seen on this continent.

The girl held some swimsuits in her hands and looked at them sheepishly. “I’m trying to pick out a swimsuit, but the fashion of the western continent has me stumped... Even the writing system and clothing norms are all different. If you have the time, could you lend me a hand?”

“Oh...” Millis blinked. “Yes, we have time. I can help.”

Eluria nodded. “Mm. No problem.”

“Ohh! Many thanks!” The girl beamed.

However, Eluria’s gaze was drawn not to that friendly smile but a bit farther above—precisely, to the pair of animal ears twitching happily on the girl’s head. They looked as natural as can be, moving like a part of her body. Eluria couldn’t pry her eyes from them, nor from the tail that swished leisurely behind the girl.

“Wow, a beastman...” Millis marveled. “I’ve only heard stories. This is my first time actually seeing one.”

“Not ‘beastman.’ The proper term is ‘beastdwellers,’” Eluria corrected. “They’re people from Legnare who’ve developed special constitutions.”

“Indeed! What a learned young lass you are!” said the beastdweller, proudly puffing her chest up. “I am Totori, a beastdweller revered and hailed as a messenger of the gods. You are welcome to worship me with sweet, scrumptious offerings!”

“Can I pet your ears if I do?” Eluria asked.

“But of course!”

“You’re so nice...”

“We beastdwellers are chosen beings whose duty is to lend an ear to the voices of those who show their sincerity!”

“Mmkay. Here’s a cookie.” Eluria handed the beastdweller the offering she’d procured from her pocket.

“Very well. I’ve received your offering.” The girl named Totori accepted the cookie and readily offered her head in return. As Eluria began fiddling with her twitching ears, Totori hummed with interest. “Still, I’m impressed you know to call us beastdwellers. We are typically referred to as beastmen here in the western continent, and it’s not something westerners learn even in the study of magic.”

“Mm. I was interested in Legnarian sorcery, so I did a ton of research and learned about beastdwellers while looking into history.”

“Oho? Delving into history in your pursuit of magic? How commendable!”

“It was really fun to compare and contrast between sorcery and magecraft.”

“Good, good! You already understand the wonders of sorcery at your age—truly outstanding!” Totori’s lips stretched into a wide and toothy grin.

Beastdwellers, more commonly known as beastmen in the western continent, were historically treasured in Legnare as emissaries who received the favor of the gods. As sorcery was once mainstream in the eastern continent, there was a time when one’s mana capacity determined one’s status and position in society. Among them, beastdwellers not only had extraordinary amounts of mana but also manifested animal ears and tails said to be proof that they were chosen by the many gods worshipped in Legnare. It was said that they even had the aptitude to grasp a wisp of the Divine Realm that existed beyond human reach.

And there was another defining characteristic of beastdwellers:

“Since you’re a beastdweller, Totori, doesn’t that mean you don’t age?” Eluria asked.

“Indeed! I’ve just turned 121 years old this year!”

“Wow...” Millis marveled. “I heard they’re long-lived, but I didn’t know they were totally *unaging*.”

“From the moment we manifest our beastly characteristics, we stop aging and turn into an entirely different species from humans. So you’d be wise not to look down on me on account of my youthful appearance!” Totori confidently stood tall. Unfortunately, Eluria was still cozily patting her head, so she certainly didn’t look her age at the moment. “Come to think of it, I’ve yet to ask for your names.”

“Oh, I’m Millis. And this here is Lady Eluria—”

Totori instantly froze. “Eluria...?” Her eyes narrowed sharply, and after a quick nod, she hopped away from the hand petting her head. “Aha. I see, I see!”

Eluria frowned. “Something wrong?”

“Sorry, I’ve just recalled some urgent business I must attend to. Let us meet again!” Totori returned the swimsuits to the display racks and hurriedly dashed out of the store.

Millis curiously cocked her head as she watched Totori disappear from sight. “Wasn’t she picking out a swimsuit? That must be some *really* urgent business.”

“Hngh...”

“Huh? What’s the matter, Lady Eluria?”

“Totori left...”

“Yes... She did indeed. And...?” Millis tilted her head the other way, a question hovering above it.

Meanwhile, Eluria heaved out a very heavy sigh. “It was a rare chance to talk with a beastdweller from Legnare, and she even seemed to know a lot about sorcery... I wanted to ask her all sorts of things, but now...”

“Whoa... Your mood took an instant tumble for the worse...”

“Yeah... I’m feeling very down...” Most beastdwellers received great status and took key positions in Legnare, so there were very few instances of them crossing over to this continent. Even if Eluria visited Legnare, she could possibly catch sight of one but most certainly never just bump into one in town like this.

Her shoulders sagged, a heavy gloom forming around her. “I am so very sad...”

“Sh-She might still come back! And besides, she was picking out a swimsuit, so she must be staying around Palmare! I’m sure we’ll see her again!”

“Yeah... Next time, I want to pet her tail too...”

“And I’m sure she’ll let you do just that! Now, come on! Choosing a swimsuit should lift your mood right back up!”

“Right, okay... My swimsuit...”

And so, Eluria gloomily resumed choosing her swimsuit as Millis desperately cheered her on.

◇

After Eluria and Millis finished shopping, they received a message from Lucas that he would be arriving early. Thus, the group met up a bit earlier than planned, but one thing soon became very apparent: Eluria was *extremely* down in the dumps. Her shoulders were slumped, and it seemed as if a cloud was hanging over her head.

Raid eyed the girl with an arched brow. “What’s got you so depressed?”

“Raid...” she whined. “A once-in-a-lifetime encounter just slipped through my fingers...”

“Oh...” Millis scratched her cheek. “You see, we met a beastman while we were shopping. Lady Eluria wanted to talk to her some more but couldn’t, and so she has entered this ultradepressed mode...”

Alma hummed. “A beastdweller, huh? I *have* heard they sometimes sneak into the eastern region to visit.”

“Yeah... But she had to leave for some urgent business...” Eluria mumbled.

“Well, beastdwellers usually are bigwigs, after all. Not much you can do about it.” Alma offered the girl a wry smile and patted her shoulder.

Raid folded his arms. “A beastman... I met one long ago. Are they really that rare?”

“Oh, they’re more than just *rare*,” Alma replied. “People don’t become

beastmen, or rather, beastdwellers just because they have a lot of mana. It's also a unique phenomenon that's only been confirmed in Legnare."

"Right, they never pop up on this continent... Why's that?"

Eluria hummed in thought. "I think it's a form of mutation due to the use of sorcery, which operates internally. Vegalta used magecraft, so they don't pop up here."

"That sounds about right," Alma agreed. "And although sorcery is regulated these days, Legnare once dabbled in research involving human sacrifice. They say someone in power even destroyed an entire city in pursuit of perfect immortality."

"Whaaat...?" Millis winced. "And they still use that kind of thing today? Is it really safe?"

Eluria, however, nodded confidently and added, "Such techniques are now classified as forbidden arts and are strictly banned. Besides, Legnare has been using sorcery as magic since they formed ties with Vegalta, so it's safe now." She seemed to have regained some of her pep now that they were talking about magic.

Just then, Raid's mind wandered to the past. "Come to think of it, Alma, that incident you mentioned about someone in power destroying a city—I've heard it before."

"Well, it *is* a pretty famous story. People in Legnare pass it down as a warning for future generations. I suppose you could have heard it somewhere."

"Yeah. From a young beastman girl who washed ashore a thousand years ago."

"That was *not* the answer I was expecting," Alma deadpanned.

"I couldn't really get the full picture because of the language barrier, but she talked about forbidden arts and some monster destroying a city. She told me she'd fled from all that, and that was how she wound up here."

Although a rare occurrence, Legnarians would sometimes visit Altane—not in the most ideal way, however, as ships of that era could hardly reach this

continent intact. Vessels would be thrashed and swallowed by the treacherous waves of the eastern sea, and only a miraculously fortunate few would survive and drift ashore.

"Altane's iron manufacturing, refinery techniques, and even our close-quarters combat were developed in part thanks to the things we learned from those distant visitors. That was why any Legnarians who drifted ashore were to be treated with courtesy—an unusually civil order, coming from Altane."

Eluria hummed. "Now that I think about it, Altane did have a completely different combat style from Vegalta."

"I'm far more interested in those iron manufacturing and refinery techniques," Wisel chimed in, eyes sparkling with intrigue. "Could that 'machinery' you mentioned before have originated from Legnare too?"

Raid creased his brow and cocked his head in thought. "I wonder... I don't know much about all that. Besides, I've heard the different regions of Legnare each have their own techniques and crafts... I did hear that we referenced something called 'automata,' though?"

Wisel's eyes lit up. "Ohhh! Legnare's traditional automata! They use complex yet calculated positioning to produce specified movements—it's certainly similar to mana circuits, yes! If I applied those sorts of mechanisms to magic gear, there might be much more room for... No, but then the durability would take a hit, wouldn't it? It might be possible on some magic devices, but magic gear handles high-power mana output, so the linking compartments of each mechanism wouldn't be able to endure a mana circuit's load... To remedy that, I'd have to..."

Millis stared at the bespectacled boy with empty eyes. "There he goes again, monologuing about whosie-whatsits and thingamajigs..."

"He just came back from touring the city. His artificer spirit must still be ablaze." Raid chuckled as he watched Wisel scribbling passionately on his notepad while muttering under his breath. He'd been this way since they'd regrouped, so it was probably safe to say even his limited time had been quite fruitful.

Eluria tugged on Raid's sleeve. "So? What happened to that beastdweller who

washed ashore?”

“Oh... Well, she seemed really distressed by the whole thing, so I went over there to take a quick look.”

Eluria blinked. “You went to...‘take a quick look’?”

“I mean, what if that monster or manabeast she talked about came over to Altane next? I thought it was better to check things out.”

“No, not that... How did you cross the eastern sea?”

“By swimming, obviously.”

“Swimming...” Eluria echoed, aghast.

“Uh... A trip to Legnare on our *modern ships* takes over half a day...” Alma pointed out, face a little pale.

“Right. I remember it took me a while. Anyway, once I got there, I found a manabeast running wild, so I gave it a good beating, came back to Altane, then put the beastman on a boat and pulled her along so she could get back home.”

“You pulled a boat...” Eluria whispered, still aghast.

Alma groaned. “This guy’s crazy...”

Thinking back on it now, it *had been* rather reckless of him. Still, the young beastman had risked her life to cross the sea and seek help for the people of her country. He hadn’t wanted her sincere efforts to be for naught.

“Well, I came back right away, so I don’t remember it that well.”

Alma blinked. “It’s actually impressive that you forgot after doing all that...”

“Then wouldn’t there be stories about you in Legnare, Raid?” Eluria asked.

“Would there? Hm... I was in a rush, so I never introduced myself, but there might be a few here and there, sure.”

The only thing he knew for certain was that Legnare was thriving today. The young beastman he met must have lived well after that; perhaps she even took up a high post and helped get her country back on its feet. For Raid, that was more than enough to make it worth the effort.

“Hm... Actually, she could still be around, couldn’t she?” Alma suggested. “Beastdwellers *are* unaging.”

Raid squinted. “It’s been a whole millennium. There’s no way.”

Eluria hummed. “Well, they may not age, but they can still die. She could have passed away from an injury or illness.”

“I guess so...” Alma sighed. “Rumors say Legnare’s ruler has lived close to a thousand years, but they’ve never appeared in public, so nobody knows if it’s true.”

“Long-lived races tend to be deified.” Raid shrugged. “It’s well within the realm of possibility that the higher-ups just pushed that story out to unite the country for its rebuilding efforts.” A thousand years was simply far too long, and medical magic hadn’t been developed yet back then. Chances were extremely low that the girl he’d met was still alive today.

“What was she like?” Eluria asked.

“She had black hair, like a lot of them do over there, but her eyes were a rare shade of red... Also, she had fox-like ears.”

“A fox... I wish I could’ve seen her too.”

“What kind of beastman did *you* meet?” Raid asked in turn.

“Her ears looked like a cat’s. And they were striped,” she muttered while holding her hands up to her head, mimicking even the way those ears had flipped and flapped. She seemed to have taken quite a liking to this beastman.

Finally, a large magic automobile stopped in front of their group. Lucas hopped out of the driver’s seat and casually waved. “Hello, hello! Sorry for the wait, everyone.”

“Yo,” greeted Raid. “Thanks for coming to pick us up.”

“Not at all. This *is* my actual job.” Lucas grinned as he tugged on the tie over his chest. He was dressed in a butler uniform, which likely meant that he’d also be balancing his duties as an employee of House Verminant with the demands of their training camp. “Anyway, here we are. I’m happy to be at your service today.”

“Thanks. Could we leave our luggage to you?”

“Of course! I’ll load it all into the back. You can all get settled in the passenger’s compartment.” Lucas got right to work, loading the bags in while everyone climbed in.

Just a while later, he returned to the driver’s seat. “Now then, allow me to escort you to House Verminant’s villa,” he announced as he gripped the wheel and pressed on the pedal. The automobile gently drove off, gaining some speed as it rolled over the paved streets.

Millis gazed at the passing scenery with sparkling eyes, a breath of wonder spilling from her lips. “To think the day would come when I get to ride in such a fancy vehicle...!”

“These magic automobiles *are* still rare these days,” Lucas remarked. “The mana control and adjustments are a bit tricky, so ordinary people who haven’t trained in magic are prone to accidents.” That said, Lucas himself drove the automobile with practiced ease.

“You’re a good driver, Lucas,” Eluria praised.

“He really is,” Raid agreed. “Nothing against House Caldwin’s driver, but I do recall a bit more shaking on those rides.”

To that, Lucas just chuckled sheepishly. “Well, you see, our young master gets motion sickness from just a few minutes on a carriage, so I take extra care when driving. I observe the condition of the road and provide appropriate support with magic.”

“A very magician-like driving method. I give it a ten out of ten.” Eluria bobbed her head, looking quite pleased. She was about as experienced as one could get as an automobile passenger, so for her to give such generous praise, Lucas’s driving must have been extra skillful and smooth.

As they drove through the woods, the trees and foliage finally cleared out. An enormous lake stretched before them, surrounded by mountains coated in dense greenery. However, the scenic nature wasn’t entirely familiar; rivers flowed up toward the mountain peaks, and geysers in the distance spurted out toward the heavens, filling their view with wondrous sights of water in motion.

“Oh! We’re almost there,” announced Lucas.

A large mansion lay at the end of their path. It was only about as large as a high-end residence in the capital, but it held a unique and profound presence standing solitarily amid such expansive natural scenery.

As Lucas stopped the automobile in front, the group spotted Valk waiting at the entrance with her head bowed. “Welcome, everyone,” she greeted.

“Ooh! So you’re a maid, Valk?” Millis asked.

“Indeed. I mainly work as a maid and attendant of House Verminant. The head of the house, Lord Martis, has instructed us to treat our guests with great care. Hence, I’ve come to welcome you in my proper uniform.” Valk’s expression was calm and her voice carried softly, but even just the way she bowed her head expressed refinement, clearly practiced from a young age. “Should you need any assistance during your stay, please do not hesitate to reach out to either Lucas or me.”

Eluria bobbed her head. “Thanks, Valk.”

Millis gulped. “I-Is it okay for a commoner like me to partake in such fancy hospitality...?!”

“But of course. You have been invited here as a valued guest of House Verminant. I will expend every possible effort to ensure you have a most comfortable stay,” Valk replied, holding her head up with pride. She was certainly living up to her position as a maid in every way. “Now, allow me to escort you to your rooms. Lucas, please bring their luggage.”

“Roger that. By the way, where’s the young master run off to?”

“I heard some clattering in his room, so he must be preparing something in a hurry.”

“It *is* his first time inviting friends to the villa...”

“Really. I remember that time we invited the sons of House Verminant’s associates for his birthday celebration. Before things even began, he started crying, *‘What if nobody comes?!’* and in his panic he even gave the master an invite...”

“Then he embarrassed himself at the party, so we’ve celebrated on our own from then on...”

“The exposé doesn’t stop even when he’s not around...!” Millis lamented the pitiful nobleman as she heard Valk and Lucas inadvertently spill his embarrassing stories with wistful gazes. Still, the fact that they stayed by Fareg’s side despite his many failings showed how dearly they cherished him.

Just then, they heard loud and harried footsteps from the mansion, along with a flustered voice yelling, “Valk, are they already here?!”

“Yes, they are, so please keep it down. You’re yelling almost as loudly as you bark.”

“Hey, cut that out! You’re not talking about that time I pretended to be a dog during my birthday celebration, are you?!”

“Impressive. You understood the reference right away. I am greatly pleased.”

“No, that doesn’t matter right now! Buy me some time—another minute will do!”

“Understood. Then please choose a number from one to fifteen.”

“Wh-Why?! Uhhh—eight!”

“Eight. Very well.” Valk spun around and bowed. “Dear guests, our young master is being a handful again, so if you would kindly wait a moment,” she said as she procured a collection of picture boards from god knows where. “I shall now present to you a chapter from the Age Eight Volume: Young Master Fareg Panics After Getting Stung in the Butt.”

“THIS SHAME ISN’T WORTH ONE MINUTE!!!” Fareg’s desperate scream echoed from within the mansion, followed by the harried sounds of door after door opening, all the way until he burst out the front, nearly knocking the front door off its hinges.

Fareg awkwardly stood at the entrance and looked between his guests and the hall behind him. Finally, his lips relaxed into his usual cheeky grin as he heartily declared, “Ahem! It was about time you got here!”

Behind him and inside the villa, the group caught sight of a banner hanging

crookedly from the ceiling: *“Welcome to the Verminant Villa!”*

◇

After Valk guided them to their rooms and Lucas followed with their luggage, the group gathered by the lakefront near the villa.

“Whew... I just feel so uncomfy in swimwear,” Raid mumbled, restlessly looking down at his outfit—his thin buttonless shirt left his chest completely exposed. A thousand years ago, he’d often jump into water fully clothed *and* armored. In the present day, at most, he’d step into a river in his work clothes or undershirt. He wasn’t comfortable showing skin in front of others and felt rather awkward as he stood around.

“Raid, I’m ready,” he heard Eluria call.

He slowly turned, and there she stood in her brand new swimsuit: a simple white bikini, complemented by a light blue coverup and a sun hat with a brim as wide as her shoulders.

Feeling his stare, Eluria gripped the brim of her hat and tugged it over her face. “I-I picked it out myself...”

“Ohhh. White really looks good on you. Well, I guess I’m also used to seeing you in white.”

“Th-Thanchu...!” Despite biting her tongue, Eluria bobbed her head while still gripping her hat’s brim. She looked a bit restless in her revealing outfit as well. “You...look good in your swimwear too.”

“Ha ha, thanks. I still can’t get used to being so lightly dressed, though,” he admitted.

“Mm... Me neither, actually,” she confessed, meeting his gaze in the air.

They stared at one another for a moment before breaking into sheepish laughter.

“Jeez, there they go again, off in their own little world,” Alma drawled as she trailed after Eluria.

“Raid complimented her right off the bat. I’m not surprised,” Millis mused, walking beside their instructor. “You can always trust him when it comes to

these sorts of things. What a great guy, really."

"What do you think he'd say about *our* swimsuits?"

"I would place my bets on a harmless comment about how well they suit us."

Raid looked at the two girls and sighed. "Don't make this awkward for me, please..."

In any case, Alma and Millis's choice of swimsuits did fit their images perfectly. Just like Eluria, Alma had chosen something plain and simple, but her whole fit was completely black, with a delicate lace around her waist. Millis had no coverup or shawl, but the frills hemming her light pink swimsuit made her outfit neither too flashy nor plain.

"I think it suits you two—really," Raid insisted. "The colors go without saying, but even the little accessories and details really highlight your style."

Alma grinned. "Well, thanks a bunch. I'm honored to receive praise from Your Excellency."

"Hrgh... Your feedback was way more solid than I'd expected. I'll give you a pass," Millis relented.

Raid smiled wryly at their responses before turning to the lake once more. "All right. Everyone's here, so let's start training, shall we?"

Millis, plus the four who'd been on standby, instantly slumped as if all life had left them and mumbled, "Yes, sir..." Incidentally, the other four had been waiting around in proper training attire that looked much easier to move around in than Millis's frilly swimsuit.

"Actually, why did *you* change?" Raid asked.

"I at least wanted to enjoy the lakefront in spirit...!" Millis gritted out as she vented her frustration by punching the sandy shore. She looked all the more miserable, being the only one in swimwear among the five trainees.

Wisel bit his lips as he placed a somber hand on the girl's shoulder. "I understand, Ms. Millis... Today, we step through the gates of hell and will be training till we drop... You must've needed to avert your eyes from reality, otherwise you couldn't drag yourself here...!"

Beside him, Lucas let out an empty laugh. “We’ve heard horror stories of the kind of training everyone’s been going through, and boy, am I not looking forward to this...”

Valk sighed. “I fear we can no longer simply laugh at the young master after today...”

Fareg slumped. “Ahh... I wanted to drop the banner right as they stepped inside, but now...”

It was glum faces all around. One in particular seemed down for an entirely different reason, but nobody paid him any mind.

In contrast, Eluria perked up at the mention of training and took a step forward. “Mmkay. I’ll announce your training exercises for today.”

“Yes, ma’am...” they murmured.

“By the way, I’ve got extra training prepared for those who don’t show spirit.”

“YES, MA’AM!!!”

“Surprisingly strict, isn’t she?” Alma chuckled.

“’Course she is. After she proved the viability of wielding magic in battle, she trained an entire troop of magicians and prepared them for war in just a year.”

“Ah, now I know why Wisel and Millis are practically skipping and prancing through my training while the other kids are flopping over left and right...”

Meanwhile, Eluria continued with a satisfied nod. “First, Fareg and Wisel will be playing tag.”

Fareg raised a brow. “That’s the commoners’ game where one chases and others flee, right?”

“Mm-hmm. Here in the east, the one who is ‘it’ even pretends to be a demon.”

“Hmph. What mere child’s play compared to our usual training—literally!”

“And you’ll be playing not on land, but on the lake,” Eluria finished.

Fareg blinked. “Uh...?”

“Fareg, you will start with fifty points. You’ll lose one each time Wisel lands a hit on you.”

“Hang on! Why are you just assuming I can move on water?!”

“It’s unacceptable for a magician’s mobility to be affected by the terrain. Moreover, Fareg, you’ll be moving not with flight magic but only through your flames and explosions.”

“But I only use that for instantaneous movement! Using it for regular maneuvers is just—”

Eluria glared at him. “I’m not done.”

Fareg instantly shrunk back. “Okay...”

“The point of this training is for you to learn to control the bare minimum of mana you can output. This will ensure you don’t expend more mana than necessary on movement and also give you more options when maneuvering and dodging in close quarters.”

Wisel hummed. “What about me? Do I have any limitations?”

“None at all,” Eluria replied. “Devices, terrain—use anything you can to catch Fareg and make him fall into the lake. That’ll rack up points on your side.”

“And...what happens if I have more points by the end?”

“Whoever has the most points will be exempted from extra training.”

“Lord Verminant, please sacrifice yourself for me,” Wisel said promptly.

“Why should I?!” Fareg shrieked.

Wisel grabbed him by the shoulders and smiled, but his eyes were terrifyingly bloodshot. “Because I still haven’t taken a closer look at your house’s magic automobile... I need to have the energy to study it later!”

“Okay,” Eluria called breezily. “Start now.”

“Ha ha ha ha! I would sacrifice even my allies to study magic devices! Just watch me!!!”

“But the automobile is your *ally’s* property!!!”

Wisel whipped out his devices and began activating them, while Fareg immediately triggered an explosion and fled toward the lake.

Eluria watched the ensuing chaos with a very big and satisfied nod. “Next, Lucas,” she said. “You will obstruct Wisel and protect Fareg.”

“Ohh... That’s a bit easier compared to their tasks.”

“However,” Eluria continued, “you’re not allowed to attack Wisel directly. Instead, stick to providing support by obstructing his path, sight, or line of fire.”

“I see... That’s certainly right up my alley.” Lucas grinned and equipped his magic gear—a small crossbow—onto his arm. “I’ll get right to it, then!” As he held it up to aim, the string pulled taut and released. Instantly, a jet-black fog blanketed Fareg’s surroundings.

Eluria had learned from Fareg that Lucas specialized in endowment magic, which equipped special qualities to specified targets. He specified his target by aiming his crossbow, and he could only designate one target and one quality at a time. Lucas’s first move had been to endow color to the air. Endowment magic was extremely lacking in offensive capabilities, but instead was excellent for support, obstruction, and setting up surprise attacks.

“Ohhh!” Millis exclaimed. “Lady Eluria, isn’t that quite similar to the invisible footholds you made during your spar with Lufus?”

“Mm-hmm. Endowment magic can apply new qualities that are not innate to its target. For example, while driving, Lucas softened the road to minimize shaking in the automobile.”

“Whoa... I didn’t notice at all.”

“Right. It’s very subtle. Endowment magic can’t *convert* matter, like turning air into poison, but it can change the qualities held by matter without changing its outward appearance, making it hard to read or predict and thus tricky to combat. So Lucas, your first move—” Eluria’s eyes narrowed sharply. “—is a minus point in my book.”

As if on cue, Wisel charged right into the black fog without a hint of hesitation. Then, with a quick huff, he broadly swung his right leg and kicked through the fog. Compressed air gushed from his magic device, knocking the

black fog away, allowing him to once again set his sights on Fareg's fleeing figure.

"Yeesh..." Lucas winced. "I see now. No ordinary obstruction will do the trick, huh?"

Eluria nodded. "Throughout our spars, Wisel has grown exceedingly experienced in dealing with obstructions from endowment magic. He can easily smash through the simple tricks. You'll need to find something more discreet, more *effective*, if you want to hold him back."

"Roger that... By the way, did I lose a point with that just now?"

"You don't earn or lose points, Lucas. But you'll get extra training if Fareg loses."

"RUN, YOUNG MASTEEER! RUN FOR MY LIIIFE!!!" Lucas screamed as he chased after Fareg. Eluria's words, along with his fear of extra training, were better motivators than any magic.

"Okay. You're next, Valk."

Valk straightened her back and braced herself. "I am listening."

"You're going to play with my contracted manabeast."

"Is...that all?"

"Mm-hmm. That's all." Eluria bobbed her head. "I've heard about your magic —'permeation,' right? A derivative of teleportation magic that temporarily transports a target to a separate dimension."

"Yes. In doing so, the target's original mass and momentum are absorbed into the separate dimension, allowing matter to phase through." To demonstrate, Valk gripped her magic gear, a small hunting blade by her waist, and cast her magic. Then, she grabbed a handful of sand with her left hand and dropped it over her right arm.

The sand fell right through her arm and naturally piled back onto the ground by her feet.

"Interesting," Raid remarked. "It's like the sand temporarily disappeared from our world."

“That understanding is not wrong,” Valk said. “It is visible but nonexistent, hence why it never came into contact with my arm and simply phased through it.”

“This is really nifty,” said Eluria. “You could apply it to throwing weapons so they phase through the enemy’s flesh and directly damage their insides. It essentially ignores barriers and shields too. Moreover, if you applied it to enemy attacks, you could theoretically stand still in battle and escape unscathed.” Her eyes flashed in excitement. Used offensively, this magic could be deployed to pierce straight through enemy defenses, while used defensively, it essentially turned the user into an impregnable fortress, unfazed by any manner of attack.

Valk frowned. “But I can only perform this for three seconds at a time, after which the magic is instantly dispelled. Realistically, it cannot be used for defense.”

“Yeah...” Raid nodded. “If you time it badly and the weapon or attack is still passing through you, then you’d have essentially dug your own grave. Must be hard to use it regularly.”

“Mm-hmm. But I think the most effective way to use it is *actively*, while precisely grasping the buffer time in between. That way, she should be able to learn how to use it as an emergency means of escape.” Eluria deployed her gear, stabbed it upright into the ground, then slowly pulled it out. Puppy-sized Shefri emerged from below, peeking her head out of the ground, before letting out a bark and circling Eluria. “Guess what, Shefri? Valk said she’ll play with you.”

Shefri let out another happy bark in response.

“Oh... How cute.” A breath of relief spilled from Valk’s lips as she watched the peppy beast. Having been introduced to her new playmate, Shefri turned to Valk and began circling around her as well, even nuzzling against her legs as if telling her to hurry up and play. Valk chuckled at the sight. “And very lively too.”

“Mm-hmm. She has a *lot* of energy to burn, so good luck.”

“Please rest assured. With a task this simple, I will accomplish it without fail,” Valk said with a confident smile.

“All right then—here. Shefri’s favorite ball.” Eluria handed Valk a spherical magic device that fit snugly in the palm of her hand. “Your training will be to use permeation to stop Shefri from taking this.”

“But she’s so small... I doubt she could take this from—” Valk was cut off when the ball was swatted from her hand. Shefri pounced on it and began biting and gnawing on it. “Oh my... It seems Shefri is quite the nimble little one.”

“Valk, you’d better hurry and take the ball back,” Eluria advised.

“I suppose so. This *is* still training. I must steel myself and—”

“That’s not what I meant. That ball is full of my mana, you see.”

“Is...that a problem?”

“Shefri is a mana-eating wolf, so she gets extra hyper when she consumes mana.”

Valk froze, and her expression stiffened. “Huh...?”

As if on cue, Shefri’s body began to morph. Each gnaw on the ball made her body swell, turning her from a puppy to something closer to an adult dog.

“For this hard-mode playtime, each time Shefri takes the ball from you, she will eat my mana and grow bigger. She only play-bites with her playmates, but if she gets too big she might still accidentally bite your arm off.”

“Shefri, stop! Bad girl! No biting! No growing!!!” Valk cast her permeation on the ball in a flurry and took it away. Shefri, meanwhile, seemed pleased that Valk was finally playing with her and chased after her with a very cheery bark.

“She looks really happy to have a new playmate,” Eluria mused.

Millis, the only one left, sighed. “Ahh... I would expect no less from your training, Lady Eluria...”

“Don’t worry. I won’t have a single hand in *your* training.”

“Really?! Oh, wow! Guess I’ve drawn the luckiest straw here, huh? What a—”

“My substitute will be Special-Class Magician Alma Kanos.”

“Why do I have to be surrounded by all these crazy strong freaks?!” Millis

bashed her fists against the sandy shore.

In contrast, Alma propped her magic gear on the ground with a hefty *thud* while sporting a pleasant smile on her face. “All righty, then. Guess it’s time to beat the living daylights out of this little swimsuit-obsessed ditz.”

“Y-You’re joking, right? A respectable special-class magician wouldn’t *actually* beat the living daylights out of such a weak and frail country girl such as myself, right?!”

“Nah. I’m literally gonna beat you up.”

“Have you ever considered adding the word ‘mercy’ to your vocabulary?!”

“Don’t worry. I won’t be doing it myself,” Alma said as her shadow stretched out and inky black skeleton soldiers began crawling out of it. Their bones rattled and armor clattered like otherworldly laughter as the soldiers began to surround Millis. “Your assignment is nonaggressive defense. Hold up against my Dead Man’s Brigade for as long as you can.”

“Even Lady Eluria doesn’t use tenth-stratum magic on me!”

“I’ve toned it down *a bit* for you—still using up to about fifth-stratum magic, though, so don’t think any flimsy old defenses or barriers will cut it.”

“A-And if they break through...?”

“Then my guys will beat the living daylights out of you with their bony little fists.”

“I DON’T THINK THAT’S ANY BETTER!!!” Millis shrieked as she immediately booked it. The skeleton soldiers chased after her, clattering loudly in pursuit. Getting hit by those bones would probably hurt a lot, especially in that swimsuit that had absolutely zero defensive features.

Now that everyone had gone off to their respective training sessions, Eluria plopped down on a chair. “And we,” she declared, “will watch them from the comfort of our seats.”

“Watching others train while we lounge around in swimsuits? Man, this is the life,” Alma preened.

“I can already imagine the miserable aftermath...” Raid mumbled.

“Well, their lives aren’t in danger. Fareg won’t drown since Lucas is watching him, and I made sure my skeletons won’t do more than slap Millis even if they break through her defenses.”

Eluria nodded. “Mm-hmm. I’ve also restricted Shefri from biting down too hard. It’s just better for their training if they feel like they’re in danger.”

“I see... Actually, I’ve been wondering—what *is* that extra training?” Raid asked.

“We will be simulating actual battle under my supervision.”

“Hm... More specifically?”

“The human mind and body freeze under excessive pain. But pain is only excessive when it exceeds one’s expectations.”

“Well, that makes sense.”

“So I will repeatedly replicate the level of pain that can be expected from combat to help them get used to it. If they pass out, I’ll just dump water over them or dull their senses—do whatever to wake them up, until we do it a set number of times.”

“Eluria, that’s not training—it’s torture,” Raid kindly pointed out.

“They won’t be physically hurt, so it’s well within the realm of training.” She pouted and shook her head. “But if they work hard now, I plan to just do it once.”

“So they’re gonna experience it no matter what...”

“I think it’s good,” Alma chimed in. “Injury can take away one’s ability to think calmly, which can even lead to misfiring magic. As a magician, it’d be most shameful to lose your cool and hurt your own allies or, worse yet, cause casualties among civilians and victims.”

“Oh... That’s true. I was also pretty strict about that.” Raid had never given this kind of training, but he always put his men under strict command to keep their cool when wounded. The skill was just as important as it had been a thousand years ago.

“Anyway, you should kick back too, Your Excellency. It’s not every day you get

to relax with two beauties in swimsuits, yeah?”

“Yeah, sure. Not like there’s anything for me to do. Guess I’ll take it easy today.”

“Mm-hmm. We’re here for our investigation, so we should preserve our energy until then,” Eluria agreed with a nod as she began setting up their tea and snacks.

As the three lounged amid the distant chaos, Raid recalled something and perked up. “By the way, what are the two other special-class magicians like?”

Alma hummed and tilted her head. “A sensible weirdo and a peppy little rascal?”

“That’s quite the combination...” Raid deadpanned.

“One thing I can guarantee, though, is that they’re both powerful. The weirdo, Savad, is especially monstrous. He’s been undefeated since his student days and graduated in one year, the fastest track to become a magician. After that, he participated in the subjugation of the Thundermist Bird, an ultra-sized manabeast that appeared in Legnare’s eastern lands, and practically defeated it single-handedly. With that, he met the criteria for becoming a special-class magician and was promoted within just three years of taking his post.”

Raid hummed, intrigued. “Speaking of, how long did it take *you*?”

“I became a magician at eighteen, and it took me about five years to be promoted after that. Ultra-sized manabeasts are quite rare, you know; it’s said that they come from the mysterious unexplored continent. So fulfilling that condition to become a special-class magician also calls for the right timing and some luck. But...” Alma furrowed her brow. “Savad’s strength is extraordinary even among us special-classers.”

“Oh, really? He’s that different?”

“Sure is. You see, we special-class magicians also have our strengths and weaknesses. In Savad’s case, he’s better at fighting individual large-and ultra-sized beasts rather than a herd of manabeasts... Still, he’s remained undefeated, both against manabeasts and people, despite being a user of Legnarian magic.”

“Mm. That’s impressive for sure.” Eluria nodded in agreement, then turned to Raid to explain. “We’ve talked about this a bit before, right? Legnarian magic, founded on their sorcery, has this thing called an ‘equibinding formula’ that pushes the effects and range of the user’s magic past its limit in exchange for setting a condition that will forcibly dispel it. This means it’s effective against manabeasts but often unsuited against human opponents.”

Alma nodded. “Exactly. Manabeasts can’t aim for their weakness, but magicians can figure out their special condition, so they tend to rack up more losses when fighting human opponents.”

“Human combat is their overall weakness, and that’s why Legnarian magicians take it very seriously. Unlike Vegalta, they continue to study and develop close-quarter combat techniques.”

“Oh? Sounds interesting,” Raid replied with a grin. “Magic has made Vegalta’s close-quarter combat more diverse over time, but if Legnare’s been passing on pure melee techniques for the past millennia, then it seems I’ve got a lot to look forward to from them.”

“Now that I think about it,” Alma said, “you might get along with Savad, Your Excellency. Your fighting styles are kinda similar in that you both look utterly absurd from the outside.”

“So you think I’ll hit it off with the weirdo... Not sure what to make of that.”

“I mean, I called him a weirdo, but personality-wise he’s pretty normal. If anything, he’s one of the more gentle and friendly special-classers. He just...*looks* like a weirdo, I guess.”

“Ah, I see. And what about the other one?”

“She’s a nasty little rascal—nothing more to it.”

Raid squinted. “What’d she do to *you*...?”

“For starters, when I became a special-class magician three years ago, she yelled, *‘Rookies these days have such huge honkers!’* and grabbed my breasts in public.”

“Wow... What a nasty little rascal.”

“I know, right?” Alma sighed. “Anyway, she’s a girl so it’s whatever...but it was unbelievable behavior coming from someone over a hundred years old. So I whacked her over the head on reflex.”

“You whacked your colleague in public, huh? You’re somethin’ else too.”

Eluria curiously tilted her head. “Over a hundred years old? But didn’t you say she’s little?”

“She’s also a beastman,” Alma explained. “But she’s a kid both inside and out—does as she pleases without thinking about the consequences. The only thing remotely *mature* about her is that she treats those around her like youngsters.”

“She looks like a kid...but treats everyone else like youngsters.”

“Also, her hair color’s a little unique—mostly golden, streaked with black. Her ears are striped with the same colors.”

“Gold and black hair...with striped ears.”

“And her name is—”

“Totori.”

Alma blinked. “Uh... Right. Her name *is* Totori, but how...?”

“The beastman I met was named Totori.”

“What? So you met Savad too?”

“No... She was alone, as far as I could tell. After we introduced ourselves, she suddenly said she had some urgent business and left.”

“‘Urgent business’?” Alma’s face scrunched up dubiously. “No, if she wasn’t with Savad, her chaperone, then she could have only rushed out to—”

“It seems you’ve all been enjoying yourselves here,” a new voice declared.

The sudden words heralded a cacophony of changes. Instantly, dark clouds painted the clear and bright skies. Lightning flashed and thunder roared as the lake and its surroundings were blanketed in darkness. Amid the booming thunderstrikes, however, the light and clear chimes of a bell sounded clearly through the air.

“I, Totori the Thunderclap Maiden, shall join the fray!” With that spirited

bellow, a streak of lightning burst from the rumbling clouds, snapping and flashing as it drew a path to the three lounging by the lakefront. A lone girl descended the blinding road, a fearless smirk upon her lips. Totori stood atop the bridge spanning the heavens and looked down on the humans far below.

“Hmph... It has reached my ears that some young upstarts have been causing a ruckus in Vegalta’s capital. What’s more, a mere student *dares* to face a special-class magician? Utterly preposterous! I shall see for myself if you truly have what it takes to— BWAGH!”

In the middle of her impassioned speech, Totori’s body suddenly flew forward, courtesy of the ink-black skeleton that had sneaked up behind her. The girl rolled down her lightning path like a runaway wheel and finally crash landed face-first in front of Alma.

“Owww, that huuurt...!”

Alma scoffed. “I bet it does. We aren’t really built to use our faces as brakes.”

“Why did you hit me?! I was in the middle of making my cool entrance!” Totori whined, punching the sand.

“Oh, can it. That’s what you get for ruining perfectly good weather.” Alma rolled her eyes. “Anyway, you really should’ve contacted us if you got here early. Though, knowing you, you probably wanted to surprise us or something...”

“Exactly! I wanted to give you all a good fright!”

“Well, too bad. I don’t think anybody was listening.”

“Huh...?” Totori turned her wide-eyed gaze to Raid and Eluria.

“Whoaaa, this is new... I’ve never seen lightning turned into a fixed path. Totally different from the spears the Guardian Dragon threw at me.” Raid touched the crackling path, fascinated.

“You know, Raid, touching that just one time would’ve burned anyone else to a crisp,” Eluria pointed out.

“Seriously? But Eluria, you’re poking it too.”

“I’m protecting my finger with a hundred spells. I just really wanted to see

what it felt like.”

Raid raised an eyebrow. “That’s all it takes for you to block a special-class magician’s magic, huh? You’re pretty out-there too.”

A friendly air enveloped the pair as they each gave the lightning path a few more curious pokes. Some distance away, one of the trainees began to notice something was amiss. However...

“H-Hang on, artificer! I think something’s going on by the lakeside!”

“Ha ha ha ha! Do you think I would fall for such a crude trick, Lord Verminant?! Besides, those three can easily handle any emergency! Nothing will stop me from going for the win with all my might!!!”

“Young master, this isn’t the time to look away! We’re going to lose at this rate! I *really* don’t want a one-way ticket to extra training hell with you!”

“Aghhh... Shefri, stop growing! Please, I beg you...!”

“Hell yeah! Come at me, you stupid piles o’ bones! This country girl here drank freshly squeezed milk every day back in the boonies! You think you’re a match for me?! Bah!”

Suffice it to say, they had their hands full and hadn’t even noticed Totori’s arrival.

“Now then...” Alma approached the shell-shocked girl while rolling her shoulders. Her joints cracked ominously as a bright smile stretched over her face. “You trespassed into House Verminant’s territory and used magic against unarmed civilians without warning... That certainly warrants a punishment, no?”

Totori paled. “W-Wait! It was just a little prank, you see, so I made sure to control my—”

Of course, Alma ignored her desperate pleas and landed a big and mighty fist on her head.

◇

“It really, *really* hurts!” Totori squirmed atop Eluria’s lap while bawling her eyes out. “Ughhh... It was just an impulsive little prank! You have such a big,

mountainous bosom, yet not a shred of compassion is buried within...!”

Alma smiled brightly, fist clenched. “You’re right. I’m so uncompassionate, I’m suddenly getting the urge to beat you up again.”

“Eek!” Totori jolted, hunching her shoulders as she clung tightly to Eluria.

Eluria welcomed her into her arms and gently patted Totori’s head. “It’s okay. You have a bump on your head, but it’s nothing serious.”

“Waaah... Eluria, you’re so nice to me...”

“I can’t help it. You’re so fluffy,” Eluria muttered as she began fiddling with Totori’s twitching ears.

Totori, meanwhile, didn’t seem too displeased being treated like a house cat. Her face melted into a content smile under Eluria’s gentle touch. Not to mention, having at least one person on her side seemed to have cheered her up. “Jeez... I came all this way to talk about the incident, yet I was met with a cruel iron fist instead of a conversation... Bah.”

Alma narrowed her eyes. “You’ve got info about Lufus Lailas?”

“Indeed. More specifically, about that dark purple mana you said you saw.” Totori turned her head and said to Eluria, “I will ask to be sure: What you saw was unlike any known mana color to date, yes?”

“Mm-hmm. I saw it up close. There’s no mistake.”

“I see, I see... Yes, how strange. The Sage only identified six mana branches that living beings could possess. And it’s not as if wielding multiple branches blends the colors.”

A magician’s mana served as the core of any magic they cast, and magic gear was used to convert their innate mana to other colors, allowing them to produce a plethora of effects and techniques. In a sense, magic was the simplified version of Eluria’s Polyaggregate Expansion, made possible through the aid of magic gear.

However, the mana branches—red, blue, green, yellow, white, and black—were never blended but rather *stacked* atop one another. Those who could wield multiple branches would simply produce the color of their most

prominent branch, meaning a dark purple color should have been inconceivable.

“Totori, are there other mana colors in Legnare?” asked Eluria.

“Hrm... I’ve lived a bit over a hundred years, but not once have I seen any outside the established six.”

“Really?” Eluria pressed, a rare show of persistence. “You see, I think that if a new mana branch were to be discovered, it would be in Legnare.”

“Oh...? And why is that?”

“Unlike magecraft, Legnare’s sorcery operates internally—that is, the mana is applied within the caster’s body. So it’s entirely possible that the caster’s mana branches could be influenced and mutated in some way.”

Totori hummed. “I understand what you mean. But if you’re pinning the cause on sorcery, then any mutations should have already been discovered throughout its long history.”

“Right. In the first place, sorcery wouldn’t have become a well-established art and tradition if using it adversely impacted the body. Even if it *did* have an influence, the impact should be negligible since the human body wouldn’t naturally produce something harmful to itself.”

Sorcery was applied internally, unlike magecraft, but nevertheless the user’s mana was still born from the caster’s body, making it *their* power. It was hard to imagine that merely using it through a technique could alter one’s mana so drastically.

“But...” Eluria narrowed her eyes. “What if mutated mana could produce an immortal body?”

A small, truly subtle expression flitted across Totori’s face.

“Some people could have theorized, regardless of its veracity, that possessing unique mana could bring one past the realm of humanity.”

“And...” Totori slowly replied, “your proof?”

“Beastdwellers’ exclusivity to Legnare,” Eluria answered. “Since they don’t appear in Vegalta, the cause undoubtedly lies in Legnare’s unique culture of

sorcery. I can furthermore deduce—from the rarity of beastdwellers and the lack of humans with mutated mana—that the root cause can be traced back to forbidden arts, which are no longer in practice today."

Eluria narrowed her eyes and finally concluded, "Therefore, I propose that beastdwellers are descendants of humans whose bodies were modified through forbidden sorcery in the past. Their bodies receive internal stimulus as they use sorcery which manifests as beastdweller traits. This would mean that being a beastdweller is not an innate characteristic, but rather a physical change that occurs around the time one begins practicing sorcery."

"Ohhh. Eloquent as always when it comes to magic," Raid mused.

"You said that all in one breath too," Alma said with a whistle.

Eluria bobbed her head, smugly soaking up their praises. "I could talk about magic all day," she preened, extremely happy to have the chance to converse with someone knowledgeable in Legnarian sorcery.

In stark contrast, however, Totori's expression had grown terribly grim. "Alma," she called. "Who *is* this girl?"

"An overpowered magic geek."

"You can't fool me. I can attribute her skill to talent, but that hypothesis of hers certainly isn't something a mere student could ever formulate." Totori looked up at Eluria and asked again, "Who are you?"

"If I tell you, will you talk about sorcery with me?"

"Yes. If I deem you worthy of trust, then I swear as a servant of the deities of Legnare that I shall answer you with the truth and nothing but the truth," Totori quietly uttered, her features set with somber seriousness.

Eluria nodded. "All right then. I'm the Sage. I made magic a thousand years ago."

"Oh, wow! So it wasn't just a coincidence that you had the same name! You're actually the Sage! Ha ha!"

"Yep. I'm actually the Sage."

Totori froze. "Huh? Wait, you're serious?"

“You said you’d tell me more if I answered,” Eluria said breezily.

Seeing Totori frozen in place, jaw dropped, Alma piped in, “It’s true—she’s the Sage, in the flesh.”

“I reincarnated with Raid here. Now we’re students of the Institute.”

“‘Reincarnated’...?” Totori shook her head, trying to gather her thoughts.

Alma smoothed her expression and told her, “I’m sure I don’t need to say this, but not a word of this to anyone else. She’s telling you because we can trust you as a special-class magician.”

“I know that,” Totori grumbled. “In any case, if you’re *the* Sage, then it makes sense that you knew the top secret behind Legnare’s beastdwellers.”

“So I’m right?” Eluria asked.

“Indeed, it’s exactly as you’ve said. But I’d like to ask for your discretion as well. The origin of beastdwellers is highly classified information.”

“Okay. I promise.” Eluria took Totori’s hand and linked their pinkies. “But why is it a secret?”

“To protect Legnare’s customs and beliefs,” she answered. “Beastdwellers are revered as messengers of the gods. The very foundation of our country could be shaken if it comes to light that they’re actually descended from criminals who once stained their hands with forbidden arts.” Totori let out a deep breath. “I refrained from answering earlier, but the truth is, Legnare *does* have records of an unidentified mana color.”

Eluria narrowed her eyes. “Like the one we saw?”

“Not quite... The color itself was not specifically recorded, but it’s said that using forbidden arts can change, perhaps even *blend* mana colors.” Totori looked down at the cup of milk tea in front of her. “Blended mana, brought about by forbidden arts, can draw power from the Divine Realm. And such power that is usually beyond human reach can make many things possible—an undying body, the revival of dead souls, and...reincarnation,” she finished, her gaze sliding back to Eluria. “Allow me to ask this, just to be sure: the truth behind beastdwellers that you spoke of earlier—was that simply your own

deduction?”

“Yeah. I did a lot of thinking after reading up on Legnare.”

“That’s a relief, then. We would have really been putting our lives at risk if it turned out the esteemed Sage was our target.”

Eluria squinted. “So you crossed over to this continent because you’re going after someone?”

“Indeed. Savad is currently busy gathering intel to that end.”

“Two special-class magicians on the same case?” Raid suddenly chimed in. “Must be quite the criminal you’re after.”

Totori quietly nodded. “A few days ago, several documents and records regarding forbidden arts were stolen from the imperial palace’s treasury in western Legnare. We’re currently pursuing the thief.”

“Wait... Two special-class magicians were dispatched to catch a *thief*?”

“Had this been an ordinary thief, it would certainly have been overkill. Alas...” Totori sighed. “Both the treasury and the imperial palace are heavily guarded by networks of magic devices and barriers, yet the infiltration was only discovered through the regular inspection. Before then, not a single soul had noticed anything amiss.”

“Aha, I see...” Alma nodded. “That’s definitely no task for an ordinary magician. If it turns out they’re working on their own, then that means they’re skilled enough to slip right past all the palace’s security. If they’re a group, then it’d point to a large-scale criminal syndicate.”

There were all sorts of magic crimes. Most involved theft and violence, usually committed by those who had dabbled in magic. However, some cases involved former magicians in possession of magic gear—in such situations, multiple magicians would be dispatched to handle the case.

“Fortunately, no casualties turned up,” Totori continued. “Regardless, the heavily guarded imperial palace was infiltrated and documents on forbidden arts were stolen from the treasury. Given the weight of this case, Savad and I were ordered to investigate.”

“I see... That’s quite the curious case.” It was all the more so to Raid, as he had heard of something similar before—of a heavily guarded room left with no traces of struggle. Indeed, this was oddly similar to the circumstances surrounding Eluria’s death a thousand years ago. They couldn’t yet know if the two were related, but it was well worth keeping in mind.

Moreover, it wasn’t just the crime itself that caught Raid’s attention.

“We also decided to come to Vegalta after hearing about the silver-haired elf called ‘the professor’ from your report,” Totori continued, looking to Alma.

“You’re saying he might have used those stolen documents,” Raid replied.

“That’s *if* he and the thief are one and the same. In any case, I’d wager it’s the most likely possibility, which is why we suspect he’s hiding in Libynia Desert.”

Raid narrowed his eyes. “So he’s hiding in the place we’re about to investigate?”

“The desert is under multiple jurisdictions and cannot be entered easily...but for one with such stealth, would it not be the best hiding place of all?” Libynia Desert was the best place to avoid people’s eyes and stay hidden. Only the many manabeasts prowling the land could potentially pose a problem, but for such a skilled magician it would hardly have been a deterrent. “So your whole investigation was exactly what we needed. Our mission is top secret, so we couldn’t divulge the details, nor did we have time to seek official permission.”

“So it worked out well for you, huh?”

“Indeed. Still...” Totori frowned. “Why are *you* going to investigate Libynia Desert? You must be certain something is there, given how much effort you’ve put into getting permission, yes?”

“Well, like Eluria, I also reincarnated from a thousand years ago. Libynia Desert is actually where my country used to be.”

“Hm? You mean the desert area didn’t used to be part of Vegalta?”

“Right. It used to be a country called Altane.”

“Oho? How intriguing!” Totori’s eyes widened with curiosity. “We have records mentioning a ‘country in the western continent,’ you see, but for some

reason there's never been any mention of its magic. I've always found it quite odd!"

"Oh, that's because Altane had no culture of magic or even magecraft. Besides, we never crossed over to Legnare, so there was very little chance to learn about us."

"I see, I see! Tell me more!" Totori turned her attention to Raid as her tail swished and eyes sparkled in fascination. She looked like a child asking her grandfather to tell her a story. "You see, only our Imperial Lord knows about the world a thousand years ago!"

"Imperial Lord...?"

"The highest ruler of Legnare," Totori explained. "She stepped away centuries ago, leaving our nation's affairs and all political responsibilities to the local lords. However, a thousand years ago when Legnare nearly fell to ruin, she brought a God of Victory from another land and quelled the calamity, then she united the people and restored the continent. A truly legendary figure!" she preened, proudly puffing her chest out.

In contrast, Raid creased his brows. "Is your Imperial Lord still alive today?"

"Indeed! I, too, doubted this until I became a special-class magician and met her myself. She is most certainly living a leisurely and healthy life in the palace."

"And she's female?"

"A woman of unparalleled beauty, more like it! Her black hair glistens like the starry night, its luster never fading through the years, while her eyes glimmer like blazing orbs! She moves with such demure grace, as if embodying the very essence of beauty itself! Hence, the people once exalted her as the quintessential Legnarian beauty, Mifuru the Moonlit Majesty!"

"And she's also a beastdweller?"

"Why, yes! Her fox ears have the same splendorous color as her black hair!"

"And you said she brought a God of Victory from another land and quelled Legnare's calamity."

"Precisely! To save Legnare, she sailed the western sea, ready to throw her

own life away. Then, she met the God of Victory, sought his help, and quelled the calamity!”

“So long story short, that God of Victory crossed over to Legnare after the girl named Mifuru asked him for help, defeated some eight-headed dragon monster, then went back home.”

Totori blinked, her blazing passion finally coming to a halt as she tilted her head. “Hm...? How did you know it was an eight-headed dragon? That information is kept confidential due to its correlation with beastdwellers...”

Raid looked at her, the creases between his eyebrows growing deeper as he finally nodded decisively. “Yep. That God of Victory...was probably me.”

It went without saying that Totori froze in place and her jaw dropped to the ground.

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The setting sun dyed the distant mountains red and left the lake sparkling with crimson hues. The group had begun preparing for dinner right by the shore—not to enjoy the majestic view, but simply for lack of any other option.

“My apologies... We really shouldn’t be leaving dinner preparations to our guests, but...”

“Valk and I...are totally and utterly spent...”

Valk sat on the ground, not a hint of primness remaining in her slouched and unmoving figure. Meanwhile, Lucas lay completely sprawled, his arms and legs thrown out. Both were absolutely drained, as anyone would have been after going through Eluria’s thorough training of not only the body but also the mind.

Valk had needed to be on constant alert against a vicious manabeast, while Lucas had been required to give his all to support Fareg. The latter had less physical burden, but that was plenty compensated for with the mental strain of having another’s fate in his hands. Understandably, Lucas had run out of mana and collapsed, whereas Valk seemed to have relatively more energy to spare. However, it seemed Shefri had taken quite a liking to her, as even now the tiny beast was nibbling on her new playmate.

Alas, even that wasn't the extent of their suffering.

"Ha ha... Your thoughts on the extra training, Valk...?"

"I now know what it feels like to have my limbs torn off by a manabeast's fangs and claws..."

"Well, I've personally learned how to treat my own severe burns and frostbite without anesthesia..."

The two victims of Eluria's extra training looked to the sky with empty eyes. The fact that they were more likely to suffer such wounds in battle made the experience extra gruesome.

Eluria nodded. "But now that you know, you'll be more careful not to get hurt. At the same time, you'll also have more options if you know you can bear the pain. I'd like you both to be capable of making the best possible decisions even when placed in desperate situations."

"Yes, ma'am... Thank you..." The pair wrung out what little energy they had left to respond.

"Well, you guys can just take it easy now. After intense training always comes a hearty meal," Raid said as he flipped a slice of meat. Along with some vegetables, the high-quality cuts produced a juicy sizzling sound on the grill, sending a tantalizing scent wafting across the lakefront. They had expected everyone to be thoroughly drained from training and thus had these ingredients prepared from the villa.

"Ahhh... This strong flavor hits the spot, especially when you're so tired..." Millis smacked her lips in contentment.

"And it tastes even better with a side of victory," Wisel added with a playful grin.

As veterans of Eluria's training, those two weren't as worn down compared to their peers.

Millis spun around. "Totori, would you like a drink? We have some juice here."

"I shall gratefully partake!" the beastdweller crowed.

“Anyway, I really didn’t think you were Totori the special-class magician. I thought you just happened to have the same name, or maybe it was a common name over in Legnare...”

“That’s why I wanted to make a cool entrance...” Totori whimpered, her ears drooping glumly.

Millis smiled awkwardly and patted her head in apology. “Sorry, I was too busy fighting some very bony fellows to notice...”

Amid the friendly chatter and the delicious hard-earned food, however, one spot was draped in pure and utter misery.

“I... I can’t move...!” Fareg cried, twitching and convulsing on the ground.

“I’m not surprised. You jumped, hopped, and leaped all around the lake with such a mana-costly method,” Raid said with a shrug.

“Because your wife told me to!”

“My *fiancée*,” Raid corrected. “But I have to agree with her. I’ve also been thinking that the way you use magic for mobility left much to be desired.”

Fareg had been learning Raid’s own brand of swordsmanship, which was heavily founded on his abnormal strength and inhuman speed—both of which Fareg lacked. He compensated by enveloping his sword in flames and accelerating through blasts and explosions, but that meant he could no longer replicate those movements once he was out of mana. Worse yet, he’d be rendered totally immobile like he was now. It was essentially a time-limited buff.

“You need to manage your mana more precisely than ever before,” Raid continued. “The goal is for you to grasp how far and how fast you can go with each output of mana, down to the millimeter and millisecond.”

Fareg squinted. “*You* can do that?”

“Well, yeah. You’re surprisingly a pretty hard worker, so you should get a better grasp of it soon. Just get as close as you can to perfection until the integrated exam.”

“Hmph... All right. It wouldn’t sit well with me if I couldn’t do something you

could," he mumbled, face still pressed on the ground.

Raid grinned. "Uh-huh. Give it your best. I'm looking forward to it."

Just then, Eluria reached out and tugged on his clothes. "Raid, you haven't had a single bite since you started grilling."

"Hm? Oh, I'll eat later. Don't worry about me."

"But it tastes better right off the grill."

"Well, yeah, but I wouldn't wanna take my eyes off it and overcook all this expensive meat. And you girls shouldn't stand too close to the fire and oil with your swimsuits on."

Eluria and Alma had been busy overseeing the entire training process, so they'd had no time to change before dinner. It hadn't occurred to them either, as the weather remained mild and pleasant even after the sun had set.

As for Alma, however, there was another reason she couldn't take over Raid's place behind the grill—that is, she had been rather "busy" ever since they began preparing dinner.

"Your Excellencyyy! Pass me s'more steaaak!" the woman slurred as she raised a bottle of alcohol.

"Here you go. And don't drink too much."

"Don't worry! I can—*hic*—down two more, no sweat!"

"I literally just told you not to drink, and you're already opening another bottle..." Raid sighed as he watched Alma gleefully uncork her next drink, face already flushed.

Living up to its status, House Verminant had its villa stocked with not only the highest-quality ingredients but also the best alcohol and wine in the eastern region. Eager to taste the rare delicacies, Alma had decided to have alcohol as her appetizer, and come dinnertime she was completely and utterly wasted.

"As you can see, Alma's practically useless," Raid said to Eluria. "I'm the only one who can man the grill now. So don't worry about it."

"Mm..." Eluria blew on a slice of steak and offered it to Raid. "This will solve

the problem.”

“Thanks. But be careful not to get too close to the fire.” Raid bit the steak off Eluria’s fork and savored the succulent juices. “Mmm. That *definitely* tastes expensive. Delish.”

“Should I blow on it some more?”

“Nah, just toss it right into my mouth. I can handle hot food, no sweat.”

“Then I’ll just give it a teeny-tiny blow.” Eluria nodded and gave Raid the next bite much more quickly this time. “It’s kind of fun, feeding you like this.”

“Feeding me...” Raid chuckled. “Well, I do treat you like a house cat sometimes, so I guess that makes us even, huh?”

“Mm-hmm. Just sit tight and let me feed you.” Eluria smiled and readied the next bite.

A familiar warm and cozy air wrapped around the two—until it was shattered by Alma’s boisterous drunken laughter. “His Excellency and Eluria just shared an indirect kiss!” she yelled, shamelessly pointing at them.

Eluria’s hand instantly froze, while Raid turned to her with arched brows. “Are you serious...? Even kids don’t say that these days.”

“Then just kiss already, why don’t ya! Come on, just a li’l smooch!”

“Quiet down, you drunkard.” Raid snatched the alcohol bottle from Alma’s hands and emptied its contents in one swig.

“Ha ha ha! Now you shared an indirect kiss with me too!”

“Yeah, yeah, glad you liked it. Your alcohol’s all gone, so have some wat...er?” Raid froze as he was handing the empty bottle back to Alma. He felt something behind him—Eluria’s sharp and piercing stare.

“Mm.” The girl quietly offered him another bite.

“Oh, I’ve already had a few bites. You should also—”

“Mm,” Eluria insisted, pushing the steak closer to his mouth. Her face was as impassive as ever, but somehow Raid could feel a bizarre intensity behind it.

He gave in to the pressure and accepted the steak.

Eluria stared long and hard as he chewed before taking another bite for herself. “Mm-hmm. It’s good.” She nodded, a pleased smile forming on her lips.

Just then, Millis hefted out a dreary sigh. “We trained all day and couldn’t squeeze in a single moment of fun...”

Raid arched his brow. “I’m impressed you’ve still got your sights set on playing around...”

“Otherwise, I essentially put on a swimsuit just to get beaten up by a bunch of skeletons!” Millis puffed her cheeks up in discontent.

She *had* spent the day fending off a special-class magician’s army of skeletons. Although Alma had toned it down a notch, it was still quite the feat, so Raid had thought that Millis would be a bit more satisfied with what she’d achieved.

Beside them, Totori’s ears eagerly perked up. “Oho! Then how about we share some ghost stories, hm?”

“Ooh, I’ve heard that’s a thing in Legnare!” Millis crowed. “People sometimes gather around at night and share scary stories with one another, right?”

“Correct. They can range from chilling anecdotes to folk tales of haunting spirits. Traditionally, it is accompanied by lighting and extinguishing candles.” Totori hopped onto her feet. With a snap of her fingers, their surroundings were draped in thick clouds and darkness seeped in around them. “If you would allow me the honor, then I, Totori, shall begin with a ghost story that has been passed down in our culture.”

Her soft whisper brushed the air, and with it, a small flame appeared beside her.

“This,” she began somberly, “is a true story from a small village in Legnare.” Her voice rasped eerily and her gaze dragged, slow and ominous, across the faces around her. “The villagers there strictly forbade anyone from entering the nearby mountain. You see, there lived a monster, a *demon*, the very coagulation of human malice. If anyone were to step into its domain, they would be ripped to shreds and eaten alive.”

Fareg scoffed, although his voice came out a little high-pitched as he asked, “B-But there’s no way such a monster actually exists, right?”

Totori whipped her head to face him, her gaze searing into his. “Yes... Yes, it is as you say, young lad. Nobody believed such superstition. And that is why the children of the village decided they would see for themselves...and ventured into the mountains.”

Fareg gulped, the small sound resonating loudly in the silence.

“At first, they were merry,” Totori continued, voice hushed. “They believed that the adults simply made up the story to stop them from playing in the mountains by themselves. However...” The beastdweller’s eyes narrowed ominously. “Suddenly, they heard a bell from within the mountains. *Ding*... *Ding*... The children assumed the adults had found them and were ringing a bell to ward off manabeasts.”

“W-Were they wrong...?”

“Oh, so very wrong... The bell kept chiming, yet they couldn’t find any of the adults. Slowly, the sound grew louder, *closer*, yet whoever rang it was nowhere to be seen. Finally, it dawned on them—whatever rang the bell was not human...and whatever it was, it was slowly but surely getting closer and closer to them.”

Totori eerily stared right into Fareg’s shaky eyes.

“Falling into a panic, one of the children shoved a girl toward the sound. That girl had been ostracized within the village, while the one who shoved her was the village chief’s son. He thought to use her as a decoy while the rest of them ran.”

“A-And did they make it out...?”

“Oh, they did... The children made it back to the village, and the girl, too, returned...after a while.”

Fareg breathed out in relief. “Good grief. Then it was really just a—”

“Then, the next morning,” Totori continued, “one of the children was found *dead*.”

Fareg froze. “Huh...?”

“The child had fallen into a deep ravine, reduced to naught but a pitiful corpse

—mangled, as if he had been ripped to shreds. Apparently, the night before, he'd clung fearfully to his parents and mumbled, *'I hear a bell, I hear a bell,'* before running away and throwing himself off the cliff."

Fareg's face turned pale as a sheet, but Totori's remained cold as stone.

"The next day, and the day after... One by one, the children who'd entered the mountains would run from something they couldn't see and ultimately throw themselves to their deaths. The last to go was the village chief's son. He covered his ears, tears streaming down his face as he cried, *'The bell... It won't stop ringing...'* Soon, he ran from home and jumped into the abyss like the rest."

"S-So none of them survived...?"

"Oh, no. Just one... Yes, only the girl was left alive—the very one the other children had abandoned that night. As the villagers grieved the children's deaths, however, the girl simply smiled and said this..." Totori paused, took a short breath, and whispered, "'That's what they get for not believing in the demon like I do.'"

Totori's gaze then slid toward Fareg. "Truth be told, lad, there's a bit more to this story."

The boy, now trembling in his seat, gulped. "M-More...?"

"Whoever hears this story...will come to hear the bell too. So you mustn't repeat what you said before." Totori's lips curved into an eerie crescent, her eyes growing wide and imposing. "For those who lack faith will be hunted by the demon...for so long as the bell continues to ring."

Finally, Totori blew out a quiet breath to put out the floating flame. Their surroundings fell back into a chilling darkness and eerie silence—until it was shattered by an ear-piercing scream.

"You mean I've been *cursed*?! AAAAAHHH!!!"

"Glad to see you're enjoying yourself, kid," Raid mused.

"Do I look like I'm having fun?! Didn't you hear what she just said?! The demon is going to come after us now!" Fareg's face turned paler by the second,

and his eyes desperately darted around. He had been so drained from training, yet now he'd gotten up on his feet in one lively jump. The story must have given him a real fright.

On the other hand, Millis was smiling pleasantly. "You're such a great storyteller, Totori!"

Wisel nodded in agreement. "We magic artificers have our fair share of scary stories, but this tale certainly has a unique Legnarian flavor to it."

Ghost stories were less about veracity and more about the atmosphere. In fact, most were completely fabricated, so Raid assumed that those like Fareg, who actually believed these ghost stories, were in the minority.

Alas, he was proved wrong very quickly as two pairs of trembling arms clung to him. One pair belonged to the girl once known as the Sage, now too spooked to even utter a word, while the other belonged to a certain drunk special-class magician who kept muttering, "I don't hear a thing... Not a single thing...!"

Raid incredulously looked down at them. "Why the heck are *you two* scared?"

"I've theorized the existence of souls in this world, so if my theory proves right, then any ghost stories could be true..." Eluria muttered under her breath.

"How do you expect me to fight something magic might not even work on?!" Alma shrieked.

"Okay, that actually makes a lot of sense for you two," Raid said, even feeling a little relieved. Eluria and Alma could slaughter ultra-sized manabeasts, so he'd found it weird that they were so upset; it seemed their primal human fear of the unknown was still intact. Even if it was easier to imagine ghosts running from *them*.

In any case, Totori's ghost story was likely a little fiction. Raid looked down at the two girls gripping him from either side and was about to calm them down—when his words were cut off by a sudden sound.

Ding...

"Eek! D-Did you guys hear that?!" Fareg shrieked.

Lucas cocked his head. "It...sounded kind of like a bell, didn't it?"

“But this property is surrounded by a manabeast-warding barrier.” Valk turned to him with a perplexed frown. “It also marks House Verminant’s property, so I doubt outsiders would wander in...”

However, even as they spoke, the chiming continued, echoing and permeating their surroundings. Eluria and Alma were stiff as boards, clearly set on edge by the sound.

“An auditory hallucination... Yes, if I think of this sound as the product of illusory magic, then there are several ways to counter it. However, if it’s being produced by a ghostly soul, then there are too many unknown factors. I need to devise countermeasures from a different angle and...”

“Ughhh... I can’t hear a thing! I have earplugs and I’m not afraid to use them...!”

“Calm down, Eluria. And Alma, get those booze bottles off of your ears.” Raid looked down at the two in exasperation. The Sage was stringing together new theories under her breath, while the drunkard was, for some godforsaken reason, holding two alcohol bottles up to her ears.

In any case, Raid sensed an odd presence in the air along with the chimes, so he followed its trail with his eyes to the source—and there, within the darkness, was a *face*. The upper half was covered by a bizarre white mask, and the pair of eyes peeking through stared intently at their group from the woods.

The moment the face emerged from the darkness, a bell chimed once again.

Everyone followed Raid’s gaze and drew in sharp breaths at the sight of the face floating in the darkness.

Millis gaped. “Huh...? Is that the demon?! For real?!”

“It can’t be,” Wisel muttered. “Even if it actually exists, it can’t possibly be here, can it?”

“S-Stop that, artificer! You’ll get cursed if you say that!” Fareg hissed.

As panic brewed, the bell continued to ring, and the floating face slowly approached with each chilling chime. Raid narrowed his eyes, disconcerted by the peculiar air around the being, and sharply watched its every move, all the

way until the face had fully emerged from the woods.

The half-masked face belonged to a man, the faint green tinge of his black hair blending eerily into the night woods. His tall stature was evident even from afar, and not a single move he made betrayed any sort of vulnerability. The silence with which he stepped onto the grass showed the skill and precision of his movements. His arms were thick and burly, more than enough to wield the long-handled metal club he had hefted over his shoulders.

Under Raid's piercing gaze, the man's steps came to a halt with one final chime. His eyes, hidden beneath his half mask, daringly met Raid's. At last, the man slowly brandished his club...and revealed the banner tied to it.

It read: *"You've been pranked!"*

Raid blinked. "What?"

"Ohhh! That was sooo good!" Totori cheered, skipping over to the masked man.

The mouth beneath his mask tugged into a soft smile. "Did I do it right, Totori?"

"Most certainly! Why, just look—you've scared the living daylights out of Alma!"

"Really? I'm a bit hurt... She didn't even recognize me."

"Because ghost stories are her one true weakness! Back during her inauguration ceremony, I shared a tale to liven up the mood, and she was practically quivering in the corner! So this was just the kind of thing we needed to surprise her!"

"And this is why she gets so mad at you every time you see each other..."

"What are you saying?! She started it! Always calling me a kid and making fun of me!" Totori puffed her cheeks and stomped on the ground, looking completely at ease chatting with the so-called demon.

The sight seemed to have snapped Alma back to her senses. She pointed at the half-masked man and yelled, "Ahhh! It's the masked pedo! Where have you been?!"

“It’s been so long and that’s the first thing you say? Not very nice of you, Alma,” said the masked man.

“Oh, shut it! As if your looks aren’t creepy enough, you even erased your presence!”

“Well, I needed to go all the way if I wanted to hide from a special-class magician’s detection. That said, it didn’t seem to work on that fellow over there.” The masked man turned to Raid with a smile which strained apologetically when he glanced at the other students behind him. “I’m sorry for causing such a fright on our very first meeting. You see, Totori was very insistent on giving Alma a good scare.” His voice carried gently through the air. “I’m Savad, a special-class magician assigned to Legnare—”

“And my husband!” Totori cheerily piped up, standing proudly by his side.

◇

After a hearty and eventful dinner, the group returned to their rooms to rest.

“Ohhh! The bed is sooo soft!” Totori crowed as she dove right into the sheets, rolling around to savor the softness.

Savad watched her with a wry smile before turning and bowing his head to Raid. “I’m really sorry about this—you know, suddenly staying over even though we’re outsiders.”

“Well, you can thank the kid for that,” Raid said. “Besides, we’re heading over to Libynia Desert tomorrow, so aside from just getting introductions out of the way, we also have some things to discuss beforehand.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Savad smiled and nodded. “With Alma out cold from all that drinking, though, we’d best discuss things among ourselves and then update her while we’re on the move tomorrow.”

Savad looked a bit odd because of his mask, but he was certainly a decent guy, as Alma had said.

“Well, to get the introductions out of the way,” Raid continued, “Eluria and I are reincarnated from a thousand years ago. Eluria’s the Sage, the progenitor of magic, and I’m the Hero. There aren’t any records of me in Vegaltan history, but

it turns out Legnare knows me as some ‘God of Victory.’”

Savad blinked. “Is that true...?”

“It is indeed,” Totori piped in. “Eluria accurately deduced the secret origins of beastdwellers, while Raid knew that the calamity a thousand years ago was brought about by an eight-headed dragon. Certainly not the kinds of things unrelated parties would know of.”

“I see... I know I can trust your judgment on this, Totori.”

“We’ve still got a lot of mysteries on our hands, so we’re only sharing the truth of our identities with a select few,” Raid said. “So no need for formalities—just treat us as the students that we are now.”

“Got it. I think I understand it to some extent. Anyway, I’ve been meaning to ask...” Savad paused for a moment to cock his head. “Why is Eluria hiding behind your back?”

“She’s shy, you left a terribly frightening first impression on her, and she’s still too scared to let her guard down,” Raid smoothly explained, enumerating all the reasons.

Eluria gripped tightly onto Raid’s shirt from behind as she peeked out while trembling all over. “I cannot deduce the truth behind the magic that makes those who hear the bell want to throw themselves off a cliff...!”

“Oh, you’re talking about this bell? I got this from Totori—it’s part of her magic gear, but it doesn’t serve any particular function.”

“Indeed!” Totori crowed. “It’s a special trinket I gave to him when we became husband and wife!”

Savad chuckled wryly while patting Totori on the head. “That’s why I really didn’t want to use it as a prop for your ghost story...” At the moment, they looked more like a father and daughter or brother and sister, rather than a married couple.

However, the mention of “husband and wife” seemed to have caught Eluria’s attention. The girl finally peeked her entire head out. “It’s my first time hearing of a beastdweller getting married,” she muttered.

Savad nodded. “Right. It’s not very common. Beastdwellers don’t age, so they’re fated to outlive their partners.”

Humans lived only for decades up to a century at most, while elves’ lives spanned centuries. On the other hand, beastdwellers were unaging and could easily live longer than both as long as they looked out for illness and injury. That being said, there had never been a lot of them to begin with, and it was difficult to evade both illness and injury over the span of centuries. Still, it was entirely possible for them to live immensely long lives, as proved by the fact that the girl whom Raid had saved in his past life was still alive today.

Thus, even if a couple loved one another dearly, one would have to bear the pain of parting through death, while the other would have to pass on with the regret of leaving their beloved behind. Knowing that, it was normally impossible for either to make the choice of taking one another’s hand in marriage.

“But now,” Savad whispered, “I no longer have to leave Totori all by herself.”

“So...you’re also a beastdweller, Savad?” Eluria asked.

“No, I’m...” Savad pursed his lips and glanced awkwardly at Totori. “Ah, how should I put it...?”

Totori quietly nodded and said, “Savad is an unknown beastdweller.”

Eluria frowned. “Unknown?”

“Generally, beastdwellers manifest characteristics of beasts that were said to have served the gods in ancient times. A tiger in my case, and a fox in the Imperial Lord’s.” Totori’s ears twitched and her tail swayed as she explained.

However, no such features could be seen on Savad. Setting aside his unusual mask, he looked every bit an ordinary human.

“Our closest guess would be a monkey, but he has no tail. And that is why...I thought that maybe he was a vassal of the God of Victory.”

Raid blinked. “You mean me?”

“Indeed. However, it seems my guess was off.” Totori’s shoulders sagged in disappointment as she shook her head and sighed. “The Legnarian gods reside in a world much different from our own, whereas you were a human who lived

a thousand years ago.”

Savad smiled awkwardly and scratched his head. “I actually thought so too, so I was a bit surprised when it turned out *you* were the God of Victory. Well, I suppose I could still possibly be your descendant...”

“Nah, it isn’t. Forget having kids—I didn’t have a *single* romantic relationship. I had lots more fun fighting back then.”

“Oho?” Totori smirked. “Yet now you’ve tied the knot with Eluria, hm?”

“We’re only engaged, so no knots tied,” Raid corrected.

“Mm-hmm. We’re not married yet,” Eluria agreed.

Totori looked between them. “Well, you’ve promised your futures to one another. Is it not the same thing? Seeing how close you two are, I take it you sleep together too, no?”

“Well, we do sleep in the same bed.”

“Mm-hmm. I sleep with Raid.”

“Then you’ve already done the deed, yes?”

“No, well... A thousand years ago, aristocrats would be sentenced to death if they were found to have engaged in premarital sex. Besides, I may look young, but I’m already a geezer on the inside...”

“I don’t really get it either... I did nothing but magic research all my life...”

“Arrrgh! But you care so deeply for one another! What is there to hesitate for?!” Totori bared her teeth and rained punches on the bed. It seemed their friends and instructor weren’t the only ones who felt frustrated by them.

“Now, now, Totori,” Savad consoled. “I’m sure they have their reasons. No need to be such a nosy granny, you know?”

“Who’re you calling a granny?! And besides, you’re one to talk! We’re officially husband and wife, yet you’ve yet to lay a single hand on me for—”

Savad slapped his hand over Totori’s mouth. “Aha ha ha... Oh, Totori... This is why the other special-class magicians call me a masked pedo...!” He lifted Totori up and turned to Raid and Eluria. “Sorry about this, you two. Totori seems a bit

too riled up tonight, so let's save the discussion for tomorrow with Alma."

"All right. Have a good rest," Raid said.

Eluria waved. "Good night."

The door quietly shut, leaving Raid and Eluria alone in their room. The two faced one another and nodded at the same time.

"Something's off," Raid started.

"Mm... You thought so too?"

"Sounds like you're of the same opinion."

"Yeah. They don't seem like bad people...but it feels like they're hiding something."

Raid and Eluria shared the same impression of Totori and Savad: something was off about them, but at the very least, they likely weren't the masterminds they were looking for. Still, it was best for them to keep this uneasy feeling in mind.

"Well, it could have nothing to do with us at all. They're special-class magicians, beastdwellers, and a married couple, so it's probably got to do with Legnare. We wouldn't want to stick our necks where they don't belong."

Eluria cast her eyes down. "A married couple," she murmured thoughtfully. Her expression hardened as she then tugged on Raid's sleeve. "Raid, I have a request."

"Hm? What's this all of a sudden?"

"I just think now is my best chance to say this." Eluria looked Raid in the eye, a touch of nerves lining her gaze. "I... I want to sleep with you tonight."

Raid stared at the girl for a very, *very* long while. So long, in fact, that Eluria's lips curved into a frown as she mumbled, "Is that a no?"

"Well, no... I mean, we already sleep together back in the dorm..."

But here in the Verminant villa, two separate beds had been prepared for them, so they had no particular need to sleep together.

Despite that, Eluria now explicitly requested they sleep together—and Raid

wasn’t so dense as to not know what that meant. They hadn’t been living together for long, but he could tell from her grip, how she shook more noticeably than ever, her general nervousness in that moment...and just how much courage she’d mustered to ask this of him.

Indeed, Raid saw right through the emotions swirling within the girl before him, so he somberly opened his mouth and confirmed, “You’re too scared to sleep on your own, aren’t you?”

Eluria meekly nodded. “Yes...” Her eyes were wide, pupils trembling in genuine fear. “Savad may not be the demon, but that doesn’t mean the real one can’t still come and ring its bell...!”

“Don’t worry. I’m pretty sure that story was made-up.”

“We can’t know for certain. I only believe what I see with my own eyes.”

“Doesn’t that mean you’d *want* the real one to pop up?”

Eluria gasped. “Oh no...” she whispered, dread painting her expression as she realized she was caught between a rock and a hard place. Her deep involvement in magic left her unable to deny the unknown, which Raid honestly found rather amusing to watch.

In any case, Eluria looked up at him and muttered, “I know it’s really childish, and I’m a bit embarrassed...but I gathered my courage to ask this of you.”

“I get it. Well, this just means it’s business as usual.”

“Also...” she mumbled, “I want to hold on to your sleeve while getting ready for bed.”

“Sure thing. I can use the earplugs and sleep masks in your Anti-Floaty Pack while you take a bath or use the bathroom or whatever. Don’t worry.”

“Ten out of ten preparedness,” Eluria praised.

“I can even watch over you until you fall asleep.”

“Hngh... That’s kind of embarrassing.”

“I already see you asleep while trying to get you ready every morning.” Raid chuckled as he patted her head before they went on to prepare for their trip

tomorrow.

At the end of the day, this was Raid and Eluria’s relationship—and for now, at least, that was all they really needed.

Chapter Three

The next day, after a sendoff from Lucas and Valk, the investigation team departed. The rest of the team's training had been left in Wisel's hands, as he would be in charge of leading them in battle. Raid and Eluria trusted they could figure out the rationale behind the training courses.

With that settled, the team of three special-class magicians and two students crossed the checkpoint closest to Palmare and finally stepped into the vast and lifeless desert.

"Whew. This place has seen better days, that's for sure," Raid remarked.

Having crossed from a land so abundant in water, they felt like they'd just wandered into another world. In stark contrast to Palmare, an endless expanse of sand dotted with weathered rubble and nothing more stretched before them. Any man-made structures they could see were barely maintaining their shape while buried helplessly under the raging sands.

"Hm... It certainly lives up to its bleak reputation," Savad observed as he swept his gaze over the land of nothingness.

Beside him, Totori nodded in agreement. "Indeed... It's hard to believe a country once stood here."

"Was this really your homeland, Raid?"

"Yep. This is where the imperial capital of Altane stood a thousand years ago. Well, considering how close we are to Palmare, this was more likely the slum area on the outskirts," Raid said, his mind wandering back to the past. "Altane's capital was built here because this was the one and only area in the eastern region where mana was stable. The farther you got from the city, the poorer the land became."

"Hm?" Totori tilted her head. "But you mentioned we're close to what would have been the capital...and yet this was already a slum area?"

"Right. It was built that way on purpose."

“On purpose...?”

“The slum residents were tasked with treating the sewage from the capital. Also, unstable mana meant that natural disasters weren’t uncommon. Sometimes, the river would flood, triggering a backflow of sewage. In these cases, the slum’s residents served as ‘dams,’ literally protecting the capital residents with their lives.”

“Hoh...” Totori squinted. “Perhaps I shouldn’t say this before a former citizen, but it seems Altane was poorly governed.”

Raid shook his head. “Oh, don’t mind me. I might have had some status, but even I could tell that Altane was your typical shitty country, rotten to the core.”

Because he had been taken in by a band of mercenaries at such a young age, Raid no longer knew the location of the village he’d been born in, and the capital was where he’d spent most of his life, second only to the battlefield. That being said, he wouldn’t call it something so precious as his “hometown.” In fact, every time he returned to the capital, he would have to put up with the aristocrats’ mockery. Even the soldiers called him a “suicidal battle maniac” behind his back.

Fortunately, that had only been the case for the capital’s direct troops who’d spent their days as leisurely as the parasitic aristocrats. Raid’s own subordinates, those who’d fought on the front lines, respected him greatly.

In any case, Raid had been deeply detested by the people of the capital, so not even a drop of emotion sprung forth at the sight of such a place now buried miserably beneath the sand.

“Anyway...” he continued. “Even taking into account that a thousand years have passed, it’s unnatural that everything’s already turned into a desert.”

Ryatt and his subordinates had rebuilt the eastern region using the mana geysers around the capital to revitalize the surrounding land. That might have taken some mana from the capital region, but it was hard to believe that could reduce the entire place into a desert. The only remaining possibility was that it had been *intentionally* made this way.

The imperial capital sat buried beneath the sand while its surroundings

prospered... It was like the perfect revenge against Altane, the nation that had once prospered from others' sacrifices.

Raid sighed. "Anyway, like I said earlier, I can lead the way. Everything may be buried now, but I've still got this area mapped out in my head."

"Okay. We'll leave it to you," Savad replied. "We'll handle the manabeasts...and any who might be hiding here."

Savad had split up from Totori the previous day because he had been gathering intel on any sightings of suspicious people around Libynia Desert's adjacent territories. There had been no such sightings, but his efforts weren't entirely for naught.

"It's said there are far fewer manabeasts compared to previous years," he began. "And those patrolling the desert perimeter also claim to have spotted a ghost among the ruins."

Libynia Desert was surrounded by a huge rampart made to keep manabeasts out of the adjacent territories. The territories sent their own magicians to patrol and monitor the desert from atop this rampart, although entering the desert itself was strictly forbidden to avoid accidentally agitating the manabeasts into attacking other patrolling magicians.

The ghost of the ruins was a rumor circulating among these magicians, as some claimed to have seen a flickering figure among the desert sands. The desert was home to ruins, so such ghost stories came as no surprise, but it was worth looking into when paired with the evident decrease in the manabeast population.

"The magicians don't eliminate manabeasts unless they approach the rampart. If their numbers are decreasing, then I believe someone else has entered the desert," Savad said.

Raid nodded. "Agreed. If they're trying to hide out in the desert, then they'd have to hunt manabeasts to secure their surroundings and routes. After all, this isn't a onetime gig like infiltrating Legnare's palace."

"So you think so too? Hm... The manabeasts closer to the center might be on edge because of them. So, Raid, I'd like to ask you another favor." Savad looked

Raid in the eye. “Please...look after those two.”

“Urghhh... I hate my life...”

“Five more minutes...”

Raid looked at the two girls beside him and sighed. “Yeah... You can leave them to me.”

Alma was managing to stand on her feet, but she was so hungover that she might’ve blended right in with her skeleton army. Meanwhile, Eluria clung to Raid while struggling valiantly to keep her eyes open. The ghost story last night had made her sleep quite restlessly, dragging her floatiness to the present even though plenty of time had passed since she woke.

Raid sighed. “It’s really bad... Even a bath couldn’t clear all her floatiness.”

“I’m not quite sure what ‘floatiness’ means, but Totori’s also quite a handful, like a curious and self-indulgent child, so I feel you...”

Raid and Savad looked at one another and nodded somberly, a warm sense of camaraderie brewing between them.

“Anyway, Alma,” Raid said. “We’ve got other combatants on board today, so just keep an eye on our stuff and our surroundings. We wouldn’t want to lose all our supplies and die in the middle of nowhere.”

“’Kaaay... I do feel bad for getting so wasted at a time like this. I can at least do that much.”

“And Eluria,” Raid continued, “stay close to me until your floatiness wears off.”

“Mngh...” she mumbled and nodded.

In the meantime, Alma deployed several skeleton warriors around them as well as a skeleton horse and chariot to transport them through the desert.

“By the way, how strong are the manabeasts in Libynia Desert?” Raid asked.

Alma hummed in thought. “Well, based on a previous survey, they don’t have intelligence like those in Celios but are still pretty tough because they’ve adapted to the harsh environment. Not to mention the lack of humans, their

only predators, has led them to grow rather large."

"And the intruder is at least strong enough to hunt them," Raid finished with a sigh.

Manabeasts were normally hunted in groups. A single magician was enough for a small-sized beast, but medium-sized beasts called for more, while large-sized beasts needed a unit with at least one first-class magician. These measures had been put in place to ensure safe and certain subjugation. Facing a medium-sized beast or stronger alone was dangerous and difficult.

If they were to assume that the manabeasts in Libynia Desert ranged from medium-to large-sized, then their potential enemy must have been strong enough to hunt those powerful beasts.

However, this didn't seem to faze Totori at all. "Psh. Must we worry about the strength of our enemy?" She hopped to the front, head held high. "We've come here to investigate the ruins, to confirm if the thief is hiding here, and to capture them if possible, but on the surface, we're also here to cull manabeasts and decrease risks to surrounding territories." Totori grinned as lightning snapped by her feet. "That means the flashier we are tearing the beasts apart, the better."

The lightning snapped and burst outward, chirping and twittering like countless birds. In Totori's hand was a pewter staff tipped with layers of bells, all chiming pleasantly in tandem with each snap of lightning.

"Dance of the Mystic." The moment Totori whispered those words, four lightning pillars shot up from the ground, shining brilliantly amid the sands as they reached for the heavens. Manabeasts lurking underground were blasted into the air, and the countless lightning snakes growing from the pillars entangled their limbs and caught the beasts in their fangs.

"Ha ha ha! What a haul! A great hunting ground!"

Totori bared her teeth as she took a step forward, and lightning snapped underfoot as she leaped into the sky. Her body flashed white as she slid over the lightning snakes, closing in on the manabeasts with inhuman speed.

“Now, offer your necks to me!”

She spun as if dancing, the bells on her staff chiming in time. The next second, a white sickle flashed from the lightning pillar and parted a manabeast’s head from its body. The manabeast, so large a human would need to crane their neck to see, was beheaded in an instant. Its blood sprayed into the air only to be evaporated by the heat coming from the lightning attack, and its head fell soundlessly, insignificantly, into the swirling sands.

From there, Totori nimbly leaped from one flash of lightning to another as she tormented the manabeasts along the way. Bells chimed and lightning crackled as she lopped off one head after the other.

As Eluria watched the one-sided hunt, her dazed expression finally began to focus. “It’s really different from Vegaltan magic,” she mumbled.

Beside her, Alma sighed. “Seriously, it’s always as impressive as I remember. Lopping off the heads of large-sized manabeasts with just a flick of her fingers... I could never do that with *my* magic.”

“Oh? It’s rare to hear you put yourself down like that,” Raid mused. “You’re not gonna say you could also do that no sweat since you’re also a special-class magician?”

“Ugh... Even special-class magicians have their strengths and weaknesses, you know? My Dead Man’s Brigade is on the weaker side in terms of offensive capability, but it covers a lot of ground and works great against multiple opponents. Plus it can be used to set up an encampment, transport supplies, and so on—very versatile and useful in all sorts of situations.”

“That’s right,” Savad agreed. “In contrast, Totori’s Dance of the Mystic is very powerful but extremely specialized in offense, so it lacks versatility. In my case, I specialize in one-on-one combat, so I don’t have much range. Without others like Alma or Totori to round out my skills, there’s a limit to the kinds of missions I can handle.” Savad sheepishly scratched his cheek.

That being said, Savad was probably just referring to missions he could handle *in the most perfect and ideal way*. And from what Raid could see of Totori's magic, she would be plenty capable of brute-forcing her way out of any sticky situation. As for Alma, she was only weaker among other special-class magicians; her ability surpassed any first-class magician by a landslide. Among all the magicians in the world, only nine were acknowledged as special-class. No doubt every last one of them was strong beyond reason.

"Regardless, none of us could hold a candle to His Excellency or Eluria anyway..." Alma mumbled.

"Oh... So that report was true, wasn't it?" Savad chuckled wryly. "It said something about fighting four Guardian Dragons at once, and punching magic bare-handed..."

"Oh yeah. That did happen," Raid and Eluria breezily recalled.

Savad nodded somberly. "Looks like Totori and I will have to think of a safe exam where we *don't* wind up corpses."

In the meantime, Totori had finished eradicating the manabeasts in their path and came strutting back, chest out and tail swishing proudly behind her. "Heh! I gave it a little oomph! How was it?"

"Your magic is amazing," Eluria praised.

"Indeed! I shall use even more oomph in your exam, so you'd best prepare yourself!"

"Okay. I'm really excited." Eluria's face relaxed into a warm smile as she patted Totori's head. The beastdweller's ears twitched and her tail swooshed pleasantly at the touch. The two of them were the very picture of warm and cozy right now, but if they were to clash for real, surely their surroundings would be decimated.

Totori beamed. "Now that the path is secure, shall we depart?"

"Right. We're still a ways from our destination, and we can't exactly set up camp in the middle of the desert. We should get to the ruins before the sun sets." Raid swept his gaze across the desert, comparing it to the map in his memories.

Altane had once ruled over the entire eastern region while gathering riches from all across the land, so its capital had been far larger than Vegalta's. He still remembered where the capital's main districts and buildings should have been, but a vast majority of those were now buried beneath the sand, so he needed to piece together a new map based on whatever structures were still peeking out the surface.

"Now that the path's safe, we can move by chariot to conserve our strength. Alma, you'll have to put your back into it so we can scan our surroundings from a higher vantage point."

"Yes, sir... Ugh, riding on this sandy surface isn't doing my hangover any favors..."

"I'll rub your back if you feel like throwing up, so do your best."

"Raid, I'm not floaty anymore. Let me help too," Eluria said.

"*You* need to take a nap. You might get floaty again if you accumulate too much fatigue."

Eluria pouted. "I can't possibly nap in this weather."

"I'll lend you my lap, so give it your best shot."

Once Raid finished placating the two dejected girls, their team loaded into the chariot, pulled by a skeleton horse, and began traversing the desert. Their destination wasn't the ruins on the surface but the center of the imperial capital that had sunken beneath the sands—specifically, a certain room that lay much farther underground.

"Now then..." Raid's lips twisted into a bitter smile. "Let's go pay our respects to the fallen empire's throne, shall we?"

◇

Viteos Altane, the seventeenth emperor of Altane, was a tyrant.

Two generations before him, the eastern region had fallen entirely into Altane's hands through the emperor's exploits, making the imperial faction's power more unshakable than ever before. Any who resisted were executed in the name of the emperor, transforming his seat into one of absolute power.

Viteos's father—the young emperor-to-be at the time—wielded this resolute imperial power with reckless abandon from a very young age. After the emperor's death, Viteos's father took his seat to live lavishly and bless only his most loyal allies with extravagances—all of this using the taxpayers' hard-earned money yet never once properly governing the nation.

Viteos Altane had watched his father live a debaucherous life since childhood, and he in turn believed without a shred of doubt that it was how the great ruler of the Altanian empire must carry himself.

However, Viteos was also a coward. The previous emperor had never shown him any affection; they were only ever emperor and heir, not father and son. It was said that Viteos was beaten any time he spoke out of turn. Having gone through such a childhood, Viteos took to mimicking his father's outrageous behavior, stripping others of their status and chasing them from their positions for the smallest of blunders. He inherited the very figure of an emperor, just as his father had envisioned.

That said, Viteos was never freed from his father's shadow. Rooted deep within him was the fear of being criticized and punished if he opposed his father. As such, Viteos decided to stop *thinking* altogether. All he needed was to do as his father did—act like his father, live like his father, and please his allies to maintain his position. As long as he followed in his father's footsteps, then surely everything would turn out fine.

This belief didn't change even after his father, who lived a life of wretched prodigality, succumbed to illness before reaching even fifty years of age. Though he'd taken the position for himself, Viteos still believed that his father had shown how the Altanian emperor must be, and that mimicking this behavior was all he needed to be spared of any criticism from those around him. So long as he behaved the right way—just like his father—then he had no need to fear failure.

However, there was one thing Viteos had to face that the previous emperor had not: the man known as Raid Freeden. The commoner had made a name for himself with his monstrous and inhuman strength. Fearful of the power that seemed to break the laws of this world, Viteos sent him out to the battlefield, only to see him return alive—and with many military achievements to his name

to boot.

In Viteos's eyes, the Hero was the most terrifying thing to ever exist. What would he do if that immense power were to be pointed at him? He wouldn't dare to find out, and so he promoted the Hero to general, slotted him into the imperial faction with his heroic title, and did everything possible to keep that blade pointed away. At the same time, the emperor never let Raid have a hand in the nation's politics or his own imperial troops, instead giving him total command over their conquest to the west in order to keep him on the battlefield and far away from the capital.

With that, everything finally returned to normal for Viteos. He prayed and hoped, dearly and sincerely, that the Hero would die in battle against the rising Sage of the west so that Viteos could keep spending his days as emperor peacefully.

Of course, Raid could read the man like an open book.

"Anyway, he kinda pissed me off, so I prolonged the war out of spite," Raid said, concluding his rather lengthy recollection of the past.

Alma stared at him in disbelief. "Wow... Your pettiness knows no bounds, Your Excellency."

"I thank the gods you're not our enemy..." Totori mumbled.

"It's almost impressive how your mind didn't immediately go to changing affiliations or staging a revolt..." Savad shuddered.

"I...didn't realize you had so much going on," Eluria muttered.

Altogether, the team looked upon Raid with identical gazes of exasperation.

"But it was the most effective thing to do," Raid insisted. "Nothing's more costly than war, and since Altane was founded on invasion and plunder, it couldn't resolve the war politically or economically. To top it all off, Viteos couldn't simply kill off the root of his problem, since it was me. When I took the position as the general, I even revamped the whole military faction and chain of command, making it so the army wouldn't function as an organization if he ever tried to replace me."

“Come to think of it,” Eluria mumbled, “I do recall a time when we managed to capture some strategic locations really easily.”

“Oh, that must’ve been when I was dismissed on account of my ‘problematic leadership.’ My successor practically handed Vegalta five strategic points on a silver platter, so I was almost immediately reinstated.”

Eluria sighed. “You wouldn’t believe how hard it was keeping all our war prisoners fed until you came back.”

“I bet you guys reminisce about your war stories over afternoon tea...” Alma deadpanned.

“Well, we called it war, but lots of battles ended with me and Eluria squaring off. It was mostly small clashes to keep one another in check rather than all-out bloody carnage. We surrendered when we lost and treated war prisoners well; after all, we heard that Vegalta would reciprocate if we did. In fact, we got more casualties from incidents while retreating or carelessness during the advance, rather than the battles themselves.”

“But...” Savad hummed. “How did you keep the war going while your country was in such dire economic straits? Food and supplies go without saying, but it must’ve also been hard to keep morale up...”

“Yeah, we had to do some work here and there. Sometimes I’d send some soldiers to nearby villages to help out with hunting or fishing, and sometimes we’d borrow some space to preserve crops and harvestables in exchange for hunting manabeasts. We even did some research on extracting the mana from manabeasts and herbs in order to turn them into ingredients.”

“Oh... So that’s why there’s a culture of manabeast cuisine in the eastern region...”

“Besides, most of the soldiers were born in poor fishing and farming villages. They already had the survival know-how and were pretty good with their hands. We just remodeled our warships to use for fishing, gave the women and children jobs to process all our harvests, and also treated the soil and helped the area find the kind of agricultural work best suited for them... At one point, a village on the very edge of the border even developed into a city overnight.”

Totori squinted. “At this point, I have to wonder if your name was erased from history for a *different* reason...”

“Yeah...” Alma scratched her head. “You contributed so much to the eastern region’s culture and standard of living, so your name *should* be about as widely known as Lady Alicia’s...”

If the Hero’s impact was the reason for his erasure from history, then it would actually make things a lot more understandable.

“Well, it’s not like everything was my idea. I gathered the opinions of my men and set out to work on the plans that seemed realistic—that was all.”

“Even then, you turned so much of it into reality. You’re amazing, Raid,” Eluria praised while bobbing her head, looking a bit proud herself.

“In any case, going back on topic...” Raid chuckled. “Viteos was your typical foolish ruler who did anything and everything to keep himself safe—for example, demolishing the imperial family’s escape tunnel behind the throne and replacing it with his own so that only he knew the internal structure.”

Totori frowned. “So why must you investigate his throne now?”

“Through Princess Kris’s magic, I passed a message to my subordinate in the past. I wanted to confirm whether this world is actually connected to the past we lived in.”

Since they were facing someone with means beyond human comprehension, they needed to be ready for any and all possibilities—even if that meant doubting the world itself. Was this present timeline they lived in truly a continuation from the past they came from? Or were they simply identical dimensions crafted by this mysterious third party? Raid had passed Ryatt a message to get his answers.

“My message to him, telling him to *‘find my sword and return it to its place,’* was part of a cipher,” Raid explained. “When the imperial capital is invaded, the emperor is to be evacuated to a safe location through the escape tunnel beneath the throne room. And when I add in orders to *‘make sure to leave it there,’* it means to store confidential information in the designated location.”

This was a cipher used by the Altanian army a thousand years ago. Raid had

instructed Tiana to pass the message verbatim, so she must have picked up on his intentions and done exactly as he'd asked.

"Considering all the incidents have been occurring around us, there's a high chance they've got a grasp on our movements one way or another. That's why I passed the message with a cipher."

Alma hummed. "It's already known that our goal this time around is Libynia Desert, so if we see any movement from them here, then it'd confirm our information's being leaked. And if the confidential information isn't there, then we can further confirm that this person's an Altanian from a thousand years ago. Basically, we can formulate deductions step-by-step."

That said, it was plenty possible the third party would simply stay hidden to avoid suspicion. Although Raid had intentionally impacted the flow of time, the impact could be too trivial for the mastermind to step in.

"In any case..." Raid squinted as he looked ahead. "We can continue this talk once we get there."

Within their sights now was a weathered man-made structure. Its surface had turned red from oxidation and rust, and some parts were hollow as if ravaged by the raging sands and manabeasts. Although it was now buried in sand and tilting over, Raid recognized this structure—it was the palace spire that had been at the heart of the imperial capital. Altane's imperial capital had been located in a sunken basin, so only this particularly tall structure remained above the surface once all was buried.

Their team alighted before the weathered spire and looked around.

"So shabby," Eluria muttered.

"I mean, it *has* been around a thousand years since their last visitor..." Raid said.

"Wait..." Alma squinted. "Is the interior even intact? The buried parts might not have weathered or decayed yet, but couldn't the whole city have already been crushed under the weight of the sand?"

Raid shook his head. "At the very least, the imperial palace and all other central establishments should be safe. The capital itself is pretty sturdy since it

expanded downward, and even the walls and structures on the surface were built using a special alloy to hold up against foreign attacks."

Altane had a tendency to expand underground because it was located in a basin, as well as to avoid the unstable environment caused by the lack of mana. A large part of the surface might have been buried in sand, but Raid was confident the interior corridors should at least be partially intact.

So that was the *least* of their concerns.

"I just hope these guys haven't been messing around too much!" Raid said as he whipped out his leg, kicking back a bug-like manabeast that had leaped out from the sand. Its shell caved in, and its body spurted out some green liquid. The bug unleashed a cry before rolling over the ground and dying.

Savad narrowed his eyes and nodded. "You're right. Manabeasts could have damaged the interior. Since this place has long been uninhabited, manabeasts have been residing within the sands for decades. They might have wormed their way into the ruins."

"Yep. For now, we should avoid using wide-range magic. A powerful impact could bury us all alive."

Totori groaned. "I don't mind restraining myself, but it's troublesome to keep track of so much while fighting. I'll leave everything to you, Savad!"

"Fair enough. You already cleared the path for us. I can use my magic if there's a wide space underground, so just conserve your strength till then."

"Of course! You must show everyone what you're made of!"

"Yes, yes... And *you* should behave yourself." Savad laughed and patted Totori's head.

"Well, that's that," said Raid. "You're also banned from flashy spells, Eluria."

"Mm... So it's okay if it's not flashy?"

"As long as it doesn't produce a huge shock, I guess?"

"Then...I'll go with something like..." Eluria nodded and waved her staff, producing a small mana blade on its tip. "This should do."

“Ohhh. That’s kinda like the sword you made for me, isn’t it?”

“Mm-hmm. We match.” Eluria gripped her staff-turned-spear with a very pleased smile, even twirling it around to show off. Her movements were impressively fluid, meaning this probably wasn’t her first time using it.

“Well, we *would* be matching, if I also had the sword...”

“Both at once is a bit too hard for me...”

“Oh well. We can wait until we find my sword. Anyway, this’ll be my first time seeing you fight melee with a weapon. You’ve got me pretty excited, you know?”

“Mm. I’ll put on a good show for you.” Eluria bobbed her head, mirroring Raid’s smile.

Meanwhile, Alma sat on the ground and hugged her knees as she gazed emptily at the warm and cozy atmosphere around the couples. “Oh, woe is me, the measly fifth wheel...” she mumbled glumly. “I mean, it’s fine, really... I enjoyed doing research in my student days and have a blast running wild in my job now... Besides, my older brother’s married and I have a cute little niece, so the Kanos bloodline will live on... Yeah, so what if I’m single...”

Raid looked at her in bewilderment. “With your looks and position, wouldn’t you have a ton of men lining up and begging for your hand in marriage?”

“But I’ll only ever marry someone stronger than me.”

“I guess that entire queue went home holding their heads in despair, then, huh...”

Alma sighed. “Your Excellency, if I still can’t find anyone, then take me in as your concubine, will ya?”

“Only royalty are allowed concubines, so you’d better brace yourself for that impending single life.”

“Fine... I can be a pet too...”

“So you’d rather give up your humanity than marry someone weaker than you...?”

After Raid cheered Alma up from her odd little fit, the group proceeded into the spire and found themselves in a room surrounded by plain and boorish walls.

Eluria curiously looked around. “The style is completely different from Vegalta’s.”

Totori frowned. “Could you even call this a ‘style’? It’s so plain, so...*inorganic*. Was this not the ruler’s palace? Why the lack of ornaments and design?”

“Well, what you’re looking at now is the inner wall of the alloy structure. The outer surface would’ve had some design on it, but it’s all worn off in time.” It seemed the interior had also been quite devastated since this part was peeking out of the surface, but the alloy walls were intact and showed no significant signs of weathering or decay. “Doesn’t look like we need to worry about it caving in. Let’s go farther down and check.”

“But I don’t see any stairs,” Eluria pointed out.

“Now that you mention it...” Totori looked around. “Shouldn’t there be stairs leading down to the rest of the tower?”

“Oh, in Altane, we moved between floors using a machine called an elevator.” Raid lightly tapped his foot around the floor before landing a powerful stomp. Iron creaked loudly as a circle hollowed out underfoot and fell right into the dark pit beneath. A few seconds later, a shrill metallic crash echoed extensively from within the gaping hole. “There. Now we can go down.”

“This man just damaged ancient ruins with no remorse...” Alma deadpanned.

“After you told us not to destroy anything,” Eluria mumbled indignantly.

“The emergency stairs are buried in sand, and we can’t use this elevator without supplying it with stable and consistent electricity, so this is really our only way down.”

Savad chuckled. “That was quite the rough solution, but it did tell us a few things. Since the sound echoed for quite a while, it looks like you were right, Raid—the sand hasn’t flooded into the inner corridors just yet. There should at least be more space down there.”

“Right. That said...” Raid peeked into the dark abyss. “I might’ve made a bit too much noise.” Cries and crawling sounds echoed within the pit. This, too, was something they’d expected: the manabeasts had nested in the palace. “Huh. You might get eaten alive the moment you land. Wanna jump in, Savad?”

“It almost sounds like you’re asking me to go on a suicide mission...”

“Wouldn’t this be no sweat for a special-class magician?”

“Well, you’re not wrong.”

“Then how ’bout the two of us jump in and clear the path?”

“Allow me to lead. God of Victory or not, you’re still a student.” Savad looked back with a smile and said, “We’re going ahead to crush the bugs,” before throwing himself into the darkness.

Sensing the enemy presence, the manabeasts crowding the narrow space looked up and bared their fangs at the falling man. However, the eyes staring back at them from above were unfazed.

Savad’s mouth curled into a smile. He brandished his iron club as mana flashed and surged through his arms. “For starters,” he muttered, “I guess I’ll take out ten of you.”

The manabeasts charged upward, but only a moment later their bodies broke and caved in under Savad’s heavy swing. The thorns on his club gouged into their flesh and pulverized their bodies. It was a single powerful blow that left the beasts no time to even cry out before they perished.

Despite his immense power, Savad’s movements were swift and nimble. He maintained his form while falling, stepped on the approaching manabeasts to maneuver through the space, and kicked against the walls to accelerate and continue his assault.

Soon, he landed upon the mountain of carcasses he’d made himself and looked down with a wry smile. “I guess this is going to take a while.”

More manabeasts flooded in from the other end of the corridor. They must have heard the commotion or been drawn in by the scent of blood, as more than just bug-type manabeasts had joined in the fray.

A moment later, Raid landed beside him and surveyed the manabeasts squirming within the darkness. “Yep. There’s a whole party down here,” he agreed. “Guess it’s gonna take longer than we thought... How ’bout we have a little chat while we’re at it?”

“Right now...? Is there anything in particular to chat about?”

“Sure. I have just the topic in mind.” Raid’s faint smile fell from his lips as he pinned Savad under his cold, piercing gaze. “For starters...I’d love to know why your mana is just like mine.”

Savad stiffened almost imperceptibly, but Raid’s narrowed gaze didn’t miss it.

“Looks like I’m right,” he huffed. “Well, I can’t use magic devices, much less magic, so I doubt they’re *exactly* the same.”

Savad pursed his lips. “How did you figure it out...?”

“The way Totori talked about you,” he answered. “The little missy I saved back then is still alive and is now your Imperial Lord, so it should’ve been easy for you to confirm that the God of Victory she brought along was just a human. Even then, Totori theorized that you were related to the God of Victory, which implies that your power is somewhat similar to mine.”

It had been no more than conjecture the night before, but seeing Savad in action, Raid was now certain. He could recognize it better than anyone else—Savad carried the same power as Raid, and Totori had tried to hide this fact.

“You guys are hiding something—something so big, you can’t share it even with someone who possesses a similar ability.”

“Then...are we suspects in your investigation?”

“Well, if you talk now, then you’re off the list for sure. Otherwise, it must be some really huge secret, so I won’t pry any further.”

“You mean...you don’t mind either way?”

“Nope.” Raid grinned. “Yesterday, you left the decision to Totori, but this is where you decide for yourself.”

Savad found his lips turning up as well. “Yeah... I knew it. You really are amazing.”

“Well, I *was* called the Hero in my past life.”

“Then I guess it’s better to be honest and have you as an ally.” Savad’s smile strained bitterly as he effortlessly hefted his club over his shoulder. “As far back as I could remember, a strange power dwelled within my body, granting me more than enough strength to throw a fully grown man even as a kid. The villagers looked at me in fear and called me a demon, and my parents weren’t much different. They told me to stay deep in the mountains...away from them.”

It was a very familiar story. Once, there was a boy who dearly wished to be stronger than anyone else, and when his wish was granted, everyone around him, even his parents, looked upon him in fear and left him all alone.

“But I was fine with that,” Savad whispered. “Being by myself was better than accidentally hurting someone.” Savad had always been a kindhearted human. Rather than using his strength to show off and step over others, he feared he would harm them and thus chose to live a quiet and lonely life. “Years passed as I lived in solitude. Eventually, the power within me swelled and grew, and it even began manifesting against my will.”

“Your mana ran wild...?”

“In hindsight, maybe it did.” Savad smiled wryly. “I’d been chased out of the village before I could learn anything about sorcery.”

However, Raid furrowed his brow. His childhood was quite similar to Savad’s, but Raid never experienced his mana overflowing and running wild.

“Well, that doesn’t happen now. After all, my mana has changed since then.”

“It’s...changed?”

“Yes. You see, I died back when my mana ran wild,” Savad explained, far too casually.

A human who had died shouldn’t have been standing and talking now, but Raid knew all too well how feeble such logic could actually be.

“But it seems I didn’t come back perfectly. I was a human back then, but when I woke up, I’d become something like a beastdweller.” Savad placed his hand over his mask and quietly took it off. “This is the story of Savad,” he

whispered, “a former human reborn through forbidden arts.” Savad’s lips curled into a bitter smile. On his forehead was a pair of horns exactly like the ones on his mask.

◆

After Savad and Raid jumped into the pit, the girls patiently waited at the top of the spire for their signal.

“Hrgh... I wonder if Savad is doing okay...” Totori mumbled as she peeked into the hole, her tail swishing restlessly behind her.

“Don’t stick your head in there, Totori. It’s dangerous.” Eluria wrapped her arms around the beastdweller and pulled her back onto her lap. Of course, she wasn’t concerned for Totori’s safety; she simply didn’t want to give Raid and Savad a fright by suddenly dropping them a very peppy package. “Raid and Savad will be fine, and Ms. Alma is keeping watch outside. Let’s do our part and wait patiently.”

“You’re right... Still, I’m worried. Savad is oddly airheaded at times. I feel anxious just watching him.” Creases formed between Totori’s eyebrows as her ears flopped glumly.

Eluria smiled and patted her head. “You really do care for Savad, don’t you?”

“Hm? Where did that come from?”

“It just caught my attention since your relationship reminds me of my relationship with Raid.”

“Hm... Well, we certainly won’t lose to you two when it comes to intimacy!” Totori beamed from ear to ear, like she was happy from the bottom of her heart—a feeling Eluria understood very well.

“Yeah... I understand how you feel.” When Eluria had lost consciousness for the last time in her old life, Raid’s smile—always so warm, so unguarded—had been the first thing that came to mind. Her memory of that smile and her heartfelt desire to see it once more had spurred her to look for Raid the moment she’d realized she had reincarnated.

And so, she could understand Totori’s feelings.

“I understand why...you revived Savad with forbidden arts.”

Totori’s eyes snapped wide open, but after a passing glint of realization, her gaze regained its calm. “Why do you think that?” she quietly asked.

“Because you said you’re a tiger and your Imperial Lord is a fox.”

“What...?”

“The fact that you could give a clear answer as to what animal your features represent points to the existence of records that can corroborate it. After all, you can’t pinpoint those specifics with just a pair of ears and a tail.” Ears and tails weren’t the only characteristics used to classify and differentiate animals and beasts. Their size, patterns, habits, and whatnot also spelled the difference—none of which manifested in beastdwellers. For all they knew, Totori could actually be a striped cat, while Legnare’s Imperial Lord could simply be a black dog or wolf closely resembling a fox.

“In other words, Legnare’s records of past forbidden arts are detailed enough that they can be used to identify beastdwellers’ origins. Perhaps the researchers and their results are also recorded. Yet Savad remains an unidentified beastdweller—meaning he’s a product of *recent* forbidden arts.”

Without exception, all forbidden arts performed in the past were said to have ended with great sacrifice and utter failure. That was why their research and practice were now strictly banned, and no new types of beastdwellers had been born thereafter. Thus, an unidentifiable and unrecorded beastdweller could only stem from forbidden arts that had been performed *after* the ban.

“And didn’t I say earlier,” Eluria quietly continued, “that you two are very similar to us?” Savad was a human who became a beastdweller, not too dissimilar to a certain elf who was reincarnated as a human. “It’s just like what happened to me.”

Eluria had been reincarnated into a human, and if she had to pinpoint the cause of it, it would be her death. If Savad had also been reborn into a different kind of existence, then he must have also experienced death. Hence, Eluria came to the conclusion that Savad had been revived through forbidden arts.

Totori listened until the end and quietly nodded. “You truly are worthy of being called the Sage.”

“So...did your ritual succeed?”

The price for forbidden arts was steep, as proved by the records of entire

towns and villages being lost to them. However, no such news had ever reached Vegalta in recent times. The practitioner herself was not branded a criminal; far from it, she was now working proudly as a special-class magician. This meant that nobody knew what had happened, and for that, the ritual must have been completed without any steep cost.

However, Totori's smile was strained as she scoffed. "Did I succeed? I'm not so sure myself."

"What do you mean...?"

"I revived Savad with forbidden arts—you are right about that. What I used at the time was a ritual to bring the dead back to life, not reincarnation. Yet Savad came back as a beastdweller like me." Totori barked an empty laugh and dragged her gaze to meet Eluria's. "So? Will you expose my crime? I might not have caused any outward harm, but I've certainly gone against the ways of the world by staining my hands with the forbidden arts."

"Mm... I just asked because I thought it might be related to my reincarnation. Tell me more about the ritual you conducted back then. That's all I ask for."

"You mean...you will keep my secret in exchange for information?"

"Mm-hmm. If I expose you, then others may find out about our reincarnation and suspect our connection to forbidden arts. Then we'd all just end up jail buddies." Eluria shook her head in dismay. Considering the similarities between their cases, it was very possible that reincarnation magic had roots in forbidden arts. Although they hadn't dabbled in it themselves, Raid and Eluria would probably still face the consequences for it. "So I just want to know what happened. That's all."

Totori pursed her lips and looked down. After a moment, she finally nodded and took out her magic gear. "In that case," she said, "I shall repay your mercy in kind."

"Will you tell me what you know?"

"No... I will directly show you my memories. This way, you have no need to doubt my words and can even see and judge for yourself."

Eluria squinted. "Are you sure about this?"

Memory projection was a unique kind of magic born from Legnarian sorcery which was normally used on criminals. It caused considerable pain to the caster, so only first-class magicians and above were permitted usage. Moreover, if Totori were to use such a spell, then she would have to revisit her memories of Savad's death—to witness the death of her beloved, whom she had revived by risking her heart and soul. Using this magic would place a great mental and physical burden on her.

However, Totori decisively shook her head. "I am a criminal who soiled my hands in forbidden arts, yet the esteemed Sage showed me great mercy and compassion. This is the best form of gratitude I can offer in return," she whispered as she brought her gear to Eluria's hands. "And perhaps, deep down...I just want someone to know the truth."

Before Eluria's eyes, Totori's brittle smile warped along with their surroundings.

On an unfamiliar mountain, blanketed in trees and greenery, a little girl cried silently. Eluria watched from this girl's perspective as tear after tear fell to the ground below her.

Soon, she heard footsteps parting the grass and the clear chime of a bell. The girl snapped her head up and shouted, *"Savad!"* as she pushed herself off the ground and hugged the young man before her.

He was an ordinary human, with no mask obstructing his eyes. *"Were you crying again, Totori?"*

"Yes... But... But everyone keeps saying mean things...!" cried the young Totori, tears spilling from her eyes once more. *"They say that I can't become a magician...that my family's sorcery is useless and defective...!"*

In Legnare, knowledge of sorcery was traditionally passed down through families and clans. Eluria recalled reading in some documents that oftentimes this inheritance—rather than one's mana capacity, effort, and skill—would dictate one's standing in society. Thus, those such as orphans, who could not inherit any sorcery, would inevitably live in poverty.

Savad looked down at the crying girl with a gentle smile. *"You shouldn't cling to me, Totori. You'll get dirty."*

“So what? I can wash my clothes!”

“It’s almost winter. The water’s getting cold.”

The girl pouted and mumbled, *“Doesn’t mean I can’t wash them...”*

“Oh, you’re so stubborn... You also keep coming even though I tell you not to.” With a familiar wry smile, Savad placed his hand on Totori’s head. *“What’ll you do if your hands get frostbite? You won’t be able to practice your sorcery or even hold an inkstick for your studies.”*

“Hmph. So what? I can’t become a magician anyway...”

“That’s not true. I know nothing about sorcery or magic, but that dance you showed me before...was really, really beautiful.”

The girl beamed. *“You mean it?! Did I look cool?!”*

“Very. The sight of you dancing on the dazzling stream... It was captivating.” Savad’s lips tugged into a smile as he watched the girl’s expression brighten. *“So I’m sure you’ll become a really cool magician. No matter what anyone else says, I want to see you become one.”*

“Then... Then I’ll practice a whole lot more and show you all sorts of cool magic! Then I’ll become a great magician, earn tons of money, and treat you to some really nice food!”

“Hmmm... I do want to see you become a magician, but shouldn’t you use your money for yourself? I’m already happy with this bell you gave me.” Savad fondly flicked the bell by his waist, producing a clear sound.

Totori grinned. *“Then I’ll get you an even bigger one once I become a magician! That way, I can find you no matter where you are!”* she crowed, her dreams filling her face with mirth.

It was then that Eluria’s view warped once more, transporting her into an old house. Adults restlessly moved about with grim expressions while a single boy was crying, his face warped in fear.

“Why did you enter the demon’s mountain?!”

“Because of you kids, the demon attacked Viju’s house yesterday!”

The boy could do naught but shrivel under the adults' screams. *"B-But Totori said that the demon up in the mountains isn't scary—that we're way more cowardly and evil! So we used her to lure it out...t-to teach her a lesson...!"*

Ding...

Suddenly, a clear chime rang through the air.

Ding... Ding... Ding...

A bell continued to chime, announcing its presence in the world.

"Eek! Th-The demon is here! He's here to kill—"

The boy could not finish his words, for the next moment the wall was smashed apart. The force sent the boy and adults alike flying through the air along with the rubble.

Now, Savad stood before that gaping hole. Hefted over his shoulder was a log thicker than his torso, bathed in red and dripping with fresh blood. *"I'm sorry, Totori."* The tenderness of his familiar smile reflected starkly against the blood splattered across his face. *"I'm sorry...you had to get so hurt just to protect me."*

He looked down at the girl before him—at her pitiful figure. Not a single nail remained on Totori's small hands and feet, and countless bruises dotted every inch of her fair skin. The boy and his friends had tried to lure the demon out with Totori's screams—but Totori had swallowed it all down, bearing with it till the end, to the point where she couldn't even muster her voice to speak to Savad now.

All because she didn't want him to harm the villagers and be condemned as a demon any further.

"But I... I just couldn't take it." Savad's face was painted in blood that wasn't his, red like the rage boiling within him. *"I'll become the demon they say I am...if that's what it takes to protect you and your smile."*

Savad's lips twisted oddly, his smile bitter and resigned.

"I'm sorry," he whispered again, *"for not staying by your side till the end."*

Savad left the village and returned to the mountains. Once his figure disappeared into the trees, the scene shifted once more to the very same

village, now long abandoned and devastated beyond recognition.

“The target ‘demon’ has been spotted, Ms. Totori,” said a magician. *“The subjugation squad is on standby. We should all move in before the target tries to—”*

“Unnecessary. Tell the rest to stand back. I will handle this.”

The magician paused. *“The target is a bizarre monster, neither human nor manabeast. It has destroyed all nearby villages. If it starts approaching the towns and cities beyond—”*

“I am a beastdweller and a special-class magician. Do you think I will lose? If anything, having too many people around will only impede me from using my full strength.”

Refusing to take any objections, Totori stood and headed for the mountain. She walked along a very familiar path surrounded by very familiar scenery, just like that day she cried in Savad’s arms.

Finally, she came to a halt and looked up at the “demon” before her.

“I’ve come to fulfill our promise, Savad.”

The young man she had once cried to was no more. His body loomed above the trees, and his skin was tainted black from the bleeding caused by his rampaging mana. Long hair draped over his face, tangled and blotched with dirt and mud, hiding the agony that warped his expression. The pair of eyes glaring at her from between the disheveled locks were wild and manic.

Despite it all, Totori simply looked back at the demon before her. *“It’s been decades...yet you haven’t changed one bit.”* Her gaze fell past the demon’s hunched shoulders and down to his waist—to the bell that was so distorted, it could no longer make a single sound. *“You forced your rampaging mana in and bore with the pain... You should no longer be conscious, yet you went down to the villages to ward the people away... How about you try thinking of yourself for just once, as you near your end?”*

Totori slowly approached the demon, her tears forming a trail alongside her footsteps.

“You’ve already...suffered enough,” she said, her voice coming out a shaky whisper. *“Because of your overflowing strength, you were branded a demon, morphed into a monster, and even lost your sanity... Even then, you held on to your humanity and suffered all on your own.”*

Lightning flashed over Totori’s right hand, snapping at the tears falling from her cheeks.

“I’ve kept our promise... I became a proud magician acknowledged by all, just like you wanted. And now, everyone praises my magic, just like you always did.”

The demon growled like a wary beast, but his gaze never once left Totori, almost as if he was listening.

“So behold this sight...and don’t ever forget it!”

The lightning gathered on her left arm took shape, buzzing like a thousand singing birds. Totori pointed the tip of the lightning spear at the demon as tears spilled past her strained and broken smile.

“I am Totori, a proud and mighty magician!”

The lightning spear unleashed itself from her right hand and flew toward the demon. Instantly, an earth-shattering explosion rattled the mountains, and lightning flashed blindingly over the trees.

Within the world of white, a single bell chimed.

By the time their surroundings returned to normal, Totori saw only the earth scorched by her own lightning.

The smile from her distant past was no more.

The body warped by agony was no more.

The demon was no more.

Totori fell to her knees, lips trembling. *“Why... Why did you have to be called a demon...?!”* she cried out. *“You were so kind...so gentle! You chose to live in solitude because you were afraid of accidentally hurting others! You were just...too kind for your own good!”*

To whom was her anger directed? To her beloved, who’d chosen a path of

solitude? To herself, who could give him nothing but freedom through death? Or to everyone and everything that condemned him to such a cruel fate?

“I just wanted to spend my life with you! If the whole world kept calling you a demon, then I wanted to be there by your side to call you by your name a thousand times more!”

The girl screamed her heart out as her mana shone and flickered around her. Pure white and glossy black flowed from her body, spreading around her and blending into a pale gray that warped the air and bore into space.

“Please... Please, Savad...”

She cried toward the gaping space and begged.

“Please...let me see you smile once more.”

The moment Totori’s dearest, most desperate wish spilled from her lips, Eluria’s view warped yet again, this time fading into pure darkness.

Soon, light entered her sight once more. The next scene was a wide space surrounded by plain and dilapidated walls—it took Eluria a few moments to realize she had come back to reality.

“That was the ritual of revival that I conducted,” Totori uttered weakly as she sat on the floor before her. “I lost consciousness at that point. By the time I woke up, the subjugation squad had already retrieved me...along with Savad, who had come back as a beastdweller.”

“I see...” Eluria whispered, quietly rubbing her sleeve over her eyes.

Totori lifted her head and gave a wan smile, raising her hand to pat the girl’s head. “I’m sorry. I should have just shown you the part where I used forbidden arts, but memory projection reproduces the memories that left the strongest impression, so I ended up showing you some pointless scenes too.”

Eluria swiftly shook her head. “They weren’t pointless,” she insisted. “They’re your precious memories. Don’t call them pointless.”

Totori’s lips quirked into a wry smile. “Good grief. You are also too kind for your own good,” she sighed. “I do not know why my ritual was successful... I think it might have been due to the compatibility between Savad’s mana and

the mana born from forbidden arts. Perhaps the addition of my mana had influenced Savad to be reborn as a beastdweller rather than a human."

Eluria raised a brow. "Isn't it because you used forbidden arts?"

Totori shook her head. "We beastdwellers have unique physical traits because forbidden arts leave an impression upon the *practitioner*. Past documents clearly state this as well."

In other words, as the caster, it was Totori and not Savad who should have been impacted by the ritual. However, Totori was already a beastdweller, meaning her body had already manifested this impact, carried over from the distant past. Thus, her body suffered no further change.

Therefore, it was not the ritual itself, but rather Totori's influence on the whole process, that had changed Savad into a beastdweller—or so Totori theorized, at least.

However, that led to another possibility.

"You used to be an elf, then became a human after reincarnation, right?"

With that question alone, Eluria already understood what Totori was getting at. Since she had become an entirely different race through her reincarnation, someone must have influenced the process—and there just so happened to be a human who reincarnated just like her.

"Then," Totori muttered, "it is highly probable that Raid triggered your reincarnation."

The Divine Realm was a world beyond human comprehension, housing mana that was abnormal, unique, and omnipotent. Most likely...*that* was the true origin of the mana within Raid's body.

"Considering he cannot use magic and knows nothing about reincarnation magic," Totori continued, "there may be a gap in his memories...or your reincarnation was simply the effect of a preset magic formula. At the very least, it likely didn't happen of Raid's own volition."

Eluria didn't know why such power dwelled within Raid's body. Perhaps it had been planted there by the mastermind. Regardless, she was certain of at least

one thing:

“Even then, I want to thank Raid.”

He might have earned that mana by coincidence or someone’s ploy, and their reincarnation might not have been his intention, but it was none other than Raid who had risked his life to come and see her after she died.

“Thanks to him, I get to be with the person I love now. We get to spend time together and walk side by side with smiles on our faces.” It was the kind of life she’d longed for a thousand years ago, and now it had finally become her reality all thanks to Raid. “The person I love came to see me and made my wish come true... What else can I say but ‘thank you’? My days are filled with so much happiness that even now it still doesn’t feel real.”

Eluria smiled and gently pulled Totori into an embrace. “So,” she whispered, “it’s okay for you to be happy with the one you love too, Totori.”

Totori trembled in Eluria’s arms and buried her face in Eluria’s chest. “I’ve... I’ve always doubted myself!” she wailed, tears streaming down her face like a lost and lonely child. “Savad already suffered enough, and because of my selfish wish, he might have had to suffer even more...! I even turned him into a ‘demon,’ the root of all his pain... I was so afraid that...he actually hated me for it...!”

This guilt must have festered within her from the moment she revived Savad. So, as someone else who'd come back to life by another's will, Eluria firmly refuted her worries. "That's not true," she said. "Otherwise, he wouldn't have stayed with you this whole time."

"But... But I...!"

"And he was smiling," she continued. "He was smiling and laughing right by your side...because this time, he's not alone." Savad's smile in the present was the same as the one Eluria had seen in Totori's memories. "So...you don't have to cry by yourself either, Totori."

Totori's cries echoed in the ruined space, and Eluria gently caressed her head all the while, hoping the small comfort would someday wipe away all her worries—praying and wishing, quietly and sincerely, that these two would have many more happy days to come.

◇

Once Raid and Savad finished exterminating the manabeasts, they called down the rest of the team and resumed their trek to the throne room.

"And I thought *I* was an expert in close-quarter combat," Savad mused. "But watching you fight and seeing how you move, I really learned a lot."

"Well, I do have over fifty years under my belt," Raid replied. "Besides, I learned a lot from you too. Magic is incorporated into your combat style, so it'll be good to reference when I teach the kid."

"What a lucky boy, having you as his teacher."

"Why don't we have a bout sometime? I *am* your senior in terms of combat experience, and with your skill, you'd pick up a lot from even a short spar."

"That sounds great! I'll look forward to it after this whole case is wrapped up."

Eluria watched their friendly exchange with a curious stare. "You two seem chummy," she observed.

"Well, we had a little heart-to-heart." Raid shrugged. "Savad told me all about his power and his past."

Savad scratched his head and turned to Totori with a sheepish smile. “That I did. I’m sorry, Totori.”

“I don’t mind. I also confessed everything to Eluria.” Totori beamed, her smile free and unburdened. “Thanks to that, Eluria and I, too, have gotten much closer!”

“Mm-hmm. We’re super good buddies now.” Eluria took Totori’s hand and mirrored the girl’s cheery smile. Raid and Savad looked at the two in relief.

However, *someone* wasn’t quite as peppy as the rest.

Alma followed the group with slumped shoulders as a lifeless laugh spilled from her lips. “Ha ha ha... Woe is me, the fifth wheel...*again*.” Fortunately, it seemed her wounds were shallow this time—she expelled her gloom with a heavy sigh and straightened her back. “Sounds like you talked about your past already, so...don’t mind me and just keep talking. I can just fill in the gaps by myself—and of course, I know how to keep a secret or two.”

“That’s the one thing I like about you, Alma,” said Raid.

“You mean there’s nothing else?” The woman frowned. “Ah, whatever... Where’s this throne room, anyway?”

“We’re already pretty far down, so I’d say we’re almost there...” Raid sighed. “Jeez, it takes *ages* to go all the way down. Why does this place have to be so extravagant?”

Alma raised a brow. “Because...it’s the ruler’s palace?” she pointed out, rightfully so, but Raid simply shrugged apathetically.

“But it’s rather unusual for the throne room to be underground,” Savad remarked. “I recall that in Vegalta’s palace, the throne room and the royalty’s living spaces were in the upper floors.”

“It’s just an Altane thing,” Raid answered. “The harsh and unpredictable climate meant it was always safest underground, so the higher your status, the deeper you occupy.”

Rain and winds hadn’t been a huge problem given their topography, but summers had been scorching hot and many Altanians had frozen to death each

winter. Meanwhile, the wealthy and powerful would often hole up underground.

"But now," Raid muttered, raising his leg to kick, "they're dead all the same!"

The sturdy door before him tumbled down, revealing a large throne on the far end of a vast room. Layers of dust told the tale of time, but the ostentatious design and splendorous ornaments remained exemplary of Altane's glory in the distant past.

"Wow, this brings back so many unpleasant memories. I'm kinda pissed now. Can I destroy the throne too?"

Alma and Eluria immediately latched onto his arms.

"Your Excellency, please refrain from destroying ancient ruins out of pettiness," Alma said flatly.

"Your hate for the old emperor is palpable," Eluria muttered in dismay.

Since they insisted, Raid decided to put his throne-thrashing plans on hold—emphasis on *"on hold."* He was still set on venting his frustrations before he left.

Meanwhile, Savad looked around. "Where's the emergency escape tunnel?"

"Behind the throne, under the floor," Raid answered. "The mechanisms in this room were made based on Legnarian automata, so it can be opened even without electricity." He peeled up the floor behind the throne and delicately operated the apparatus within. Soon, the floor sank, revealing a stone stairway leading farther down. "There we go... Well, my tour ends here. I've never gone past this point myself."

"There should at least be an exit on the other side, given it's an escape tunnel," Savad said. "The 'ghost of the ruin' might have entered from there."

Raid nodded. "Possibly. Now the question is: are they a band of grave robbers who stumbled upon it by luck? Or did they know its location from the start? Let's go see, shall we?"

Only the sound of their footsteps echoed as the team cautiously descended. At the bottom of the stairs was an open space filled with garish treasure chests

and rotten casks, pointing to the likelihood that the imperial family had used this space to store their hidden wealth and emergency assets.

However, the team paid these treasures no mind; their gazes were drawn to the very center of the room—at the Altanian standard on the ground. It wasn't black and red like Raid remembered it to be, but rather white and blue. It was the combined flag of the Allied Army led by Tiana von Vegalta, the Sage's disciple, and Ryatt Kanos, the Hero's adjutant.

Raid somberly picked up the standard. "Well done, Ryatt," he whispered, sending solemn praise to his most trusted subordinate, now long gone.

He dug up the ground beneath the flag and found a magic box containing two letters. "To my dearest general," he read aloud. Raid flipped open the letter that had awaited its recipient for a thousand years and read:

"I have received your message from Tiana and fulfilled your orders. Upon investigation, the remaining members of the imperial family have testified to witnessing Viteos flee with Your Excellency's sword. However, his whereabouts —as well as your sword's—remain unknown. From witness reports and testimonies, it is highly probable that he had it on his person when he drowned in the eastern sea."

"That concludes my report," Raid finished.

Alma blinked. "What? That's all?"

"Looks like it."

"Oh, my dear ancestor... After making all your descendants read about you gushing on and on about His Excellency... Are you serious? Shouldn't your letter to him have a bit more, I dunno, *sentimentality* to it...?"

"He was a real serious guy." Raid shrugged. "He probably didn't want to include any personal feelings in a report. If anything, I'm relieved to see he hadn't changed at all in ten years." He chuckled and handed Alma the other letter. "This one's for you. It might be a personal message, so you don't have to read it out loud."

Alma squinted. "For me?"

“Yep. Says right there—*‘To my dearest descendant, Alma Kanos.’*”

Alma reluctantly took the letter and trailed her eyes through the rows of text:

“I find it rather odd to say ‘nice to meet you’ to my own descendant, so excuse my lack of a proper greeting. Tiana told me that she met you, and she was quite proud to say that you were helping His Excellency. However, I’ve yet to know for certain whether you are capable of supporting His Excellency. Of course, I’ve heard you are a highly respected special-class magician in your time—a position that is, without a doubt, every bit the product of your own skill and effort, but still I am truly proud as your ancestor. That being said, His Excellency is a personage of unfathomably profound thought. To support such an esteemed individual, you mustn’t fall complacent. Stay humble, seek constant improvement, and devote yourself to your training. To help you better understand the scale of this undertaking, allow me to share with you one of His Excellency’s many noteworthy feats...”

“Hang on,” Raid cut in. “How long is that letter?”

“Looks like I’ve got ten whole pages of nagging from this fanboy of yours...”

“Just skim it. That guy nags for *ages*.”

“Roger that,” Alma drawled. “His Excellency’s orders come first, as my ancestor would’ve said...probably.” Her empty gaze dragged over the rest of Ryatt’s passionate letter, until the light returned to her eyes at the final page.

She squinted and read aloud, *“Lastly, Tiana and I have left you a gift. You are a proud and wise member of the Kanos bloodline, so it should prove useful to you. I have high hopes for you, Alma Kanos.”*

Alma knelt and dug deeper, finding a magic box far larger than the last. Inside was a folded Allied Army flag and a single book.

The flag drew Eluria’s attention. “That’s made of manaworm thread,” she whispered, eyes wide.

“Manaworms... Those manabeasts went extinct from excessive hunting, didn’t they?” Alma asked.

“Right. The thread they produce is coated in mana, making it sturdy yet soft

to the touch. In the past, I considered making mana circuits out of the thread, but I gave up on the idea since their population was already dwindling."

"How expensive were they back then?" Alma asked.

"Enough to buy a huge castle and land, and then some."

Alma's jaw dropped. "Isn't that a bit too expensive to leave sitting here for a thousand years?!"

"I think Tiana took a liking to you, Ms. Alma, and I can promise you she doesn't favor many people," Eluria mused, nodding as she placed a hand on her shoulder.

Raid was subtly amused that neither Alma nor Eluria seemed to have realized they were actually very distant relatives, but he stowed the thought away. "As for the book," he continued. "It looks like the Altanian army's register... No, it's a bit thinner, so maybe it's just a list of those affiliated with the Allied Army?"

"Looks like it," Alma agreed. "But it's not just any register either. My ancestor left his notes and comments on their abilities and personalities..." She trailed off, eyes widening in realization. "Hah... He said he had high hopes for me, and he sure wasn't kidding."

"Did you figure something out?" Raid asked.

"Yeah, I think I know what he wants me to do with this. It's just... Well, I don't know if I can make it happen." Alma sighed, placing the standard and register into her bag. "It'll call for a few all-nighters, at the very least... Not to mention the exam is almost here, so I don't have a lot of time. Guess I'll toss all my instructor duties to Philia and—"

"Quiet," Savad cut in, eyes narrowed.

Beside him, Totori's ears twitched in alarm. "Someone is here."

"Mm... Not just one. There are dozens of them," Eluria whispered.

Their gazes shifted, gathering toward one point, when suddenly, a flash of light blitzed past them and pierced straight through Savad's body.

"Ugh...!" Savad wheezed and fell to his knees. He pressed his hand over the wound, but blood continued to spill between his fingers.

“What the hell? There’s a whole party over here!”

Several figures emerged from the darkness.

“Ah, fuck... I’m already in a shitty mood seeing my motherland in ruins, and now this? I gotta deal with some sewer rats all the way down in this desert too?” Among them was a white-haired man clad in jet-black armor. A scar ran horizontally across his face, and his crimson eyes glared at their group in disgust.

However, Raid paid little attention to this man’s arrival; his eyes were focused on the group’s attire—their jet-black uniforms with deep crimson accents...as well as the crest that was unmistakably Altane’s.

Raid narrowed his eyes at the white-haired man. “If we’re sewer rats, then what does that make you? Grave robbers?”

“Hah? You talkin’ to me, ya damn rodent?”

“And the whole gang behind you, yeah.”

“Ha ha! Listen to this guy run his mouth! I didn’t know sewer rats were such jokesters these days!” The white-haired man wore a vicious grin as he hefted a large battle-axe over his shoulder. “Ah, well, guess I shouldn’t laugh. After all, you’re just a buncha morons who don’t know a thing about us—or anything else, for that matter. Well, listen up.”

The man breezily lifted his battle-axe as his lips twisted into a sinister smirk. “I’m the *Hero*,” he declared. “Get it? Now go to hell.”

Ignoring the group’s piercing glares, the man cast a sideward glance to one of the other armored men. “Hey. Any of our targets there?”

“Yes, sir! We can confirm Totori Yahigashi among them!”

“Tsk. And you expect me to know which one that is?”

“Pardon me! Our target is the beastman—the small girl with golden hair!”

“That’ll do. Now...kill the rest,” he ordered.

The black-clothed men instantly readied their weapons—all very familiar to Raid.

“Don’t block! *Dodge*!!!” he yelled to his group.

A chain of sharp explosive sounds rattled the air just as the group managed to take shelter behind some rubble. The enemy’s projectiles rolled by their feet—small black pellets, shining with a metallic luster.

Alma raised her head and yelled, “Your Excellency! Why can’t we block?! These puny things would hardly put a dent in our barri—”

“Magicians can’t block these,” Raid cut in, plucking one from the ground and holding it up to eye level. “These are bullets made from armored dragon shells.”

Eluria’s eyes widened in recognition. “The long-range weapons used by Altane in the past?”

“Right. In long-range combat, Altane used weapons called firearms,” Raid explained. “They were weaker than magic and didn’t stand a chance against barriers, so we hardly used them beyond cover fire. However, *these* bullets can weaken mana and pierce through magical defenses.”

They were made from the shells of armored dragons, the type of manabeasts they had encountered in their first simulation exam. However, a thousand years ago, these bullets had never been successfully manufactured.

“Armored dragons ate other metals too, not just mana ores, so their materials were tough and difficult to process. That said, selectively feeding them could lower the strength and disrupt the balance of their materials. They were still pretty hard to form into armor, so the idea was scrapped.”

Thus, Altane had ended up using the armored dragon itself as a live weapon. When they ultimately lost control over it and caused massive damages to their own army, the entire plan was abandoned. In other words, this bullet was a weapon that had never been created in this world.

“You *can* knock them down with magic, but the force of your attack will be greatly weakened. Consider this a weapon especially strong against magic.”

“So Totori and I are out,” Alma muttered grimly.

“Right. You two should prepare for our escape. Eluria can brute-force it with her Polyaggregate Expansion, and I can read their trajectory and dodge.”

“But...we can’t just let these guys go, can we?” Savad said through gritted teeth and ragged breaths.

Totori grimaced. “I sense something terribly wicked behind them—something very...familiar to me.” It was clear what she was referring to: forbidden arts, the practice that had brought about countless sacrifices and terrible calamities to Legnare.

“I’ll handle things here,” said Savad. “Raid and Eluria, go after that white-haired man and stop the ritual they’re attempting.”

“Don’t.” Totori clenched her fist. “You’re injured... You could die.”

“On the contrary, this is my best chance. Of course, I don’t plan on dying.” Savad got to his feet, sweat matting his forehead and blood still gushing from his torso. “Sorry, Totori. I’ll be gone for a bit.”

The girl frowned. “You must come back.”

“I will.” He smiled softly. “That’s what I made this spell for—to make sure I always return to your side.”

Savad boldly leaped into the rain of bullets. They gouged his flesh, splattering blood into the air, but Savad did not stop. His feet kicked against the ground, pushing him closer and closer to the black-clothed soldiers.

“Let’s play. You’re ‘it.’”

His breath rumbled, the innocent words stringing together like a chant. His spurting blood formed thin threads that weaved all around his wounded body.

“Found you. Found you. Found you.”

His eyes beneath the half mask swept across the scene, landing on each of the intruders in turn. Blood painted his body, but not a single target escaped his gaze.

“Now,” he growled, “I’m ‘it.’”

Savad gripped his iron club and *stabbed* it into his chest. Drenched in his own blood, his large body instantly swelled and morphed into that of a monster.

“Let’s play and play and play some more,” he chanted. “Till I catch you all, till

you cry and crawl...”

He gripped the iron club stuck to his chest.

“This,” he growled, “is the Demon’s Tragedy.”

Savad uttered the name of the spell that now embodied the root of his power and freed his club from his chest. His half mask dispersed into mana—and soon he, too, vanished.

“What?!” sputtered a soldier. “Hurry! Confirm the target’s loca—” Alas, he failed to finish his orders as his head was knocked off his neck. Fresh blood sprayed into the air, and his head fell to the ground with a dull thud.

“Caught you,” Savad crooned, his lips curving into an eerie smile. Not a hint of his usual gentle expression could be gleaned in his face, as if something truly evil had possessed him.

Another soldier screamed. “H-How?! How is he alive after taking all those anti-mana bullets to the—” Yet he, too, failed to finish speaking, as Savad’s iron club rammed against him and tore his body in two.

The demon smiled and laughed, relishing the bloody rain.

Eluria’s eyes widened as it finally hit her. “Wait, that’s...”

“A *curse*,” Totori finished, her gaze set on the demon’s savage figure. “The root of sorcery at its most basic, primitive form. It is the practice of linking fates through grudge and resentment. Now, sorcery is much closer to magic, but originally it was conducted by reacting to both the caster’s and the target’s mana.”

Eluria squinted. “So the bullets are ineffective...because they’re only diminishing *Savad’s* mana, not his targets’.”

“Precisely. And no matter how battered and wounded he becomes, Savad will continue to regenerate his flesh for so long as he and his targets are linked through the curse. His magic, Demon’s Tragedy, essentially grants him a temporarily undying body. In exchange, he loses his awareness as ‘Savad’ and becomes a ‘demon’ until the spell is undone.” Totori sighed and quietly got to her feet. “And that is my job, so I must remain on standby. Alma will have to

prepare for our escape on her own. As for those who went deeper into the ruins...could I leave them to you?”

Raid nodded. “Got it.”

“Mm-hmm. Raid and I can handle it,” said Eluria.

With that settled, the pair leaped over the soldiers in one breath.

“They broke through! Rear guard, take— AAAAARGH!”

Neither Raid nor Eluria looked back as they rushed deeper into the ruins. Bloodcurdling screams echoed behind them, while an eerie air seemed to take them into a chilling embrace each step forward. It was an odd and unnameable sensation, one they had never felt before.

They finally came to a halt as they emerged into an open space. Before them stood an altar illuminated by standing torches and surrounded by the black-clothed soldiers. There were around thirty of them, but Raid and Eluria couldn’t make an accurate count...not with the current *state* of those soldiers.

“The hell? Did these rats actually give ’em the slip?” The white-haired man turned around, his eye twitching irritably...with the severed head of his ally dangling loosely from his hand. “Tsk. I know we sicced the weakest bunch on ’em, but are they honestly weaker than a bunch of sewer rats? Our damn plan keeps going off the rails.”

The man tossed the severed head over the altar, where it rolled to join the rest of the heads, limbs, and dismembered corpses that lay in the center like offerings.

Raid clenched his fist at the absurdity of the horror before him. “Bastard,” he growled. “You killed your own men? Are you crazy?”

“What’s it to ya, rat? I’ll kill you too in a minute, so just—”

Before the man could finish, Raid leaped forward and closed in on him. “I said *—do you feel nothing of killing your allies?!*” Mana surged through his leg, unleashed through a skull-shattering kick.

The force behind it was fatal; no human would’ve known what hit them before they died, nor could any manabeast have cried out before breathing

their last. Raid had whipped out his kick with every intention of ending this man's life.

But the man simply planted his feet on the floor and *blocked it* with his battle-axe.

Raid swallowed his shock and fell back with a calm glare.

The white-haired man returned the expression, his crimson eyes glinting sharply. “Hey,” he snarled. “What the hell was that? Didn’t this era only have magic?” His eyes narrowed, sharp and calculating, as he studied Raid from atop the altar. “Damn brat. How the hell are you wielding the same power as me?”

That told Raid all he needed. The bullets that shouldn’t exist, the man’s mention of “this era,” his power that mirrored Raid’s...and what the Guardian Dragons had said after being summoned with Lufus’s future mana. All of it pointed to one answer:

“You’re...the Hero of the future.”

The white-haired man clicked his tongue. “Damn. Are you working with that bastard Wallus?”

“And you think I’ll just answer you, scar-face?”

“Brat,” the man spat. “That ain’t no way to talk to the Hero...but if you’re connected to that traitor, then I guess we can’t be wasting our time here.”

As the two men glared fiercely at one another, a soldier came running from the other side of the space. “Your Excellency! The preparations are complete!”

“About damn time,” the man hissed. “Hell, a kid could’ve done that faster.”

“My apologies!”

“Whatever. Just say your name.”

The soldier performed an Altanian salute. “I am William Haust!”

“The bunch stalling those rats aren’t coming back,” said the white-haired man, “and these guys might be related to Wallus, so we’re skipping the stimulation and proceeding straight to the awakening. Now, fulfill your final duty.”

“Yes, sir!” The soldier drew a firearm from his waist and roared at the top of his lungs, “Glory to Altane, our motherland!!!”

BANG! An explosive sound rang through the space, followed by the dull thud of the soldier collapsing to the floor.

The white-haired man simply watched with a satisfied nod. “Well done, William Haust.”

The soldier’s absolute lack of hesitation in offering his own life for his motherland left Raid utterly stunned. However, he soon snapped back to attention when the ground began to shake violently. The ceiling crumbled, filling the altar with tiles and rubble.

“See ya ’round, then. Be a good kid and wait for Wallus on the other side, yeah?” The man’s crimson eyes glinted with mockery as he stood amid their collapsing surroundings. “But if you dare show yourself to me again...I’ll just send you over myself.”

Leaving that threat behind, the white-haired man vanished beyond the curtain of rubble.

Raid glared at him until he was gone, then clicked his tongue and whipped his head around. “Eluria! Hold the rubble with your—” he yelled, before his words caught in his throat. His eyes fell to the trembling hand clutching his clothes.

“Wallus...” Eluria whimpered, shoulders shaking. “Why... Why did he say that name?” Her eyes, lost and fearful, desperately looked up at Raid. “Why...did he know my dad’s name?”

She looked like she was about to cry.

Chapter Four

The investigation team escaped from the collapsing underground space and returned to the checkpoint by the desert. Following the underground tunnel's collapse, the weight of the sand caused a chain reaction and buried part of the imperial capital as well, rendering it too dangerous to remain in the vicinity of the ruins.

Fortunately, their group escaped unscathed. Savad had been wounded at the start of the battle, but according to Totori, his Demon's Tragedy not only made his body temporarily undying but also healed all his flesh wounds once dispelled.

That being said, nobody was in the mood to celebrate. A grim air hung around just as Alma finished giving her report to the official and finally returned to them. "I've shared the results of our investigation—the manabeasts we hunted and also the underground ruins," she told them. "But I also warned them not to get close for a while due to the risk of further collapse."

"Sorry for leaving it all to you," Raid said. "You really pushed yourself back there too..."

"I don't mind. Your Excellency's praise is more than enough reward for me...or something like that?" Alma flashed a toothy grin. That said, her complexion was certainly pale. Before the collapse, she had summoned her entire army of skeleton soldiers to secure their escape route all the way back to the spire. After that, they'd all run nonstop all the way back to this checkpoint.

"You two also had it tough," Raid said, turning to the rest of the group. "How're you holding up, Savad?"

"Ah, no need to worry about me. I heal up after using Demon's Tragedy. The mental strain is no joke, though, so I don't really use it often..." Savad smiled, but just like Alma, it looked a tad wan. His forehead was matted in sweat, and he was leaning against Totori for support.

“We’re fine...” Totori reluctantly glanced to the side, where Eluria sat, her head hung low. “More importantly, what happened to her?”

Raid quietly sighed. “This whole thing might be related to Eluria’s father.”

Alma narrowed her eyes. “I’m guessing you’re not talking about Galleon Caldwin.”

“No. I’m talking about her father before she reincarnated, back when she was an elf.” Raid didn’t know much, nor had Eluria ever delved into detail about him.

“Wallus Caldwin... That was my dad’s name,” Eluria whispered. “He’s the person who taught me magecraft, though we hardly spent time together since he was busy jumping from place to place... But he’d always look over my progress whenever he came home and praise me for my improvement.” She clenched her fist as memories of her father resurfaced in her mind. “I did my best because I loved when he praised me...but I never caught up to him.”

And that was only a matter of course. Diligent as she was, Eluria had been no more than a child. Elves had far longer lifespans than humans, but their children weren’t much different from human kids. Eluria had already shown an extraordinary talent by being able to comprehend magecraft at such a young age.

But what if her father had already known about her talent? What if he’d known that one day, Eluria would invent magic? What if he’d known everything from the start and, because of that, spurred on her magecraft studies?

“Dad told me back then...” she muttered. “He told me to make ‘magic’...because it would grant me my greatest wish.”

That had been the moment Eluria began walking down the path to becoming the Sage. The term “magic” should not have even existed back then, yet it had come from none other than her father’s lips a thousand years ago.

So a small suspicion had festered within Eluria’s heart as they investigated: was her father somehow involved in all this? That suspicion had become reality the moment his name had been spat from the white-haired man’s mouth.

And now, a certain doubt that had been cowering deep within her had been

violently unveiled:

“Who...am I?”

The question she wrung out spilled shakily from her lips. If the Sage was a crafted existence, then what did that make Eluria and everything she’d accomplished in the past? Was she really someone from the past? Or was she someone who’d returned from a distant future?

And why...

Why had the future Hero ordered the Guardian Dragons to kill her?

“I’m...”

“You’re Eluria Caldwin,” Raid said, laying out the answer for her, quietly meeting the girl’s haggard gaze. “Your hobby is reading. Your favorite drink is warm milk tea. You like napping under the sun when you’re tired. You’re usually so shy around others but can ramble on forever when it comes to magic. You hate losing and never give up. You get so floaty and need so much support, but when the time comes to fight, you’re so strong and beautiful and just so incredibly dazzling.”

He broke into a smile so bright, it nearly wiped away all her worries. “I don’t know who you were in the past. I don’t even care about all the stuff you achieved a thousand years ago. But the Eluria Caldwin I saw on the battlefield and have watched every day since reincarnating—I know her very well. Because it was *her* I fell in love with, and nobody else.”

He reached out and gently patted her head, just like he would any other day. Raid’s words swelled with confidence, founded upon his pride as her one and only rival in the past and her fiancé in the present, and everything that they had built between them.

Eluria stared at Raid in a daze, her ocean-blue eyes peering up at his gentle smile. After a long pause, she slowly tilted her head and parroted, “‘Fell in love with’?”

Raid blinked at her and also tilted his head. “Hm?”

The couple stared blankly at one another before Raid turned to the side,

where three pairs of wide, owlish eyes stared back at him.

He slowly turned back to Eluria, only to find the girl was now gripping her hair on either side, willing it into a shield to cover her face. But alas, her ears, flushed to the tips, were clear for all to see.

A long and awkward silence ensued.

At last, after what felt like an eternity, Raid finally understood what he'd just done. "Oh," he said. "Hang on. Did I just...?"

"Your Excellency," said Alma, her tone eerily calm. "I remember you told me something a while back."

"Yeah? What is it?"

"'Until we settle things, we'll just be engaged and nothing more.'"

"Oh, yeah. I *definitely* said that."

"With that in mind, Your Excellency," she continued. "Do you remember what you said just now?"

"I said that I fell in love with her. Right to her face."

"*Aaaaand yer out!!!*" Alma yanked the Allied Army's flag out of her bag and whacked him right over the head. "Are you kidding me?! After all the tiptoeing you did until now?! Really?!"

"Well... I dunno. It just slipped out," Raid admitted sheepishly.

"And you looked so serious too! Then you blurt it out, just like that?! 'Won't say it until we settle everything,' my ass!"

"Look, I'm human too. Can't help that my true feelings slip out sometimes..."

"Ah! Ahhh! I'm so pissed! We've been watching you two all this time and prodding at you to *just freaking confess already*, but now what?! Arghhh, I hate my life!" Alma's face turned red as she repeatedly bashed the standard over Raid's head.

"I-I don't really get it, but calm down, Alma!" Totori yelled, scrambling to hold her back.

Savad tried to help, but he looked utterly bewildered. "Um... Huh? Had you two not even said that yet?"

Dodging Alma's angry swings, Raid turned back to Eluria and continued, "Anyway, you're Eluria Caldwin, and that's that. Whoever you were in the past doesn't change who you are now, nor the fact that the Eluria I know is the one

before me right now.”

“I-I don’t understand...wh-what’s happening...” Eluria vigorously shook her head, still hiding her flushed face behind her hair. “B-But I’m so happy...so it’s okay...”

Spontaneous confession aside, Raid had spoken from the bottom of his heart. Whoever Eluria might have been in the past didn’t change anything for him, for he had already watched and fallen in love with her as she was now—it was as simple as that.

“Uh... Uhhh...!”

“Eluria looks like she’s about to boil over,” Alma remarked. “Shouldn’t we cool her down a bit?”

“Then let’s talk about those guys in the ruins,” Raid said.

“Uh... *Now*? After that wholesome confession? Really?” Savad scratched his head.

“No, well, he’s not wrong...” Totori sighed as she smoothed her expression. “After you two left, I undid Savad’s transformation and captured several enemies, but they all committed suicide before I could draw out any answers. The only source of information we have left would be the odd magic gear they were using.” Totori’s nose scrunched up in distaste as she recalled the scene. “Those men had no hesitation... It was like they were prepared to die from the very beginning.”

Raid hummed. “They probably were.”

“What do you mean...?”

“There was an altar deeper inside,” he answered. “There, the white-haired bastard killed every last one of his subordinates and offered them as sacrifices.” He recalled that eerie sight—that black-clothed soldier who had hailed the name of his motherland before shooting his own head. His face at the very end, and the swiftness of his movements leading up to it, had shown not even a hint of hesitation. It was like he had been prepared for death from the start. “Forbidden arts use human sacrifices and rituals, right?”

“Indeed,” Totori nodded grimly. “I cannot say for certain since I haven’t seen the altar myself, but there are records of rituals where humans are used as sacrifices.” Her face twisted bitterly. “I’m afraid I can’t narrow it down any further. Legnare only has records of forbidden arts that ended in failure. If those fellows somehow succeeded, then we cannot fathom what that could possibly entail.”

Raid’s expression stiffened. “They definitely succeeded. I’m sure of it.” Otherwise, they wouldn’t have gone so far as to offer up their lives. Even if they had been ordered from above or manipulated, Raid found it hard to believe that they would sacrifice dozens of personnel for anything less than guaranteed success.

More than anything, that white-haired man’s smile at the very end—he just couldn’t get it off his mind. He’d looked like he had already won.

“Hm?” Alma raised a brow and took out her magic communicator. Her eyes trailed through the content of the message before snapping wide. “Your Excellency,” she called grimly. “I think I know what that ritual was for.”

“What...?”

Their conversation was interrupted by panicked knocks against the door, followed by a magician of the checkpoint rushing in. “Pardon the interruption! Is Ms. Alma Kanos here?!” he asked, face pale as a sheet. “An ultra-sized manabeast has been spotted off Palmare’s coast!”

◇

An ultra-sized manabeast had appeared off the coast of Palmare. After receiving the report, the group hurried back to Palmare, where they were no longer met with the cheery smiles and beautiful sights that had welcomed them when they first arrived.

“This is horrible...” Eluria whispered, aghast.

Flotsam and wreckage littered the coast. Debris was scattered all over the orderly streets, and the white buildings were caked in muddy water—signs that a huge tidal wave had washed over the entire coastal area. Not to mention the group was wading through muddy water to assess everything.

Alma scanned the city before turning to the magician who'd accompanied them here. "The latest intel and damage report," she demanded.

"Yes, ma'am!" The magician saluted. "A ship sailing out east reported that they 'spotted an island up ahead,' after which a tsunami plowed into the towns and villages along the coast. From there, intermittent earthquakes have been causing minor injuries."

"Have the residents and tourists been evacuated?"

"As far as I am aware, the evacuation is...approximately sixty percent complete."

Alma squinted. "Sixty percent? What's taking so long?"

"Muddy water rushed upstream after the first wave, collapsing the bridge piers and thus delaying the evacuation. However, we're rather fortunate this happened here of all places. With Palmare's many water control devices, they were able to avoid fatal damage." The magician's expression turned dark. "However, seventy percent of said devices were damaged in the first wave, so the second wave is expected to cause devastating destruction to the coastal regions."

"In other words..." Alma brought a pair of magic binoculars to her eyes and looked out to the eastern sea. "We're screwed the moment *that thing* moves."

Through the binoculars, she could see a strange "island" floating starkly amid the vast sea, colored a bizarre mix of blue and purple. They could spot it with their naked eyes all the way from this port, making it clear that it was worlds larger than an ordinary manabeast.

Just as Alma lowered her binoculars, the earth rumbled as if nature itself were ridiculing the puny humans cowering on land. "The earthquakes have been happening since that big guy popped up, right?"

The magician nodded. "They have been occurring intermittently, yes."

"I see... Then its body must be in contact with the seafloor."

The magician's expression turned stiff. After all, that meant that what they could see was no more than the tip of the iceberg—or in this case, the

manabeast—and that most of its body was still submerged. That information gave them an idea of just how large this creature was.

Alma groaned. “It’d be nice if it appeared on land, or heck, even up in the sky.”

“Certainly,” Totori agreed with a scowl. “Battling on water is as exhausting as fighting in the air. Worse yet, it’s too far out for us to expect any backup from land. Fighting it over there will also cause another tsunami for sure, racking up more damage.”

The mere appearance of the “island” manabeast had already caused catastrophic damage. It likely wouldn’t have been this bad had it appeared on land or in the air, but because it appeared in the sea of all places, it posed a risk of additional damage through a second wave and far worse consequences should it start moving in earnest. At the very least, more than half of the towns and villages on the eastern coast would be wiped out in the time it would take for reinforcements to come from other regions.

However, three special-class magicians were already on the scene. They had already proven their ability to subjugate ultra-sized manabeasts and accomplish any mission given to them, standing as the pinnacle of all modern-day magicians.

Alma smirked. “Totori, Savad, you two aren’t going to sit out just because you’re a little tired, are you?”

“Hah! Do you think just kicking around some desert worms could tire me out?” Totori replied with a daring grin.

“Honestly, I’m still in pretty bad shape...” Savad admitted. “But I can lead the local magicians—we’ll support you from the shore.”

Alma nodded at her colleagues before turning around. “Your Excellency, Eluria,” she called. “You’re still students, so we’ll have to ask you to sit this one out. Evacuate with the rest.”

Raid frowned. “Well, I get where you’re coming from, but...”

“What? Don’t tell me you’re expecting us to just let you two fight that thing.”

“I’m just wondering... Are we sure this manabeast was created with forbidden arts?”

Alma shook her head. “I mean, we can’t know for certain, but there’s no other possibility given the situation and the timing. This happened right after those guys in the ruins conducted that whole ritual and—”

“But it’s way too small,” he interrupted.

Alma froze, her expression warping dubiously. “Too *small*...?”

Totori’s eyes widened in realization. “Wait... That’s right. You saw for yourself a thousand years ago, did you not? A being born from forbidden arts?”

“I did. Of course, this isn’t the same type...but the eight-headed dragon I saw could swallow a city whole. Heck, just one of its heads was as big as a small mountain.” Raid didn’t know exactly how deep the sea was, but this manabeast was clearly smaller than the creature he’d fought in the past.

Moreover, forbidden arts birthed monsters because the price of *failure* was borne by the caster. In other words, supposing the white-haired man was the caster of that ritual, normally this manabeast would be the thing that man had morphed into.

However, that smile he’d worn at the very end hadn’t looked like the expression of a resigned sacrifice. Raid was certain the ritual had succeeded in exactly the way the white-haired man had envisioned it—and whatever that entailed, Raid was just sure that it was no mere ultra-sized manabeast.

Raid was snapped out of his thoughts when Eluria took her vibrating magic communicator from her pocket. “Millis?”

“Oh, it finally got through! Lady Eluria, where are you guys?!”

“We’re all back in Palmare.”

“Palmare?! Why are you and Raid there?! We heard an ultra-sized manabeast popped up, and the earthquakes just aren’t stopping, so we—”

“Hang on,” Raid cut in. “Millis, are you having earthquakes over there too?”

“Is that you, Raid?! Oh, we’ve been having earthquakes, all right! And landslides up in the mountains to boot! We’re currently helping the magicians

who were dispatched here, assisting with the evacuation!”

The Verminant villa was within Palmare territory but far from the urban district Raid and team were in right now. No matter how large this ultra-sized manabeast may be, no amount of shuffling atop the seafloor could possibly have been causing earthquakes and landslides so far away.

In other words, its body wasn’t simply *in contact* with the seafloor.

“Raid?!” Millis called, jarred by their sudden silence. *“Hello? Can you hear me?!”*

Alas, Millis’s voice was the last thing on their minds now.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...” Alma whispered, eyes blown wide.

The port of Palmare was enveloped in a dark shadow. A pair of wings had emerged from behind the “island” and swallowed up the scarlet sun—along with the horizon it had nearly sunk beneath and the sky it had painted in its fiery hue.

The “island,” too, began to shift. A pair of large golden eyes glinted ominously, visible even within the darkness that had draped Palmare—and its sights were set on the shore. Its eyes curved, mocking the feeble humans.

The “island” was certainly a mere portion of the manabeast, but only now—with those fearsome eyes in sight—did they truly understand how minuscule that portion was.

“This... This is ridiculous!” Totori screamed, her ears perking up.

Right now, they could only see half of its head, as well as its immense wings that had swallowed up the horizon. Its tremendous figure instilled fear in the hearts of all who saw it. Their instincts yelled and screamed that they were powerless before this enormous being.

“The Calamity of Destruction...” Savad muttered, recalling the name given to the monstrosity that once ravaged Legnare.

A breathy, almost hysterical laugh spilled from Alma’s lips. “Totori, which is bigger—this or the Droughtster you hunted?”

“Are you really asking?!” Totori hissed. “They’re beyond comparison!”

“Figured... It’s definitely bigger than the Frost Whale I beat,” Alma said, her body shuddering against her will.

This Calamity hadn’t simply been staying put until now—it simply *couldn’t* move, for it had gotten stuck between the tectonic plates, buried so deep within that it struggled to squirm its way free. Its body was so enormous that its minuscule movements shook the tectonic plates, causing the intermittent earthquakes. By no means was it the kind of being mere humans could dream of facing.

And so, Alma’s wide eyes fell upon a *god*, or rather, a being once hailed as a “god” long ago. “Your Excellency...” she mumbled, staring at the man who now stood with his back to them.

Raid cast a glance over his shoulder. “What? Keep it short—we’re a bit pressed for time.” His smile betrayed not even the slightest hint of fear, and his broad shoulders showed no signs of retreating.

And he wasn’t alone—Eluria stepped up beside him. “That’s a very big fish,” she mumbled.

“You said it. It’s gotta be bigger than that fella I knocked out in the past.”

“So if I beat that...will that make me stronger than you?”

“You won’t know that for sure. What if I beat it first?”

“Wanna race?”

Raid arched a brow. “Is this really the time for a race? The eastern region might be washed away the next time that guy wiggles, so we gotta be careful.”

“I’ll do something about that. *Then* let’s race.”

“Oh, I guess that’s fine, then...” Raid shrugged. “The eight-headed guy was so big I took a whole week to beat him, but I think we can wrap this up in three days with your help.”

“Three days is too long—make it one. I’m kinda hungry.”

“May as well cut it down to half a day if you’re going that far. Let’s get this over with and get some grub.”

Alma stared in disbelief as Raid and Eluria chatted away like they did any other day, absently noting that Totori and Savad's expressions were similarly slack. Her voice trembled as she asked, "How... How are you both so calm?"

Raid and Eluria grinned. "Because the Hero and the Sage are way stronger than that thing," they answered in perfect unison. Their gazes snapped to one another, and after a short pause, they laughed.

"Besides," Raid added. "Since there's no one at sea, we're free to run wild."

Eluria nodded. "We need to go all out once in a while or else we'll get rusty."

"Speaking of, I guess this means you can go all out for real this time, huh? It's not an exam, plus it's an emergency. You're totally free."

"Mm-hmm. I only got to use one magecraft spell against Lufus, but this time I'll go all out with my magic."

"Man, good for you. If only I had my sword... Well, since Viteos turned into fish food, maybe that big fella will kick it up for me?"

"Hm... Should I make one for you again?"

"That thing uses up a ton of mana, doesn't it? I wouldn't wanna ruin your one chance to fight freely. Besides, I want to see you go all out too. So my fists will do for now."

Eluria squinted. "But you can't even break an armored dragon's shell bare-handed."

"Oh, just rub it in, why don't you? And you know, our friends were behind me back then. I was holding back 'cause I didn't want the cave to collapse on them."

"You're such a sore loser..."

"I'm just telling the truth—I can prove it to you right now."

Eluria's lips quirked into a smile. "All right. I'll see for myself, then."

"Sure thing." Raid chuckled, then turned to the three special-class magicians behind them. "Oh, right—we're leaving the rest to you guys."

"Mm-hmm. Only you three can protect everyone," Eluria agreed.

“‘Protect everyone’...?” Alma parroted blankly.

To that, Raid and Eluria wore identical smiles: broad and bright, brimming with all the confidence in the world—yet at the same time, curling eerily like beasts that were about to ravage their prey.

“You have to protect them,” they said, “because the world’s strongest are about to let loose.”

◇

After entrusting the shore to the special-class magicians, Raid and Eluria headed for the Calamity. Over the course of their discussion, the beast had quieted down, and now Eluria observed it from above as she floated in the air with magic.

“We’ve gotten this close and it still hasn’t moved,” she noted.

“That white-haired bastard said something about ‘stimulating’ its awakening,” Raid recalled. “Maybe it isn’t fully awake because we got in their way?”

“Hmph... This might be over too quickly.”

“Which would be a *good* thing,” Raid reminded her with a raised brow. “The entire eastern region’s at risk here.”

“Mm... We can’t have that. Tiana and so many others worked hard to redevelop it.” At the thought of her precious disciple’s efforts, Eluria wiped the dissatisfied pout from her face and nodded.

“Anyway, could you, uh...make a foothold for me?” Raid asked, sheepishly scratching his cheek. He was currently in Eluria’s arms, feeling terribly awkward being carried by the smaller girl.

“I never thought the day would come where I carry you,” Eluria mused.

“Neither did I. The other way around is just business as usual, though.”

The girl pouted. “I don’t recall being carried by you that often.”

“Oh, I’m sure you don’t. You’re always floaty.”

“Then maybe I’ll have you carry me home today,” she decided, eyes blazing for some weird reason. However, she soon turned to glare at the Calamity. “I’ll

make you a foothold, Raid, but first I need your help."

"If it's something I can help with, then sure."

"I have to cast a spell, so I'm going to give you a quick upsy-daisy."

Raid arched a brow. "You know, I'm almost ninety now. You'll have to toss me up *real* high to get a giggle out of me."

"I can send you all the way to the stars if you want."

Raid squinted. "You're joking, right?"

"I am." She nodded. "But I *will* need you to stay in the air for a bit, so I want you to jump too."

"All right. Guess I'll watch your magic from my VIP seat, then!"

Eluria swung her arms up in a smooth arc, and Raid jumped in tandem, shooting up into the air. Without a moment to waste, Eluria brandished her magic gear and began casting.

"O vast waters, O grand seas. Upon the current of eternity you flow, beneath the curtain of stars you flux."

Countless spells rumbled in the air in beat with her melodic chant.

Incantations were not merely a string of words; they were careful crafts of language made by weaving mana into one's voice and tying it together with the proper pitch and intonation. Long and rigorous practice was needed to master the art of incantation, and the spell quality vastly fluctuated depending on one's abilities and training. Hence, there was no such thing as the perfect replication of a spell—until the advent of mana circuits, that is. This innovation was soon followed by the disappearance of incantations from the process, as per the Sage's design.

"Praise be to thee, protectors of the world, allies of the stars. May you grant a moment of respite to those under your embrace."

However, the Sage was naturally gifted in magecraft, and of course, her skill in incantation was extraordinary. By applying specific elements of magecraft to her own art of magic, she could single-handedly manifest large-scale magecraft that normally required hundreds of mages to execute. She comprehended the

art of magecraft, grasped the laws of this world, and with her wisdom converted it into all-encompassing power.

And so, Sage Eluria Caldwin strung together the final chant with a silvery breath:

“Cradle of Frost.”

Instantly, the vast sea was overcome with a blanket of ice. The rough waves—not only around the Calamity, but all the way to the horizon—came to a halt, as if frozen in time, transforming the sea into an endless landscape of ice and stillness.

The painter of this grand frozen canvas simply stared down at her creation and muttered, “You’re free to run wild now, Raid,” passing the baton to the Hero in the scarlet-stained sky.

Just a beat later, a man came plummeting down, piercing through the clouds, aided by the acceleration of gravity. His sights were set on the head of the Calamity far below.

“Since this is still a sea,” he said, grinning wildly, “I can destroy it as much as I want!”

There was one incident in the distant past that had made the Hero’s existence known to all.

Long ago, a volcano had stood between Altane and Vegalta. Its constant eruptions would send lava flowing down the surrounding land and scorching the earth, while the ash clouded the skies and obscured the sunlight. One eruption had just so happened to occur while the armies had been engaged in battle. Orders to pull back had been lost in the chaos of the scuffle, and both armies had stumbled over the shaking ground as smoke rose from the volcano’s mouth. Their impending deaths loomed before them in the form of gushing lava that would spare not even a fragment of their bones.

But the tragic tale did not come to be, for the man named Raid Freeden *stopped* the eruption. His method had been simple: he crushed the entire volcano underfoot. It had been a plain and simple stomp, just another one of the many imperial-style melee techniques taught to Altanian soldiers, but Raid

Freeden's might had transformed it into a move of immense force.

His stomp had mercilessly crushed the grand volcano. The magma chamber had been trampled, and the conduits and vents were warped, forcing the volcano into extinction and forever transforming it into a gigantic basin. Only two undeniable truths remained in its wake: the absolute strength of the human known as Raid Freeden...and the fact that he had single-handedly protected every single person on that battlefield.

From that day forth, the monstrous human came to be known as the Hero. And with him, the once unassuming melee technique had gained a name, taken after the gear that had been used to kick through a monster's maw in a children's epic.

"Ironheel."

His quiet words were drowned out the moment he smashed his foot against the Calamity's head. Its ice prison cracked and its gigantic body gouged into the frost, forcing it deeper and deeper into the frozen surface. The crushed ice fragments cut and bore into its skin, dyeing the white landscape with its purple blood and drawing out an eerie, earsplitting shriek.

Raid grimaced. "Ugh, I've never heard something so disturbing in my life... It sounds like it's grating directly against my head."

"I think anyone would be mad to be woken from a nap by a drop kick to the head," Eluria pointed out.

"Says the one who froze the guy in a sea of ice first," he retorted.

While exchanging some lighthearted banter, the pair took the chance to observe the features of the writhing Calamity. On its head, which was now warped from the impact, three pairs of eyes glared back at them. Farther below, still buried beneath the ice fragments, they saw three pairs of uncannily human arms and a pair of wings.

Vicious hostility and bloodlust radiated from the Calamity, directed like a blade's tip toward Raid and Eluria. Its grating shriek pierced the air, the sound so bizarre they couldn't even determine whether it was screaming in agony or roaring in anger.

“Oh, crap,” Raid said. “Did I give it more space to move?”

“Mm-hmm. It’s kind of squirming, isn’t it?”

They weren’t the only ones the ice foothold granted more freedom. The Calamity’s hands crawled over the ice, searching for something to brace against to pull itself out of the earth. Every movement sent tremors through the ice, forming more cracks and fissures each moment.

“I wonder what would happen if we shoved this thing into a volcano,” Eluria mused. “You know, kinda like what you did in the past.”

“You think this monster can be melted with lava?”

“Hm... I guess not. It looks pretty tough.”

“Right? I stomped it pretty hard, but its head still looks like a head.”

“It could be closer to magic than a living being,” Eluria proposed.

“Oh... Like the spell itself just took shape?”

“Yeah. It feels really compact, kind of like your mana. That’d explain how it’s still fit as a fiddle even after taking both our attacks. And it might have super regenerative abilities like Savad; after all, his spell and this thing are both based on sorcery.”

“Seriously...?” Raid sighed. “And we were acting all cool in front of Alma and the rest too. I’d be way too embarrassed to go back now and say, *‘Whoops, sorry! Looks like it can’t die!’*”

“Me too...”

“Though,” Raid said, “I do have *one* idea.”

“What a coincidence. So do I.”

The pair looked at one another, nodded decisively, and said, “We just have to keep beating it up until it dies.”

At the end of the day, simple is best.

“We’re not getting a better chance than this,” Raid said with a toothy grin. “I never got to rampage so freely in the past!”

“I have a few spells that have been too dangerous to test,” Eluria murmured in agreement. “It’s an all-you-can-blast party for us today.”

Before the world-threatening Calamity, the two wore identical grins as they cracked their knuckles and rolled their shoulders. However, their eager battle preparations were interrupted by a strange ringing in their ears.

Instantly, the world around them *stilled*. The Calamity’s screams of anguish and wrath, the shattering sea of ice—all the sounds around them disappeared. Even the faint brush of the wind and flow of the air seemed to fade. A strange sensation of pure and total isolation washed over them.

Amid the bizarre emptiness, however, Raid narrowed his eyes into a glare and spoke with absolute certainty. “Took you long enough, Wallus Caldwin.”

A voice responded, resounding aimlessly around them. *“Good grief... I never thought you’d be so reckless.”*

Raid’s lips curled into a smile. “We figured this would draw you out.” By their hypothesis, the mastermind’s plan was to change the future by changing the past. Therefore, if they attempted something that would greatly derail the future, then the mastermind would come crawling out from the shadows to stop them.

“Hmmm... Guess I fell hook, line, and sinker, huh? But if you run wild here, it really would cause problems for my plan. I’ll tell you two how to defeat that guy down below, so could you refrain from making him your punching bag?”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Raid said, a chilling wrath in his voice, “but didn’t your *allies* start running wild first?”

A sigh brushed through the air. *“They aren’t my allies. Well, they used to be—until I took it upon myself to betray them.”*

“You mean...you were allies with the future Altane?”

“That’s about right. We were allies in a different future... In this timeline, that would make it a thousand years in the future... Oh, and I mean about a thousand years from when you reincarnated, okay? Well, it gets pretty confusing, with all the pasts, presents, and futures going on here...”

Wallus spoke openly and readily, but that wasn't the explanation they wanted, nor were those the words Eluria wanted to hear.

"Dad..." The girl looked up at empty air, at her father whom she couldn't see. "Who...am I?"

The voice was silent for a moment. *"I'm sorry, El,"* he finally said. *"I can't answer that."*

"Why not?"

"Because you wouldn't have wanted me to," he whispered somberly. *"And I swore...to grant you whatever you wanted. So I can't answer you now."*

Eluria frowned, her eyes glistening with tears. "It's been a thousand years, but you're still as petty as ever..."

The voice remained silent for a while. *"Yeah,"* he finally said, an apologetic strain to his tone. *"You're right. I'm sorry, but this is as much as I can share with you. We don't have much time either. Let's just defeat this big guy here and wrap this up with a happy ending for—"*

"No thanks," Eluria mumbled.

"Uh... Huh?"

The girl petulantly puffed her cheeks and glared at the Calamity. "I'm going to take all my stress out on that stupid thing."

"Now hang on just a darn minute! Didn't I already tell you that's a big no-no?! If you guys go wild, the entire ecosystem will fall to shambles and this peaceful world will be ruined!"

"Hmph. Why should I trust you when you won't tell me anything?" Eluria whipped her face away, like a sulky child throwing a tantrum.

"W-Wait..." Panic clearly seeped into the voice in the air. *"B-But I swear I can't talk! As in, really! That's why I'm here now to tell you how to defeat it—it's the least I could do, or my way of apologizing, o-or something...!"*

"Eluria, you're gonna let off some steam?" Raid asked. "Count me in."

*"*Nooooo*! If you join in, then this world is really hopping on a one-way trip to*

destruction!!!”

“But Eluria’s right—why *should* we trust a guy who won’t tell us anything? Heck, for all we know, you could just be pretending to be Wallus Caldwin... I’d rather just let Eluria do as she pleases.”

“Wait... Please, could you just hold on for one second...?” Wallus pled. Then, after what sounded like a fierce mental struggle, he finally heaved out a sigh. *“Fine... We don’t have much time, so I can’t explain everything. So for now, I’ll tell you how to beat that monster. Then, after everything is over, come and see me—that’s when I’ll tell you everything.”*

“Where will we meet you?” Raid asked.

“I can’t tell you that—this is nonnegotiable. I have some preparations to make too. It’s up to you to follow my traces and find me in this era.”

“I think Eluria would much rather start her warm-up exercises than go on such a roundabout trip.”

“I said this is nonnegotiable *and I meant it! And I also meant it when I said I’d tell you everything after you find me!”*

Raid sighed. “Well, you heard him. Your thoughts, Eluria?”

The girl pouted and, after a long silence, begrudgingly mumbled, “So be it.”

“Oookay! Attagirl, El! Anyway, we really don’t have any more time left, so listen closely and I’ll tell you how to beat that thing down there!” Wallus spat it all out in one panicked breath. It seemed he wasn’t kidding when he said he had no time. *“First, just as you suspected, that thing is like magic itself. Punch it, kick it, burn it, freeze it—it’s all pointless. It’ll just regenerate in time.”*

“So,” Eluria mumbled, “should I analyze and dismantle the formula?”

“No, that thing is made with future magic. You may be the Sage, but it’ll take you time to do that. But,” Wallus said, *“that guy has a core inside him that serves as his driving force. Raid, you can destroy it with your mana, and that should get rid of it.”*

“And where is that core?” Raid asked.

“Around where a human’s heart would be,” Wallus answered. *“No normal*

attack would leave a dent on it, but the magic sword El made you before should do the trick."

"Hm... All right. We'll trust you on this." Raid narrowed his eyes and glared at the air. "We'll see you soon. Sit tight and wait for us, Wallus Caldwin."

No answer came. Instead, the lost sounds—the earsplitting screech and the cracking ice—gradually filtered back in.

Raid scoffed. "You'd think a father would have a bit more to say to his daughter after a thousand years."

"Mm... It's fine. I don't mind." Eluria shook her head. "I know dad has his reasons...so I'll just chase him down and make him spill everything." She looked up and gave Raid a smile.

Raid breathed out a sigh and nodded. "You're right. Let's go beat that big guy so we can get to it."

"I had lots of spells I wanted to test out... Too bad."

"You can test them out on your father when we see him."

"Oh. That's a *great* idea."

"Just make sure he doesn't die."

As Eluria began to form a sword with her magic, she slowly opened her mouth and whispered, "Raid."

"Yeah? What is it?"

"Just...thank you. For everything."

"Where's this coming from all of a sudden?"

"I just felt like saying it." A bright smile bloomed on her lips. "The truth is, I was still a little worried. Who am I? Or...*what* am I? I didn't know, and that really scared me." For a moment, her blue eyes wavered like the waves that had once swayed beneath them. But with a shake of her head, she washed it all away with a bright smile. "I still don't know...but that's all right. Because you know who I am. You told me so."

Raid looked her in the eye and nodded. "Yeah. And I'll tell you as many times

as I need to—you're Eluria Caldwin, the Sage."

"Mm-hmm. I'm also glad that I got to show off to you a whole lot today."

"You sure did. I didn't think you'd freeze the whole sea."

"Did you...f-fall for me all over again?" the girl asked, cheeks flushed as she cast him a sideward glance. She was as shy as ever, but her growing courage was as bright and dazzling as her efforts.

So as he gripped the magic sword in his hands, Raid thought to answer her with just as much brazenness. "Nothing new there," he grinned. "I already do that every day."

Epilogue

Raid and Eluria eradicated the Calamity that appeared off the coast of Palmare. After that, Eluria undid her spell and returned the land of ice to a tranquil sea.

No more significant damage was sustained after the monster's initial manifestation, no doubt thanks to the hard work of the magicians on land. Understandably, though, they had a few words for the two once they made their way back to shore.

"You've gotta be kidding me," Alma grumbled. "I braced myself the moment you two said you were going to go all out, but I never would've imagined something so...*ridiculous*!"

Totori sighed. "Alma and I had a tough time offsetting the shock waves and minimizing the damage... The ice fragments almost destroyed the coastline..."

"Yeah... No offense, but I *really* don't want to do this ever again..." Savad mumbled. "There was no end to the rain of ice. It was exhausting making sure not a single one got past me..."

The Legnarian duo looked thoroughly exhausted, as if all their years were finally catching up to them. Alma, on the other hand, still had the energy to yell as she was already used to Raid and Eluria's shenanigans.

They were also able to regroup with their classmates after submitting a report.

"Waaah! You're both safe! I knew it...!" Millis wailed.

Wisel raised a brow. "It almost sounds like you wished otherwise."

"Th-The ground was shaking like crazy, and there were all these loud explosions!"

"I was checking the situation through my device. It seemed Raid and Eluria caused most of that," Wisel clarified.

“Yeah, I thought sooo!”

Eluria comforted her crying friend and offered to help with her training as an apology. Millis’s tears dried up in a split second and all emotion fell from her face as she swiftly said, “No thank you.” Things were business as usual between the two of them.

Meanwhile, the rest of the crew also approached with relief painted all over their faces.

“Really... I’m so glad to see you both safe,” said Valk.

Lucas sighed. “I broke out into a cold sweat when Ms. Lambut told us you were in Palmare...”

“Hah! I was hardly concerned! If you were so weak as to succumb to an ultra-sized manabeast, then you can bet I will surpass you in no time!” Fareg harrumphed, only to be smacked over the head and scolded severely by his two childhood friends. He was the same as always, but he was probably worried in his own Fareg way.

Finally, when Raid and Eluria headed to the nearest magic institute to give a more detailed report, they were met with a very warm and peppy welcome.

“Hooraaay! Congratulations on subjugating an ultra-sized manabeast!!!” Elise cheered, making celebratory sounds with a handheld magic device. “And you’re still only students too! I never doubted your skills, but you really just went and beat an ultra-sized manabeast! As your headmaster, I couldn’t be any prouder!”

Raid chuckled. “Well, we realize we were quite reckless this time around. We will humbly accept any punishment.”

“Nuh-uh! Not if I have anything to say about it! The beast that popped up this time is top class—all the magicians on-site, including the three special-classers, testified that it was unlike any other ultra-sized manabeast to date! Nobody will stand for you two *not* getting rewarded for this!”

“And that way, you can get off scot-free without getting scolded,” Raid finished.

“Exactly! That’s the best part about all this!” Elise’s face warped as she

recalled her suffering throughout the years—an expression that hardly suited such a young girl. In any case, it looked like she could finally lower her stomach medicine dosage. “Anyway, you two are practically slotted in for the fast track to graduation. And with an ultra-sized manabeast subjugation under your belt, Eluria at least will surely become the youngest special-class magician to date.”

“Speaking of, weren’t my abilities labeled as ‘unknown’? Would I still be considered a magician on record?”

“Well, probably?” Elise shrugged. “Savad also specializes in physical enhancement, so they probably wouldn’t mind slotting you into the same category.”

“Ah... Well, becoming a magician was one of the promises I made to the head of House Caldwin, so I’m okay as long as that works out.”

“Now that you mention it, that *was* how you two got engaged, wasn’t it? And while we’re on the topic, I want to ask...” Elise turned to the side, where Eluria was seated next to Raid like always. However, something was slightly off today. “Is it just me, or are you keeping your distance from Raid?”

Eluria flinched and squeaked. There was simply no end to the variety of her reactions when she was nervous.

“You two are usually all lovey-dovey whenever and wherever, but today you seem a little distant... Are you experimenting with a new form of flirting, perhaps?”

“We don’t conduct such strange experiments,” Raid deadpanned. “Today is just that sort of day.”

“What sort of day?”

“A day where Eluria feels like keeping her distance from me.”

“How oddly specific...!”

In actuality, Eluria wasn’t exactly keeping her distance from Raid. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have been reaching past the open space between them to grip onto his sleeve. The reason for this was none other than Raid’s clumsy little slip of the tongue—she must have been conducting some sort of mental

restructuring. Still, nothing had really changed between them, and they were going about their days as usual.

“Well, as long as you two are getting along. You’re ‘Raid’ and ‘Eluria,’ after all,” Elise said with a warm smile as she recalled the story she’d once shared with them—the love story between the Hero and the Sage, passed down among the elves as if someone had wished dearly for their happy ending. “Anyway, that’s all from me! You might not have much time to rest with the integrated exam right around the corner, but be sure to prepare as best as you can and to give it your all!”

“Oh, speaking of preparations,” Raid said. “How are yours going, headmaster?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you mention having some preparations to make?”

“Hm? Did I now? Maybe for the integrated exam? Or for scolding Alma? Or my excuses to avoid running into those whiny old men?” Elise tilted her head left and right, confusion plain on her face.

Raid watched her with a placid smile. “You’d better not have forgotten the promise you made just a few days ago,” he muttered as the smile completely fell from his face. “I told you we’d come see you right away...didn’t I, Wallus Caldwin?”

His chilling gaze was unmistakably set on Headmaster Elise Lammel.

Afterword

Greetings, distinguished readers. My name is Washiro Fujiki.

For this afterword, I would like to begin with an apology:

I am so terribly sorry for failing to meet the deadline!!!

If you are reading this now, then this volume must have safely made it out into the world. That said, in my seven years of writing, this was my first time extending the deadline to its utmost limit. Normally, I would have made it just in time while saying, “Sorry for cutting it so close lol,” but this time around, forget laughing out loud—I was miserably rolling on the floor dying.

Once again, I would like to extend my sincerest apologies to my editor and everyone in the publishing process.

As I genuinely reflect on my actions, I would like to add in my excuses:

First would be my poor physical health. Lack of exercise is seriously scary. Everyone, please take care of yourselves.

My second reason is actually rather serious. Whenever I plot a story, I prepare about ten volumes’ worth. I’ve kept this consistent throughout all my works until now. The chapters are then written out with more or less that length in mind. Perhaps now I look like an incredibly meticulous and well-prepared writer, and of course, you may praise me for this.

In any case, I went about my preparations as usual for this third volume. However, you may recall—this work is about an overpowered couple uncovering complexities between past, present, and future. I’m sure you can tell already by now: since past, present, and future are deeply entangled in this story, I myself got tangled in a web of mental complexities while trying to piece it all back together. Of course, my head overheated and exploded, and ultimately I screamed, “Which dumbass thought of this mess?!” while bashing my head over my desk. The stress from this even exacerbated my sickness and caused the delay in my work—a very wonderful example of reaping what you

sow, if I do say so myself.

That said, this is my job, so I won't make any more excuses and am sincerely reflecting on myself. The author's mishaps don't make for a very meaningful afterword, though, so I shall touch upon this volume's contents too:

Washiro Fujiki brought out swimsuits in volume 3.

Thank you very much for reading all my remarks on this volume till the end.

Now that I've mentioned the one most important point, allow me to move on to my words of thanks:

To my editor, I'm afraid I've already pleaded guilty back in volume 2, so I really have no words. From now on, I shall do my best to keep the foreshadowing within the story and away from myself. I also present to you the right to beat some sense into me if need be.

To Heiro, the illustrator, I apologize for all the trouble with this volume, and thank you for completing such wonderful illustrations despite it all. I truly cannot thank you enough.

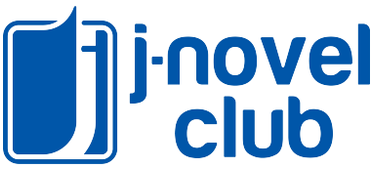
Finally, to everyone involved in the production of this book, once again, I apologize, and thank you for your work. And to the readers who gave this novel a chance, I offer you my sincerest thanks.

Washiro Fujiki

“I’m Savad, a special-class magician assigned to Legnare—”
“And my husband!”

Alma Kanos
A special-class magician and an instructor at the Vegalta Royal Institute of Magic. She descends from a bloodline that once served the Hero.
Millis Lambut
Raid and Eluria's classmate in the magician course. She was a lonesome country girl before she became friends with Eluria.
What awaits in the Water Capital? Training from hell... or a vacation by the beach?!
Eluria Caldwin
A beautiful girl once known as the Sage, the progenitor of all magicians. She proposed to Raid in order to fulfill their promise from a thousand years ago.

“I’m the Hero. Get it? Now go to hell.”
Raid’s eyes were focused on the group’s attire—their jet-black uniforms with deep crimson accents... as well as the crest that was unmistakably Altane’s.



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The Hero and the Sage, Reincarnated and Engaged: Volume 3

by Washiro Fujiki

Translated by Joey Antonio Edited by Emlyn Dornemann

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